

# A MIDDLE EAST PRIMED FOR NEW THINKING

Insights and Policy Options  
from the Ancient World

**Andrew Skitt Gilmour**





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ANCIENT WORLD

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**Center for the Study of Intelligence**  
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## PREFACE

This book is the product of a 32-year career at the Central Intelligence Agency and a life-long interest in the ancient world. At CIA, I served mostly as an analyst and manager on the Middle East, engaging with senior policymakers—including directly with three US presidents—members of Congress, foreign partners, and with my fellow citizens in public forums. My career focused on thinking and writing about many of the hardest and most enduring challenges confronting the United States and our allies in the Middle East. Toward the end of my government service, I also helped to refine the craft of strategic analysis at CIA and to assess the future of the analytic profession. In every challenge, I benefitted greatly from working with a cadre of extraordinarily good, capable, and thoughtful colleagues.

Readers seeking here an insider's account of the secret world of intelligence will be disappointed. The following pages offer no pent-up critiques of US policy, disclosures of sensitive senior-level discussions, or quick fixes to the enormous human suffering that plagues much of the region. Instead, this is a book about the strategic, long view the United States and its allies will have to develop toward the Middle East. It proposes new ways for the United States, and the West more broadly, to think about the Middle East during a period of wide-ranging upheavals of strategic consequence. The premise here is that the patterns and precedents of the ancient world can help us to think more deeply and more usefully about the contemporary challenges confronting the region. The really old stuff still matters and can help us think in new and perhaps better ways about the region.

I trained in modern Persian but kept my pre-CIA academic interest in ancient Greek language study alive throughout my career. This book incorporates some of the insights about the ancient world, particularly the Middle East, which I have gleaned from my academic work—a study of ancient texts that came alive and became policy-relevant amid decades of peregrinations to the region's still visible footprints from antiquity. This is not a formal work of scholarship but, in the tradition of intelligence analysis, seeks to build upon diverse fields of knowledge to gain policy-relevant insight.

There are many important approaches to thinking about the Middle East well underway in the public domain, but the use of ancient history to conceptualize contemporary problems in the region has generally not been among them. There are at least two reasons for this. First is academic aversion to anything that hints at “Orientalism,” amplified by a modest and often shrinking presence within the Academy of Classics and other disciplines associated with the study of antiquity. The second is the new turn to algorithms and massive data sets and the general dominance of social science methods in our approach to the region.

My hope is that this work—written by one who has been up close as a practitioner—will serve to begin to address this deficit in how we conceptualize the region. This is a brief work that argues for a method with specific examples but makes no claim to be exhaustive. It is an initial, and I hope, timely invitation to policymakers, analysts, scholars, and concerned citizens to harness insights from the ancient world in support of sound thinking and policymaking about one of the world’s most ancient—and troubled—regions in which the United States and other Western powers continue to have significant security and economic interests. I am indebted to the late Professor Augustus Richard Norton for his encouragement to undertake this project and for his wise and generous counsel on the manuscript. I am also deeply grateful to Caroline O’Connell for her superb editorial review of the manuscript and keen insights on structure and argumentation. This book expands on a preliminary essay published by *Harvard Magazine* in 2014.<sup>a</sup>

We need to think in new ways because we are entering a Middle East that is different from any the West has encountered over the past century. A recovery of knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean world and wider Near East—with the aid of scholars whose achievements and relevance to policymaking are often underappreciated by specialists of the contemporary Middle East—will be an important and useful step to navigating our way through this period of strategic uncertainty. —A. S. G.

Andrew S. Gilmour, “Classical Studies and Today’s Middle East,” *Harvard Magazine*, 16 December 2014, [harvardmagazine.com/2014/12/classics-studies-and-todays-middle-east](http://harvardmagazine.com/2014/12/classics-studies-and-todays-middle-east).



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## A MIDDLE EAST PRIMED FOR NEW THINKING

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The World Factbook (CIA, 2019)

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## INTRODUCTION

### A SUMMONS TO NEW THINKING

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*The events and patterns of the ancient world can help us think more deeply and usefully about the contemporary Middle East, giving policymakers new ways to manage uncertainty and seize diplomatic opportunity. It is time to let history—especially ancient history—expand our analytic toolkit beyond our own intellectual traditions, atomized disciplines, and prevailing analytic assumptions.*

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## EARLY INSPIRATION

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*Vincent Pascucci swept into the classroom like a muse descending from Mount Helicon,<sup>a</sup> pouring insight and inspiration into the mostly empty vessels of our young minds. A Greek class for high school freshmen was a rarity even in 1975 but our deeply learned professor of Classics had persuaded the guardians of curriculum at Phillips Academy Andover that he could sow seeds of interest in the study of Greek amid the fields of untilled freshmen.*

*He would not attempt the usual daunting approach of memorizing morphology and syntax but bring us straight to the riches of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. On the first day of class, we were handed the first two lines of each poem in Greek, given basic instruction in the pronunciation of the Greek alphabet, and sent on our way to memorize and later recite. We had only the dimmest idea of who wrathful Achilles and clever Odysseus were but when we watched our anointed muse stand before us and in stentorian tones of perfectly articulated dactylic hexameter recite Homer for us, our own voyage to living antiquity had begun. One of the great rivers flowing into our civilization was opening up to us. We may have had only a half-inflated innertube for our maiden voyage downstream, but before us lay currents of heroism, virtue, war, women, and fickle gods. This was more than enough to grab a ninth grader's attention.*

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*The next year's task was to learn the basics of Greek so that we could journey as foot soldiers with Xenophon on his ill-fated but heroic journey into the Persian Empire. Xenophon—an Athenian aristocrat with so many ties to Sparta that he would operate in both worlds at different times—wrote in a simple, laconic style that all students of Greek encounter early in their studies. Xenophon drew our rapt attention with his account of an army of Greek mercenaries hired to fight in a succession struggle in the Persian Empire, losing their Persian paymaster, then their Greek officers, and having to fight their way back to Greece through modern-day lower Iraq, Kurdistan, and Turkey to reach the Black Sea and the way home.*

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a. A traditional abode of the Muses and the largest mountain of Boeotia in Greece.

*We studied the text for evidence of self-government among the marooned soldiers and for the displays of resourcefulness and courage of the Greeks. In our determined adulation of the Greeks we tended to view the Persian military and political context of the expedition as obscure afterthoughts. It was the Greeks we were to honor by studying their literature so that one day, if we should find ourselves in some great struggle, we too could drink from the inspiration of heroes that Homer gave in archetype and Xenophon echoed in his *Anabasis*—the journey “up country.” All so that perhaps we might be like the poet-soldier Patrick Shaw-Stewart, who when facing the high explosives of Ottoman shelling in World War I in the Dardanelles, would seek solace and meaning in the *Iliad* he had studied in Greek:*

*“Was it so hard, Achilles,  
So very hard to die?  
Thou knewest and I know not—  
So much the happier I.”<sup>a</sup>*

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## ANCIENT HISTORY’S PERSISTENCE

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The study of Classics in the 1970s laid claim to preserving one of the foundations of Western Civilization. Greek literature was about contemplating the human condition in ways other ancient civilizations had not. The Greeks also had a literature and artistic culture that had fueled the Renaissance and eventually the Enlightenment, whose fruits we still enjoyed. The Cold War helped affirm the idea of the West and offered reasons for studying the roots of the West in what had been dubbed the “Graeco-Roman” world. A small number of students would put up with the difficulty of learning Greek, but a greater number were willing to learn Latin and study Roman institutions and their fusion with Germanic peoples on the march to a modern Europe. This meant that Classics played a minor supporting role in the global struggle between the West and the Soviet Bloc.

As I entered CIA in 1985, the modest presence of Classics in the wider culture and my own more focused interest were not subjects I usually discussed with my new colleagues. The job of an analyst was about managing the present, anticipating futures, and only occasionally delivering a succinct historical reference. In the wider national security community—especially at the US military service academies—one could go to a public lecture and sometimes hear a reference to Thucydides, who still had standing as the founder of the modern historical tradition and whose bipolar framework of Athenian-Spartan conflict in the Peloponnesian War seemed apt for thinking about US-Soviet competition and realism in foreign affairs. Even more rarely, a US official

a. Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Reception in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 271.

might speak publicly about being “wedged between the Scylla and the Charybdis”—an allusion to a serpent monster and a devouring whirlpool between which Odysseus had to navigate—but such occasional references were the exception that proved the rule of the ancient world’s exile from our thoughts about the contemporary world.

I thought better of using such ideas in my own official work. Making arcane references to long lost civilizations in one’s analytic product—however purposeful the intent might be—always bore the risk of an appearance of intellectual condescension to highly intelligent and successful policymakers who might be broadly educated in all fields apart from the ancient world. Analysis is about helping leaders frame difficult choices with the best information. It is never about appearing clever for cleverness’ sake. The words of my first senior boss also rang true, when after favorably reviewing my first short paper, he gently admonished me never again to force him to look up a word in the dictionary.

The salience of antiquity for my analytic work on the Middle East, nonetheless, gradually began to surface once the Cold War had ended and the whole planet seemed to experience a surge of religious and ethnic identities whose roots reached back often to ancient times. Islam was reviving globally in new political ways as Afghanistan fell to the Taliban while the Balkans were shattering and as Kurds in Iraq and Berbers in north Africa were stirring. As if to make sure that I got the point, my Persian instructor began to fulminate with wounded pride when I referred in Persian to “Alexander the Great” rather than the more neutral “Alexander the Macedonian.” In his class, Alexander could not be great because he had invaded the homeland and burned down the palace library of the Achaemenid Empire. Old identities were surging to the forefront, often across the strictures of modern borders.

A new appreciation for the interactions among ancient civilizations in the Middle East and what these ties could mean for the present began to grow as I traveled in the course of my duties. From the Strait of Gibraltar to the Tigris-Euphrates basin the vestiges of a unifying Roman Empire were everywhere, forming a substratum for subsequent civilizational deposits that animated the present. The consistent and unifying Roman architecture in Carthage, Tunis; Alexandria, Egypt; and Jerash, Jordan, forced one to contemplate what the breakup of Rome meant for the course of the region. Standing in a fourth century Roman church on Mt. Nebo looking into ancient Canaan under modern Israeli occupation while the call of the muezzin wafted from a nearby minaret reminded one that antiquity—especially Rome’s legacy—lives on in complex ways.

Political and cultural events in the post-Cold War era also begged questions about their provenance in the ancient and early medieval worlds. Why would an Arab Egyptian president in 2002 recreate the Library of Alexandria of the third century BCE and invite the world to attend its grand opening? Why would Saddam Hussein name his elite

Republican Guard divisions after Babylonian kings? Similarly, why would Egypt as the epicenter of twentieth century secular Arab nationalism keep the medieval Eagle of Saladin—the Sunni Kurdish conqueror of crusader states and destroyer of Shia Fatimid rule—on its national flag? Why would the Khorasan region of Eastern Iran and Western Afghanistan, where the revolt against Umayyad rule in the eighth century began, become a brand label for contemporary Islamic extremists? The sense of history was part of US policy when the Madrid Peace Conference convened in 1991 to reach a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement at a venue at the heart of the cosmopolitan Al-Andalus culture of eighth century Iberia where Hebrew and Arabic literary traditions flourished side-by-side.

As these linkages between old and new were appearing in my work-life, my night classes in Byzantine history and Greek offered the welcome revelation that the past offered precedents not only of conflict but also of cultural exchange and knowledge sharing. The ancient Near East had been a place where a transnational cosmopolitanism kept a toehold amid frequent warfare. Bronze age cuneiform writing had migrated with merchants from the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin to northeast Syria, Homer's epics revealed deep Near Eastern literary influences, and Hellenistic scholarship ranged collaboratively across the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. In late antiquity, Greek philosophy had been translated on Persian-Byzantine borderlands into Syriac, migrating to the Persian Sasanian court and then to the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad. The resulting transfer and expansion of Greek knowledge included commentaries on Aristotle that would eventually reach Europe in the middle ages and shape the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

This patchwork of old and new in the contemporary Middle East and the enticing prospect that pre-modern precedents of knowledge exchange could help envisage a more peaceful region sustained an analytic approach that, even if somewhat obscure, seemed to complement the heady optimism of 1990s Arab-Israeli peacemaking. When the tornado of 9/11 hit, however, the crisis focused the mind on the immediate. Strategic ways of thinking about a region where ancient and modern were woven together quickly yielded to the analytic imperative of anticipating further attacks. The creative use of history for analytic imagination and the discerning of plausible recurring patterns would have little reception with sleepless policymakers fending off the next assault on the homeland.

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## IRAQ: CATALYST FOR NEW THINKING

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Arriving in Iraq soon after US forces had entered the country and defeated Saddam Hussein's army in 2003, I began to consider once again the value of ancient history—Mesopotamia tends to do that to the visitor. One evening, a melancholy rain began to

fall over the swift currents of the Tigris, drawing my mind to the Arab chroniclers who had documented the Mongol sack of Baghdad of 1258. Then, the Tigris had reputedly run black from the texts of Arabic, Persian, Syriac, Greek, and Sanskrit that had been torn from the great Abbasid library and intellectual center—the House of Wisdom—and thrown into the river by the armies of Hulagu Khan. The river would later run red with the blood of the victims of the week-long sack. The Mongol invasion had shuttered the glory days of medieval Islamic civilization, the days of Arab reception and expansion of knowledge from most of the known world—the days when the scholars of Europe knew almost no Greek and Europeans bathed only a few times each year.

Such reflections about the cataclysm of medieval Baghdad, however, soon dissipated in the plume of exhaust belching from an M1 Abrams tank idling along the river's embankment. I was looking for one of the US soldiers—a sergeant—who regularly patrolled the streets of Baghdad and whom I had befriended over dinner one evening. He was the tip of a US spear planted in the Middle East. His duty meant encountering face to face the political, linguistic, cultural, and religious cauldron about which I had to write more abstract reports back to Washington. He had ground truths—albeit anecdotal and his alone—that went beyond the assiduously curated information digitized on my computer screen. He reminded me of the early days of intelligence gathering in the ancient Near East by military scouts of Achaemenid Persia and Alexander the Great. I envied his immediacy. I recalled that the earliest histories of the ancient Near East are preserved in an ancient Greek prose in which the verbs to see and to know have the same root—a useful linguistic truth for an analyst to remember and a reason for searching out the sergeant.

I caught up with my scout as he was returning from his patrol with the taut expression of a professional operating in a high threat environment. When the pillars of law and political order crumble to dust in war, it is the soldier on patrol with one leg hanging out of a jeep and a finger on the trigger of his long weapon, that fills the space. The burden is visible on each soldier's face. That night he sighed as he recounted how little communication he had with those locals around him. He pulled out a thin metal extension rod from his pocket and confessed that he often had to resort to threatening people with it to gain compliance from those confused by his incomprehensible commands. He was thoughtful and troubled by his failure and, turning to me, he asked pointedly “Do you have any suggestions on how this could go better?”

There we stood, the most recent, modern, lawful, and civilized invaders of the land between the rivers—Mesopotamia, the Tigris-Euphrates basin—and I, the supposed government expert, struggled to respond. The one thing I knew not to do was to ask him if he was familiar with Michel Foucault—the twentieth century French social theorist and influencer of academic approaches to the Middle East—a postmodern assault on meaning seemed ill-suited for a soldier in search of understanding. Nor would I ask if he had considered the virtues of aggregating the interests of competing groups within



political parties or appreciated the need to develop the organs of civil society between rulers and ruled. Perhaps a reminder of the universal appeal of liberalism and the proven stability and wealth generation of democratic capitalism would counsel my erstwhile dinner companion. In every potential syllogism, however, there was a disturbing lack of coherence and relevance as we sought to explain the moment in which we were living.

These potential paths for a better Middle East future lacked the persuasiveness felt back home when we preached our thoughts as victors in a long twentieth century struggle for liberal and democratic ideals. That struggle—though global in scope—was about the defense of the highest ideals of the Western tradition. It was a bloody, century-long trauma about preserving the West's interlocking foundations of human dignity, freedom, reason, law, and democratic sovereignty in the face of totalitarian alternatives. These stakes seemed to the combatants at the time—and their descendants—to have universal import. The Western leaders who had sent forces to Iraq were indisputable heirs to this victory and inspiration. Some who were shaped by it even dared to call the triumph “the end of history.”

The aspirations of peoples across the globe for such ideals continue to suggest the best of the West—once adapted to particular national environments—has universal meaning and appeal for humankind. Yet, on the banks of the Tigris—still entombing the pages of learning ruined by Hulagu—different ways of thinking echoed. Our ideas were not irrelevant but they seemed as foreign and incomprehensible to many as the commands of a foreign soldier on patrol. Their interpretation and assimilation would take time and would need an indigenous vocabulary and new institutions that no M1 Abrams tank could deliver.

A decade later, attempts at understanding the events that came to be known as the Arab Spring would lack such an indigenous vocabulary, one that could describe the upheaval's causes, aims, and implications. The phrase “Arab Spring” harkens to a Cold War moment in Prague in 1968 when nearly eight months of political liberalization eventually provoked an invasion of Soviet and other Warsaw Pact forces. When observing the Arab world's own revolt against authoritarian rule beginning in Tunis in late 2010, the western world was quick to conflate the Cold War struggle for the liberal ideal in Europe with events in the Middle East. Adopting the phrase “Arab Spring” offered a succinct banner for complex events while revealing the extent to which the turmoil in the region was perceived through an external lens rooted in the Cold War events of 1968.

Understanding the ways those outside the West—especially in the Middle East—will chart their futures is harder when the ways we think about the Middle East rely mostly on our own intellectual traditions and analytic preferences. The standard toolkit of methodologies for thinking about the Middle East includes political science, economics, security studies, and leadership analysis. Some will think from the perspectives of particular periods of Ottoman history, the subsequent history of colonization and

decolonization, anthropology, and even environmental sciences—for example, attributing the breakdown of order in Syria to the flight of drought-stricken farmers to Syria's cities and the government's inadequate response. Neologisms foreign to the region such as “political Islam” and “Islamic activism” have emerged to enable a discussion by post-Enlightenment secularists of religious peoples who bafflingly persist in non-Enlightenment ways of knowing and acting. More recently, social media analysis and its handmaiden of big data analytics are promising algorithmic insights into the political behavior of previously opaque societies. When need of large, overarching frameworks for discussion of the region's trends arises, extremism and terrorism have begun to replace colonialism as conceptual frameworks that are sufficiently broad to allow for a range of views, academic funding, and cable news interviews.

Our ways of defining the region are also captive to our own preconceptions and internal divisions. The region is where the Abrahamic religions and Hellenistic humanism intersect in three millennia of exchange, where the Indo-European migrations of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe encounter the Semitic and Afro-Asiatic speaking peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa as well as the Turkic speaking peoples of the wider Eurasian Steppe. A consensus that the region of the Middle East includes a core area of an ancient “Fertile Crescent” extending from the lower Tigris Euphrates basin to the coastal highlands of the Eastern Mediterranean begins to fray as debates over whether to include North Africa to the West and Afghanistan and even parts of Central Asia to the East persist. The Anatolian Plateau—modern-day Turkey—has the particularly broad portfolio of being a part of Central Asia thrust into the Mediterranean with equally important orientations toward Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean coastal highlands and the Tigris-Euphrates basin.

Ancient geography has served as arbiter over these conceptual debates about naming the region. The region has been a seaborne and terrestrial entrepot of ideas and markets binding economic centers across Eurasia which has favored the term “Middle East.” It is the region of most of the world's earliest civilizations and where ancient religious and ethnic minorities still secure mountainous redoubts as echoes from the past—realities rooted in geography. For such complexity, a single name has always posed risks of lacking comprehensiveness or conveying political or cultural bias. “Middle East” has emerged, despite its European, colonial orientation alongside “Near East” which tends to be reserved for academic study of the region's ancient periods. The triumph of “Middle East” is seen in the adoption of the term into Arabic and Persian and the failure for alternatives to gain a consensus. More neutral terms like West Asia carry their own baggage—why should one privilege a Hittite word “Asia” for the Eastern Aegean which was later adopted into Greek by Herodotus?

The serious scholarship within Middle East studies across a range of disciplines in recent decades of intensifying upheaval in the region has been essential to improving

our understanding of fundamental changes to governance and the Middle East state system. Conflicts that have killed hundreds of thousands, displaced millions, destroyed key infrastructure and key parts of humanity's archaeological patrimony, weakened the region's twentieth century post-Ottoman borders, and reached into European politics and society are driving much of the most recent work.

Yet, it is hard not to sense some incompleteness and even incoherence when all the views are read and one finds little agreement on the most important issues that are determining the future of the region. We are far from a consensus on large conceptual frameworks—no single framework is likely to emerge—for framing the right questions and guiding useful research on a region beset with high levels of violence, political fragmentation, and assertive regional actors. Each academic specialization can offer insights into part of the kaleidoscopic complexity of the region and will do so relying on conventions and norms of a particular discipline hatched and developed in our universities. These conceptual approaches can include an insistence on empiricism, an assumption of rational actor political and economic models, or perhaps an emphasis on a post-colonial context for thinking as well as adroit combinations of all the above.

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## ANCIENT HISTORY AS ANALYTIC OUTLIER . . .

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For the first time in centuries of Western scholarship on the region, however, the narrative presentation of history that tells a story about the past by assembling and critically analyzing primary source material in a theoretical framework is often absent. The funeral pyre for this once flourishing discipline drew from many torches of the past century. Foremost, the postmodern critique of large ideas and enduring assumptions about many aspects of human political behavior established a new consensus that we cannot know much for certain and what we do know is often conditioned by our own perceptions and interest in power. In Middle Eastern studies, this intellectual approach merged with the impassioned politics of decolonization, successfully branding traditional historians of the Middle East as complicit in a political and cultural hegemony of the colonial era. Big ideas and theories about the region with a provenance among European scholars became politically and intellectually suspect at best and anathema at worst. Ninth grade intellectual rafting trips down the rivers of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would largely cease.

The seismic shift rumbled loudly in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century amid protracted exchanges between leading “Orientalists” such as Bernard Lewis and the leader of the new approach, Edward Sa’id. From the wings of the academic stage, the postmodern Foucault breathed inspiration—or flames from the perspective of traditionalists—for the assault on history. The hostile reception in many academic circles to Samuel Huntington’s post-Cold War thesis of a clash of civilizations confirmed the triumph of the

revisionists. “Orientalism” had been summarily PNGed—made *persona non grata*—from most Middle East studies departments. In the wider field of history, preeminent historians of the Annales school, such as Fernand Braudel<sup>a</sup> became the exceptions that proved a new era had begun. The assumptions in the word “civilization”—that ancient economic specialization, trade, literacy, and urbanization could spawn enduring states—also came under assault, reducing the conceptualization of the Middle East to ever smaller analytic units.

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### . . . AND ANALYTIC FORCE MULTIPLIER

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The extent of upheaval in the Middle East requires a reconsideration of these intellectual strictures. It is not sufficient to approach the ferment in the region with only the intellectual tools and constraints of the last century—an era that in many respects no longer exists. The Middle East is not under European rule, the states delineated by European powers in many cases barely exist, and the twentieth century suppression of the region’s underlying political and social forces has ended in much of the region. In my more than three decades in government, I never encountered the ghost of Lord Kitchener—the British colonial administrator and military officer—stalking the halls of Washington’s Old Executive Office Building. There remains ample room for public debate on US diplomatic and military approaches to the region and criticism but attempts to cast the United States as the latest incarnation of nineteenth century colonialism seem anachronistic.

When the twin demands of faltering governance and a changing regional balance of power swirl and touch deep questions of political community, state borders, and the interaction of religion and modernity, we need every available conceptual approach to ask and attempt to answer the right questions. We need approaches that enable us to go beyond our own intellectual traditions, atomized disciplines, and prevailing analytic assumptions. In the world of intelligence, when particularly severe crises arrive that are poorly understood, analysts go back and reexamine their assumptions. This is such a time—a call not to reopen old academic wounds but rather, to get past them, and allow history back into the analytic mix.

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a. Fernand Braudel was a leader in the Annales school of history which emerged in the inter-war period and to which he contributed significantly beginning in the 1950s. He analyzed such enduring structures as geography, culture, civilization, and economics and proposed that long-term trends in these areas were a better foundation for the writing of history than the traditional focus on individual leaders and near-term events. This emphasis on “la longue durée” is an important counterpoint to the tendency in much journalistic and academic analysis of the Middle East to focus on wars, leaders, and other near-term events but has suffered in the mainstream along with “Orientalist” scholarship that has often addressed similar long-term forces. See: Braudel, Fernand and Immanuel Wallerstein. “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée.” *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center) 32, no. 2 (2009): 171–203.

The proposal here is that history—especially ancient history—can help us think more deeply about the most important issues in the contemporary Middle East in ways that are attuned to the region, not just our own intellectual preferences. The paucity of thematic historical writing, research, and analysis of the ancient Middle East for insight into contemporary issues has obscured basic knowledge which we can no longer afford to ignore. The changes that have engulfed the Middle East for nearly a decade and the uncertainties about the region's future offer a rich opportunity for ancient history to claim a voice in assessing a region of global importance. The study of the early civilizations of Mesopotamia, Persia, Anatolia, Arabia, and the wider Mediterranean, as well as the influences these peoples exerted on each other, tell histories that give policymakers new ways to manage uncertainty and seize diplomatic opportunity. Ancient history orients us to a deeper understanding of the present by revealing discernible patterns and precedents that provide conceptual frameworks for contemporary understanding and policy formulation.

To reconsider ancient history from the Bronze age through the middle Byzantine state for national security insight is a form of the growing sub-field of Classics known as “reception”—the study of how audiences of a particular era internalize a canon of ancient literature and interpret the meaning of past events, culture, and history for their own time. Here, it is to ask how a mostly fixed corpus of literature and events spanning the earliest civilizations of Sumer and Akkad until the rise of competing Christian and Muslim empires in the early Middle Ages can help analyze the complexity and diversity of new challenges in the Middle East. The expectation is not for deterministic answers to emerge that claim a specific correspondence between ancient and modern but rather that the events and patterns of the ancient world provide new ways of thinking about the most important contemporary issues in the Middle East. A generation has been schooled at the university level largely without the benefit of learning history that is broad, thematic, and attentive to large questions. It is time to grind a new lens from an old discipline, but not for reopening academic debates that often were politicized and which sometimes produced more heat than light. Instead, the task is to expand the breadth and depth of our thinking at a critical moment in the region's modern history.

The revival of ancient history as an analytic thinking tool also offers the potential to think in new ways about the role of the United States in the region by mapping the ancient communities, identities, and patterns which US policies and actions will inevitably affect. The United States has been in the Middle East since its early nineteenth century wars with Barbary pirates, inheriting much of the political and military influence of a collapsing British Empire, confronting Soviet Influence in the Cold War, and eventually serving as guarantor of the region's supply of oil to global energy markets. Throughout these two centuries, the United States has rarely had to face directly the complexity of the region's internal political and religious culture. In recent decades, however, it has had to face a political and cultural kaleidoscope head on. The defining and pursuit of

US interests require a range of analytic approaches—including the insights of ancient history to assess trends and inform decision-making.

To many post-modern theorists and to thinkers who emphasize the region's past century of colonization and decolonization, the quest for such understanding risks charges of what is derisively known as "essentialism." It would be an attempt to create a fixed "other" that can be ranked in cultural and political terms as inferior. The restoration of narrative history that posits theories about events and their meaning with large conceptual frameworks is inevitably freighted with political consequences.

By contrast, the proposal here is that the examination of the ways in which the past echoes into the present in the Middle East is to take history as seriously as the peoples of the region do. It means showing deference to the possibility of diverse ways of political organization and expressions of religious identity that are indigenous to the region and not always fully discernible with an analytic tool kit that privileges the political assumptions and analytic methods of the post-Enlightenment world. An analytic method that takes *ihitiram* ("respect" in both Arabic and Persian) as a starting point also might lead to understanding and even policy outcomes for the United States that can endure in the region.

The near complete failure of the Arab Spring to usher in a new post-authoritarian era is a summons for a new thinking for a region where the expectations of a western liberal ideal spreading to the Middle East need the leavening of historical context and analysis rooted in the region. The analytic method of ancient history respects the ideas and traditions that the people of the region will themselves bring to the political, economic, security and religious challenges that loom.



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## CHAPTER 1

### ANALYSIS ENTERING UNCHARTED WATERS

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*The Middle East is in the throes of its most significant transitions in governance and the regional state system since the end of World War I. The case for ancient history begins with a recognition of this tumult and of the insufficiency of the analytic methods we developed in the last century, which were predicated on a Cold War power distribution and a spread of secular nationalism in the region. The key analytic questions arising from a new and uncertain period in the region's history, include: the strategic intent of states, their political development and posture toward religion, as well as the potential contours of an emerging regional state system. These uncertainties and their policy implications will be addressed in chapters 2–5 through an examination of the patterns and precedents of ancient history.*

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*Looking down at the Rock of Gibraltar and the North African coast. Image @ Phillip Lange/Shutterstock.com*

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## THINKING BEYOND OUR PILLARS OF HERCULES

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In the geographic imagination of the ancient Greeks, the end of their familiar Mediterranean world stood at the Pillars of Hercules—our modern Strait of Gibraltar—beyond which lay the vast and unknown Ocean, conceived as an all-encompassing river that was the source of all the waters of the earth. The mysterious world beyond the Pillars of Hercules was where Plato had placed the lost city of Atlantis. The pillars drew their name from Hercules, who had conducted a series of twelve nearly impossible labors to atone for having murdered his family during a fit of madness induced by the goddess Hera. The tenth labor required him to venture to the extreme west to fetch cattle from an island guarded by a three-head monster and, according to Greek legend, upon his return Hercules proclaimed his success by erecting two pillars at the entrance to the Mediterranean. The northern pillar was understood in antiquity to be the Rock of Gibraltar and the southern pillar as various mountain peaks at the northern tip of Morocco. Such a mixture of myth and topography was not unusual in the early approaches to what would eventually become the discipline of geography.

The comparable Herculean task for those seeking to understand the meaning and direction of the contemporary and increasingly unfamiliar Middle East is to voyage beyond our conceptual pillars. The ways we have understood the Middle East for decades have led us, especially those looking into the region from outside, to make mental maps of how the region governs itself and how power is distributed in a regional state system. As these points of reference erode in a period of significant transition, a less well understood, broad, and different conceptual space lies before us. An analytic summons to parts unknown is upon us—a call that invites us to draw, in part, upon the patterns and precedents of the ancient world to chart our way.

The need for new ways to understand more fully what is unfolding in the Middle East has its own allegory in American myth. Dorothy's tornadic fall into the Land of Oz hints at some of the disorientation seasoned observers of the Middle East might feel trying to make sense of a region seemingly blown apart in recent years. Many of the fixed landmarks that ordered our thoughts are gone, there are familiar faces but in new guise, and a desire to return to a less uncertain time gnaws at the mind. Like Dorothy, the analyst can pick from many sources of helpful advice on how to proceed and the stakes are high for success or failure. In the midst of the turmoil, we can understandably turn to our fellow observers of the region and declare as Dorothy did "Toto...I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

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## POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE SKEPTICISM ABOUT ANCIENT HISTORY'S RELEVANCE

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In the face of such challenges, the world of policymaking and intelligence analysis tends to view—with the exception of exchanges with scholars at conferences—historical discourse and, worse still, discourse about historical discourse that occurs on government time as exacting too high an opportunity cost. When an analyst is spending time thinking historically, the analyst is forfeiting time and treasure that could be dedicated to the immediate mission. Inboxes overflow with fast turnaround requests from decision-makers perpetually facing security and other threats to US interests and who have high expectations that intelligence analysis will function as the nation's "first line of defense." Soldiers, citizens, and allies also have claims on the analysis developed within the Intelligence Community. At the core of the analytic profession lies a basic duty to warn policymakers and this forward-looking and essential function necessarily orients the analytic mission toward the future. History is what you were supposed to have learned before you entered on duty and history is presumed to be—like some basic ingredient in your favorite recipe—present but not necessary to discuss.

The use of ancient history faces the additional hurdle that it must often be contextualized at the cost of additional drafting for the analyst and of increased reading or listening time for the policymaker. The more senior the audience, the less time is allotted for reception of the product, making high-impact uses of ancient history difficult. One senior intelligence official once asked me to rehearse a three-minute briefing to deliver the next day in a meeting he would have with senior policymakers. The rehearsal brief elicited a terse "good" followed by "but that was three and a half minutes." The next day I returned to my seat after delivering the high-stakes briefing as my senior smiled and clicked off the timer on his watch. I had respected the rule of the opportunity cost: never forget what busy people could be doing instead of reading or listening to you and always make it worth their while.

The use of ancient history, which traditionally suffers from an absence of data, also risks spurring doubts that any judgments derived from the distant past will lack sufficient evidence to form sound intelligence judgments. Reliable data is the preeminent source of authority for intelligence judgments and its absence can prompt reasonable charges of analytic speculation. We live in an era when hard drives for home use can provide a four-terabyte data storage capacity. This amounts to about 50,000 trees made into paper and printed on 250 million pages. What analyst would be inclined to quote a single, even renowned ancient source—such as Herodotus, who bears for some the weighty title "Father of History"—who used uncertain methods of information gathering and included mythic language when that analyst could reach for a terabyte of publicly available data on a specific topic and analyze it with the latest computational method?

The data gap between our knowledge of the ancient world and our information about contemporary trends, however, may be narrowing as applications of technologies such as ground penetrating radar, sonar, DNA analysis, and the use of geographic information systems that assess data from a variety of geographic sources begin to reshape the field of archaeology. Previously unknown sites from antiquity can be identified for excavation and sites that cannot be easily excavated can be analyzed with a variety of these and other advanced survey techniques. The canal that the Persian King Xerxes ordered to be dug across the peninsula of Mount Athos, for example, so that he could deliver a death blow in 480 BCE to the recalcitrant Greeks on the fringe of his empire has been located and evaluated by such techniques, confirming Herodotus' written account of the canal's existence.

A backward-looking orientation, a need to contextualize for the policymaker, and the risks of a low-data judgment derived from ancient information are significant but perhaps not the main challenge to the regular use of ancient history in thinking about the contemporary Middle East in intelligence and policymaking environments. More broadly, skeptics can charge that what does not exist cannot serve as an analytic method for contemporary policy issues. In this argument, the Middle East has changed so much since antiquity that the presumption of useful precedent, of preexisting patterns, and of a continuous bond between eras separated by centuries cannot be analytically useful.

The evidence for such a transformation is substantial. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 ended the need for European powers to bypass the region on their maritime routes to markets in India and China. The result has been the partial integration of the region into the modern global economy—an economic transformation which oil production and exports from the region demonstrate. The region's ancient arable lands have become desiccated altering settlement patterns from antiquity, long-range missiles and deep-water navies have conquered once formidable geographic barriers in warfare, and the advent of an information and communications technology revolution has changed the region's notions of political community and eroded traditional authority. Modernity, in this view, has begun its inexorable march toward transforming the region and there is no turning back. For the skeptic, ancient history is a backward, rear view that works against the forward thinking needed for an unfolding, even if incomplete, modern era in the Middle East.

Over all these changes, modern nationalism casts a broad political shadow. Loyalty to the nation state—the nationalism professed in the American and French Revolutions and which would become a defining force of nineteenth and twentieth century politics in the West—entered the politics and societies of the region as they secured their post-colonial independence. The political modernity of secular nationalism arrived in a region liberated from the traditional grasp of the Ottoman sultanate in 1922 and the nominal religious authority of the last Ottoman Caliph over all Muslims in 1924. An allegiance to the state—at least in the strategic aspirations of departing colonial powers

such as the United Kingdom, France, and Italy—would transcend ancient allegiances to clan, tribe, ethnic group, and religion. Citizenship in a nation state was to eclipse Druze, Alawi, Sunni, Copt, Kurd and Shia as the primary political identity of the region's diverse inhabitants.

Such a view, however, risks promoting a decidedly western approach toward modernization that exports a particular mix of individualism, secularism, nationalism, and industrialization the West experienced. Thinking about the Middle East as it undergoes a period of significant transformation should encompass not only the conceptual framework of western modernization but also ways of thinking, ideas of community, and perceptions of national identity which have their provenance within the region in the pre-modern era. Ancient history—even when understood through the West's own ancient historians, geographers, and philosophers—allows us to think about the fitful process of modernization with an appreciation for the indigenous context in which progress will unfold. Perhaps the greatest analytic challenge for students of the Middle East, as well other non-western regions, will be to understand how ancient civilizations in their twenty-first century molds are encountering the spread of modernity hatched in the West. The study of ancient history can prevent us from becoming a latter-day Lord Kitchener, presiding over an intellectual colonialism that sees the world through our own lens.

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## THE ENCUMBRANCE OF COLD WAR ANALYTIC ASSUMPTIONS

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For the United States and its allies in Europe, the dominant lens it relied upon throughout the second half of the twentieth century to interpret the workings of government and society in the Middle East had its origins in the Cold War struggle. This lens tended to presume that either socialist or liberal capitalist models of governance would shape the course of political, economic, and social development in the region. The unfolding era was about how modernity would arrive in the Middle East and the global dominance of two superpowers established a conceptual framework that suggested whatever course the region's states would follow, outsiders and their ideas about modernization would play major roles.

Forging close ties with the new regimes offered the United States and other outside actors a more practical route for securing influence in the region than engaging in the risks and complexities of mass politics. Nationalism may have come to the region through the West, but its associated democratic forces were suppressed by ruling elites, relieving outsiders of the analytic burden of understanding what complex societal currents flowed around the citadels of power. From the early 1950s until the beginning of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, questions about governance could be limited to assessing which power center—civilian, military, or royal—would rule over the citizens and

subjects of the region. Thinkers who knew the region's languages, tribes, religions, and ancient history—such as T. E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, who had modeled regional expertise in the early twentieth century—were important to recruit and did persist in government. Still, the presumption that local friendly elites could guide any foreigner through the thicket outside the palace endured.

The regional state system that developed in the Cold War also easily fit into our established modern conceptions about how states operate. Foreign policy realists could see the rough balance between US and Soviet-allied states as confirmation of their understanding about the role of power, interest, and competition in defining a state system. Liberal internationalists could point to the rise of multinational regional institutions like the Arab League, the role of UN Resolutions 242 and 338 in establishing the parameters for an Arab-Israeli peace, and the gradual progress toward the region's integration into the global economy.

The Cold War also left a conceptual legacy of powerful external actors dominating the regional state system. Turkey's assimilation into the West's security architecture meant that it acted primarily as a European state securing NATO's southern flank rather than as an Ottoman successor state capable of asserting its own interests in the Middle East. Egypt was a regional leader in Arab nationalism but its governments functioned either under the security umbrella of first the Soviet Union and then the United States. The Arab-Israeli war in 1973 was concluded with significant engagement by the Cold War superpowers and a brief threat of nuclear escalation. Iran under the shah had exercised more independence than any other regional state but the succeeding Islamic Republic of Iran had seen its wider revolutionary pretensions founder in an all-consuming and isolating war with Iraq and in a Western-led strategy of containment.

As the United States and other external actors looked into the post-colonial Middle East through a Cold War lens, the states of the region began to develop their own political identities and ways of governance. The predominant ideology for the newly independent republics—mostly those along the Mediterranean littoral as well as in Iraq and Yemen—was Arab nationalism. The new nationalist movement had its theorists such as the French-educated Michel Aflaq who would found the Ba'th Party in 1946 and its dominant voice in Egyptian President Gamal Nasser. His political victory in the 1956 Suez crisis against the United Kingdom and Israel helped catapult him to Arab political preeminence and confirm him briefly as the leader of Arab nationalism. The focus of Nasser and Arab nationalism was anti-colonialism, sometimes Marxist in rhetoric, and persistently anti-Israel. In the conceptual framework of Arab nationalism, Israel was a part of the colonial, crusading West that, like Britain, France, and Italy, would need to depart the region. The failure of four major Arab-Israeli wars to achieve this goal led, in part, to Arab states transferring the responsibility for confrontation with Israel to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) at their summit in Rabat in 1974.

The successful ruler had a monopoly on coercive force and a monopoly on the information that was broadcast in the pre-internet era from terrestrial radio and television stations. Cults of personality and networks of patronage among the ruler's favored family members as well as among business and military elites created durable authoritarian regimes. The social contract for citizens was to accept the rulers as legitimate and forfeit political activity in return for government jobs, education, affordable basic commodities, and a domestic peace. The democracy that was, in principle, attendant to nationalism in the West was absent but many new Arab states could still appear modern, though imperfect in their authoritarian modes of governance.

In the non-Arab Middle East, the export of European ideas of nationalism had also successfully seeded the political ground. Kemal Atatürk dismantled the vestiges of the Ottoman Sultanate and Caliphate with a radical secularism in modern-day Turkey. Theodor Herzl's political Zionism would eventually define the new state of Israel in 1948. Iran in the early 1960s under an increasingly autocratic shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, launched a secular program of modernization and economic reform while introducing Western cultural norms and political institutions at a rapid, and destabilizing pace. Iran's secular nationalism, like Egypt's, drew upon an ancient civilizational past to buttress its modern political identity and aspirations.

The conservative, religiously-based Arab monarchies were awkward dissenters from the surging wave of nationalism. As Arabs, they could not openly dissociate from Nasser and his new political ideology and were obliged to participate in the Arab League, whose headquarters had opened in the nationalist epicenter in Cairo. Nonetheless, the monarchies—with the exception of Jordan, which bordered Israel—did not consider it a political necessity to wage war and largely avoided direct military confrontation with Israel. Their confrontation with the new Jewish state was serious but so was their confrontation with the mass politics and secularization permeating the new Arab republics. The Hashemite monarch of Iraq, Faisal II, was killed with his family in 1958, and King Idris in Libya had been forced into exile in 1969. For the surviving monarchies, the new era of nationalism and its secular ideological underpinnings posed more of a danger to their rule than any imagined invasion by a distant Israeli Army.<sup>a</sup>

The conservative monarchies also maintained religiously-based political identities to legitimate their rule, laying claim to their part of the Muslim *ummah* by dint of descent from the Prophet Muhammad. New ideas of nationhood and secularism were not only unnecessary but potentially hostile to the faith. The emerging religious mass movement in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood that combined nationalism with pre-existing Muslim identity was also unacceptable to monarchies that saw mass politics and republicanism in any guise as threats to their rule. The extraction and sale of oil and natural gas deposits provided the foreign exchange earnings needed to maintain government

a. The more recent antipathy of the region's monarchies toward the Muslim Brotherhood is the latest manifestation of these longstanding palace fears of mass political movements.

spending for a social contract similar to the nationalist regimes: forfeiture of political activity in return for government jobs, education, affordable basic commodities, and a domestic peace. The level of repression needed to maintain this contract would never be as high as that in the mostly poorer secular nationalist states, not only because of exportable natural resources available to most of the monarchies but also because of their claims to ancient, religious legitimacy.

These emerging trends in regional politics and governance would become part of the larger Cold War lens through which the West understood the region. Nationalists found patronage, for the most part, from the Soviet Union, while the monarchies who had been allied with the United Kingdom formed strategic partnerships with the United States. Washington would succeed in adding Turkey and eventually Egypt to its alliance system aimed at containing the Soviet Union. The Arab-Israeli conflict—though sustained, in part by ancient religious fissures—was understood more as a conflict between competing territorial nationalisms to be negotiated according to the terms of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338 under an implicit US and Soviet diplomatic umbrella. The region's mosaic of religious and ethnic identities, ancient rivalries, and historically driven aspirations mattered to few in the West who were pre-occupied with avoiding mutually assured nuclear destruction.

An analytic framework for understanding a part of the world in which the United States had little previous practical experience before World War II had emerged that tracked with our own way of thinking, our global position, and the needs of our Cold-War interests in the region. We conceptualized the workings of governance in the Middle East in ways that almost certainly revealed more about ourselves than about the region. Assumptions that the Cold War's modernization theories would define the future of the region, that elites could be relied upon once they had become allied, and that an interest in stability would often have to supersede an interest in promoting democratic institutions seemed plausible well into the 1970s.

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## BELLWETHERS FOR NEW THINKING ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST

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This lens through which the United States and its allies understood the Middle East for decades has begun to blur. The United States—and the West more broadly—needs new conceptual approaches for understanding the Middle East's emerging actors, ideas, as well as its fluid political and social institutions. The cognitive challenge is especially acute because our experience in the region has been only recent and the demise of narrative history with its theories and marshaling of evidence over large expanses of time has deprived us of alternative, less recent ways of looking at events in the region.

The first signs that this legacy conceptual framework would be insufficient came with the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. The clashing nationalisms of Israel and the PLO had drawn the PLO into Lebanon and begun a process of internal fragmentation and external intervention that would hobble the Lebanese state. To be Lebanese in a modern, national sense yielded to demonstrating some other, narrower communal identity. The dominant Christian Maronite community had served as custodians of the Lebanese state but quickly lost their monopoly on force. Over the next sixteen years, the Lebanese civil war would demonstrate the primacy of all the traditional allegiances and identities the modern idea of citizenship and the nation state were supposed to transcend. The modern nationalisms in Israel and the Arab world would persist and contribute to the violence in Lebanon, but the resurgence of old identities and allegiances provided significant fuel for the lengthy civil war.

The US and broader Western attachment to ways of conceptualizing governance in the Middle East would get a more profound shock with the advent of the Iranian revolution in 1979. That a leading cleric of Shia Islam could harness Iranian disaffection with the shah, innovate a new form of religious nationalism, defeat the shah's formidable security state, and seize power at the center of the Middle East at the expense of US interests could find no explanation in the conceptual frameworks we used to understand the politics of the region. If there was opposition to the United States, it was supposed to come from states allied with the Soviet Union, such as Iraq, Syria, or Egypt—before its accommodation to Israel's permanence in the region and its shift to Washington's orbit. The limited expressions of Islam in politics that we had encountered in the palaces of conservative Sunni monarchies were acceptable because we shared with them an opposition to communism. Islam in the modern era, until the Iranian revolution, had not posed a plausible challenge to the West's self-conception and the export of its modern, secular, and liberal ideals.

The Iranian revolution was especially galling to our worldview because it contested the relationship between religion and politics that we in the West had presumed to be settled permanently by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. With the end of the Thirty Years' War, the principles of religious toleration and the right to private worship came into force in the West to end the era of states going to war on the pretext of religion. Religion and state power had acquired some dividing walls meant to keep the peace. Four centuries later, in the middle of the Cold War over the meaning of the West's liberal and democratic tradition, a third way from an old civilization had brazenly dissented from this settled framework. Other states with ancient civilizational pasts such as India and China were choosing to sort out their development trajectories broadly within the framework of secular modernity. Iran's new quest was much less clear.

The upheavals in Lebanon and Iran could be discounted as anomalies on the path to modernization that otherwise persisted haltingly throughout the rest of the region.



The Muslim Brotherhood had not seized power in any Sunni state, and oil wealth had underwritten an infrastructure revolution throughout the Gulf monarchies. Lebanon's descent into civil war could be explained as a consequence of the failure to secure a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace settlement. Iran may have succeeded in establishing clerical rule, but it was isolated and mired in a war with Iraq, raising doubts about whether the revolution would survive. A modernizing lens from the West's own historical experience could still be defended, even as it was proving in other ways insufficient for understanding a region on the cusp of change.

The Middle East remained a volatile and dangerous region for US interests, but it also remained intelligible with the lens we had deployed for at least four decades for interpreting governance and the contours of the regional state system. Authoritarian regimes in various hues and degrees of intensity persisted, perpetuating the social contract of meeting basic needs in return for acquiescence in a regime. The Middle East's role as another regional battleground in US-Soviet competition also made regime stability—not understanding societal trends—the measure of success in the region, further obscuring undercurrents of political, religious, and ethnic dissent roiling outside regimes.

The state system remained intact when, after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US and allied military response affirmed the permanence of the Iraq-Kuwait border and the need to defend a conservative oil monarchy allied with the United States. The convening of the Madrid Conference to help secure a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace followed in 1991 to reconcile the competing nationalist claims of Arabs—especially Palestinians—and Israelis, suggesting again that the Arab-Israeli conflict was the central issue of regional security.

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## WE ARE NO LONGER “IN KANSAS”

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The first conceptual earthquake came on September 11, 2001. The terrorist assaults of 9/11—the most serious foreign attack on US soil since the War of 1812—began the urgent summons for new analytic frameworks for understanding the region. A sub-state actor, spawned in part from forces allied with the United States in the Cold War against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, was now invoking one of the world's major religious traditions in successful violent attacks against the United States. The role religious identity and ideas played in motivating the attacks would be debated, but the United States faced the new strategic reality that violent actors operating outside state control and claiming to fight in the name of religion could exert strategic leverage over the US homeland. This was outside the conception of Westphalia that we had considered durable in the twentieth century Middle East and outside the presumption of secularism that was supposed to undergird the development of the region as it modernized.

The events of 9/11 and their aftermath also upended the assumption of the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict to the region's security, already in doubt as a second outbreak of violent Palestinian opposition in 2000 to the Israeli occupation elicited no supporting armies from the wider Arab world, a world that was by then living on the embers of previous flames of Arab nationalism. The post 9/11 US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq further shifted the strategic center of gravity of the wider Middle East away from the Eastern Mediterranean. These interventions also inexorably drew the United States into the powerful ethnic, religious, political, and security currents that had long been presumed to be the management responsibility of allied palaces. The containment of the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War, in hindsight, now seemed to have included as well the containment of sub-state identities and allegiances.

The imprecise framework of terrorism surged to the foreground in the strategic thinking of policymakers, citizens, and analysts throughout the world to help explain what had occurred on 9/11 and how to prevent its recurrence. Definitions of terrorism emphasized—and still do—acts of unlawful violence, political motivation, and the illegitimacy of targets attacked by terrorists, words that are authoritative but which have left open wide avenues of interpretation and little consensus regarding the underlying causes of the phenomenon. Terrorism had descended like a *deus ex machina* onto the world stage, organizing a global coalition with wide political support to counter its perpetrators. The coalition, however, has held together more because of the agreed impermissibility of the tactic and less because of an agreed conceptual framework for understanding the roots of the phenomenon.

The *coup de grace* for any claim that the analytic assumptions and attendant policy frameworks from the Cold War and its aftermath would be sufficient for understanding the new events unfolding in the wider Middle East ended with the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late 2010. The rupturing of social compacts within most of the secular nationalist regimes has led to weakened or failed states and the rise of sub-state actors that operate across borders and undermine national governance. Amid the hundreds of thousands killed and the millions displaced, many of the region's twentieth century, post-Ottoman borders have weakened. The region's seismic disruptions have also driven waves of migration, overflowing into European regional and domestic politics. These levels of change to state governance in the Middle East have not been so extensive since World War I, making the summons to reconsider our assumptions and develop useful conceptual frameworks about the internal workings of these societies urgent.

A deficit in unifying political ideology emerged in the Middle East in the wake of failed secular nationalist models which Islam has been only partially successful at filling. Islamic political forces of the Muslim Brotherhood during 2012–2013 briefly held power in Egypt through the ballot, while insurgent forces of the terrorist Islamic State imposed their brutal, self-styled caliphate over much of the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin

from 2013 to 2017. The ways Islamic institutions and Muslim leaders will manage the antecedent forces of secular nationalism, liberal political ideas and institutions, as well as internal sectarian conflicts remain open questions. Conceptual approaches that presume that the region's recovery and development will eventually relegate religion—as in the West—to a private sphere decoupled from the state are likely to prove insufficient for understanding how Islam and politics will interact.

Changes to the regional state system have also been dramatic. In place of the Arab-Israeli conflict, an ethnically and religiously tinged struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for wider influence has emerged as the region's new political center of gravity. Iran—beginning in the late 1990s—began to assert growing political and military influence in the region while Saudi Arabia has contested this rise politically and sometimes militarily. The United States and Russia are once again competitors for regional influence, but increasingly autonomous regional powers—principally, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—are seeking to redistribute power and spheres of influence.

We are no longer able to presume, to the degree we once did, a region of well-defined states, durable social compacts, authoritarian regimes, repressed political, religious, and economic forces, and superpowers dominating regional powers. Governments no longer secure borders, information, or people as they once did. From the region's current upheaval, five large analytic and policy challenges have emerged that must be considered in new ways because this new environment has exposed the limits of our old ways of thinking.

- What are useful ways to think about the interactions between the region's ancient geography and contemporary state interests and actions?
- What are useful ways to conceptualize the challenges of political development across the region?
- What are useful ways to think about the future role of religion in the region's diverse societies?
- How can we understand how states in the Middle East might form a new regional state system?
- What opportunities for diplomacy and peacemaking might emerge in a re-ordered regional state system?

For each of these challenges, the patterns and precedents of ancient history offer conceptual frameworks to manage uncertainty and create new policy options. We need to think beyond the Pillars of Hercules that defined the twentieth century Middle East and whose familiar analytic waters have decanted into new analytic seas. We are in a new era that requires the introduction to our thinking

of patterns and precedents that are rooted in the region and which have the potential to help us better understand and shape a positive future for the region.



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## CHAPTER 2

### ANCIENT SPACES AND MEMORIES ENDURE

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*In a Middle East where twentieth century national borders have frayed, perceptions of earlier civilizations—earlier political geography—are filling the conceptual space. Turkey, Egypt, Iran, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict offer especially useful examples of the ways in which modern day regional actors conduct their foreign diplomacy and security policies consistent with ancient political geography and identity. The civilizational antecedent of a modern state can also inform our understanding of which peoples the modern state believes it is entitled to govern or influence as well as the challenges of repatriation and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons. Unprecedented information and communications networks permit regional actors to pursue ancient patterns of influence without recourse to military conquest. In a region of failed secular nationalism, weakened borders, and no longer dominant external military powers, such demonstrations of ancient spheres of influence are likely to grow.*

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*The Persian Empire, ca 500 BCE*

From William R. Shepherd, "The Historical Atlas," 1923

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*A replica (enlarged) of the Treaty of Kadesh presented in 1970 by the Turkish government to the United Nations.*

UN Photo by Teddy Chen, 24 September 1970

One of the jewels in the crown of post-World War II New York's global culture has been the presence of the headquarters of the United Nations. During the late 1970s, to enter the flag-draped UN plaza along the East River and visit the General Assembly Hall and the smaller space of the Security Council chamber was to find hope for relief from the tense state of the planet during the Cold War. This was the space dedicated to serve as a buffer to conflict, the space that would affirm law and diplomacy and declare that the world had grown too small and dangerous to tolerate the anarchy in international relations that had persisted since the first city states in Bronze Age Mesopotamia recorded their conflicts. The embedded optimism of the institution remains and continues to draw global pilgrims—and member states—to its halls and chambers.

Near the entrance to the Security Council, a copy of an agreement between the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II and his Hittite counterpart Muwatallis dating from around 1260 BCE has borne witness—since 1970 when the government of Turkey presented it—to the world's first known peace treaty or non-aggression pact. The Treaty of Kadesh refers to the town along the Orontes river where thousands of chariots of the Egyptian and Hittite armies clashed inconclusively in 1275 BCE as Egypt sought to expand its control in the Eastern Mediterranean into Hittite-controlled areas of Syria. The ensuing strategic stalemate led to a treaty in which both sides pledged not to attack the other.

The presence of a copy of these stone tablets at the epicenter of modern world diplomacy has testified to the idea that what happened in the distant past is worth remembering, especially for those who are writing—whether as citizens, scholars, diplomats or analysts—their own first drafts of history. The meaning of the words of the early Indo-European language of Hittite will depend on the interpretative lens the viewer uses—a lens that will be formed, in part, by the times in which that viewer is living. A late twentieth century reader of the Treaty of Kadesh, for example, might have seen an important document attesting to the beginning of the long and incomplete process of regulating conflict, establishing the rule of law among nation states, and affirming the abiding linkage between diplomacy and peacemaking. It is reasonable to surmise that whatever UN authority during the US-Soviet nuclear standoff approved the display of the Treaty of Kadesh outside the UN Security Council chamber intended to affirm these principles and peaceful aspirations.

The Treaty of Kadesh, for all its potential universalism in diplomacy, is also a particular political and geographic story from the ancient Near East. An observer in the twenty-first century of the cuneiform display might reflect on the violence once again underway near the Orontes and be struck by the echo of competing powers clashing again in the perennial Syrian vortex of Middle Eastern politics. In its elemental form, Kadesh is the story of the interaction of political power and geographic space, a story that predates the establishment of nation states and the ordering of space along agreed and recognized boundaries. At Kadesh, concepts of national identity, civilization, and

contested borders were present in ways that are increasingly recognizable in the contemporary Middle East. Egyptians and Hittites once clashed where Arab, Israeli, Turkish, and Iranian protagonists now wrestle for advantage, each crossing national borders and each bearing a different civilizational history.

The first attempt in the aftermath of the Cold War to re-introduce a civilizational discourse—an approach that seemed to many in the academic world non-empirical and a throwback to a politically-motivated Orientalist view of the Middle East and the wider Islamic world—came with the publication in 1993 of Samuel Huntington's essay "A Clash of Civilizations?"<sup>a</sup> In that controversial and influential work, one claim received particular criticism: that "Islam has bloody borders." Twenty-five years after Huntington's essay and eight years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, Huntington's claim in retrospect seems most controversial for its selectivity. The violence in large parts of the Islamic world—a civilization divided within and along its diverse borders—is apparent but what civilization has not had a contested and sometimes violent periphery? Determining gradations of current and past conflict among civilizations is likely to founder on disputes over the terms of any comparison.

In a Middle East where twentieth century borders have frayed, an analytically more useful question, however, remains whether perceptions of earlier civilizations by all parties—perceptions of earlier political geography—are filling the conceptual space where fixed borders once dominated. The possibility that old empires and civilizations can echo politically into the present—like the terrain in the civilizational battle of Kadesh—suggests that analytic methods that exclude the possibility of historic memory will be insufficient in assessing a region working its way through significant change. This use of history does not seek anecdotal reprises of particular events to score political points against a foe but rests on a broader and objective view of the past. History to be useful and to generate creative and effective policy cannot be weaponized in tendentious argument; it has to be understood through more than one lens. It must be understood through different interpretations and memories of the past.

Thinking in civilizational terms and creating analytic insight and policy options for the contemporary Middle East begins with an understanding of what lens each actor in the region uses to perceive political and geographic space. That lens is likely to see beyond the borders of the twentieth century and into a geographic space that has roots in the past. Such an approach requires suspending the long-running debate between postmodern theorists who have allied with the politics of decolonization against their intellectual predecessors who studied the region deeply during and in the immediate aftermath of its decolonization. That debate has kept objective uses of history blocked from the ways we think conceptually about the region—a price too high to pay when the need for new thinking to temper conflict and foster new social compacts is growing.

a. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3 (1993).



Thinking about space in political terms has its roots in the earliest works of geography produced in the Greek and Roman worlds. Hecataeus—who came from the Ionian town of Miletus along the Persian-Greek frontier in what is today Turkey’s Aegean coast—documented his travels in the early fifth century BCE around the Mediterranean and Black Sea in his foundational geographic work *Periegesis* (Travels Around the World). He also functioned as a prominent envoy for the Greeks of Ionia and his political activities seem to have been rooted in his geographic knowledge.

When Hecataeus’ understanding of Persian power led him to try to keep his fellow Greeks from revolting from Persian rule, he failed. Nonetheless, once Persia crushed the revolt, he was the geographer chosen to represent the Greeks of Ionia in negotiating terms with Persia. Similarly, the Greek geographer Strabo, writing in his *Geography*—a survey of the entire world as it was understood in seven BCE and which drew upon the accumulated geographic knowledge and speculations circulating in the Graeco-Roman world—put the political import of geography at the very beginning of his work. He states simply at the opening of Book 1 that geography is supposed to have “utility” for “the activities of statesmen and commanders.”<sup>a</sup>

This ancient idea that political order and military action are intrinsically related to geographic space invites us to think with a different mental map—a map that allows us to challenge our preconceptions of the geographic space demarcated in the twentieth century and to see the region through the eyes of its inhabitants and the civilizations that preceded them. We need not resolve debates about Michel Foucault and Orientalism or pass judgment on the durability of the national borders of today’s Middle East. We might do well, however, to consider that thinking beyond the political geography of the post-Ottoman period invites us to think more historically.

Turkey has been invoking its pre-modern past in recent years. In 2015, for example, Turkish President Erdogan publicly surrounded himself with costumed palace guards representing successive Turkic ancestral armies of the Steppe—beginning with the Huns of the fourth century.<sup>b</sup> In 2017, the same Turkish president traveled to the site of the Seljuk victory over a Byzantine army in 1071 that laid the foundation for the rise of the Ottomans and the Islamization of the Anatolian plateau.<sup>c</sup> In 2018 President Erdogan recited an Islamic prayer in Hagia Sophia—the former religious epicenter of

a. Strabo and Horace Leonard Jones. *The Geography of Strabo*, (Harvard University Press, 1917).

b. Agence France Presse, “Turkish president mocked for adopting ‘Lord of the Rings’-like costumes for palace guards,” *South China Morning Post*, January 13, 2015, accessed August 11, 2015, [www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1679028/turkish-president-mocked-adopting-lord-rings-costumes-palace-guards](http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1679028/turkish-president-mocked-adopting-lord-rings-costumes-palace-guards).

c. “Recalling Manzikert: Turkey’s President Recalls a Millennium-old Battle,” *The Economist*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/09/09/turkeys-president-invokes-a-millennium-old-battle> (Accessed June 8, 2018).

the Byzantine Empire—dedicating the prayer to the Ottoman conqueror of Byzantine Constantinople.<sup>a</sup>

A similar revival of civilizational discourse has begun to penetrate other parts of the Middle East. In 2014, Arab insurgents proclaimed the re-founding of a seventh century caliphate, and in 2015 a senior Iranian official publicly declared that Iran has always been an empire and that Baghdad “has become part of this empire.”<sup>b</sup> Similarly, an Iranian member of Parliament in 2017 petitioned the Iranian government to allow public celebrations of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great as Iranian public support for the ancient King grows as a symbol of pre-Islamic Persian nationalism.<sup>c</sup> In the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt hosted a week-long celebration in 2018 of the city of Alexandria’s ancient ties to Greece and Cyprus,<sup>d</sup> while competing Palestinian and Israeli claims to sovereignty over Jerusalem that rely on narratives drawn from the Bronze Age through the early days of Islam continued to fuel violence in 2018.

Conceptualizing geographic space in ancient civilizational ways assists in defining and potentially answering strategic questions about key actors in the region. These questions are strategic because like the Greek strategos, or general, who had to combine heavy and light infantry and sometimes cavalry into a single fighting force, they require assembling specific analytic topics into a coherent, larger explanatory whole. The strategic questions that flow from a reconsideration of the region’s space in civilizational terms include: How do precedents of past conquest shape an actor’s current perception of spheres of influence? What political, military, and cultural achievements in a past civilization might shape a modern successor state’s national identity? Does historic memory—particularly when it reaches to the ancient past—provide analytic insight into an actor’s current strategic intent.

A civilizational analytic approach can draw support from contemporary trends in scholarship—part of a methodologically diverse “spatial turn” in the humanities—that consider geographic space, not only in material terms but also in terms of perception and symbolism. Political meaning can be associated with physical space, even when the

a. “Erdogan Triggers Outcry after Reciting Quran inside Secular Istanbul Landmark.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, March 31, 2018. [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkish-president-erdogan-recites-islamic-player-at-hagia-sophia-despite-international-outcry-a8282861.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkish-president-erdogan-recites-islamic-player-at-hagia-sophia-despite-international-outcry-a8282861.html). (Accessed 8 June 2018)

b. Al Arabiya News, “Iranian advisor clarifies ‘Baghdad capital of Iranian empire remark,’” March 13, 2015, [english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/13/Iranian-advisor-clarifies-Baghdad-capital-of-Iranian-empire-remark.html](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/13/Iranian-advisor-clarifies-Baghdad-capital-of-Iranian-empire-remark.html) (Accessed June 8, 2018)

c. Radio Farda, “MP Calls For Celebrating International Day Of Cyrus The Great.” October 12, 2017, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-mp-calls-for-celebrating-cyrus-day/28789762.html> (Accessed June 8, 2018)

d. “Egypt Moves towards ‘Reviving Roots’ with Greece | Middle East Online. [www.middle-east-online.com/en/egypt-moves-towards-reviving-roots-greece](http://www.middle-east-online.com/en/egypt-moves-towards-reviving-roots-greece). (Accessed June 8, 2018)

physical space is not fully controlled.<sup>a</sup> Such perceptions of physical space help explain the irredentist territorial claims of insurgents, states, political parties, and terrorist groups, as well as attempts to project transnational authority—such as in the declaration of a caliphate by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014.

Each of the major geographic nodes of the region—the Anatolian Plateau, the Nile Basin, the upper and lower Tigris-Euphrates basin, the Iranian Plateau, and the Eastern Mediterranean, repeatedly gave rise to distinct ancient civilizations. These civilizations established spheres of influence, national identities, and strategic priorities which serve as precedents that modern successor states and non-state actors can seek to revive. Historic memory is not necessarily the cause of these actions, and geography is not destiny—environmental conditions are not deterministic as proposed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by strategists such as Alfred Mahan and Halford Mackinder. Nonetheless, the study of the region's ancient civilizations invites consideration of how the past can influence the strategic choices that the region's contemporary actors face and encourages analytic thinking that goes beyond the mostly ahistorical methods that shape current Western perceptions of the region. If there is a reasonable chance that the region's key players care about the past when they act, it is reasonable to ask what that past might mean to them.

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## ANCIENT GEOGRAPHY ECHOES IN TURKEY

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Modern Turkey, for example, is the latest heir to the strategic reality that the Anatolian Plateau sits athwart Europe and Asia, a geography that has persistently obliged Anatolian powers to engage one or both continents. The Hittites sought to expand from their base on the Anatolian Plateau into the Middle East in Kadesh and in their sack of Babylon in 1595 BCE, but their Anatolian history also included a westward thrust through vassal kingdoms on the Aegean, including perhaps King Priam's Troy. The pattern of a dual European and Asian pull for Anatolia persists in the founding in 330 of a new Roman capital at Constantinople, which anchored Roman political authority between Rome's European and Asian territories. Similarly, after the Islamic conquest of the southern and eastern Mediterranean littoral in the seventh century and the Seljuk Turk victory over Byzantine forces in 1071 in Eastern Anatolia, diminished Byzantine power pivoted from the Middle East toward the grain-producing areas of the Balkans. Byzantine rulers also pivoted to Western Europe for military aid in the form of Christian crusaders. When Anatolia was contested, European-based powers frequently rivaled Asian-based powers on the plateau such as during the fourth century BCE struggle among Alexander's successors—the Diadochoi—and later between Rome and

a. For an excellent example of the application of this type of spatial thinking in classical scholarship see: Paul J. Kosmin, *Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

Parthia. Anatolia is the story of perpetual balancing and seesawing between Europe and Asia—an ancient reality that continues to merit consideration today.

Turkey's history over the past century can be understood in this conceptual framework. The post-Ottoman modernization and secular nationalism of Kemal Atatürk decisively moved the Anatolian Plateau into the political orbit of the West—a westward strategic pivot that would continue with Turkey's integration into NATO and Turkey's halting and ambivalent steps toward membership in the European Union. By contrast, the weakening of borders along the Plateau's southern reaches and the attendant military conflicts in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin that have erupted since 9/11 and the Arab Spring have drawn Turkey's strategic attention once again toward the Middle East. The pivot has also corresponded to a gradual re-Islamization of Turkish politics and society. Turkish foreign and domestic policies continue to merit close attention using the mainstream analytic tools of political science as well as leadership and security studies, but the ancient strategic patterns that unfolded among earlier civilizations on the Anatolian Plateau continue to serve as a useful framework for understanding the modern Turkish state and its strategic choices.

The composite elements of Turkish national identity also can be understood within this political and geographic framework of antiquity. Turkey is at once heir to European ideas and practices of secular nationalism, republican government, and industrialization, and to the Middle East's Ottoman Caliphate and Sultanate, Central Asia's nomadic Steppe warriors, and ancient civilizations that projected influence in the Middle East. This complex reservoir of identity cannot predict how Turkey will act on a given policy issue but provides a framework for considering the different elements of national identity any modern Turkish government can draw upon to define its interests and to shape foreign perceptions of its actions.

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## EGYPT'S ANCIENT NILE IDENTITY PERSISTS

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Egypt's ancient past and geography, similarly, continue to echo into the contemporary Egyptian state, shaping national identity and strategic choices. Since the combining of Upper and Lower Egypt at the beginning of the third millennium BCE, Egypt has almost always had a unifying national identity—even when dominated by foreign invaders—shaped by the Nile river. The description of Egypt in Book 2 of Herodotus' *Histories* as “the gift of the river (Nile) to the Egyptians” revealed that Herodotus understood that annual flooding and silt deposits endowed the Nile Valley with the agricultural riches necessary for Egyptian civilization. Just how decisive the Nile is for Egypt becomes apparent when one walks along the border between cultivated land and desert, that space where lush fields of alfalfa, irrigated by burrows circling in Sisyphean labor abruptly meet the barren land of the desert.

The Nile also has shaped Egypt's external strategic posture. To the south, the second cataract of the Nile has defined its ancient border with Nubia and its modern border with Sudan. To the north, the Nile divides into a delta that empties into the Mediterranean—a link to trade routes that—along with Egypt's wealth—made Egypt a strategic prize throughout antiquity. The conquests of Egypt by the Achaemenid Persian King Cambyses II in the sixth century BCE and by Alexander in the fourth century BCE as well as by the Roman forces under Octavian in the first century BCE demonstrate that control of Egypt was a goal sought by all the major empires of antiquity.

An ancient Egypt at once looking upstream to its Nile neighbors and across the Mediterranean to Europe offers ways to conceptualize Egypt's contemporary strategic environment and foreign policies. Egypt's dependency on the flow of waters from its upstream riparian neighbors has focused Egypt's security concerns on events in Sudan and in Ethiopia, as several years of trilateral negotiations over the construction of a dam in Ethiopia for hydroelectricity attest. Along the Mediterranean, Egypt's conquest and assimilation as the breadbasket to the city of Rome set a pattern of European influence that would repeat anew with Napoleon's invasion in 1798. In the modern era, Egypt's leadership of the Arab nationalist movement, its sometimes vibrant intellectual and artistic culture—evident in its film industry and more recently in its contributions to a UN-sponsored series of reports on Arab human development—and its eventual decision to make peace with Israel all attest to the ancient interaction between Egypt and the West and the influences these contacts have had on Egypt's domestic and foreign policies.

Egypt's past has also established patterns and precedents that bind it to the wider Middle East, especially to the Sunni Islamic world. The fall in 1171 of the Shia Fatimid Caliphate to the forces of the Kurdish warrior Saladin led to the return of Egypt to the Sunni Abbasid Caliphate and emphasized the strategic importance of Egypt to the wider Middle East and Islamic world. Saladin's victory also put the Fatimid-founded al-Azhar university in Cairo under Sunni control, setting the region's oldest university on a path toward becoming a major center of Sunni scholarship and giving modern Egypt a claim to religious leadership in an Islamic world lacking a centralized clerical authority. Despite decades of secular nationalism and determined opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt today commemorates the Sunni religious victory of 1171 by preserving the heraldic seal of Saladin on its flag. Saladin also defeated the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187 and so when Yasser Arafat returned to Gaza after the failed Camp David Summit in 2000, he was hailed as "Saladin" for not compromising on the status of Jerusalem<sup>a</sup>—a meaningful reference to those whose past shapes the way they see the present.

a. Alan Philp, "Palestinians Hail Arafat as a New Saladin." *The Telegraph*, July 27, 2000. [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/1350603/Palestinians-hail-Arafat-as-a-new-Saladin.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/1350603/Palestinians-hail-Arafat-as-a-new-Saladin.html).

In making peace with Israel in 1978, Egypt broke with the rest of the Arab world after having achieved what it perceived as a strategic draw with Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and after choosing to receive the strategic benefits of moving to Washington's orbit. The decision, nonetheless, was also consistent with an independent Egyptian national identity and political confidence—nurtured over millennia and shaped by its political geography—that would allow it to challenge a wider consensus in the Arab and Islamic worlds against Israel. The decision for peace signaled a willingness to develop further Egypt's long ties to the Western world—ties that reach as far back as ancient Greece's adoption and adaptation of Egyptian monumental architecture and other Egyptian influences that remain a sometimes intense focus of scholarly debate.<sup>a</sup>

The patterns and precedents of Egypt's ancient and medieval histories present a unique combination of political stature, Islamic scholarship, and ties to the West that could position Egypt to lead the development of new political thinking in the Arab world and again dissent from political and religious trends in the region that have been so destructive. Since the nineteenth century, Al-Azhar has maintained both a wide-ranging religious curriculum and offered its students degrees in applied sciences. As a result, Al-Azhar in particular, and Egypt more broadly, offers the potential to innovatively consider how politics and economic development in the Arab world can advance in the wake of the region's twin governance failures of secular Arab nationalism and extremist Islam.

Egypt is equipped for this effort in unique ways that are explicitly derived from its past but it will face the strategic reality that the fulcrum of Middle East politics has moved east to the Persian Gulf. In the new era, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated that it seeks to be the dominant religious voice in the Sunni Arab and wider Islamic world and has far greater resources to fund its strategic ambition. Saudi Arabia's proselytization, or *da'wah*, efforts, are religious and lack the leavening cosmopolitanism that has been common in Egypt since the founding of the library and Mouseion, or royal academy, in Alexandria in the early third century BCE and which Al-Azhar today could perpetuate.

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## IRAN'S HISTORIC MEMORY ON DISPLAY

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Iran—perhaps more than Turkey and Egypt—conducts its foreign and security policies in the Middle East consistent with its ancient civilizational patterns and precedents, though not necessarily because of them. Iran projects itself as an Islamic state, born of a just rebellion against an unjust and oppressive monarch who was oriented toward a secular and liberalizing West that is apart from Iran's true Islamic identity. Its political doctrine of clerical rule (*velayat-e-faqih*) is a modern innovation that includes some representative political institutions, but the regime asserts a backward-oriented reli-

a. See Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How "Afrocentrism" Became An Excuse To Teach Myth As History* (Basic Books, 1997).

gious conservatism and retains a monopoly on power. Whereas the shah had explicitly linked his brand of modern, secular nationalism to Iran's ancient imperial history and saw himself as the legitimate representative of that past, the Islamic republic does not cloak its actions in pre-Islamic terms.

What a state does, however, usually carries more weight than what a state says. The actions of the Islamic Republic of Iran since reemerging as a regional power in the late 1990s suggest that the geographic extent of Iran's imperial past could be informing its current strategic aspirations. The pattern of the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau, for example, attempting to assert power over the lower-Tigris Euphrates basin—the core of the modern Iraqi state—dates to the Bronze Age raids of the Elamites. Similarly, the projection of indirect and direct military power into Syria is consistent with Achaemenid reach in the sixth century BCE to the shores of the Mediterranean. Iran's decades-long stake in the various stages of conflict in Afghanistan also represents a strategic interest in an area that it had ruled in the Achaemenid period, an area where Persian power reached to the Indus River and where elites still speak a form of Persian and preserve Persian literary and cultural influences.

The current confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, though often loosely defined as a Shia-Sunni sectarian confrontation or a Persian-Arab ethnic confrontation or both, has potentially deeper strategic significance when seen in the context of the early era of Islam. The defeat of the Persian Sasanian Dynasty by Arab Islamic forces at al-Qadisiyyah in 636 in modern-day Iraq placed Persian scientific, literary, religious, and medical knowledge that had been translated from Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese into the hands of a foreign Arab force and new religion—Islam. These Persian-based influences would form the foundation for medieval Arab Islamic civilization, a cultural precedent that allows Iran pretensions to more expansive leadership in a Sunni Islamic world than its minority Shia sectarian identity would otherwise allow. I used to think that surely such history could not possibly be alive in the minds of contemporary Iranians until I asked a highly educated Iranian who had been exiled after the 1979 revolution what benefits the Arab conquest of 636 had bestowed on Iran. He not only declined to name Islam but offered with biting sarcasm that “they (the conquering Arab armies of Islam) taught us to eat grasshoppers.” The defeat at al-Qadisiyyah was vividly present nearly 1,400 years later.

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## REVISITING PERSIA AND THE ANCIENT GREEKS

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The familiar ancient history of Herodotus offers a mostly antagonistic framework for conceptualizing Iran's relations with the West—a pattern of conflict that would recur between Rome and later Iranian civilizations. (We will examine Iran's larger role in the Middle East state system—including the pattern of antagonism with the West—in

Chapter 5). Herodotus represents Persia in a series of losing military battles to Greek forces which Greece then harnesses to cultivate its own separate, and, for Herodotus, superior civilizational identity. Persia suffered an unexpected defeat by Greek forces at Marathon (490 BC) and, after ravaging the Greek mainland, suffered a naval defeat at Salamis (480 BC) and a final expulsion from the Greek mainland at Plataea in 479 BCE. These losses, together with the calamity of Alexander's defeat of the entire Persian Empire by 327 BCE, offer a pattern of Persian rivalry with the founding state of the West that would seem to argue that ancient history offers little promise for reconceptualizing Iran's currently antagonistic relationship with the West.

Persia's other ancient patterns of political interaction with Greece offer a different potential reservoir of national identity from which Iran one day could draw if its political objectives so required. Less well known, is the key role Persian military and financial aid to Sparta played in helping to secure Sparta's victory in the Peloponnesian War over Athens in 404 BCE. Similarly, when an alliance of Greek city states subsequently went to war against a victorious but oppressive Sparta in 395 BCE in the Corinthian War, Persia was deeply involved in the military alliances and political fortunes of the Greek mainland. Persia eventually guaranteed a balance of power in the Greek world between Sparta and the other Greek city states in the "King's Peace" (the Persian King's peace) and succeeded in securing the return of the Greek city states in Anatolia to Persian dependency. A Greek mercenary force also became involved in a Persian succession struggle around 400 BCE, documented by Xenophon in his *Anabasis* (the "march upcountry" of the 10,000 from Greece into the interior of Persia and back to Greece.) These interactions in the ancient world offer precedents that place Greece and Persia—and by extension Iran and the West—on a more complex and somewhat less confrontational plane.

Roman-Persian rivalry also has a countervailing backstory of strategic cooperation that goes mostly unacknowledged. Around 400 CE amid a shared threat of invading Huns from the Steppe, Persia and Rome collaborated on a massive, defensive wall fortification in the Caucasus.<sup>a</sup> This strategic precedent of cooperation among rivals would reappear in recent years as Iran and the United States tacitly collaborated in defeating Islamic State forces in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin.

These ancient interactions demonstrate that bilateral relations were more complex than the often-polarizing narratives each side of the Persian-Western divide has been prone to tell of the other since antiquity. To Americans, Shia revolutionary Iran is linked to the taking hostage in 1979 of US Embassy personnel, US flag burning protests with chants of "*marg bar Amrika*" (death to America), the killing of US soldiers, threats to Israel, the pursuit of a nuclear capability, sponsorship of terrorism, and the fueling of military tensions in the international waterways of the Gulf and in the wider Middle East. For

a. See Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (Vintage Books, 2015), 47.



Iran, the United States is the foreign enemy that backed the deposed shah, protects rival Israel, deploys a hostile naval force in the Gulf Iran calls “Persian”, amasses an army near its borders, and seeks to contain its economic development. These narratives will not disappear with the recollection of more equal power relations and even collaboration against common foes between the West and Persia in ancient times. Nonetheless, the existence of such alternative conceptual frameworks provides a precedent for legitimizing and supporting a rapprochement when other conditions should trend toward such an improvement.

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### ANCIENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

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Ancient history has had particularly audible echoes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel’s national identity rests, in part, on the history of ancient Israel, forged in the Exodus from Egypt around 1500 BCE, the subsequent defeat of Canaanites, and the rise of a Kingdom of Israel with Jerusalem as its capital in the early Iron Age. This narrative has spurred Palestinians to claim that they are the descendants of the original Canaanites in order to assert a prior political inheritance and implicitly more legitimate claim over the lands West of the Jordan river.<sup>a</sup> Such uses of history in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aid in the pursuit of already well-defined national identities, political conflicts, and competing territorial claims. Seen through this lens of ancient history, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict becomes more intractable and the ability to conceptualize this particularly longstanding modern conflict in the Middle East in useful, policy-relevant ways seems implausible.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, however, becomes politically more pliable and susceptible to reconceptualization when the ancient history of the surrounding regional states enters the analysis. The frequent assertion of a sphere of influence into the Eastern Mediterranean littoral by successive ancient and early medieval powers suggests that the predominantly bilateral structure of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the historic exception. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will hinge, over the long term, on the constellation of forces around it rather than just the predisposition of the parties themselves to make peace. Pre-modern civilizations on the Iranian Plateau, the Anatolian Plateau, the Nile Basin as well as the lower and upper Tigris Euphrates Basin all defined their spheres of influence in the region of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict usually through direct military conquest. The pattern is seen in Achaemenid Iran, Rome, Byzantium, Egypt, and Babylon. Their modern successors in Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and to a lesser degree Iraq, have all asserted an interest in the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian

a. <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/abbas-palestinians-are-canaanites-were-in-jerusalem-before-jews-1.5743576>

conflict consistent with their ancient strategic pattern of asserting power and a sphere of influence in this part of the Middle East. This ancient pattern suggests a regional multilateral framework, more than a Cold War era external power framework, is a plausible way to conceive of a future Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy.

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## STRATEGIC USES OF EARLY HISTORY GLOBALLY

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The modern revival of ancient civilizational identity and attendant strategic interests has its own precedent in the West. The post-World War II project of European unity—aimed at eradicating French and German conflict and securing the wider continent’s peaceful economic development—includes, in part, a political vision inspired by the late eighth century. In the Carolingian Renaissance of Charlemagne—who forced the unification of Germanic tribes and oversaw a selective combining of Germanic and Roman institutions—a revival of classical learning flowered in schools he founded. The memory of Charlemagne’s brutal conquest and conversion of the Saxons has not been forgotten but it is the memory of Carolingian political development and the reawakening of classical learning and its attendant progress that helps sustain the vision of a united Europe today. The European Union, for example, as recently as 2015 was sponsoring an exhibition throughout Europe entitled “The Legacy of Charlemagne” to educate publics on the origins of European unification.<sup>a</sup> In 2018, French President Macron traveled to Aachen Germany—where Charlemagne was crowned in 800—to receive a prize for contributing to European unity and made reference to the “Carolingian dream” to address growing doubts about the future of the European Union.<sup>b</sup>

The suggestion here that what happened in ancient times matters to the behavior of modern states has had purchase in other parts of the world where ancient history is used to proclaim national identity and justify territorial claims. China’s attempts to link its South China sea claims to ancient patterns of Chinese fishing and other maritime activity; Serbia’s defeat in 1389 at the Battle of Kosovo by Ottoman forces continues to resonate across Muslim-Serbian relations in the Balkans; and ancient identities of Theravadin Buddhism in Sri Lanka and in Myanmar have infused contemporary Buddhist nationalist politics in both states.

Ancient echoes into contemporary politics—in the Middle East and beyond—do not sit easily with the late twentieth century’s attempts to transcend the past’s violent demonstrations of nationalism. The European project to tame French and German rivalry in a peaceful web of interlocking economic and security interests, the attempt to build a

a. Francia Media, “The Legacy of Charlemagne,” accessed August 11, 2015, [www.cradlesec.eu/cec2014/Exhibition.aspx](http://www.cradlesec.eu/cec2014/Exhibition.aspx).

b. Simon Nixon, “Charlemagne to the Rescue,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2018, [www.wsj.com/articles/charlemagne-to-the-rescue-1529680682](http://www.wsj.com/articles/charlemagne-to-the-rescue-1529680682).

global trading system of wide economic benefit at the expense of some national economic sectors; the UN commitment, in principle, to collective security and the maintenance of international peace at the potential expense of national sovereignty; and the advent of an information and communication technology revolution that transcends national borders all affirmed a consensus that modern ideas are emerging that promise a break from previous patterns of civilizational conflict. Analysis that is informed by ancient history, however, sees ancient patterns as useful for understanding the contemporary world and not only as obstacles to political modernization.

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### THE ANALYTIC GAINS OF EXAMINING ANCIENT SPACE AND IDENTITY

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An analytic approach that harnesses ancient history for what it may say about how actors in the Middle East might see themselves and others suggests that ideas and perceptions matter as much as traditional hard power—economic and military. This is enough to alarm empirically-minded analysts because historic memory that defines interests and motivates action is hard to measure as a component of decisionmaking. When Iran finds itself pressing closer to the Mediterranean, objective measures of the degree to which a memory of Achaemenid Persia informs Tehran's thinking—if at all—do not exist. Yet, a preemptive exclusion of ancient history as a component of national identity, spheres of interest, and possible strategic intent may say more about contemporary intellectual currents than about the usefulness of history for generating insight on the region and new policy options.

Uncertainty about how fixed ancient memory and identity are, whether they affect decisionmaking and strategic intent, and the difficulty of linking ideas in a causal chain to specific action will allow some to dismiss ancient history's usefulness on the grounds that it is not predictive. Such a high standard, however, would exceed what we ask of other analytic methods. When we suggest, for example, that large populations of young, unemployed men are associated with political instability or that state-run enterprises pose economic risks of inefficiency, we observe and accept correlations that are analytically useful because they help describe plausible futures and allow decisionmakers to develop appropriate policies. So too in a civilizational framework, we can demonstrate correlations and propose a factually-based conceptual framework that also meets standards of analytic objectivity and usefulness.

The related ideas of historical memory, civilizational analysis, and political geography are particularly useful for thinking about the region's turbulent transition and the rise of more assertive and competitive powers. The now routine projection of power across regional state borders—including by major actors such as Iran and Turkey—and a cross-border refugee crisis in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon rivaling the re-

gional impact of the Palestinian refugee crisis of the twentieth century are compelling a reappraisal of how we think about the region's political geography. The inability of governments in Libya, Yemen, and Syria to control their territories demarcated in the post-Ottoman era add to the uneasy recognition that our mental political maps of the region are outdated.

In this volatile environment, discerning the strategic intent of actors will remain imprecise and vexed by the often-unknowable thoughts and plans of individual leaders of states and sub-state groups. Sophisticated network analysis of key power centers in a regime or group, algorithms demonstrating unusual and plausible correlations in large data sets, careful plotting of past behaviors in previous periods of regional conflict and applying theories of decisionmaking and other political calculus can all contribute to framing potential futures for the region. Adding to these standard tools of analysis an assessment of how key actors see their own historical identities and those of their rivals can increase the quality and breadth of our analytic imagination and help anticipate a broader range of plausible futures. The recent percolation to the political surface of usually unarticulated ideas of empire and civilization and the likelihood that borders will continue to remain violated within and across states makes the analytic case for thinking along civilizational lines plausible.

The civilizational antecedent of a modern state can inform our understanding of which peoples the modern state believes it is entitled to govern or influence. The role of European powers in delineating the post-Ottoman borders of the region adds a political incentive for the region's actors to assert their alternative political geographies even when these powers lack the will or capability to impose a new political map on the region. As the United States wields its military and political influence throughout the region, it should at a minimum be familiar with the spheres of influence modern states believe they have inherited from their ancient forerunners as well as accusations—genuine or not—that the European imposed modern political map lacks legitimacy. These civilizational dynamics could affect, for example, negotiations about the boundary between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, the Turkish presence in Syria, and Iran's attempts to assert, as its Achaemenid ancestors did, influence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ancient political geography will also matter, potentially, to the challenge of repatriation and resettlement of refugees and internally displaced persons. If civilian life in Gaza, for example, becomes untenable on humanitarian grounds and a regional consensus for a new political order emerges, Egypt's modern and ancient presence in the Eastern Mediterranean would likely appear in the backdrop to any negotiations. Those displaced from the upper Tigris Euphrates—whether from Syria or Iraq—already find themselves pulled between the interests of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq which have divided up the ancient region in modern times. In Libya, the underlying ancient settlement patterns of Phoenician and Greek colonies that persist in modern Tripoli and Benghazi are likely

to influence where internally displaced persons return within any reconstituted Libyan state.

The potential for perceptions of ancient spheres of influence to shape the modern calculus of key actors in the Middle East grows when actors can reach across physical borders with unprecedented information and communications networks. An Egyptian voice can be present in Ethiopia to contest the Nile's flow, Shia groups in Lebanon can contribute to Iranian strategic aims across the Levant, and a Turkish president can broadcast ancient Turkic identities for nationalist aims in images online. It is now possible to enact ancient patterns of influence without recourse to military conquest. In a region of failed secular nationalism, weakened borders, and no longer dominant external military powers, such demonstrations of ancient spheres of influence are likely to grow.

The ancient world teaches that there are important linkages between geographic space and action, that there is a geography from which civilizations begin and from which they expand and contract. There is also evidence that modern day successor states conduct their foreign diplomacy and security policies in ways that are consistent with ancient geography and their associated civilizations. This observed correlation between the past and the present opens up new ways of analytic thinking—new ways of conceptualizing—what is happening and may happen in a period of significant change in the region. The once fixed order of secular nationalism with its attendant state borders has been weakened or destroyed in much of the region, raising questions about which succeeding ideas of national identity, strategic intent, and spheres of influence will arise. The answers to these questions cannot be known with certitude but the patterns and precedents of the ancient and early medieval worlds add to our analytic toolkit by letting us see the region as those in the region do—with historic memories that can define objectives and motivate action. As Kadesh echoes into the UN's self-conception, other ancient histories echo into the deeds and conceptions of actors in the region which we ignore at our peril.





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## CHAPTER 3

### HARNESSING ANCIENT POLITICS

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*The Middle East's internal political disorder ranges from ruinous destruction in most of the former secular nationalist republics of the Arab world to a combustible mix of tradition and modernity in the Arab monarchies, Iran, and Turkey. The dearth of conceptual frameworks that can bring some order to our thinking about the political landscape of the contemporary Middle East finds remedy in remembering the experience of the ancient Greek world where politics—not simply rule—began. Going back to conceptual beginnings makes sense in a region that is starting anew after a century of ideas, institutions, and social compacts have failed or begun to fail. The Greeks offer insights on: how to conceptualize the complex overlay of past, present, and future in the politics of the Arab world today; the importance of building citizenship over tribal and clan allegiances; and the requisite primacy of law for a stable political order. The Greeks are well suited for helping us to think about the complexity of the Middle East's political future because they began their political journey influenced by the civilizations of the ancient Near East, found ways to innovate politically, and faced some of the same internal divisions Middle Eastern societies confront. The renewal of social compacts will also require a reckoning with the underlying geographic boundaries of the Middle East and the patterns of settlement and political community that have attended these divisions since antiquity. This ancient physical map helps us understand the constituent parts of any new political order.*

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## A MERCHANT'S PROPHECY FOR SYRIA

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*The late morning sun's rays bent through the fountain in the courtyard of a prosperous eighteenth century Ottoman home. Within the old city of Damascus, the scents of spices, carved wood, and warm bread filled the summer air as Syrians, small groups of European tourists, and the occasional American or Canadian visitor circulated through the warren of ancient streets in the al Hamidiya Souk. In the mid-1990s a veneer of Ba'thist secularism lay over Damascus—a historic mosaic of religious and ethnic sites. A handful of Jewish merchants—the remnant of a fast disappearing ancient community—were still selling Christian icons of wrought iron that once adorned the lintels of homes abandoned by Christians emigrating to the West. The Sunni majority and Alawi minority maintained peacefully a political and economic partnership that sustained Alawi rule. The large Kurdish population in Damascus did little to discourage the notion that Kurds were Syrians first. Enough momentum from the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991 remained to keep the idea of another Syrian-Israeli war far from the imagination.*

*The all-pervasive mukhabarat—the intelligence and security apparatus of the regime—guaranteed that even the most indirect mention of politics in the street was detected. Idle young men gathered in coffee shops, attending to cigarettes and coffee in lieu of employment. Throughout Syria, old European cars created a sea of metal in which a few BMW late-model sedans declared their owners' membership in the elite. Driving by a black stone statue of a majestic lion, my cab driver explained its history and seemed nervous when I attempted to make light of the ruling family's sharing the same name. Asad is the word for lion in Arabic, but this name was never a source of casual conversation. It was also clear that humor was not on regular display, in part, because humor has often been the backdoor to political dissent.*

*I settled into my second small cup of tea with the enthusiastic seller of carpets in the souk as we talked about the various mihrabs—the architectural form in a mosque that indicates the direction of prayer to Mecca—woven into his large inventory of prayer rugs. He was proud of his trade in leather goods with Gulf merchants and was especially eager to show his rugs from Isfahan in Iran with their deep azure blue motifs. At this point in the ritualized pre-sale choreography of banter and tea pouring, I asked what he, as a long-time resident of Damascus, thought would happen if the Asad family ceased to rule Syria. The question was unusual because in the mid-1990s, posters of father Hafez, son and heir Bashar, and deceased son and previous heir Basil adorned the city's walls and lampposts. The three Asad men formed a political trinity that left little doubt about succession plans, even*



*while reminding the three-quarter Sunni population of Syria that the minority Alawis had heretically absorbed elements of Christianity into their faith.*

*The merchant rose from his chair, giving nothing away with his blank expression, and moved to the front door of his shop and stuck his head out onto the street. He looked left, right, across, and up to the balconies nearby. He returned and stared at me and calmly declared that “blood would run in the streets.” Before I had time to pose a follow up, he again arose, migrated to the door, and conducted once more his careful inspection to see who might be listening. Then with drama he took his right hand and, placing it under his chin, clarified in a shouting whisper: “up to here!” The halcyon feel of Syria in the 1990s appeared to have a fixed term and the prophecy of a Damascene merchant would come to pass with the death of Hafez Asad, the attacks of 9/11, and the eventual eruption of the Arab Spring in Syria in 2011 and subsequent Syrian civil war.*

*Blood running in the streets is the type of catastrophe that eclipses usual ways of thinking about politics. The implosion of a social compact and descent into civil war mean not only death, humanitarian crisis, and economic destruction but also that the basic structures of governance have failed. The institutions that regulate disputes, allocate resources, define and defend borders, enshrine the rights and duties of citizens, and serve as the reservoir for a community’s norms all depend on agreeing who is in charge and extending that authority through governing institutions. These are basic conditions that define political life—in liberal and illiberal regimes. These are the basic conditions that are agreed in a social compact between rulers and ruled.*

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## WARNING SIGNS OF POLITICAL FAILURE

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Increasingly, politics and social compacts are failing in the Middle East of the twenty-first century. The Arab world's former secular nationalist republics lie in various states of political rupture and, for many, economic ruin. Since late 2010—excluding the tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians and nearly 5,000 US and multinational allied service members killed earlier in the Iraq war<sup>a</sup>—hundreds of thousands have been killed, millions displaced,<sup>b</sup> and a century-long political project begun after World War I and based on European ideas and political institutions has largely failed. The collapse of national institutions has pitted militias, terrorist groups, as well as foreign and regional armies against one another—within and across borders. These groups are the new arbiters of politics in many states in the region.

The crisis has been a long time coming. Within the post-colonial secular nationalist republics, the aggregation of the interests of different communities in broad-based political parties had faltered as these parties either disappeared or became subservient to increasingly authoritarian rulers. Legal freedoms to protect the individual from the misuse of the power of the state were enshrined in constitutions but could not survive the consolidation of power within a narrowly based ruling elite. The successive pretexts of conflict with Israel or communism or Islamic extremism provided useful foreign and internal threats for regimes to justify their repression.

In the pre-internet and wireless broadband era, regimes could also dominate print media and terrestrial broadcast television and radio. They succeeded in regulating non-governmental organizations—part of the civil society that mediates between the state and the citizenry—to ensure stricter control and eventually spread their reach to mosques to shape the content of Friday prayers.<sup>c</sup> The leviathan of secular authoritarian rule would prove so effective that a genre within Middle East studies dedicated to analyzing the durability of authoritarianism in the region would briefly emerge in the years immediately preceding the Arab Spring.

The level of coercion was also a result of basic tension within the post-Ottoman social compacts across much of the Arab world that allowed for rule by one ethnic or sectarian group over another. In the modern era's drawing of national boundaries, power within the new Arab republics belonged to one ruling family, which governed over

a. Philip Bump, "Analysis: 15 Years after the Iraq War Began, the Death Toll Is Still Murky," *The Washington Post*, March 20, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/03/20/15-years-after-it-began-the-death-toll-from-the-iraq-war-is-still-murky/?utm\\_term=.8c9360592be6](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/03/20/15-years-after-it-began-the-death-toll-from-the-iraq-war-is-still-murky/?utm_term=.8c9360592be6).

b. "Syrian Civil War Fast Facts," *CNN*, May 3, 2018, [www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/27/world/meast/syria-civil-war-fast-facts/index.html).

c. "Mosque," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, 2018, [www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1552](http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1552).

peoples who were from different religious or ethnic groups and who usually did not benefit equally from the patronage of clan-based regimes. The new political geography meant that as one group ruled over others, it had to claim its legitimacy in the name of a secular nationalism that was as modern as it was foreign to the region. The earlier Ottoman governing structures, for the most part, did not have this underlying tension in their social compacts because the Ottoman Empire devolved much of its central authority to provinces, *vilayets*, and sub-provinces, *sanjaks*, that were more ethnically and religiously homogenous. The authoritarianism of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, for example, grew out of the forced political geography of combining the *vilayets* of Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul which roughly corresponded to the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities of the Ottoman era. This political amalgam formed the modern Iraqi state and a secular Iraqi Ba'thist ideology effectively perpetuated Saddam Hussein's tribal and family rule over other religious and ethnic groups.

Under these modern social compacts, the political and economic development of the Arab world—promised in stirring radio broadcasts of Gamal Abdel Nasser and development projects like the modernized Aswan Dam in Upper Egypt—was far from reaching its potential. The Arab-Israeli conflict shielded most regimes from direct blame, but eventually the failings—including corruption—became too apparent to excuse on foreign policy and security grounds. When Egypt and Jordan made peace with Israel and a Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s and a second begun in 2000 failed to deliver on nationalist goals, some began to look inward at the Arab world's structural challenges and failings in governance.

In 2002, a group of Arab intellectuals—including many from Egypt—operating under the auspices of the UN and using language that avoided criticizing specific Arab regimes issued the first in a series of *Arab Human Development Reports*. The UN summarized the findings with language that presaged the fracturing of social compacts that would begin with the self-immolation of a fruit vendor in Tunis in December 2010.

*The report shows that Arab countries have made significant strides in more than one area of human development in the last three decades. Nevertheless, the predominant characteristic of the current Arab reality seems to be the existence of deeply rooted shortcomings in the Arab institutional structure. These shortcomings are an obstacle to building human development. The report summarizes them as three deficits relating to freedom, empowerment of women, and knowledge. These deficits constitute weighty constraints on human capability that must be lifted. . . . Arab countries need to embark on rebuilding their societies on the basis of:*

- *Full respect for human rights and freedoms as the cornerstone of good governance, leading to human development.*

- *The complete empowerment of Arab women, taking advantage of all opportunities to build their capabilities and to enable them to exercise those capabilities to the full.*
- *The consolidation of knowledge acquisition and its effective utilization. As a key driver of progress, knowledge must be brought to bear efficiently and productively in all aspects of society, with the goal of enhancing human wellbeing across the region.<sup>a</sup>*

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## STRAINS IN THE SAUDI SOCIAL COMPACT

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The report implicitly targeted the Arab monarchies—dominated by Saudi Arabia, which spans four fifths of the Arabian Peninsula, is custodian over Islam’s holy sites of Mecca and Medina, and has the largest petroleum reserves in the region. The Saudi response to the rise of the West’s technological, military, and political power first took shape with the establishment of an Islamic reform movement in the Najd heartland of the Arabian Peninsula by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century, which Western observers would call Wahhabism. The movement, emphasizing strict adherence to the revealed knowledge of the Qur’an and to the sacred traditions of the Prophet Muhammad as recorded in the Hadith, was predicated on the belief in the absolute oneness of God—the doctrine of *Tawhid*.

The return to the roots of Islam as a response to foreign threat echoed the religious literalism taught by Ibn Taymiyyah in the aftermath of the Mongol destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate. Ibn Taymiyyah was following in the theological tradition of Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the founder in the ninth century of the most conservative of the four schools of jurisprudence in Islam—the Hanbali School. For these adherents of Islam’s most conservative theological traditions, innovation, *bid’ah*, whether from the import of Aristotelian philosophy in the middle ages or of Western ideas in the eighteenth century, was a threat to Islam.

The social compact in Saudi Arabia since the eighteenth century has rested upon the embrace by the al-Saud dynasty of the movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and, in turn, Saudi clerics in the tradition of Abd al-Wahhab have legitimated Saudi tribal rule. The kingdom’s oil wealth—which most of its Arab republican counterparts lacked—has helped insulate the social compact from dissent by funding subsidies for employment, consumer goods, and social welfare benefits. Subsidies are so central to

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a. *The Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*. United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2002, [hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/rbas\\_ahdr2002\\_en.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/rbas_ahdr2002_en.pdf).

the social compact that when the “Arab Spring” began to spread in 2011 throughout the region, the kingdom increased government spending by twenty-five percent.<sup>a</sup>

This social compact has endured into the modern era in paradoxical ways. Saudi Arabia is at once a modern, urbanized society with high levels of industrialization in its energy sector; a mostly foreign labor force drawn from all over the world, a growing skilled workforce of technically trained Saudis, and high levels of internet and broadband penetration that have helped implant Western-style consumerism. Saudi Arabia also participates in regional and international forums and hosted US forces after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990—an extraordinary invitation to a non-Muslim military power to enter a key Muslim land.

These growing elements of engagement with the outside world, however, have coexisted alongside deeply conservative political and cultural trends at odds with the globalization of democratic norms and individual freedoms. The Saudi royal family dominates the kingdom’s closed political life, and Saudi Arabia’s female population remains excluded from key educational as well as public and private sector employment opportunities. Saudi women continue to be subject to the control of male family members for employment and other permissions. The kingdom offers no religious freedom and maintains a global proselytization effort that is rooted in its own conservative Islamic traditions.

Maintaining the 18<sup>th</sup> century social compact between the Al Saud and the conservative religious followers of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab even as Saudi Arabia has entered the modern era often leads to social and cultural ambiguities. During flights from Saudi Arabia to Europe and the United States, Saudi women who board in full length *abayas* and *niqab* head coverings sometimes deplane in blue jeans and loose-fitting head scarves, the *hijab*. The kingdom hosts the annual *Hajj*—the obligatory pilgrimage every able Muslim is to undertake during his or her lifetime—transforming Mecca into a massive human migration of religious devotion that has been taking place since medieval times. Meanwhile, Saudi hip-hop lyrics stream into the earbuds of Saudi youth making their own frequent journeys to nearby Saudi shopping malls.

The proposed raft of mostly economic reforms announced by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in 2016 aimed at reducing Saudi dependency on oil and the dependency of Saudi citizens on state revenue suggests that behind these anecdotal contradictions within Saudi society the regime perceives deeper threats to the eighteenth century social compact. The proposed reforms ambitiously seek to project Saudi Arabia at the heart of the Arab and Islamic world and as a global trade and investment

a. Camilla Hodgson, “The Fragile Balance between Saudi Arabia’s Ruling Class and Its People Is ‘Unsustainable’” *Business Insider*, November 16, 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabian-social-contract-unsustainable-2017-11](http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabian-social-contract-unsustainable-2017-11) (accessed June 14, 2018).

hub.<sup>a</sup> Following the turmoil of the “Arab Spring” and a sustained period of lower oil prices upon which the regime depends, the Saudi crown prince—at least when speaking to Western journalists—has made clear that he also intends to strike directly at the conservative Hanbali jurisprudence that has underwritten the social compact. To avoid accusations of heterodox innovation—*bid'ah*—the reform strategy appears aimed at “restoring” Islam to a more religiously tolerant and female-empowering expression, according to the crown prince.<sup>b</sup> Whether the Saudi ruling family can compel a new interpretation of Islamic tradition that dissents from Hanbali jurisprudence is far from clear. What is clear is that the Saudi royal family itself has concluded that the social compact of government largesse in exchange for political loyalty of its subjects is becoming increasingly untenable.

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## GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN THE NON-ARAB WORLD

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Across the Gulf in Iran, the social compact has also drawn explicitly from Islam for its legitimacy. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the shah in 1979, the Shia clerical establishment—led by its charismatic leader Ayatollah Khomeini—took control of a revolutionary and broad-based coalition to establish a Shia revolutionary state of clerics. The clerical regime still dominates all aspects of Iranian life but, unlike Saudi Arabia, which has benefitted from a strategic partnership with the West that dates to the British-backed Arab revolt against Ottoman rule in World War I, Iran has incurred to varying degrees strategic confrontation from the West over its internal, regional, and, more recently, nuclear policies from the earliest days of the Cold War to the present.

Iran’s attempt at crafting a social, political, and religious order to succeed the rapid modernization and ruthless authoritarianism of the shah has had mixed results. The regime can claim credit for having survived 40 years and for constituting the only revolutionary government in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Middle East. It introduced the innovation of a form of republican governance that is partially representative while ultimately subject to Shia clerical rule. The regime can also claim credit for having survived a devastating war with Iraq—piles of rubble from Iranian missile attacks on Baghdad were a common site in Baghdad in the 1980s—and costly economic sanctions from the international community.

These strategic achievements, however, obscure significant underlying threats to the social compact. The absence of an equally charismatic successor to Khomeini, the need at once for the regime to maintain ideological distance from the West while participating

a. “Foreword.” *Goals | Saudi Vision 2030*, [vision2030.gov.sa/en/foreword](http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/foreword).

b. Thomas L. Friedman, “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, at Last.” *New York Times*, November 23, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html).

in the global economy, and factional differences within the regime over how zealously to guard the tenets of the Islamic revolution have fueled persistent dissent among citizens as well as governing elites about Iran's political future.

The rise of a new Iranian generation attracted to Western freedoms and secular attitudes, participating in the information and communications revolution, and lacking the revolutionary motivation from memories of the shah has added to the pressures on Iran's governance. Regime repression—often using the repackaged institutions and methods of the shah—has undermined the regime's legitimacy with Iranian youth. These tensions erupted into months of protest between reformers organized in the “Green Movement” and conservative supporters of President Ahmadi Nejad following his contested reelection in 2009.

Iran's social compact, like those in the Arab world, remains in transition. Iran seeks to sustain its religious identity and pursue revolutionary ambitions for renewed regional influence while also having to engage with the norms of a secular, globalized world economy that has a major stake in regional stability and expects that Iran not act as a revolutionary disruptor. Iran's economy remains heavily dependent on energy rents and on foreign investment, which it has difficulty attracting consistently. Revising the social compact under this swirl of competing internal and external forces carries significant risk.

Political and ideological strains have also been increasing within Turkey's social compact. The securing of an electoral majority in Turkey's national assembly in 2002 by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) brought political power to a party inspired by Islam that represented a growing number of Turks willing to assert their Islamic identity in society. Since this political pivot, the country has continued a gradual shift from the dogmatic secularism of Atatürk that followed the collapse of the Ottoman era to increasing government use of Islamic rhetoric in its foreign policy, an increased role for Islam in Turkish public schools, and the elevation of the Directorate of Religious affairs to the equivalent of a cabinet office.<sup>a</sup> These expressions of religious faith in post-Cold War Turkey, however, face the same competition for hearts and minds Iran has seen among youth coming of political age in an era of globalized consumerism, technologically-driven economic progress, and the appeal of liberalism in the West.<sup>b</sup>

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a. Soner Cagaptay, “Opinion | In Long-Secular Turkey, Sharia Is Gradually Taking Over,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/02/16/in-long-secular-turkey-sharia-is-gradually-taking-over/?utm\\_term=.4d604e8732d6](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2018/02/16/in-long-secular-turkey-sharia-is-gradually-taking-over/?utm_term=.4d604e8732d6).

b. Mustafa Akyol, “Why so Many Turks Are Losing Faith in Islam,” *Al-Monitor*, May 4, 2018, [www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-why-so-many-turks-are-losing-faith-in-islam.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-why-so-many-turks-are-losing-faith-in-islam.html).

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## THE POLITICAL AND ANALYTIC CHALLENGES AHEAD

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In aggregate, the Middle East's internal political disorder ranges from ruinous destruction in most of the former secular nationalist republics of the Arab world to a combustible mix of tradition and modernity in the Arab monarchies, Iran and Turkey. Israel faces some of these same tensions over its national identity but its political system continues to function without the periodic eruptions of violence against its social compact that have roiled Iran and Turkey and with nothing close to the political cataclysms besieging much of the Arab world. Israel's foes—particularly Iran—lie outside its borders and less within.

The political environment beyond the region has been little help in offering new models of social compacts suitable for a contemporary Middle East wedged between externally derived modernization and its own religious and political traditions. Liberal social compacts founded on the rule of law that might help reconcile these tensions in the increasingly hard-to-govern states of the modern Middle East do not sit ready for appropriation from a faltering European Union with limited influence in the region or a United States increasingly reluctant to prolong its lengthy and costly military presence in the region's war zones. External powers do not appear to have the answers for the region's political challenges.

Instead, the region faces the daunting task of developing, adapting, or recovering its own set of governing structures and political ideas to make societies, states, and religious and ethnic identity cohere enough for the region to recover and advance. According to the medieval Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, human communities of various scope develop when they have social cohesion—*asabiyyah*—a bond that inevitably falters and then regroups in a new way under a new political order. It is the quest for new *asabiyyah*, a binding social compact, that preoccupies the Middle East—a quest that will almost certainly have to take place within the region and on its own terms to be enduring.

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## STANDARD ANALYTIC APPROACHES PROVING INSUFFICIENT

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The analytic toolkit for addressing such widespread political uncertainty is extensive and often very specific in scope and method. Few observers seem willing to offer broad narratives of an inevitable recovery of the region through various combinations of youth, technology, political mobilization and new political ideas. Nor is it common to hear confident predictions by journalists and academics that Islamic extremism is poised to recapture the region's politics and identity. The region has demonstrated that it will anoint for its social compact neither a new caliph obedient to the conservative Islam first articulated by Ahmad ibn Hanbal nor a western-derived social compact inspired by the optimistic ideas of freedom and political community of the ilk of Jean



Jacques Rousseau. Some hybrid and new form of politics that reconciles the diverse influences on the contemporary Middle East will be needed. The new social compacts for the region will have to emerge from the bits and pieces of conflicts that fragment and strain the region's politics everywhere.

In this fraught political environment, public discourse on the Middle East has focused on specific issues through a variety of optics. The impact of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan on politics and society or the role of poverty, income inequality, corruption and rising expectations for a better life offer insights into ongoing political instability and other societal stresses. The nature and goals of Islamic-oriented political movements, regional sectarian conflict, the attitudes of youth, the spread of communications, the rise of feminist movements, and the residue of secular nationalism are also relevant to the future of the region and demanding the deployment of our standard analytic methods. These diverse analytic approaches lead to particular insights that can be useful to policymakers. It is helpful to know, for example, how insurgent groups operate, how palaces construct patronage systems and webs of influence, how the price of oil affects government expenditures and foreign reserve holdings, and how states and substate actors define their interests and goals.

The emphasis on parts, rather than the whole, is consistent with the enduring analytic assumption that broad-based historiography—the kind of writing about the Middle East that takes more than the fall of the Ottoman Empire as historically relevant—is less useful or even tainted with ideas of European hegemony from the colonial era. Examining the crisis of political compacts with suggestions that antecedent empires and earlier civilizational borders could form the basis of new states seems implausible in the face of an enduring consensus to maintain the existing, albeit weakened, system of national borders that emerged after World War I.

The broad-based military response by regional and external states to quash the attempt by Islamic extremists in 2014 to establish a caliphate in the upper Tigris-Euphrates region demonstrated not only opposition to extremism but support for the still-surviving political map and some form of modern political institutions. Even if ancient civilizational ideas can inspire actors to define their interests and spheres of influence—a shaping force from ancient history on their contemporary worldview—there is little evidence that the idea of restoring ancient kings and emperors to solve the problems of the Middle East's social compacts is gaining traction either within or outside the region.

Analytic methods that focus on particular issues, however, have been unsuccessful in providing a larger theoretical framework for understanding the region-wide reality of social compacts under stress. Policymaking rests upon such meaningful frameworks to coordinate action across military, political, economic, and cultural domains. Having a conceptual framework is also necessary to justify the expenditure of finite resources,

whether material or in the form of political capital. The policymaker is akin to the *strategos* who sees the battlespace and organizes all elements of national power to achieve an objective. She or he, when making policy, demonstrates the ancient and enduring value of having a larger conceptual framework—a strategy—for action of any kind.

The volume of data available as ideas, networks, and political activity increasingly unfold in digital space has also tended to orient our thinking toward the specific and less toward broad conceptual frameworks. A single pattern observed in a terabyte of information can be more authoritative in our conversation on a region than a broad conceptual framework informed by revisiting the patterns, precedents, and thinking of the ancient world. Technology carries the promise of new insights into old problems and, in the latest incarnation of this cognitive and cultural preference, we look to the advancing computational methods of data science to reveal hidden realities in data and, most ambitiously, perhaps to offer predictions about future trends and outcomes in complex environments like the contemporary Middle East.

The ability of data analytics, however, to discern with high confidence which commercial product may interest you based on your digital exhaust does not yet translate into a comparable ability in far more complex conditions to map the trajectory of transitioning societies. The process of writing algorithms to analyze data from complex political conditions requires some sort of conceptual framework to bound the search for patterns, correlations, and causes that preoccupy data science. Such sensemaking of complex events inevitably draws upon prior ways of organizing our thinking—including potentially drawing upon the patterns and precedents of ancient history.

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## EXPANDING OUR ANALYSIS WITH AN ANCIENT LENS

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The dearth of conceptual frameworks for bringing order to our thinking about the chaotic political landscape of the contemporary Middle East finds remedy in remembering the experience of the ancient Greek world. The Greeks invented politics and key parts of their experience provide a conceptual framework for thinking about the remaking of politics now underway across the Middle East. Going back to conceptual beginnings makes sense in a region that is starting anew after a century of ideas, institutions, and social compacts have failed or begun to fail. The Greeks are also well suited for helping us to think about the complexity of the Middle East's path toward new social compacts because they began their political journey influenced by the civilizations of the ancient Near East, found ways to innovate politically, and faced some of the same divisions Middle Eastern societies confront.

The path the Greek world took to arrive at the rule of law and the placing of sovereign power in a popular assembly—albeit composed of limited male membership—is a tale

of kings, aristocrats, blood feuds, persistent conflicts, religion, and only gradual progress toward a stable and freer order governed by law. It is a story of the difficulty of building and maintaining a social compact amid differing groups and coping with foreign influence and invasion. It is a world that would be familiar to the inhabitants of the Middle East today who rebelled against undemocratic rule in the mostly ill-fated “Arab Spring,” became subject to foreign military intervention, and fell into various degrees of internecine conflict. The struggle to emerge from conflict by creating institutions that can mediate and claim the allegiance of citizens over tribes and sects was central to the Greek political experience and makes that experience conceptually powerful for understanding the challenges of political development in the Middle East.

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### ANCIENT GREECE’S ANALYTIC INSIGHT #1: HOMER AND A LONG VIEW ON ARAB POLITICS

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Homer is always a good place to begin. It is a common practice for professors teaching survey courses in ancient Greek literature to ask students to identify the first occurrence of a given literary technique, historical method, or divine or human attribute in the Greek corpus. The equally common and often correct reply is “Homer.” The answer refers to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—epics which, depending on the perspectives of different schools of scholarship, were either written, dictated, or assembled from an oral tradition sometime in the eighth century BCE. The *Iliad* recounts not only the Bronze Age siege of the kingdom of Troy by a Greek force but also probes deeply into a wide range of human experience—particularly the consequences of the wrath of the Greek hero Achilles. The *Odyssey* is the domestic foil to the martial *Iliad*, focusing on the journey home of Odysseus after Troy has fallen and the adventures he has until reunited with his loyal wife Penelope. Together these poems have endured as the wellspring of Western literature.

The *Iliad*’s description of the Greek military camp along the shores of Troy includes political processes and nascent institutions that are helpful for conceptualizing change in the contemporary Middle East. As the scholar Kurt Raaflaub notes, the Greek encampment represents a “temporary polis” but “one that lacks laws, powerful public institutions, and a developed political culture that would enable it to control even its strongest members.”<sup>a</sup> This political community—not quite city state—has political elements of the Greek Bronze Age of Mycenaean kings, the armed aristocracy of the archaic age of the eighth century, and a foreshadowing of the democratic Greek polis of the classical fifth century. In Homer’s poetic conception, the community of Greeks—and their rival Trojans, who also meet in assembly as armed lords behind the walls of Troy—inhabit simultaneously multiple political phases of past, present, and future.

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a. Kurt A. Raaflaub, *Peace in the Ancient World: Concepts and Theories* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 123.

The strains in the social compacts of the contemporary Middle East are like the multi-layered political time and space of the *Iliad*. In each of the conflicts within the region, past identities of religion or empire blend with modern political institutions, ideas, and technologies to hint at nascent political futures. States are modern in their organization and aspirations but attracted to political geographies and identities of the ancient world. Similarly, Islamic extremists embrace early medieval battlefield successes to define modern political and territorial goals and rely on the tools of the digital age to achieve such aims. Like Homer's proto-Greek city state encamped along the shores of Troy, political actors are operating in more than one time and space, making their actions difficult to assess on a single political continuum. The political bargains forged in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire and the dominance of European ideas and institutions that pervaded the region through most of the twentieth century have given way to a transitional period that defies—like Homer's Greek encampment—a single branding.

The political community that Homer offers in the *Iliad* has implications for how actors within and outside the Middle East think of the social compacts that could emerge from the current disorder. Just as we can see in the Greek encampment the seeds of the developed *polis* so too we can look now for the ideas and institutions that could emerge from the current conflicts to forge new social compacts. Within the current battlespaces of the region, some political framework will need to triumph that allows individuals from different ethnic and sectarian groups to pledge common allegiance to a state while retaining their own religious and ethnic identities. The unifying idea will have to be sufficiently home-grown to rebut charges of foreign interference and will need to recognize broadly the authority of Islam in public life because Islam—as the next chapter addresses—is indigenous, authoritative, and ascendant in the region's politics. The grist for any new social compact, however, will almost certainly also need to accept the continued role of foreign-derived political institutions—such as parliaments and constitutions—the continued spread of information and communication technologies, and come to terms with the individualism and consumerism that circulates globally. Like the Greeks on the shores of Troy, the Middle East's inhabitants today represent the messy beginning of a political process whose future is potentially visible in the contours of the present. We need to look for it with the aid of a conceptual framework for politics that comes from the archaic age of Greece and the literary imagination of Homer.

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## ANCIENT GREECE'S ANALYTIC INSIGHT #2: BUILDING CITIZENSHIP OVER TRIBE AND CLAN

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The politics Homer described represented the beginning of a difficult political journey for the Greeks that dealt with inequalities and institutional weaknesses which evoke analogous challenges in the contemporary Middle East. The tall order of forging a

social compact from the layers of monarchical, aristocratic, and nascent democratic politics would fall on Athens as it moved incrementally in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE to establish a partially democratic political order. The Athenian statesman and poet, Solon, laid the groundwork in the early sixth century BCE for a democratic social compact by doing away with birth as the entitlement for political office and by preventing the indebted poor from being sold into slavery. Later in the century, the Athenian strongman Peisistratus and his sons undertook the equivalent of an economic infrastructure program as well as tax and legal reforms that benefited all Athenians. The constitutional and economic foundations for a more egalitarian order had been laid. Recalling this ancient history of institution building, reduced inequality, and greater representation in government can help us conceptualize what will be required for the region to form more sustainable social compacts.

The Athenians, like today's Arabs, also faced the daunting task of forging a social compact on more than just dominant family groups. The Athenian solution—conceived and executed by the Athenian *archon* (ruler) Cleisthenes in the late sixth century BCE—was equivalent to an ambitious redistricting program that created ten new tribes, each of which drew members from the city of Athens, coastal areas, and the rural interior. Politics was no longer tied to dominant local families from one geographic region. Instead, newly diverse tribes had to forge a common set of interests when each new tribe's constituent members were drawn from different regions. The unifying political idea of Athenian citizenship emerged from the creation of inclusive political institutions that transcended narrow allegiances.

The reforms of Cleisthenes provide a conceptual framework for thinking about how states in the Middle East—especially the secular nationalist regimes that have lost their social compacts—can bind in a single state disparate religious and ethnic groups by creating a political identity that is larger than the sum of its parts. Cleisthenes helped create what in modern times we would recognize as an Athenian nationalism—an identity which all Athenian citizens would accept and accord preeminent political allegiance. The analytic challenge for observers of the contemporary Middle East is to identify how in a political environment that looks backward and forward simultaneously states can establish reforms to bind fragmented political communities into stable, well-functioning states.

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### ANCIENT GREECE'S ANALYTIC INSIGHT #3: THE PRIMACY OF LAW IN POLITICAL ORDER

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The Athenian poet of the tragic, Aeschylus, helps us answer this contemporary political challenge. In a trilogy of plays—the *Oresteia* which includes the plays *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*—performed in Athens in 458 BCE, Aeschylus demon-

strates the role of law as a conceptual tool we might use for thinking about the political challenges of the contemporary Middle East. The *Oresteia* tells the story of a cycle of bloody vengeance in the Bronze Age house of Atreus that begins when Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia to secure favorable winds from the gods before setting sail to besiege Troy.<sup>a</sup> The clear message from Aeschylus is that the rule of law justly administered by the state is the only way to escape the cycle of retributive bloodletting that has plagued the house of Atreus. The play is an allegory of political development that helped inform Athenians attempting to steer their polity from class conflicts and the rule of tyrants to a partially democratic order under the rule of law.

The *Oresteia*'s emphatic call for the rule of law is a reminder of the fundamental political and societal challenge facing much of the contemporary Middle East. The failure of social compacts has led to a cycle of bloodletting between a range of protagonists in a lawless environment. The region is awash in armed combatants professing a range of tribal, political, ethnic, and sectarian loyalties. Within the failed secular nationalist republics, reestablishing the rule of law with some degree of popular legitimacy is the beginning of binding disparate communities under a new social compact and channeling their rivalries into durable institutions.

Within societies whose social compacts are strained or have failed, debates over the enactment of laws and their just administration will shape the political environment for years. As the states in the region struggle to remake or amend their social compacts, the sources of law—including Islamic law—and what types of institutions will administer those laws will be at the center of political developments. Aeschylus provides a key reminder about how to conceptualize the recovery and long-term stability of the region through the establishment of the rule of law.

As the United States and other external powers consider their policy options in the Middle East in such a time, the central message of Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* is worth recalling. The rule of law will be necessary for any stable outcomes in the region and a clear focus on the sources of law and how much democratic power will determine how those laws will be administered will be part of ending the costly conflicts plaguing the region. The idea of the supremacy of the rule of law will face resistance in the region's Arab monarchies, in Iran, and perhaps in Turkey and Egypt where new modes of authoritarian leadership are becoming entrenched. Nonetheless, the ancient Aeschylean insight that law is the road to civilized life is worth remembering in the often chaotic political landscape of the Middle East. In a region of centrifugal political forces that

a. When Agamemnon returns from Troy, his wife Clytemnestra soon exacts her revenge by killing her husband and his Trojan concubine, Cassandra. Agamemnon's son Orestes, colluding with his sister Electra, and at the urging of the god Apollo, kills their mother to avenge Agamemnon's death. For this murder, Orestes is pursued by the Furies—a group of avenging spirits from which Orestes must hide. The cycle of vengeance ends when, at the urging of the goddess Athena, the Furies and Orestes make their separate cases in a trial before a jury of Athenian citizens, which ends with the acquittal of Orestes after Athena breaks a tie left by a deadlocked jury.

struggles for an idea around which competing parties might agree, the primacy of the rule of law could serve as such an organizing principle. Aeschylus is ancient but he is also highly relevant to the ways we ought to conceive of the region's contemporary political challenges.

In harnessing Homer and Aeschylus to conceptualize the political landscape of the contemporary Middle East, one might be accused of committing the error—political and intellectual—of imposing Eurocentric frameworks on the region's troubles. Yet, the work of Orientalists since the late nineteenth century in deciphering texts in Akkadian, Hittite and other ancient Near Eastern languages has demonstrated that the literatures of the ancient Near East have strong parallels with Greek epic and other Greek literary forms. These parallels, alongside the demonstrated trade linkages and transportation corridors between West Asia and the Greek world raise the possibility that the ancient Greeks—writing in their Indo-European language—absorbed substantial influences from ancient Near Eastern literature. In his exhaustive study, *The East Face of Helicon*, the renowned classicist Martin West documented, for example, how Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* uses imagery and scenes similar to those in Sumerian, Ugaritic, Hittite, Akkadian, Egyptian, and Hebrew texts<sup>a</sup>. West also makes a strong case for potential Near Eastern influences on Homeric epic, in part, by demonstrating that the Iliad's central character, Achilles, has strong and specific parallels with the character of Gilgamesh in an Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh epic.<sup>b</sup>

In conceptualizing political challenges in the Middle East, we may draw from the well-spring of Greek literature and in so doing are almost certainly partaking of the Middle East's ancient literary traditions. Allowing insights from the ancient world to inform our analysis is to recognize the mixing of ideas in ancient international literary currents from the Near East and not to imply or assert the primacy of the Greek corpus over the Near East's own traditions. Homer and Aeschylus offer useful conceptual frameworks for the contemporary Middle East because they permit us to think beyond our traditional analytic frameworks. They are among the authors who may have been overlooked in most contemporary analysis of the region because of their association with the Western literary tradition and because of a reluctance to open the door more broadly to a renewed study of the ancient world and its relevance to the modern Middle East.

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a. Martin L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Clarendon Press, 1997), 566–79.

b. Ibid. 401.

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## DEFINING THE PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL COMMUNITY

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A final conceptual challenge associated with the forging of new social compacts will be how to think about the region's political geography; again ancient perspectives can inform our analysis. The quest for new social compacts will not only entail the multi-layered political process that the Greek encampment in the *Iliad* invites us to contemplate, the redistricting methods of Cleisthenes to build a wider political identity, or the pursuit of the rule of law that Aeschylus exhorts. The renewal of social compacts will also require a reckoning with the underlying geographic boundaries of the Middle East and the patterns of settlement and political community that have attended these divisions since antiquity. This ancient physical map helps us understand the constituent parts of any political order. Where rivers flow, where rain falls, where mountains rise, and where deserts divide and influence early settlement and national identity, they will, in turn, affect the renewal of social compacts.

Ancient geography echoes loudly into the region's contemporary political and territorial challenges because the distribution of combatants—state and non-state—after nearly a decade of civil conflicts across the Middle East corresponds roughly to the region's underlying geographic divisions and ancient settlement patterns. In Libya, the main political and military divisions today between Tripoli and Benghazi are the same divisions that separated Phoenician and Greek colonies in antiquity. One can conceive of modern Libya in many ways, but not without recognizing these enduring geographic antecedents. In Yemen, failing modern borders have again sifted into ancient underlying geographic zones with combatants in the highlands, including Sanaa, often contesting with rivals in and from the desert coastal areas, including Aden.

In Syria, similar ancient geographic divisions are now resurgent with the regime holding the Eastern Mediterranean highlands—the traditional locus of urban centers, rain-fed agriculture, and maritime trade routes to Europe—while Damascus has struggled to reassert itself in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin. Also known as the grasslands of the *Jazirah*, the upper Tigris-Euphrates has long acted as a separate zone wedged between the Anatolian plateau, the Eastern Mediterranean highlands, and the lower Tigris-Euphrates basin. This remote area—where states have always struggled to assert their writ—became the brief redoubt of the self-declared caliphate in 2014. One can speculate whether the ambitions of the attempted caliphate drew inspiration from the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the seventh century BCE, which managed to rule most of the Middle East from the same remote area.

In these ways, political communities in the former secular Arab nationalist republics have sought to demarcate new borders, either within or across the twentieth century Middle East. The long-term status of these *de facto* attempts to redraw boundaries will



be likely to remain uncertain but *de jure* changes to the political map face the reality that no military power is willing and able unilaterally to impose new borders, and no consensus exists among the various regional and external state powers or non-state actors to effect changes to the present political map. Under these circumstances, the status quo is likely to endure. Nonetheless, durable political compacts will have to address the distribution of combatants along ancient geographic boundaries that have political and historical resonance. Ancient patterns and precedents can inform this project.

The region's chaotic and fragile political environment summons us to think imaginatively and differently about the challenges that lie ahead. The twentieth century discourse on the Middle East gave us ways of thinking that were inevitably shaped by the politics of European colonization and decolonization, the Cold War, an overreliance on elite palaces to mediate our understanding of societal change, and by an assumption that the demarcated state borders of the post-Ottoman era were permanent and politically viable. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the attacks of 9/11, and the ongoing tumult unleashed in the "Arab Spring", we find ourselves well beyond the Pillars of Hercules and deep into uncharted waters and in need of thinking differently about the region's political recovery.

To help understand the breadth and direction of change, the conceptual frameworks of the ancient Greek political experience—undertaken in a wider Greek culture that was influenced by the Near East—helps us to remember the complexity of political change and the fundamentals of representative social compacts. The ancient world makes us think about basics—a suitable subject for a region shorn of much of its twentieth century ideas and institutions. The ancient beginning of politics is a useful way to organize our thinking for a region in which the Damascene merchant's prophecy of violence and destruction has largely come to pass, launching a new and uncertain modern political beginning.





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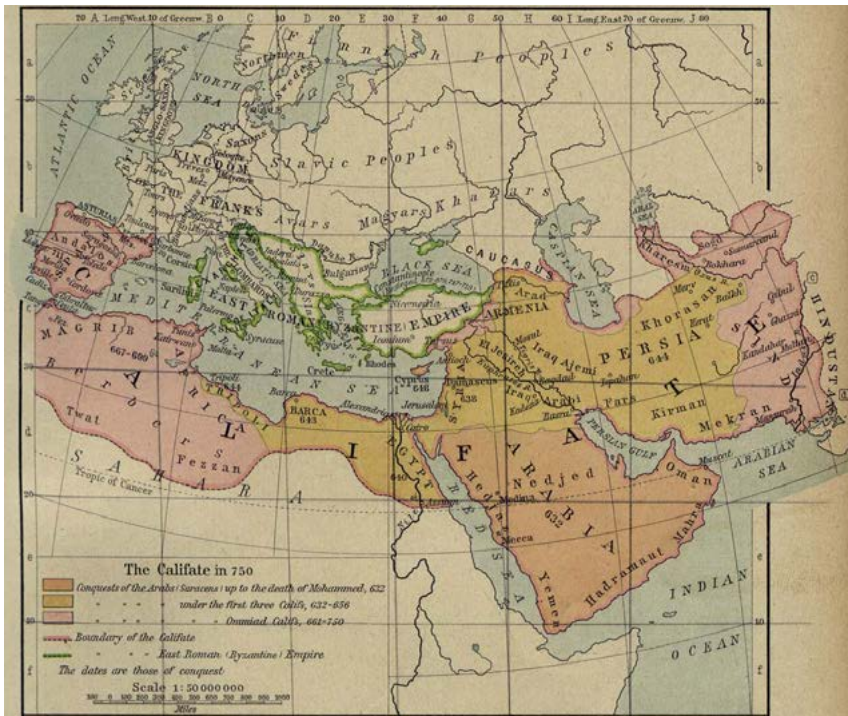
## CHAPTER 4

### ANCIENT RELIGION'S PERSISTENCE

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*Religiously-inspired events in the Middle East—especially since the end of the Cold War—do not accord well with the secular orientation of post-Enlightenment foreign policy elites in the West or analyses that are limited to the social sciences. The region's ancient and late antique history, however, helps us to conceptualize the potential religious elements of emerging social compacts and better understand the complementarity of religious and non-religious knowledge systems persistent in the region. Recognizing these ancient patterns of governance and knowledge can leaven the perception that the region faces a choice between a backward-looking religious culture and a forward-looking culture of reason and material progress. Once homo religiosus becomes recognizable in our view of the region, we can ask how this fundamental and influential attribute of human behavior will affect the region's recovery from conflict and instability.*

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### *The Caliphate in the Eighth Century*

From William R. Shepherd, "The Historical Atlas," 1923

University of Texas Austin Perry-Castañeda Library

"HOMO SAPIENS IS ALSO HOMO RELIGIOSUS."<sup>a</sup>

*Karen Armstrong's compelling declaration about the durability of religious sensibility in human beings is more than one insight from a learned scholar. This modern affirmation of religious faith in diverse human communities builds on the scholarship of German scholars Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), who argued that the experience of the divine was personal and still plausible in the age of the Enlightenment.<sup>b</sup> Armstrong does us all the service of extending this German theological discourse into a contemporary global context, arguing that whatever expectations we may have for the demise of religion the reality of religion persists.*

a. Armstrong, Karen. "Think Again: God." *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2009, foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/think-again-god/.

b. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (Oxford University Press, 1950) and Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

## RELIGION AND HUMAN COMMUNITY: FORMATIVE LESSONS OUTSIDE THE MIDDLE EAST

**Ghana:** *The ideas that God isn't going anywhere and that religion in the modern era is more resilient than generally presumed<sup>a</sup> took concrete form when I found myself volunteering in Ghana in the summer of 1980, well before I joined CIA. In the streets of a slum in the capital Accra, a priestess in religious frenzy made me think of how the Pythia at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi might have sounded to petitioners seeking guidance on statecraft and how difficult understanding a prophetic message might have been. The ecstatic contortions and shouts of the Ghanaian priestess proclaimed a connection to the supernatural that gave her vague authority—like the Pythia—over the large crowd around her. In the slum, there was a correlation between poverty and traditional belief that would be consistent with subsequent decades of international social science research data indicating that people who have low levels of existential security manifest strong traditional beliefs among which is religiosity.<sup>b</sup> Homo religiosus is usually not wealthy.*

*Three months in Ghana would reveal how religious belief can inspire entire communities to act collectively with a common understanding of the sacred that defines and motivates their actions. This lesson began for me as faint voices rose with the dawn in the village of Moseasu in the Ashanti highlands of Ghana, rousing me from deep slumber earned from the prior day's planting of cocoa seedling plants—the cash crop upon which the Ghanaian economy rested. That prior day had been unusual because a cobra snake nesting in a rotten tree trunk we had felled had protested our intrusion by lunging at us. The locals in our group moved so swiftly with their machetes that the serpent was in pieces before it had fallen to the ground. Nonetheless, the event seemed to sap the enthusiasm of the foreign volunteers for our remaining labors, making the day grow longer. I became exceedingly popular and never found myself working alone once I let my fellow volunteers know that I had brought a pocket-sized snake bite kit.*

*The voices were singing more loudly as a group of women inexplicably walked up the one dirt-covered street of the village in a quasi-military formation. They were mothers and carried in their right hands large palm branches that they pushed forward and back, in broad, sweeping motions. The village had no electricity, so the only light came from the orange dawn which enshrouded the female warriors in a numinous glow, refracted through the early morning fog. I would later learn that these mothers were*

a. See also John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World* (Penguin Books, 2010).

b. R. Inglehart, et al., (eds.), 2014 *World Values Survey: All Rounds - Country-Pooled Datafile 1981–2014* (Madrid: JD Systems Institute), version: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp)

*seeking to drive from the village an evil spirit they blamed for causing an outbreak of dysentery among their children. They were acting religiously, in community, and for shared purpose. Beliefs defined interests and motivated action not just for individuals but for groups too.*

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**Sri Lanka:** *That ancient religious ideas make public claims on the politics, norms, and beliefs of a society rang true again during an academic trip to Sri Lanka just before the Sinhalese-Tamil civil war erupted in 1983. I was researching my undergraduate thesis on how Buddhist nationalist monks had successfully conspired to assassinate the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka in 1959. I sat at a long mahogany table in the university library near Kandy shoulder to shoulder with saffron-robed monks. They were studying ancient texts in Pali that belonged to the canon of Theravada Buddhism, while I devoted my energies to finding out details of a modern-day Buddhist political conspiracy that some of their predecessors had hatched. The pounding of the monsoon rain outside seemed to emphasize the lesson that religion and politics were as proximate to each other as I was to my monastic student colleagues.*

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**New York City:** *The idea that religion can be more than a private choice of belief, permitted but not endorsed by the state, is not apparent in cosmopolitan Manhattan, where I grew up. Homo economicus was easier to spy in the financial canyons of downtown than homo religiosus. The creeds of individualism, scientific reasoning, and liberation from traditional communities and knowledge systems needed no formal profession because they were self-evident. Religious thought lived in the preserves of some academic institutions, art galleries, religious communities, and museums, but the slightest hint of official public affiliation with anything religious was fraught with what the ancient Greeks called eris—strife and quarrel. The Enlightenment's and French Revolution's triumph over religion was, of course, far from assured in a nation whose founders included many of profound religious conviction, but in the elite academic and political circles of the East Coast, religion seemed definitely in retreat.*

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This persistence was on display during a visit to pre-war Syria when Islam's numinous voice awoke me. The call to prayer from the muezzin atop the minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in the old city of Damascus called to mind the solitary shofar—the ram's horn of Judaism—and the melisma of a Gregorian Chant of the medieval church. I remembered how the conquering Arab armies of Islam had banned the use of the iron bells of Byzantine churches to stop the bells from mobilizing whole villages at a moment's notice. It was apparent that the religious artistry of the muezzin's call to prayer had the same power to summon as the Byzantine church bell once did. The Islamic conquest assured that the new religious faith would remain public and pervasive.

The comingling of religion and politics in late antiquity<sup>a</sup>—and its echoes into the contemporary Middle East—was also on full display when I visited a Coptic monastery about 60 miles from Cairo in the Nile Delta at Wadi al Natrun. The black-robed Coptic monk's eyes twinkled with excitement when I asked whether the Monophysite—"one nature"—Coptic claim had been overdrawn amid the theological wrangle over how to describe the divine and human attributes of Christ<sup>b</sup>. Although this debate had prompted multiple and unsuccessful attempts by Byzantine emperors to formulate language that all parts of the empire could find acceptable and the Coptic Church had persisted in its separate way, few in the 21<sup>st</sup> century speak of the Coptic Church as heretical.

Listening to my modest attempt at religious diplomacy, the monk smiled and reached for a censer<sup>c</sup> and pulled it apart to reveal an ember the size of a golf ball. Motioning toward it, he noted that it was a single ember but the top was red hot and the bottom cool black, symbolizing the true view of the Coptic Church that there was one person in Christ and two natures. The monophysite debate, he suggested, was no more than an unfortunate misunderstanding from the past that had been resolved. Nonetheless, its religious and political overtones were alive in the contemporary mind of an Egyptian monk in the desert of Wadi el Natrun. Religion and politics rested symbolically and enduringly in the censer he held before me.

In the Middle East we inevitably face questions about how the search for religious meaning persists for individuals and how it is expressed in the social compacts between rulers and ruled. The global awakening of religious and ethnic identity in the aftermath

a. Late antiquity holds different meanings, dates, and geographic scopes among scholars but it is often considered to be the transitional period in the ancient Mediterranean world that began as Rome encountered multiple crises of the 3rd century and that ended with the rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. For a key early work in the field, see: Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*. London, Thames and Hudson, Ltd. 1971.

b. The 5th century had witnessed highly nuanced Christological debates about how to articulate the presence of divine and human natures in Christ. A formal church council—under the Emperor's aegis—had attempted in 451 to settle the matter by declaring that Christ had distinct divine and human natures that were both present in a single person. This contrasted with the slightly different view among Alexandrian bishops who oversaw the Egyptian church—today's Coptic Church—that Christ had one nature and this nature was foremost divine after having absorbed Christ's human nature.

c. A spherical metal container used to burn fragrant incense in religious rituals to sanctify space and, in earlier times, cover up the odor of sacrificed animals.

of the Cold War, the religious backdrop to the attacks of 9/11, and the attempt by religion to fill the vacuum left by secular nationalism in the Arab world suggest religious sensibility will animate political action throughout the Middle East well beyond this period of political turmoil and violence. The religiosity of the Middle East also reaches back to the earliest civilizations of humankind. *Homo religiosus* walks through the region with a sense of God that—for the time horizons contemporary policymakers care about—is ineradicable.

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### RELIGION'S AWKWARD PLACE IN ANALYSIS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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The pervasiveness of religious sensibility and its ability to influence the lives of peoples in publicly visible ways constitute habits of mind and ways of being that do not sit easily with foreign policy elites in the West. To serve as a civil servant in the West is to participate in governance based on an established set of principles that individually and in combination resist the idea that “*Homo sapiens* is *Homo religiosus*.”<sup>a</sup> The separation of religion and politics at Westphalia, the privileging of reason and science in the Enlightenment, the secular political legacy of the French Revolution and nationalism, and the personal political right to freedom of worship in the West’s liberal ideal shape elite—government and academic—views that religion in public spaces is a pre-modern, even negative, phenomenon. There should be, in this conception, no normative claims of religion on society, politics, and knowledge systems. Religion should only make private claims on the individual’s personal spiritual life and ethics.

The invention in the West at the end of the last century of neologisms such as “Islamic activism” and “political Islam” attest to an academic and government preference to describe the revival of Islam in public spheres as a political, not a religious trend. Throughout the many academic conferences on political and societal conditions in the Middle East I have attended over three decades, analytic approaches frequently treated religion as a form of political ideology that came with its own institutions and resources and was subject to political struggles for power. Suggestions that religion could function as an independent force and provide an alternative knowledge system and thereby shape governance were rarely offered.

Analysts in the modern West seeking to understand how *Homo religiosus* will function in societies of the Middle East that are seeking new social compacts are unaccustomed to thinking and speaking about religion. In government and in the academy, the understandable reluctance to introduce the divisions and tensions into the workplace that can accompany expressions of religious identity or allowing religion to distort empirically

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a. Armstrong, Karen. “Think Again: God.” *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2009, [foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/think-again-god/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/15/think-again-god/).



derived facts has often come at the expense of our willingness to think critically about religion. In many corridors of power, discussion of religion is awkward and frequently taboo, even as the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom is honored.

One significant consequence of the lack of thinking about religion is that we often assume that religion and politics are ordained to be separate and that this is an appropriate norm for modern societies, including those developing in the Middle East. We can unintentionally commit the analytic error of projecting our own assumptions onto other societies and limit our ability to understand from the subject's perspective the full range of political and other potential outcomes. This is an analytic pitfall intelligence professionals have long recognized and sought to avoid. In *The Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*—a foundational work for intelligence analysis which the CIA has available on its website—Richards Heuer notes that:

*“One kind of assumption an analyst should always recognize and question is mirror-imaging—filling gaps in the analyst's own knowledge by assuming that the other side is likely to act in a certain way because that is how the US would act under similar circumstances. . . . Mirror-imaging leads to dangerous assumptions, because people in other cultures do not think the way we do.”<sup>a</sup>*

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## ISLAM'S PERSISTENT CLAIMS ON THE PUBLIC SPHERE . . .

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The religiously-inspired events that have arisen in the Middle East—especially since the end of the Cold War—and the subsequent demise of much of the twentieth century's post-Ottoman order of governance do not accord well with these secular intellectual preferences. In the 1970s, Lebanon's sectarian civil war and Iran's Islamic revolution were the harbingers of a wider religious awakening that is now coursing through the region. The revival of Islam in Turkish politics and society beginning in the 1990s, the rise of the Taliban in post-Soviet Afghanistan, the subsequent radicalization of religiously-inspired Muslim combatants against the West leading to the attacks of 9/11, the surge of Shia religious expression in post-Saddam Iraq, the Muslim Brotherhood's brief electoral success in capturing the Egyptian presidency in 2012, and the establishment of a so-called caliphate in 2014 in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin all attest to the resurgence of Islam in politics and society across the wider Middle East.

The necessary preoccupation with counterterrorism has helped defer, at least temporarily, reconciliation of the gap between our intellectual disquiet with the return of religion and the reality that much is happening again in the name of religion. The global counter-terrorism fight since 9/11 has been a necessary response to the violent and law-

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a. Richards J. Heuer, *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, (Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 1999.) <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/art9.html> (accessed June 7, 2018).

less targeting of civilians, to attempts to sow disorder in the state system, to create insecurity and economic loss especially in the West, and to undermine the assumptions of a secular, liberal, and prosperous way of life. The fight against terrorism has drawn in—to varying degrees—states outside the West that have stakes in preserving the foundations of the international system. The counterterrorism effort has been assiduously and appropriately defended as a response to extremism, not the religion of Islam, recognizing that only a tiny minority of Muslims support such tactics and even fewer execute them.

The non-religious approach of counterterrorism—although necessary and respectful of Islam—has had the unintended consequence of delaying a wider discussion of Islam's importance to the future of the region. In focusing on extremism and the use of terror as an illegitimate tactic, it is possible to perpetuate the now outdated assumption that religion is not an independent and salient force in international politics and, in particular, in the Middle East's future. Yet, Islam is part of the complex and troubled relationship the region has had with the West since crusaders brutally sacked Jerusalem in 1099 and especially since European powers completed their defeat of Ottoman rule in the early twentieth century. Not only does the tiny minority of extremists fighting the West invoke the authority of Islam for its cause, but so do broader movements in key states such as Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Iraq claim Islam as part of the political compacts that should follow the failed European export of secular nationalism.

Muslims in the contemporary Middle East—though undeniably diverse in their religious practices, jurisprudential traditions, and political beliefs—share a common religious identity and historic memory that includes a conflicted relationship with the West. In offering its followers a way of life that does not neatly distinguish between private and public spheres of behavior nor submit deferentially to the Enlightenment's claims of a preeminent knowledge system, Islam is a wellspring for an alternative conception of politics and society the West cannot ignore. If a necessary and appropriately grounded counterterrorism effort obscures these realities, we risk missing the role Islam is likely to play in the region's future.

Refrains that Islam is diverse—which it is—or invocations of “political Islam”—a largely redundant phrase because Islam by its self-definition makes claims on the public sphere—say more about our own analytic preferences than about the inescapable presence of religion as an independent force shaping the region's future. Relegating decades of historical scholarship to the margins of our discourse because of presumed complicity in colonialism puts more obstacles in our path toward recovering analysis that is inclusive of religion. The task of taking religion seriously is all the more difficult for a foreign policy establishment in the West built on decades of defending one side of a secular argument—liberalism—against opposing secular arguments of communism and fascism. Accustomed for decades to secular disputation, we find ourselves facing new religious terms of reference. Awkwardly, God is likely to be sticking around for the foreseeable future regardless of our analytic preferences.

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## . . . BUT WHO WILL SPEAK FOR ISLAM?

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The issues that are in play when assessing how Islam will exert its influence in the renewal and reform of social compacts in the Middle East are daunting. The status of the four main Islamic schools of jurisprudence has eroded as the information and communications revolution has dispersed the traditional authority to interpret Islam's sacred texts to any—including extremists—who claim to know the meaning of Islam's canonical texts. Traditional seats of Islamic learning have come increasingly under the influence of governments, putting at risk of politicization nodes of centralized authority in Islam. In any political compact in the Middle East, the question of who will speak for Islam and by what authority looms large. Key religious ideas of *ijma* (consensus), *qiyas* (juridical reasoning by analogy) *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and *bid'ah* (innovation) will influence Islam's ongoing attempts to reconcile its civilizational inheritance with global norms of individualism, scientific reasoning, and secular government. The status of the *Qur'an* for Muslims as the ingenerate word of God also makes any attempt to reinterpret its meaning replete with spiritual import and difficult to accomplish. Compounding these uncertainties is the larger struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran for wider influence in the Middle East and the power to speak on behalf of the faith.

Standard analytic tools that treat such problems as primarily political can offer important—even if incomplete—help in understanding trends and policy options for the role of Islam and other faiths in the Middle East's future. The study of Islamic discourse, for example, can identify liberalizing theological reasoning, security analysis can determine how successful Islamic insurgencies are in holding the hearts and minds of those they seek to govern, and political analysts can attempt to forecast prospects for party formation based on religious identity and teaching. Still, these insights relegate religion to dependency on other, secular forces.

The now banished conversation around Orientalism—that often proposed large conceptual approaches for thinking through complex problems—can speak to some of these contemporary challenges and can help us to think more broadly about religion's role in societies of the region. In 1957, the Canadian orientalist and scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote about the Arab Islamic world and the gulf between it and the modernizing culture around it in ways that are conceptually useful today:

*It is one of the novelties of modernity that these gulfs must be bridged, that communication and understanding be created. In the past, civilizations have got along without such understanding of their neighbors; either ignoring other civilizations or fighting them. The unprecedented task of our day, of learning to live in close touch and even collaboration and indeed with large-scale interpenetration with*

*them, demands a creative effort. Such an achievement cannot be taken for granted, nor the way to it learned without difficulty.<sup>a</sup>*

Smith's prescient observations rest on taking history—including its religious component—seriously in ways that a rigidly secular view of human beings and their political communities does not. His sympathetic and inclusive vision for the interactions among civilizations also appears to be far removed from the blanket indictments of some modern scholars that Orientalism perpetuates the political and cultural hegemony of the colonial era against the peoples of the region.

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## ANCIENT PATTERNS OF COMINGLED RELIGION AND GOVERNANCE

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In this analytic tempest of religion, politics, and societal change, revisiting the ancient world's religious sensibility and its more complementary approaches to religion and governance can be useful. Studies of the ancient and early medieval worlds show that philosophy and science routinely co-existed with revealed knowledge, religions were not closed systems, and the complementarity of religious and political authority has been a governing norm in different forms for at least five millennia. These ways of understanding religion do not predict how the social compacts of the region will be amended or remade in religious contexts but offer ways of thinking about the central phenomenon of religion for which our modern analytic tools are not as well suited. Ancient perspectives, once again, are needed for conceptualizing change in the modern Middle East.

In the ancient world the norm of religion and politics functioning as two overlapping spheres in a unified society is at least as old as our written records. In early Bronze Age Mesopotamia, for example, Sumerian and Akkadian cities were paired with deities, and if a city was powerful, its god would dominate the gods of another city. In Babylon, the god Marduk, whose origins are described in the creation myth *Enuma Elish*, became the official deity of the realm of the Babylonian King Hammurabi. The Assyrian Empire followed the Babylonian model of integrating state and religion, claiming its own transnational god Ashur. Similarly, in the Achaemenid Empire of the fifth century BCE, Persian Kings worshipped Ahura Mazda as the supreme god and the Persian Sasanian Empire of the third century BCE organized this worship into the official state religion of Zoroastrianism with the ancient *Avesta* as its sacred text.

In the ancient Greek world, the intersection of religious and political activity developed in different ways. The Athenian city state, like its ancient Near Eastern neighbors, recognized the power of religion and made sure the state was integrated with it. Athenians

a. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, (Princeton University Press, 1957), 103.

celebrated Athena—the city's patron goddess and protector—with an annual state sponsored festival and procession, the Panathenaea, which included representatives from all the Athenian citizenry and from cities subject to Athenian imperial power. The main effect of the rituals, sacrifices, and games of the Panathenaea was a display of Athenian political unity and power fused with themes of the divine. For the Greeks, religion also surfaced in key moments of political and military turmoil, for example, when Socrates was put to death, in part, on the charge of not believing in the gods, and when Sparta delayed marching to the aid of Athens at Marathon because Sparta was celebrating its own annual festival.

A more indirect pattern of state sponsorship of religion flowed from the annual competition of Greek tragedies that were part of the state-sponsored worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy. The experience of tragedy for Greeks was a ritual performance that allowed its participants to contemplate all aspects of the human condition, often through myths. As the early twentieth century classicist Edith Hamilton noted, the Greeks did much of their engagement with transcendent truths through their literary and philosophical writers.<sup>a</sup>

The relationship of religion and political power was also explicit throughout the Roman imperial age, beginning with the elevation of Octavian to Emperor Augustus in 27 BCE. The subsequent development of an imperial cult, especially in the eastern Roman Empire, in which Romans worshipped their emperors almost as gods, the divination of emperors—usually after their deaths but also sometimes when they were alive—and the emperor's role as *pontifex maximus*, chief priest of the Roman state, established a pattern of political and religious powers intertwined that would persist for centuries.

In the Byzantine, or East Roman, state of late antiquity faith and politics remained deeply intertwined. The relationship of a Byzantine emperor to the Christian patriarch of Constantinople was by design and custom intended to be mutually supportive and complementary.<sup>b</sup> In high moments of cooperation, the arrangement proved beneficial for all parties. The emperor Heraclius, for example, went on a campaign against his Persian Sasanian foes and entrusted the successful defense of Constantinople in 626 to his patriarch who faced the separate threat of attacking Avars descending from Central Europe. When the religious-political compact faltered, however, as it did during the bitter debates that spanned the eighth and ninth centuries over the role of Christian images in the orthodox faith, patriarchs would wield their power of legitimation of the Byzantine emperor who wielded his power of appointment of the patriarch in a political and religious tug of war that violated the norms expected in the relationship. Similarly, as we witness periodic storms of Islamic iconoclasm, we should recall that representation

a. Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way*, (Modern Library, 1961), 208. Originally published by W. W. Norton in 1942.

b. Christianity had decisively triumphed over paganism in the late fourth century, when Emperor Theodosius I made Christianity the state religion, assuring that the role of the patriarch would be an essential part of the wider Byzantine order.

of the sacred in images—a practice associated with the earlier pagan civilization of the Roman world—was also deeply contested in eighth and ninth century Christian Byzantium and encumbered with political, not just religious, motivations.

These intersections among religious and political forces across millennia would infuse directly Islam's conception of a unified religious and political order. The caliphate in Islam rested upon the idea that there were rightful successors to the Prophet Muhammad who wielded spiritual and temporal power over Muslims. This Muslim political and religious model had more in common with the Byzantine order in which patriarch and emperor held in two persons the power accorded to the Caliph than with the more competitive model emerging in Western Europe between religious and monarchical power. The ancient norm in the Eastern Mediterranean world was an interweaving of religion and politics.

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## RELIGIOUS THOUGHT CAN BE COSMOPOLITAN

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In addition to overlooking the ancient comingling of religion and politics, our modern perspectives on the Middle East can also assume that religious ways of knowing and reasoning are incompatible. As heirs to the Enlightenment, we risk viewing religious knowledge systems as inevitably subject to revision and improvement by the power of reason and observation applied through the scientific method. The idea that a non-rational world could be apprehended apart from the rational has had little impact on a modern culture in the West, which privileges technological innovation through science, engineering, and mathematics. The ancient world offers again, a remedy for this potential analytic bias by demonstrating that religious and non-religious ways of thinking have co-existed for centuries. The modern binary choice many in the West make between faith and reason is less normative to peoples of the Middle East. *Homo religiosus* is not necessarily hostile to reason, and a review of the region's ancient past affirms this. Realization of this has consequences for how we in the West understand political and social change.

The co-existence of religious and non-religious ways of knowing appears in the ancient Mediterranean in the sixth century BCE. The Greeks had learned already about the pantheon of gods that ruled over them through Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Theogony* of the poet Hesiod, and through a series of Homeric hymns—attributed to but not authored by Homer. Explanations of natural phenomena relied on the actions of the Olympian pantheon, and when Thales of Miletus offered new explanations of the phys-

ical world through empirical observations, he became the first of many thinkers on the western edge of Anatolia<sup>a</sup> to propose an alternative way of knowing the world.<sup>b</sup>

The Greek philosophical tradition that would eventually produce Socrates in the fifth century BCE and Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century BCE had begun in Miletus and with it came a scientific reasoning that would eventually dominate the modern era. The ancient world's revolution in worldview, however, did not require of Greeks or others in the new shadow of reason to make a binary choice between religious and non-religious knowing. During the flowering of science and mathematics in the Hellenistic era,<sup>c</sup> for example, the preeminence of Homer as a source of religious knowledge and a guide to norms of behavior would persist. A new Hellenistic genre of pastoral poetry—launched by Theocritus in the third century BCE amid a scientific revolution—would be predicated upon the mythology of the received Greek religion from Homer and Hesiod.<sup>d</sup>

Theocritus grounded his work in the epic tradition of divine and human interaction, leading his audiences to settings that blurred natural realism with supernatural images as he struck a pose of a rustic, enchanting urban dwellers in Alexandria. All this creative energy unfolded under the sponsorship of the Hellenistic Kings of Egypt, who had founded a prototype of a royal academy of arts and sciences—the Mouseion—and the adjacent great library of Alexandria, which together sustained wide-ranging scientific and literary pursuits well into the Roman era. The investigation of the natural world and the experience of the supernatural world existed in distinct domains but also in a larger, complementary unity. This pervasive religious sensibility is increasingly unfamiliar to moderns, but it is worth recalling as we think about *Homo religiosus* in the contemporary Middle East.

The Greek love affair with reason carried over to the houses of Christianity and Islam throughout late antiquity and the early middle ages. As early as the late second and early third centuries, Christian theologians in Alexandria, such as Clement and Origen, relied on their classical educations to interpret and establish the new faith. These thinkers often drew upon Plato, who would also become central to the religious thought of Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. In the East, theology in the fourth century depended for its orthodox exposition on thinkers such as Basil and Gregory of Na-

a. The region the Greeks called Ionia.

b. On the trail of Thales would follow other pre-Socratic philosophers such as Anaximander, who speculated that human beings evolved from marine life, and Heraclitus, who proposed that fire—not water, as Thales had thought—was the essence of the cosmos.

c. The dates for the Hellenistic era are usually given as 323–30 BCE.

d. For a foundational study of the Hellenistic pastoral poet Theocritus see: *Theocritus. Works, English and Greek*, translated and with commentary by A. S. F. Gow (Cambridge University Press, 1952).

zianzus who had studied classical authors in Athens.<sup>a</sup> In the tenth century, the Muslim polymath Al Farabi, brought Greek ideas of governance to the Islamic world, founding the tradition of Islamic political philosophy using his unsurpassed knowledge of the works of Aristotle and Plato.<sup>b</sup> Philosophy and reason were harnessed in the service of the revealed religions of Christianity and Islam.

In the literature of the Eastern Roman Empire, the importance of Homer—who wrote not only about Greek gods but also about politics and societal norms—would survive the transition of the ancient Mediterranean world to Christianity and demonstrate the ability of the Byzantines to keep Christian and Greek intellectual traditions alive together. Knowledge of Homer in the Christian era was not a forbidden pursuit in an empire under new religious management but an essential component of elite education.<sup>c</sup> In the ninth century, the Byzantine Orthodox Patriarch and polymath, Photios, commented on hundreds of works of Greek literature composed over fourteen centuries, launching a Byzantine renaissance in Greek learning.<sup>d</sup> Homer, as an essential component of an educated worldview, was also expressed as late as the twelfth century by the Byzantine princess and historiographer Anna Komnene.<sup>e</sup>

This ancient pattern of one intellectual inheritance thriving alongside newer worldviews—a coexistence of different ways of looking at and understanding the world—is on the surface familiar to someone living in the twenty-first century West, where it is routine to adopt and construct different identities while drawing from different literary and cultural traditions. In our view of the contemporary Middle East, however, we rarely credit the region with cosmopolitan pluralism in religious or other ideas. Embassies overrun, brutal killings, and now persistent conflict along religious, ethnic, and tribal fissures often shape our immediate view of the region.

The co-existence and even complementarity of different ways of thinking—religious and non-religious—can leaven our modern perception that the region faces a choice between a backward-looking religious culture and a forward-looking culture of reason and material progress. Too strong a tilt toward the assumptions of the Enlightenment

a. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 599.

b. For an English translation and commentary on Al Farabi's political thought, see Charles Edwin Butterworth, *Alfarabi the Political Writings: Selected Aphorisms and Other Texts* (Cornell University Press, 2001).

c. The Byzantine Empress Eudocia in the fifth century, for example, wrote a series of Christian poems, each line of which was borrowed from either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, to express ideas from Christian scripture and tradition.

d. Warren Treadgold, *The Nature of the "Bibliotheca" of Photius* (Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1980).

e. Anna Comnena and E. R. A. Sewter, *The Alexiad* (Penguin Books, 2003) and Andrew Dyck, "Iliad and Alexiad: Anna Comnena's Homeric Reminiscences," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* (Duke University Libraries) <https://openpublishing.library.duke.edu/index.php/grbs/article/view/5121> (accessed June 7, 2018).



can blind us to the possibility that religious and non-religious ideas have often co-existed and even flourished in the region. It is also helpful to remember that the geography of the region—where currents of the ancient Near East meet currents of Greek civilization—has inevitably led not only to competing worldviews but also to complementary and intersecting ones that could help conceptualize a more tolerant era for the region.

The ancient expression of religious identity and the intersection of religion and politics in the Middle East have survived a century of challenge from a secular nationalist alternative. In the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, new concepts of the modern state, political parties that claimed broad allegiance, and citizenship that transcended clan, tribe, and sect were supposed to prevail but they did not. The establishment of universities, the spread of industrial production in the region's traditional agrarian societies, and the more recent democratization of knowledge in an information and communications revolution could have been expected to lessen the role for religion but this too has not come to pass. Only Arab monarchies with their legitimacy predicated on ties to Islam have kept their social compacts from imploding. Beyond the Arab world, Iran has sought to rebuff a western, secular modernization path, and Turkey has begun to rekindle the role of Islam in governance. The region's reality is the profound and persistent presence of Islam throughout transitioning societies.

In the face of this religious dynamic, one option for those who would maintain the analytic assumptions of secular modernization would be to argue that the failure of secular nationalist regimes was mostly due to corruption, repressive authoritarian rule, and an inability to meet the basic needs of growing populations. To these arguments could be added the failure of clan and tribe-based regimes to expand their base of support across diverse societies, insufficient foreign investment, weak educational infrastructures, the exclusion of women, and a failure to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. The combination of all these forces—none of which is religious—could suggest that only marginal change to the last century's secular model is necessary. In this view, the remedy would be to fight corruption, redouble efforts to broaden political representation, and strengthen economic performance. Such a version of updated secular nationalism would also seek to revise social compacts in ways that reduce Islam's claims on governance, leaving an exemption for Western allied Arab monarchies. In this stay-the-course approach to the region, a new generation of Iranians would be expected to continue pressing their demands for diminished religious control over their lives, and Turkey, once stable social compacts had been re-established on its borders, could resume the European strategic orientation in the aftermath of the Ottoman era.

This is the thinking that inevitably flows from analytic assumptions about the primacy of secularism, but it is an approach that has been repudiated by the religious trends in the region that have been gathering especially since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Such thinking arises in the absence of any consideration of the ancient patterns in the region that blend religion and politics and that demonstrate that in the Middle East holding

religious and non-religious knowledge systems in tandem is a longstanding practice. If these rhythms of the region again are unacknowledged and not discerned, they are likely to resurface and surprise in destabilizing ways. Although the old approaches to thinking about the region can lead to improvements in governance and economic performance, unless they are complemented with an understanding of who *homo religiosus* is and how religion might find accommodation with modern governance, we risk analytic and policy failure in the region. A recovery of ancient history in our assessments is central to developing a deeper understanding of the region, especially its religious patterns and precedents.

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Once our analysis of the region—informed by the study of its ancient history—allows us to take seriously the religious sensibilities, traditions, and aspirations of its inhabitants and not subordinate these forces to our own secular models, new approaches to policymaking arise. When perpetrators of terrorism claim to act in the name of Islam, efforts to organize an authoritative and broadly-based countervailing definition of the meaning of jihad in Islam and an equally compelling declaration of the religious impermissibility of killing innocents assume greater importance. Similarly, if we understand that Islam will inevitably make claims on governance and that the post-Westphalian view of privatized religious worship has almost no antecedent in the region, a new emphasis on the role of Islam in the remaking of social compacts is necessary. We need to be able to understand how the elements of Islamic law, *Sharia*, can complement Western sources of law, whether republican forms of government can draw legitimacy from Islam's sacred texts, and how individual freedoms can be understood and legitimated in an Islamic religious context.

Taking religion seriously in the public sphere of the Middle East means working to deepen and expand a consensus within Islam on key issues that matter to Muslim and non-Muslim states alike. In the decentralized and ruthless scramble for leadership in the diverse world of Islam, there is a need for Islam to once again centralize leadership and authority without resorting to a territorial caliphate. Islamic scholars and political leaders from a broad spectrum of the faith need to be encouraged to affirm Islam's respect for international borders and to define or renounce Islam's claims on the public and political space of non-Muslim states. This process will require *ijma* (consensus), *qiyas* (juridical reasoning by analogy) *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and perhaps *bid'ah* (innovation). It will be an internal Muslim debate over which the United States and the rest of the West will have no standing to advance particular outcomes.

Demonstrating greater *ihitiram* (respect), however, for religious sensibility and for the legitimacy of Islam's claims on governance in Muslim majority states could help the

West. Such *ihitiram* would allow for the West's political and security concerns to be taken into consideration as Islam works toward an authoritative consensus that can isolate and undermine those violent extremists claiming to speak for Muslims. The West can also acknowledge that the diverse traditions of Islamic jurisprudence contain within them the tools and precedents to begin addressing these urgent issues and encourage a revival of Islamic scholarship as a key part of political development for the region.

The ancient world provides some important perspective on how this process of religious deliberation and change might unfold. Rome's transition from a pagan to a Christian empire—though greater in scope than any transition likely to be attempted in the Muslim world—offers a precedent for how religious change could unfold in the contemporary Middle East. Just as Christians absorbed selectively the tools and institutions of religious architecture, political organization, letter writing, rhetoric, and philosophy from their pagan predecessors to forge a Christian civilization, it is worth considering what Islam has already chosen and will choose to adapt from a secular, globalizing culture sprung from the West. If the transformation of identity and worldview that gradually overtook pagan Rome between the first and fifth centuries is illustrative, a diverse culture of modern Islam—grappling with the materialism, individualism and democratization that circulates globally—will be slow to emerge and initially fragile.

Religious change in the Middle East, like the Greek encampment along the shores of Troy, is likely to have seeds of the past, present, and future in motion all at once. From the Abbasid and Andalusian periods of medieval Islam, Islamic thinkers can find a pretext for cosmopolitan exchange of ideas with other cultures, a deep tradition of philosophy and science, and an explicit precedent for embracing and advancing key parts of the Greek canon. The United States and other Western nations could propose academic exchanges with Arab and Iranian scholars to look at the full range of Arabic and Persian commentaries on Greek authors as a way of encouraging a recovery of Islamic speculation and reasoning in the contemporary Middle East. Such "track II" diplomacy on a shared intellectual heritage between Islam and the West could also help cushion intellectual divisions between an increasingly secular West and a persistently religious Middle East and foster exchanges on the role of religion in renewed social compacts.

The region's attempts to recreate or amend social compacts will focus scrutiny on the sources of law—including Islamic law—that will govern transitioning societies. In ancient Greece, law included both the statutes established by governing authority as well as divinely ordained rights and customs—a duality that is worth remembering as the states of the region sort out which elements of law in which domains of society will infuse their future social compacts. The fundamental insight from Aeschylus will be worth remembering: that the rule of law is the only way out of endless cycles of revenge and bloodletting—cycles he described in the ancient house of Atreus but which we can recognize in Syria, Yemen, and throughout much of the contemporary Middle East.

The ancient world's lessons about religion matter because religious identity and political action based on religion endure. The proposal here is not to abandon traditional analytic methods as part of the conceptualization of the region's problems and policy responses but to allow the ancient world back into our thinking. Religion has been an especially difficult topic to include in our policy and academic discourse because of our post-Enlightenment posture that limits the claims of religious knowing, our legal constraints on the blending of religion and politics, and an intellectual environment that has often equated ancient historiography with colonial and cultural misdeeds of Western powers in the Middle East.

Loosening some of these analytic fetters will allow us the intellectual freedom necessary to see the region as those dwelling there do and to imagine futures we might not have imagined with our traditional analytic tools. Taking religion seriously as an independent force will allow us to see religious knowledge systems and religious influence on governance as interacting with modernization and the remaking of social compacts. Once *homo religiosus* becomes recognizable in our view of the region, we can ask how this fundamental attribute of human behavior that has not been mitigated fully by the history of the modern West will affect the region's recovery from conflict and instability.



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## CHAPTER 5

### THE EMERGING MIDDLE EAST STATE SYSTEM

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*The breakup of the Roman Empire is analytically useful for understanding how the Middle East state system might evolve. Rome's greatest territorial extent overlapped with much of what we recognize as the contemporary Middle East and Rome's eventual dissolution into three distinct civilizations: Western Christendom in Europe, Orthodox Byzantium on the Anatolian plateau, and an Arabic-Islamic civilization along the southern rim—with Iran exerting influence from the periphery—continues to provide the political substratum of the modern Middle East. The analytic focus on the breakup of Rome also leads us to consider the pattern of alternating unipolar and multipolar systems that began in antiquity and which has persisted to the present. The ancient and medieval pattern of power descending from the Steppe and shaping events in the region is further worth remembering—including the recent actions of Russia and China in the region—in any comprehensive analysis of the emerging state system in the Middle East. This systemic analysis of the region also benefits from recalling how—amid conquests and defeats—the Near East from antiquity to the early Middle Ages established precedents for the exchange of ideas, the mixing of peoples, and mutual intellectual discovery in a broad range of scientific, literary, and religious fields. Such cultural interaction has the potential to soften hard lines of identity and is worth considering in the shadow of today's political and security challenges.*

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## SENSING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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*In 2011, the emerging turmoil in the Middle East reached quickly back to Washington with alarm. When events become volatile in high-stakes strategic environments, the demands on intelligence surge and a 24-hour task force often takes shape to provide the responsiveness policymakers expect in a crisis. It was my turn once more for this type of crisis duty and even my dog knew something big was upon us. In the early days of the “Arab Spring”, my shaggy Tibetan terrier—whose smarts had enabled him to survive against difficult odds as a stray—seemed to understand that all these changes in the region were seismic in their scope and intensity. His eyes would tell the story of systemic change. With an uncanny resemblance to Toto in the Wizard of Oz, he would stare at me at one o’clock in the morning as I left for my duties as a manager of the CIA’s Middle East Task Force. As I bade him farewell in the dark hours of the night over several months, his eyes would become visible as the updraft of air from his exhalations would lift his drooping locks to reveal a mixture of mild indignation at the hour and encouragement for the task at hand. His canine sleep rhythms were disturbed by my departures, but he had the virtue of knowing that adaptation was necessary—an analytic imperative that was worth remembering. He too seemed to understand that we were not in Kansas anymore.*

*One analytic risk of such task force service is losing the forest for the trees, as the premium on tactical intelligence can crowd out time to conceptualize larger strategic ways of interpreting change. As social compacts frayed or collapsed into civil wars and as regional powers increasingly began to stray across their formal borders, it became difficult to discern what, if any, regional state system persisted. Intelligence bears the heavy responsibilities of warning of both immediate and long-term threats and the regional crisis that erupted in 2011 continues to summon the imperative to think strategically amid necessary tactical responses. To become the analytic strategos—the thinker who can distill several distinct narratives into a conceptual whole in the heat of battle—it helps to go to the high ground where a larger perspective is possible.*

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*It was often from the air that I could sense systemic change. During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, for example, I was on a flight from Europe to India, and our pilot announced that we would have to detour to avoid Lebanese airspace, which Israeli fighter aircraft were dominating. Thirty-three years later it would be the airspace over Iraq I would have to avoid amid US-led coalition combat operations against the self-declared caliphate of the Islamic State. The region’s strategic center of gravity—at least measured in the deployment of surface-to-air missile batteries and fighter aircraft—had moved from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Tigris-Euphrates basin.*

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## THE FADING TWENTIETH CENTURY STATE SYSTEM

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In the Cold War era, the Middle East functioned largely as a system of secular nationalist regimes, mostly backed by the Soviet Union, competing with tribal monarchies broadly supported by the United States. With the exception of the Palestinian nationalist movement, key actors were states, and the Arab-Israeli conflict was central to the foreign and security policies of all actors in the region. Regional powers were subject to heavy external influence from their superpower patrons and largely acted within their borders. Throughout the 1980s, Iran's revolutionary leaders were preoccupied internally with consolidating their grip on power and externally with an eight-year war with Iraq. The state system had frequent flashpoints, but wars fell mostly within the rubric of the competing nationalisms of the Arab-Israeli conflict. One could describe a regional system with defined states, recognizable dominant ideologies, and significant superpower influence.

This systemic outline is no longer discernible. The region lacks the ideological framework of Arab nationalism; in its place a political and sectarian struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia unfolds across much of the region. The number of regional actors willing to assert their interests across borders in the post-Cold War era is also growing as Turkey, Israel, and Iran project their military power into Syria, while Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates lead an Arab coalition fighting in Yemen. Egypt and several Gulf states have become involved in Libya's civil war to varying degrees. Beyond defeating the common foe of Islamic extremism, external military powers—particularly the United States and Russia—have lacked the willingness and ability to impose political settlements or prevent regional actors from acting in pursuit of their own interests. The resulting disorder—fueled by an unprecedented number of armed sub-state actors—constitutes, for now, the new regional system.

There are no analytic methods that promise a quick escape from the uncertainties and potential risks in this period of disorder. There is no analytic overhead imagery that allows us to seize the high ground of the *strategos* and survey all the region's moving parts in order to place them in a discernible whole that informs policymaking. The number of variables and their volatility create a degree of analytic complexity that is likely to defy attempts at projecting with high confidence a single future for the regional state system. The explanatory power of contemporary analytic approaches to the region such as security studies, political science, economics, or leadership studies is strong within bounded areas, but most of these disciplines refrain from attempting a systemic explanation of all that is underway in the region. Data analysis of unprecedented amounts of information can offer unexpected correlations that can prompt further inquiry but also are likely to fall short of projecting futures of a still emergent regional state system.



The task of managing such uncertainty begins with the development and testing of competing hypotheses that can plausibly account for events observed in the region. If the region lacks a single discernible and stable distribution of power—military, economic, and ideological—that could give shape to a regional state system, one way to begin to map a range of plausible futures is to generate different conceptual frameworks that can be tested, over time, with empirical data. One could offer a hypothesis, for example, that the regional balance of power will be organized in a sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shia, or in a struggle between Sunni Islamic extremism and the rest of the region, or in a series of sub-regional conflicts with current state borders accepted formally while violated in practice. Alternatively, one could hypothesize that the regional state system will fray into smaller states under the sway of larger states and that from this fragmentation, a regional system of competing alliances might emerge. For each of these hypothetical structures for the region, observable events will eventually narrow the range of possible futures.

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## REVISITING THE BREAKUP OF ANCIENT ROME

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The ancient world offers its own conceptual frameworks for thinking about the contemporary Middle East's emerging regional state system. The patterns and precedents of the ancient and early medieval Near East will not determine the future regional state system, but the persistence of the contours of these past systems into the contemporary era suggests the ancient and early medieval worlds can be conceptually powerful in analyzing this period of upheaval. We do not think often enough in these ancient ways, in part, because a politicized debate on Orientalism and decolonization and the privileging of more recent social science analytic tools have eclipsed such uses of history. We need, nonetheless, to loosen these strictures and begin to think with the benefit of patterns and precedents derived from the ancient and medieval periods in order to navigate our way beyond the Pillars of Hercules that bounded our views of the Middle East over the past century.

The breakup of the Roman Empire is analytically useful because it is the most recent of the ancient empires that dominated the region, and Rome's greatest territorial extent overlapped with much of what we recognize as the contemporary Middle East. At its height in the second century, Rome's imperial order comprised the entire Mediterranean world, including Western Europe, Egypt, the Anatolian Plateau, and parts of the Tigris Euphrates basin. Iran was never under Roman rule, but Iran then, as now, formed a crucial center of power in a regional system.

In recent years, the imprint of ancient Rome has continued to affect the contemporary Middle East. The Islamic State, for example, has proclaimed its intent to conquer Rome

as the traditional center of Western Christendom.<sup>a</sup> The anniversary of the fall in 1453 of Constantinople—the Christian orthodox capital of the Eastern Roman Empire—has also been celebrated in high-profile gatherings in Turkey in recent years, including a massive commemoration in Istanbul led by the Turkish president in 2016.<sup>b</sup> The former unity of the Roman Empire across most of the region also reveals itself in archaeological footprints extending across much of the contemporary Middle East—a physical presence that serves as a spur to conceptualizing how the end of this empire can help us think about the emergence of a new regional state system in the contemporary Middle East.

The fall of the Roman Empire we are considering here is not just the familiar tale of Germanic invasions of Roman territory and the eventual overthrow of the last Roman emperor in the West, Romulus, in 476. That story, especially for those educated in the West, often continues with the eventual recovery of Western Europe a few centuries later and relegates the surviving Eastern Roman Empire, Byzantium, to an afterthought. The story of Byzantium—a religious state—did not much impress the Enlightenment-era English historian Edward Gibbon who wrote in the eighteenth century that the Byzantines “present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity, nor animated by the vigor of memorable crimes.”<sup>c</sup> Partly as a result of this legacy of the Enlightenment, Byzantium barely surfaces in the perspective of moderns in the West, and even less in the conceptualization of the contemporary Middle East. Still, the break-up of Rome matters today because its empire had both Western and Eastern spheres, which in their modern vestiges can help frame the region’s emerging state system.

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## ROME’S THREEFOLD BREAKUP REVERBERATES TODAY

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The fall of the Roman Empire we remember here is the fall of a unifying Roman civilization that eventually separated into three distinct civilizations: Western Christendom in Europe, Orthodox Byzantium on the Anatolian plateau, and an Arabic-Islamic civilization along the southern rim. The process of settling into this threefold succession was lengthy. In the view of the Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, the Western Roman Empire’s collapse did not fully occur until the rise of Islam in the sixth and seventh centuries, when the economic relationships of the Mediterranean world began to sepa-

a. Nick Squires, “Isil Want to Assassinate the Pope, Says Iraq’s Ambassador to Vatican,” *The Telegraph*, September 16, 2014, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/11098905/Isil-want-to-assassinate-the-Pope-says-Iraqs-ambassador-to-Vatican.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/11098905/Isil-want-to-assassinate-the-Pope-says-Iraqs-ambassador-to-Vatican.html).

b. “Istanbul Marks 1453 Ottoman Conquest of Istanbul with Grandiose Ceremony,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, [Hurriyetdailynews.com](http://Hurriyetdailynews.com), May 29, 2016, [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbul-marks-1453-ottoman-conquest-of-istanbul-with-grandiose-ceremony-99825](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/istanbul-marks-1453-ottoman-conquest-of-istanbul-with-grandiose-ceremony-99825)

c. G.W. Bowersock, “Brilliant, Beautiful & Byzantine,” *The New York Review of Books*, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/09/25/brilliant-beautiful-byzantine/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/09/25/brilliant-beautiful-byzantine/)

rate, casting Western Europe back to a more primitive agrarian economy.<sup>a</sup> In this view, the descent of Germanic tribes in the fourth and fifth centuries into Roman territory—tribes that preserved many Roman institutions and trade relationships—was not as disruptive to the continuity of Roman civilization in the West as was the rise of Islam. The surviving East Roman Empire of Byzantium functioned, as modern Turkish celebrations of the fall of Constantinople indicate, as the third main actor after the breakup of the Roman Empire, struggling against repeated Islamic attempts at conquest until the conquest of the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

This ancient strategic map has its echo in the contemporary Middle East. The Roman southern rim has remained an Arab-Islamic world—only the Iberian Peninsula has moved back to Western Europe's sphere of influence. The Anatolian Plateau of Byzantium has become the Turkish republic whose separate geographic zone, Turkish language, and history of Ottoman political domination has differentiated it from its southern Arab-Islamic neighbors. Similarly, the West's crusader states in the Middle Ages, its separate rise to modernity, and return to the region with the landing of Napoleon's forces in Egypt in 1798 were anchored in the vestiges of the Western Roman Empire. European engagement in the regional state system of the contemporary Middle East reaches back to this Roman antecedent. In this ancient mold, the United States, as the successor to British military power arrayed against the Ottoman Empire, acts in the region as the most recent heir to the western remnant of the Roman Empire.

The breakup of the Roman Empire also provides an ancient framework for thinking about Iran's contemporary role in the region as a major state acting on the eastern boundary of the region. Beginning in the second century BCE and until the Arab conquest of 651 CE, the Iranian plateau gave rise to kingdoms—Parthian and Sasanian—which repeatedly contested Roman and subsequent Byzantine power in the ancient Near East. The shifting frontlines of this centuries-long strategic competition were often in the Tigris-Euphrates basin and on the Anatolian Plateau. As the Western Empire broke into Germanic successor kingdoms, the surviving Eastern Empire of Christian Byzantium found itself in constant struggles with the Sasanian Empire to its south—a civilizational rival professing the religion of Zoroastrianism, sponsoring scholars and gathering texts from all over the ancient world while maintaining trade routes from Asia.<sup>b</sup>

Iran's contemporary military and political influence in the Tigris-Euphrates basin (i.e. in Iraq) and its confrontation with western power there are consistent with the pattern of early Roman rivalry with the Sasanian Empire. The Sasanians—like their immediate Parthian and more ancient Achaemenid and Elamite predecessors from the Iranian

a. Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, Vol. 27 (Routledge, 2008); Pirenne, *Mahomet Et Charlemagne* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1970).

b. In the Islamic era, the cultural and intellectual influences of defeated Sasanian Persia would eventually shape the emerging new Islamic civilization, perpetuating the pattern of Iranian influence on the wider Middle East even in defeat.

plateau—projected power into the Tigris-Euphrates basin and frequently confronted Roman forces there, even capturing one emperor and killing another.<sup>a</sup> The struggle between Iran and the West for influence in Iraq since 2003 echoes this ancient rivalry between a western power at the furthest extent of its reach into the region and a rival power located on the Iranian Plateau. It is also worth recalling that the United States, on behalf of the West, backed Iraq in its war with Iran in the 1980s, consistent with the ancient pattern of Roman-Sasanian rivalry.

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## RECONSIDERING THE REGIONAL STATE SYSTEM

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Remembering the political and geographic legacies of a once unifying Roman civilization that fragmented into western, Anatolian, and southern successor powers—as well as the assertive role of neighboring Iran—provides a conceptual map for policymaking in a period of significant change in the regional state system. The conflicts within the Arab-Islamic region raise the key question, for example, of how Arab power will eventually be organized and assert itself in a recovered Middle East state system. Egypt's ancient political cohesion and proximity to the West as well as Saudi Arabia's Islamic religious credentials and wealth make both countries—which have also managed to contain domestic unrest from the “Arab Spring”—potential contenders for leadership in the Arab world. The outcome of internal Arab conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya and the ability of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to influence the resolution of these conflicts to their advantage are likely to serve as bellwethers of both countries' prospects for wider leadership roles in the Arab world. The battlefields of Syria and Iraq have not only weakened or destroyed social compacts there but have also forced both states to cede a measure of sovereignty to foreign political and military forces, making both unlikely to regain leadership roles in the Arab world in the near-term.

The breakup of Rome also provides a modern conceptual framework for assessing the interaction of Rome's Western vestige with its southern Arab-Islamic vestige. A key analytic and policy question in the aftermath of the mass migration to Europe in recent years from the Middle East and North Africa—including peoples from Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa—will be whether the barrier that Henri Pirenne theorized had arisen with the rise of Islam has begun to resurface. Whether the West will choose to see in the turmoil along its southern reaches threats to its security as well as to its political order and culture or will embrace the migrant flow as a potential economic benefit of human capital and seek to integrate Muslim refugees into a secular Europe is far from certain. What is clearer, however, is that analytic assessments and policy options on migration will depend on thinking with a conceptual framework that is plausible and that

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a. The emperor Valerian was captured in the upper Tigris-Euphrates basin at the battle of Edessa in 260 by the Sasanian King Shapur I. The emperor Julian died of his wounds in 363 campaigning against the Sasanian capital.

can be tested with empirical observations. The vestiges of the breakup of Rome in the contemporary Middle East help provide such an hypothesis and conceptual framework.

Turkey—as the Anatolian Plateau’s modern vestige—also has the potential to exert significant influence on the emerging regional state system. The key analytic and policy questions will revolve—as is often the case with whatever power emerges on the Anatolian Plateau—around how much of a Middle Eastern or European power Turkey will aspire to become. A more Islamic politics that orients Turkey once again toward the Middle East is gaining ground on a still resilient secular national politics and culture. As its willingness to commit military forces in Iraq and Syria has indicated, Turkey also is playing for high stakes in whatever social compacts emerge along its borders, especially with respect to the status of Kurds in these neighboring states. It has been a century since the Anatolian Plateau has exerted sustained regional influence, but thinking about Turkey’s underlying and ancient political geography and its role as a separate vestige of the breakup of the Roman Empire helps frame the potential roles Turkey can play in an emerging regional state system.

Understanding the ancient pattern and precedent of Iran projecting influence into the Tigris-Euphrates basin in competition with the West can broaden the ways we think about Iran in the emerging regional state system. Using ancient history, we can see Iran as not just as a religious state opposed to US influence in Iraq, seeking nuclear technology, harboring a legacy of hostage taking and other terrorism, determined to diminish US regional influence, and a rival to Israel. Instead, ancient history poses other strategic questions such as whether Iran’s perception of the Tigris-Euphrates basin as part of its sphere of influence is so ancient that it will be unlikely to be reversed. We can also ask whether the three-fold division following the break-up of the Roman Empire means Iran is destined for either confrontation or cooperation with the other two vestiges of Rome—the Republic of Turkey and the Arab-Islamic world.

Iran’s Parthian and Sasanian outsider role in the region with a sphere of influence that projected westward into the Tigris-Euphrates basin also raises the strategic question whether its current attempts to assert influence as far as the Eastern Mediterranean represent the adoption of a more expansive Persian imperial precedent that could define the future regional state system. In the Achaemenid Empire of the late sixth and early fifth century BCE, Persian power extended not only throughout the Anatolian Plateau, Eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt, but even into part of modern-day Bulgaria. Ancient history cannot predict Iran’s current strategic ambitions or the extent of the sphere of influence its leaders may harbor, but knowing ancient precedents permits us to generate hypotheses about Iran’s regional strategy and its potential impact on the regional state system which we can test against observable events. We can think with conceptual tools not usually in our analytic toolkit and become better able to think beyond the most recent behaviors and policy responses that usually fill our thoughts about the states in the region—including Iran.

A reconsideration of Israel's role in the region can also flow from the conceptual framework that arises from the breakup of Rome. Israel, in a region of competing Western, Turkish, and Arab-Islamic vestiges of Rome, with Iran knocking again at the region's door, is no longer Israel the besieged outpost of Zionism confronting Arab—especially Palestinian—nationalism and engaging in repeated Arab-Israeli wars and suppressing Palestinian uprisings. Instead, Israel sits at the crossroads of an emergent regional state system whose strategic center of gravity has moved east. Israel faces the challenge of asserting its interests—especially toward its rival Iran—in a region with an uncertain center of power in the Arab world and a Turkey beginning to assert anew a larger regional role.

In the old twentieth century order, Israel's regional options were largely shaped by the Arab-Israeli conflict and external influences of the United States and the Soviet Union. In this new conceptualization, drawn from the ancient world, Israel finds itself in a multi-polar and more fluid regional state system that is more preoccupied with ethnic and sectarian conflict than nationalism. In a region with well-armed non-state actors and states willing to cross borders, Israel will have to seek security as all parties adjust to new distributions of power. If the framework of Rome's three vestiges plus Iran persists and if Israel can wield creative diplomacy successfully, its central location in the region could redound to its strategic benefit.

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## ANCIENT UNIPOLAR AND MULTIPOLAR REGIONAL SYSTEMS

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The study of the ancient world's political orders raises the broader question of whether the region tends toward a multipolar distribution of power—such as appears to be emerging in the contemporary Middle East—or toward a more centralized political order that might arise again in the modern era. The gradual demise of the Ottoman Empire as a single political order—encompassing at its peak in the late seventeenth century most of the modern Middle East, apart from Iran—is a story of Ottoman retreat over three centuries to its original base on the Anatolian Plateau. It is the story of Ottoman territorial losses on the southern Mediterranean belt to European colonial rule and, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I and subsequent European decolonization, to individual Arab States. This Ottoman contraction represents a transition over centuries from a unipolar regional system to a multipolar regional system whose principal components—the West, an Arab-Islamic southern tier, and a Turkic Anatolian Plateau—have their antecedents in the break-up of the Roman Empire.

From this perspective, the weakening and fracturing of social compacts throughout the region and the rise of more assertive regional powers are the most recent phase in a long process of return to a multipolar system after Ottoman rule. The apparent “pax Americana” that briefly held sway over the region at the end of the Cold War when the US

led a region-wide military coalition to reverse Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991 and convened a region-wide peace conference in Madrid in 1991 to attempt resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict appears in hindsight as a brief interlude. The main story that resumed with the outbreak of the Arab Spring has been the gradual return to a more decentralized regional state system.

The pattern of a dominant single power transitioning from a unipolar to a multipolar regional system has ample precedent in the ancient world and in Late Antiquity. The Achaemenid Empire—drawing upon earlier Assyrian and Babylonian techniques of administration and expansion—became the Middle East's first all-encompassing imperial order and the precedent for a unipolar regional system. This Persian achievement would last from the sixth to the fourth century BCE, when after decades of Persian entanglement with the Greek world on its western frontier, the Achaemenid Kings became the target of Alexander the Great's Macedonian territorial ambitions. The Persian Empire—in a strategic surprise that stunned the ancient world—fell to Alexander's Macedonian-led army in a series of three decisive battles.

The unipolar Persian order that Alexander appropriated through conquest quickly disintegrated after his death in 323 BCE into competing kingdoms of his Hellenistic successors. These kingdoms were mostly centered along the region's traditional political geographic fault lines of the Nile River basin (Ptolemaic Egypt), the Tigris-Euphrates basin (the Seleucid Empire) and the Anatolian Plateau (the Attalid and Antigonid dynasties). The eventual absorption of these states into the Roman Empire would give the Middle East another unipolar regional system under Roman rule until the breakup of the Roman Empire beginning in the late fourth century.

The Islamic conquests under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates between the sixth and eighth centuries BCE created empires that reached from Spain to the Indus river but the unipolar moment would again prove fleeting. By the late tenth century, the Sunni Abbasid caliph had ceded effective control in Baghdad to a Shia military occupation of the Iranian Buyid dynasty. To the West, another Shia dynasty, the Fatimids, took control of Egypt so that by the late tenth century, the Middle East had again become a multipolar regional system.

The return to a multipolar system in the Middle East in the wake of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire has been—like the ancient transitions from unipolar to multipolar systems that preceded it—turbulent and lengthy. With these ancient patterns in view, we can suggest plausibly that the events of the Arab Spring are part of a trajectory from Ottoman unity to post-Ottoman disunity that follows an ancient pattern. Discerning this pattern does not reveal the specific contours of the future regional state system but it gives us a way to think about that system as it emerges. The recurrence of alternating unipolarity and multipolarity in the ancient, early medieval, and now modern state systems of the Middle East is persistent and significant enough that it can be considered a

plausible framework for understanding what is happening in the region. Accordingly, we can prepare diplomatic and military strategies that are best suited for safeguarding Western interests in a Middle East where power continues to disperse to newly assertive regional actors and to sub-state actors.

In this way, the ancient world provides the conceptual map for navigating a messy transition in ways our standard analytic tools have difficulty accomplishing. With our more familiar approaches, we can and still should focus on challenges in governance, the balance of military and political power between various opposing groups, the role of public opinion, post-conflict demobilization and reconstruction, emerging leadership, economic trends, and other topics for which there is supporting evidence. Yet, each of these approaches is more likely to produce analysis that is grounded in recent observable events and which, because of this near-term method, will be likely to make only narrow and short-term projections. These approaches are also unlikely to propose system-wide theories about what is unfolding—the type of conceptual framework that ancient history provides and which decisionmakers and citizens in the West need to propose, test, and develop. Sensemaking is hard, but it is especially hard if there are too many pieces to analyze and no conceptual framework by which to order them. Ancient state systems and their alternation between unipolar and multipolar periods present a way of thinking that is grounded in history, consistent with unfolding events, and analytically relevant to policymakers attempting to navigate a way forward in uncertain times.

The breakup of the Roman Empire into three components—with a fourth, Iran, knocking at the region's door—enables us to think about how a similar multipolar regional state system may again be developing. The breakup of Rome serves as a useful conceptual tool because it belongs to a pattern of transitions from unipolar state systems into multipolar systems. Just as with Rome's breakup, we see in the Ottoman Empire's breakup a return to a Western, Arab-Islamic, Turkic, and Iranian multipolar system. The pattern exists, in part, because the region's underlying geographic features and attendant political communities in the Anatolian Plateau, the Iranian Plateau, the Nile River basin, and the Tigris-Euphrates basin persist, giving shape to a recurring multipolar state system.

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## THE ANCIENT PATTERN OF INTERVENTIONS FROM THE STEPPE

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This framework for thinking about the region's state systems over millennia, however, is incomplete. It also requires a consideration of the role of the Eurasian Steppe from which some of the region's most consequential conquests have arisen. The Steppe has acted influentially across the Middle East's northern and eastern boundaries, not only as a periodic military threat, but also as a source of grain, other raw materials, and labor



to the urban centers of the region's civilizational core. The importance of the peoples of the Steppe to the ancient world is clear from the lengthy treatment of Scythian customs and military tactics that Herodotus provides in book IV of his *Histories*. Herodotus describes the difficulty, for example, that the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids under King Darius in the early sixth century BCE faced in attempting to subdue Scythian power along the western and northern shores of the Black Sea. Of Scythian military tactics, Herodotus writes that the Scythians

*have discovered how to prevent any attacker from escaping them and how to make it impossible for anyone to overtake them against their will. For instead of establishing towns or walls, they are all mounted archers who carry their homes along with them and derive their sustenance not from cultivated fields but from their herds.<sup>a</sup>*

The Scythians were able at times to penetrate to the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean, the first of a series of nomadic Steppe warriors to descend from the Eurasian hinterland into Europe and the Middle East. The invasion of the Huns in the fifth century, for example, into the territories of the Eastern and Western Roman Empire drove Germanic and other peoples westward, contributing to the decline of the Western Empire. The surviving Byzantine Empire would face threats from Avars, Bulgars, and Alans and the complex task of managing relations with these and other nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the Steppe became a major preoccupation of Byzantine diplomacy.<sup>b</sup>

The most lasting impacts of the Steppe peoples on the Middle East's state system, however, would occur during the Middle Ages. At the battle of Manzikert in Eastern Anatolia in 1071, for example, Byzantine forces fell decisively to an army of Seljuk Turks invading from the East, precipitating the gradual conversion of the Anatolian Plateau to Islam and the eventual fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Turks. Similarly, the sacking of Baghdad and the destruction of the Abbasid Caliphate by the Mongol armies of Hulagu Khan in 1258 ended the golden age of Islamic civilization. In these conquests, the Steppe demonstrated that, although outside the geographic scope of most definitions of the Middle East, its peoples could wield lasting strategic impact on a usually bounded state system that corresponded to the territorial extent of the Roman Empire and Iran.

The Middle East has moved well past the age of horse-mounted Steppe warriors harassing and sometimes conquering states. Nonetheless, the ancient and medieval pattern of power from the Steppe shaping events in the region is worth remembering in any com-

a. Herodotus and Robert B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, translated by Andrea L. Purvis. (Anchor Books, 2009), 301.

b. In the mid tenth century, the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII prepared for his son and heir a manual—*De Administrando Imperio* (On the Administration of the Empire)—in which he dispensed advice on how to manage relations with the various tribes along the Byzantine frontier. See: Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando Imperio* (Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 2008).

prehensive analysis of the emerging state system in the Middle East. The Russian resurgence in the region, in defense of its Syrian ally, for example, amounts to more than a return to Cold War Russian assertiveness. Such a rearview characterization would rest upon an analysis that is well-suited for a type of superpower competition that no longer exists and would ignore the reality that Russia did not engage directly in major combat operations in the region during the Cold War as it now does in Syria. Instead, Russia's Syrian intervention can be understood with the conceptual aid of ancient history which suggests Moscow's military actions are the latest example of power from the Steppe influencing the course of events in the region along a pattern begun in antiquity. Russia's geographic position and relationship to the region are not unlike the Scythian presence along the northern Black Sea at the time of Herodotus.

China's ambitions to link its economy to Middle Eastern markets by building infrastructure projects across Central Asia is another potential modern example of the ancient pattern of the Steppe shaping the contours of the Middle East's regional state system. An economic analysis of the Middle East component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could emphasize China's surplus production capacity and the prospects for trade and industrialization as well as its financing of transportation and energy infrastructure development in the Middle East. A broader political and economic analysis might examine whether the BRI is mostly about expanding China's geopolitical reach across Eurasia while also gaining strategic leverage through financing projects—some of which may not be economically viable—in poorer countries. Yet, China's strategic ambitions could also represent the bellwether of a different future for the Middle East—one that could be radically different and which can best be grasped by remembering the precedents of Seljuk and Mongol seismic impacts on the course of the region.

For observers in the West confronting the challenges of an emerging Middle East state system, conceptualizing Russian and Chinese involvement in the region as part of the ancient pattern of the Steppe penetrating into the Middle East helps place these extra-regional actors in a systemic context. We are able to move beyond economic, military, Russian, or Chinese centered analysis and can understand these states as outside actors once again pressing from the periphery into the core of the region. Russia and China, viewed as the most recent political expressions of Steppe power, can also provoke unfavorable comparisons in the Middle East with other outside Steppe powers from the ancient and medieval worlds, potentially constraining the freedom of maneuver both states might seek in the region.

In summary, these patterns and precedents of the ancient and medieval worlds give us tools to think about the uncertain transition underway in the Middle East's state system in ways our existing outlooks usually fail to offer. In considering the breakup of the Roman Empire, we see where to put our analytic focus: on the distinct roles of the West, the Anatolian Plateau, the Arab-Islamic southern rim, and Iran. This is a pattern

that persists, in part, because it accords with the underlying political geography that has defined community and identity for much of the region since the Bronze Age.

The analytic focus on the breakup of Rome also leads us to consider the pattern of alternating unipolar and multipolar systems that began in antiquity and which has persisted to the present. With this pattern in mind, we can think of the fall of the Ottoman Empire as the most recent and still unfolding shift from a unipolar order to a multipolar regional order and prepare policies and contingencies for a region with widely distributed nodes of power. In considering the ancient pattern of the Eurasian Steppe in the region, we complete a conceptual framework that encompasses all the actors in the region and which has provenance in the ancient and medieval worlds.

At a minimum, we should begin to join these perspectives to the analytic insights of more familiar and prominent methods in the study of the Middle East. Revisiting the ancient and medieval worlds offers potential frameworks for organizing the detailed analysis of a range of disciplines that are specialized but not connected to each other. We can test big ideas from the past against specific, empirical evidence from the present and advance our understanding of the region's transition in new ways. Thinking broadly about the region as an emergent state system is also helpful for the development of policy priorities and contingencies while adding an important element of long-term strategic planning which the immediate tasks of counterterrorism and war zone crisis management can often obscure.

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## ANCIENT PATTERNS OF COLLABORATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Analyzing the Middle East at the system level tends to lead to assessments of the regional balance of military and economic power and can obscure other forces—including collaborative forces—that have and could function again in the system. The narrative of ancient history we have reviewed here has divided the region along geographic and civilizational lines, implicitly emphasizing conflict over cooperation. Conflicts are a key part of the historical identities that can shape the strategic goals of key actors, influence the formation of social compacts and the distribution of power in the region, and redefine the religious identity of the defeated. As such, conflicts get most of the analytic attention.

There is no shortage of conflicts for key actors to memorialize in the modern era. Achaemenid Persia in the sixth century BCE, for example, established through military might an empire extending from modern day Bulgaria to Pakistan, subduing even Egypt at great cost.<sup>a</sup> Beginning in the third century, the Sasanian Empire waged a ti-

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a. In a measure of the political salience of this historic identity, the shah of Iran produced an extravagant celebration in 1971 of Achaemenid civilization—in such excess that the event probably contributed to his downfall.

tanic, though largely stalemated, struggle with Rome that did include—as noted earlier—the politically salient feat of the capture of the Roman Emperor Valerian by Shapur I, who repeatedly made use of his captive as a stepstool for mounting his horse.<sup>a</sup> Such narratives of humiliation in the history of the Near East further contribute to the drawing of hard lines of distinction between victor and vanquished.

The Arab achievement, of which school children throughout the Muslim world continue to learn, is no less grand. Arab armies in the seventh and eighth centuries under the banner of Islam won military victories from Visigothic Spain to the fringes of Tang China while destroying Persian Sasanian rule and Byzantine holdings in the Near East along the way. Of particular historic resonance for Arabs is their defeat of the Sasanian army in 651 at Qadisiyyah in modern day Iraq—a victory that brought Islam to Persian civilization, imposed the Arabic script on the Persian language, and seeded an ethnic and subsequent sectarian competition between Iran and the Arab world that reverberates into modern times. For their part, Turks can cite the Seljuk defeat of a Byzantine army at Manzikert in 1071 as the decisive battle that began the dislodging of Byzantine Orthodox civilization and the transformation of the Anatolian plateau into a distinct Islamic civilization.

Such victories live on in memory, in part, because they define identity in politically useful ways—especially in a period of protracted political uncertainty and conflict. In the wake of failed or weakened secular nationalism, the revival of such history can tempt leaders and peoples within religiously and ethnically diverse societies to recall victories that rally support from some while excluding others. This view of Near Eastern history can encourage a zero-sum competition of civilizations, peoples, and ideas that foster few of the conditions supportive of political compromise and a more stable distribution of power in the region.

These precedents of territorial conflict between rival empires in the ancient Near East, however, can obscure a significant shared intellectual and cultural heritage whose precedents, while often less known, are also key to the history of the region and its peoples. Amid conquests and defeats, the Near East from antiquity to the early Middle Ages yields precedents for the exchange of ideas, the mixing of peoples, and mutual intellectual discovery in a broad range of scientific, literary, and religious fields. Cultural interaction that has the potential to soften the hard lines of identity has a distinguished pedigree worth considering in the shadow of today's political and security challenges.

The echo of such ancient cooperation is less often heard in the process of state building because it inevitably suggests some shared experience and even a parity between victors and vanquished. Remembering the benefits of intellectual and artistic cooperation can threaten religious ideas that have become entrenched. The Near East, nonetheless, has

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a. Jane Penrose (ed.), *Rome and Her Enemies: An Empire Created and Destroyed by War*, (Osprey Publishing LTD, 2005), 254.

frequently lived the paradox of conflict and cooperation among different civilizations with a success that belies today's upheavals.

The Greek achievement has played a key role in this paradigm of knowledge exchange and cooperation. A common and persistent reverence for Greek knowledge exported to the Near East through the Hellenistic culture of Alexander and his Seleucid successors beginning in the fourth century BCE was a foundation for victors and vanquished alike in the arc of subsequent Near Eastern history. In civilizations as diverse as Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate, Greek knowledge not only was prized but shared and developed across each of these empires despite persistent military conflict among them.

A seam in this cultural exchange ran along the southern border of modern-day Turkey, where Byzantine Greek, Syriac, and Persian languages and ideas comingled in late antiquity. In the schools of Edessa and Nisibis—under alternating Byzantine and Persian control—Christian theologians writing in Syriac spread their texts and commentaries east. These schools also sponsored Hellenistic philosophers where treatises in Greek—notably by Aristotle—and the medical works of Galen as well as other studies of grammar, astronomy, and mathematics began their long journey into the wider Near East.

The fruits of these efforts would lead to an expanded cosmopolitan and intellectually diverse elite culture in Sasanian Persia. As the Byzantine official tolerance for secular learning and theological dissent dwindled, a religiously, linguistically, and culturally varied cadre of refugees arrived in the Sasanian Academy of Gondeshapur. There, the philosophical and scientific traditions of India added to the breadth of intellectual inquiry underway.

In the aftermath of the Arab victory over Sasanian Persia, the locus of knowledge generation and learning would shift to Baghdad—the seat of Abbasid power. In the transition, Arab caliphs would imitate the academy at Gondeshapur by establishing their own “House of Wisdom” in Baghdad in 830. There, Syriac translations of Greek works were further translated into Arabic, commentated upon, and would eventually contribute to the rediscovery of Greek ideas in medieval Europe in Latin translation. The enduring power of translated knowledge for political and social development was underscored in a UN-sponsored report in 2003 on Arab human development which pointedly contrasted the achievements of the Abbasid Translation Movement with the lack of translated knowledge in the modern Arab world.<sup>a</sup>

The historical pattern of cultural exchange also appeared on the Anatolian plateau as the medieval Seljuk state found itself at the nexus of Persian and Turkish cultural influences. From its capital in Konya, Seljuk rulers patronized the arts and founded Islamic

a. *The Arab Human Development Report: Building a Knowledge Society* (United Nations Development Programme, New York, 2003), 67 and 119, [www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2003e.pdf](http://www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2003e.pdf).

institutions of learning. Persian refugees from the thirteenth century Mongol invasion of the Near East infused their literary and artistic forms in an emerging Turkish Islamic civilization. Jalal al-Din Rumi—the revered Sufi Muslim mystic and Persian poet—bore individual witness to the blending of culture underway in Seljuk Anatolia as a Persian refugee, with a name evoking Rome, and thriving within a Turkish political order.

The elements of cultural synthesis and a shared knowledge generation that appeared in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Edessa, Nisibis, Gondeshapur, Baghdad, and Konya<sup>a</sup>—although always in the shadow of violent conflict—offer an alternative historical narrative for the Near East at a key moment in the region’s transition. The revival of this intellectual history would be unlikely to supersede the power struggles underway in the region by changing military balances or endowing economies with new resources. Neither would such a revival of particularly positive historic memory be likely to drown out the echoes of decisive military conquests that define the separateness of the region’s peoples.

Historic identities that are less zero-sum, nonetheless, might seed the political imagination of some parties and assist in the diplomacy of conflict resolution by appealing to common experience and shared tools of intellectual inquiry that have long precedent in the region. The legacy of Greek knowledge and its reception and expansion by the peoples of the Near East will be especially worthy of study as a bridge linking the Near East to the West and as a vessel for both religious and secular learning. Since history will matter much to the future of the Near East, let all parties willing to reconsider make the best of it.

In the preceding chapters, we have seen how the analytic toolkit drawn from the study of the ancient world helps frame key uncertainties affecting the contemporary Middle East. In analyzing ancient political geography, we can identify spheres of influence which key contemporary actors can inherit from their ancient pasts and which can inform their strategic aspirations and define their interests. In the face of the region’s collapsed or strained social compacts, the ancient world’s Greek political experience recounted in Greek literature offers us ways to conceptualize political change, the recovery of national allegiances and citizenship, and the importance of the rule of law in the region’s political development. In analyzing the role of religion, we can see the ancient world’s precedents of faith and reason acting as complements to each other and religious authority that legitimates and sustains political order. In these ways, ancient history offers tools for conceptualizing the contemporary political and social challenges the peoples of the region confront in ways that complement traditional methods of the social sciences.

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a. Similar successes in the development of cosmopolitan cultures outside the core of the Near East, such as in the Caliphate of Cordoba in Muslim Spain (929–1031 CE) and under the Persian Samanid Emirs of Central Asia (c. 875–1000 CE) attest further to the precedent of knowledge exchange and cultural flowering in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.

Policymakers, analysts, and citizens in the West are still left with the additional analytic challenge of thinking about the region as a systemic whole—assessing how the region's state actors and its transnational non-state actors will function in relationship to each other across the region. The Middle East now has a surfeit of actors in different places pursuing often opposing goals. This has rendered legacy conceptualizations of the Middle East state system from the twentieth century increasingly outmoded. The regional state system is changing and assessing where power will reside, what alliances will dissipate, endure or develop, and where power will be exercised will depend on the outcomes of conflicts and political processes that are still underway. We need conceptual frameworks that can interpret this fluid and fragmented landscape. The ancient world helps provide them.







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## CONCLUSION

### ANCIENT PATHS TOWARD A NEW MIDDLE EAST

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Throughout much of the Middle East, the last century has been replete with conflict and underperforming political and economic systems. While much of the rest of the world has experienced significant social development out of the ashes of twentieth century wars, the Middle East has tended to circle back to conflicts within and among the states of the region. Iran, Turkey, and the oil-rich Arab monarchies in recent years have fared better in maintaining their social compacts than the resource poor secular nationalist regimes and—apart from Iran—have avoided prolonged and destructive military confrontations.

Nonetheless, these successes are hardly secure as younger generations encounter the promises of liberalism and secularism which circulate globally and which already have catalyzed political unrest against narrowly-based authoritarian rule. The liberal West is not as globally powerful as it was in the heyday of its Cold War victory but the appeal of the West's freedoms and its promises of material improvement will remain hard to insulate from youthful populations connected to a global information and communications revolution. There are many idle young men such as those lingering in Damascus cafes in the 1990s and surely untold numbers of women who wait in the political wings. Of these we can say that there are many more reasons for them to show their discontent rather than political obedience to what is left of the region's twentieth-century order.

This turbulence and growing uncertainty unfold against the backdrop of the region's transition from centuries of unifying Ottoman rule. Following a pattern from antiquity, the region is once more finding its way from a dominant unipolar system to a more fragmented distribution of power among states and sub-state actors. The break-up of Rome gives us a rubric for thinking about the contours of the emerging regional system but the transition to multipolarity is again proving to be lengthy and uncertain.

The West usually sees itself, with justification, as having played an important and conflicted role in this period of change after it defeated the Ottoman Empire. It was a necessity for the West in World War I to defeat Ottoman rule and later it was a necessity

to arrest Soviet expansion in the region. During all these interventions, however, there has been no laying of a durable cornerstone for the future of the post-Ottoman Middle East. The borders Europe determined, the secular nationalist political ideas it exported, and the security interventions Europe and the United States conducted did not establish stable governments to follow the Ottoman era in the Middle East. A century later, the European and US influence on the region's internal politics has almost certainly reached a high-water mark as the willingness to intervene directly to help broker this emerging post-Ottoman multipolar order through large-scale military deployments ebbs. We are beginning to exit the stage we seized a century ago and the scene is not good.

This failure, of course, also rests with those leaders within the region who neither developed broadly based regimes, nor the economic potential of their citizens and subjects, nor the art of political compromise in lieu of the search for victory over opponents. The region's secular regimes, in particular, failed to create what the Athenians first achieved in a democratic process—allegiance to the state and an idea of citizenship that transcended tribe, sect, and other traditional identities.

As a result, the region seethes in conflict, instability and great human suffering, exporting mostly energy, extremist religious ideology, and refugees in tragic plight. At the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa, these strategic realities mean the United States and Europe cannot ignore the future of the region. Attempting to manage the stage Europe and the United States once dominated will require, almost certainly, more indirect means in the years to come. This will put a premium on sound analysis and policymaking to make a lighter footprint travel farther. There will be no M1 Abrams tank solutions to these challenges.

The analytic methods usually deployed against this complex circumstance in the region—like the initial post-Ottoman order—bears within it promise but also significant shortcomings. In the West, the lens through which we view and consider the region inevitably refracts in ways that make sense to us. If we are predominantly shaped by the Cold War victory, for example, we might see the possibility of implanting a liberal political and economic order in the region. If we are principally oriented toward the power of economic forces, we might see in globalization an inevitable modernizing force on the region's economies and conclude that a more democratic political order in which capital and goods flow freely and entrepreneurship is unleashed will eventually take root. If we give preeminence to our Westphalian and Enlightenment heritage, we will tend to see religious influence in the public square as something to curtail and insist that religion be bounded as an individual right separate from politics. These approaches can deliver useful insight but they also risk the analytic error of mirror imaging—adopting conceptual frameworks and analytic assumptions that reveal more about ourselves than about the subjects of our analysis.

We can also approach the looming challenges of the next phase of the post-Ottoman order with analysis that focuses on specific topics without placing them in a wider conceptual framework. It is possible, for example, to write and think authoritatively and usefully about a particular aspect of the roiling Middle East such as youth demographics or civil-military relations, or the political impacts of environmental degradation or religiously-inspired extremism. In Washington, such insights fit well into daily tactical planning and the levying of tasks on government. The challenge remains, however, to understand the region more broadly on its own terms, to connect parts to a whole, and to provide policymakers, foreign partners, and fellow citizens conceptual frameworks—such as the transition to a multipolar state system—that do not mirror our own assumptions. This is necessary so that we might navigate successfully a period of strategic upheaval in the region. We are “not in Kansas anymore” so we need new tools of navigation—not just mastery of what is immediately in front of us.

Ancient history can join with other disciplines to propose and test the conceptual frameworks policymakers and citizens need to manage interactions with a transitioning region. To be sure, the patterns and precedents of the past do not predict what will happen or provide a detailed map of how to implement specific policies. Instead, thinking about the ancient world allows us to organize data and test hypotheses that come from the region itself, allowing us to evaluate the meaning of large and often conflicting flows of information. Ancient history is a thinking tool that must work collaboratively with other disciplines to discern objectively what is happening. Preemptively removing this method from our analytic tools only makes sense if there is another goal in mind—such as waging an increasingly outdated war on Orientalism or insisting that analytic methods be predictive, a bar no method has yet attained on strategic and complex issues.

We have examined in this brief introduction some of the new thinking that can emerge with a recovery of the power of ancient—and sometimes also medieval—history. When assessing a friend or foe in the region, for example, gauging correctly their strategic intent can prove essential to sound policy formulation. This strategic intent will usually rest within a leader’s mind and be shaped by a complex array of forces which cannot be known with certainty. Still, we can posit that among these shaping forces is a leader’s civilizational inheritance—an historic memory that can shape his or her strategic aims and territorial ambitions. This conceptual framework is not predictive but, rather, asks analysts and policymakers to test whether observed actions and other data accord with an ancient past that might influence the leader. If the proposed conceptual framework for strategic intent receives confirmation from facts on the ground, we can begin to speculate with higher confidence about a range of future scenarios. This is fruit borne of taking ancient history seriously in our policymaking and in our public discourse on the region.

New thinking on the remaking and amending of the region's social compacts is another tangible harvest from revisiting the ancient world. We can consider how the ancient Greeks—under probable influences from the Near East—addressed some of the same challenges of tribe-based rule and lawlessness that plague the contemporary Middle East. Academic and other public discourse on the Middle East, however, has rarely asked how those who invented politics—the ancient Greeks—can point the way to political development in the region. This is another unnecessary depletion of our analytic capability. Returning to some of the earliest Greek political thought offered by Homer and Aeschylus provides a conceptual framework for thinking about the fundamental challenges of governance facing the region and how politics will be likely to combine elements of the past, present, and future. There is no claim here that we could not have thought about the Middle East's politics without the aid of ancient history but rather that with ancient history we are more likely to think about politics differently. In so doing, we can add to our thinking a potentially powerful explanatory tool for political behaviors.

Similarly, our conceptualization of religion through the prism of the ancient world compels us to think beyond the boundaries we have habitually placed around this topic. We see past Westphalia and the Enlightenment because we can return to an earlier time and discern patterns and precedents of religious experience that still exist in the Middle East. The region requires that we employ objective ways to discuss religious faith's intersection with politics and modern knowledge systems. And so, through revisiting the ancient world, we rediscover precedents for the integration of religion and politics not seen in the West since Roman times. We also understand anew that there can be a willingness to uphold competing knowledge systems in ways increasingly unfamiliar in the West. With its provenance in the region's ancient past, this analysis can claim an objectivity and relevance that a modern, secular framework would be most likely to miss.

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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Digging deeper into our analytic toolkit to describe objectively an increasingly unsettled region, we have seen that buried underneath our standard methods is the underappreciated and forgotten power of ancient history. It is powerful as method because the ancient world's patterns and precedents offer insights on policy-relevant challenges such as the strategic intent of leaders, the political import of underlying physical geography, the recovery of social compacts, and the role of religion in societies that are a patchwork of modernity and tradition. These are front-burner issues that are likely to demand attention across the region as it lurches toward a different phase of the still emerging post-Ottoman era.

Thinking differently about a problem affords an opportunity to imagine different strategic goals and how to achieve them. When policymakers receive new analysis, they have the opportunity to reconsider policy objectives and priorities—this is how the intelligence cycle is supposed to function. A consideration of the pattern of alternating unipolar and multipolar state systems since Achaemenid Persia, for example, could spur policymaking that seeks to manage future alliances, the distribution of military and economic power, and the potential impact of asymmetric power—especially from non-state actors. The patterns and precedents of the region's ancient state systems help us to think about this new emerging order, especially as a contrast to the necessary but tactical focus on counterterrorism that can crowd out new strategic thinking.

Another framework with important policy implications that emerges from this reconsideration of antiquity is ideological. The secular nationalism of the last century has deteriorated or vanished from the region, leaving policymakers with the task of deciding what ideologies will help to advance the West's interests as the region rebuilds its social compacts. What ideas will lead to a stable political order that can help secure energy supplies, combat religiously inspired terrorism, stem the flow of refugees, and promote the region's reconstruction and economic growth? Will the placing of sovereignty among citizens—the core idea of democracy which Athens invented—appear in the region in a new, Islamically-legitimated way and how should the United States respond? What ideas might create allegiance to the state and transcend religious and ethnic identities? These are policy challenges borne of analysis that incorporates an understanding of the ancient world.

Islam—in all its diversity of expression and thought—remains a decisive religious, political, social, and cultural force. Across the region, it is interacting with modernity's individualism, materialism, science, and an information and communications revolution. As the quest for agreed-upon ideas to sustain new social compacts unfolds, Islam will inevitably be a key part of the region's ideological future. As a result, the United States, which lacks standing in Islam's religious debates and which does not conduct religiously-focused foreign policy, faces the challenge of influencing these looming debates from the margins. This challenge is discernible when we take seriously ancient patterns of religious and political behavior to which our post-Westphalian and Enlightenment-shaped standard analytic methods do not readily lead us.

The precedents of knowledge exchange and collaboration in the ancient and early medieval worlds offer a potential avenue of informal diplomacy that could give the United States and the West some influence in these debates. Organizing Arab, Iranian, and Western scholars, for example, to revisit commentaries written on Greek works—especially Aristotle—and to revisit how these works were translated and reintroduced in the West could create a pretext for rethinking Islam's encounter with the Greek corpus and its wider relationship to rational philosophy in politically useful ways. Scholars from Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt along with counterparts from the West could meet

in ancient centers of knowledge exchange such as Cordoba, Alexandria, Edessa, and Baghdad to exchange views and revive this common intellectual heritage.

A deeper understanding of the historic memories, underlying geography, and civilizational history among the region's key actors also has the potential to assist US diplomacy. Diplomacy can appeal to the ancient influence a state once yielded to win over support from that state to advance US policy objectives—Egypt's self-image from its ancient past, for example, has helped advance US interests in Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Similarly, diplomacy can challenge a power that is attempting to recreate ancient spheres of influence that disrupt modern state borders by calling out that power in an authoritative reference to that nation's ancient past. The political use of civilizational antecedents is now part of the region's landscape. US interlocutors need to speak this same historical language.

Normalizing the use of ancient history in US public discourse and policy making circles faces a steep climb. The number of tactical threats and other immediate requirements the United States must manage in the region, the general isolation of knowledge of the ancient world from other academic disciplines, and the legacy of an intense and often politicized debate about Orientalism suggest the use of ancient history for conceptualizing the Middle East's transition will require demonstrations of analytic success to gain traction. The remoteness of these civilizations and the difficulty of learning Greek and other ancient languages also give pause to undergraduates considering Classics and other fields of ancient study. These women and men are our future diplomats, strategists, military officers, and intelligence professionals, who will need to work the challenges of the region and who will need to see the usefulness of adding the ancient world to the ways we analyze the region today.

Nonetheless, there are grounds for optimism. The hardest problems often require teams of interdisciplinary specialists to conceptualize new approaches, and the rising field of data analytics will be likely to depend on interaction with subject matter experts to advance its computational methods, offering an opening for specialists in the ancient world to be part of emerging technical analytic tools and practices. The field of Classics is also experiencing a bit of a renaissance as it studies how ancient knowledge has been received at different historical moments for different ends—a reminder that we too can mine an ancient corpus to assist in solving contemporary analytic and policy challenges. The urgency to think creatively and strategically about the Middle East has rarely been greater. The ancient world's patterns and precedents can help us.





