

# Common Myths about the Middle East

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This study provides an objective and sound delineation of the Middle East. The study, consequently, focuses upon the ethnic, cultural, religious, economic, political and geographic diversity of the region. The primary aim of the study is to dispel many widely held "stereotypes-distorted" beliefs of the Middle East and replace them with "sociotypes-accurate" perceptions.

Special attention is drawn to the distinction between "Westernization" and "Modernization." While the people of the region embrace modernization, many reject westernization. The people of Southwest Asia/North Africa have come to realize that they need not westernize in order to modernize.

中東地域の民族的、文化的、宗教的、経済的、政治的、地理的な多様性に注目することにより、中東を客観的かつ歪みなく描き出そうとした。中東について流布する固定的で歪んだ数々の見方を排除し、事実に基づく正確な理解、すなわち「社会学的類型」をもってそれに置き換えることが本論の第一の目的である。特に「西洋化」と「近代化」との違いには注意を払った。中東地域の人々には近代化を希望するが、西洋化を拒否するものも多い。南アジア及び北アフリカの人々も近代化の為に西洋化する必要がないことを知るに至った。

## Introduction

For all too many people, the term "Middle East" evokes images of a land filled with intrigue and conflict, an image accompanied by seemingly little understanding of the true complexity and diversity of the region, its people, and its culture or of the root causes of its seemingly persistent conflict. The Gulf Crisis and ensuing war focused the world's attention on the Middle East but did little to allay the many misconceptions about this widely misunderstood part of the world.

This study dispels many common myths about the Middle East by examining the geography of the region as well as its ethnic, cultural, religious, economic, and political diversity. Special attention is devoted to the attitudes and responses of various groups within the region to the rapid modernization, and the accompanying westernization, of that society. The facts, as the data will reveal, often run counter to widely held, erroneous or distorted beliefs about the Middle East, beliefs fostered, in this author's opinion, by media bias, limited knowledge about the region, and ethnocentric limitations and prejudices of non-native Middle East experts. This study is intended for the average reader who is interested in the "facts" and in developing more accurate perceptions about the region. This study is not aimed at the "regional specialist" who may be more interested in a theoretical discussion about the region or the origin of the myths about the Middle East.

## Myth: The Middle East is located somewhere in the east.

In reality, the region defined as the Middle East is a highly fluid area reflecting both the European ethnocentric origin of the name and the various perspectives regional specialists bring to their studies. As Figures 1 and 2 on the next page clearly indicate, some specialists limit the region to eight countries while others enlarge it to include 14 additional countries. Yet, even more specialists cite historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors to add five of the Newly Independent Former Soviet Republics to the region known as the Middle East.

The origin of the term "Middle East" and an associated term "Near East" can be traced to a Western European, and particularly British, geocentric view of the

world. For the British and the West Europeans, the Euro-Asian landmass was divided into the Occident—the familiar and similar peoples of Western Europe which did not include all of contemporary Europe—and the unfamiliar areas and people of the Orient (East). The countries and areas closest to Western Europe were consequently called the Near East. Current-day Greece, Albania, and the former Yugoslavia were included in this region. Subsequently, the areas farthest east were classified as the Far East with Japan, China, India and neighboring countries included in this group. Countries between the Near and the Far East had, according to West European and British logic, to be classified as the "Middle East." The Europeans saw Europe as the center of the world and all regions were, therefore, named according to their location relative to the world's center. The confusion over terminology increased when other countries outside of Europe used and modified those regional classifications.

Even today some still call for a division of the world into the Western World and the rest of the World with the West to include Western and Northern Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand and possibly South America. The other world will include Eastern Europe and parts of Southern Europe—the Orthodox Christians; all Asians—Muslims, Hindus, Confucians, Shinto, Buddhists and others; and all Africans, Muslims, Christians and animists (Huntington 1996). Ethnocentrism is still alive and well in the modern world.

The Middle East according to some academic textbooks

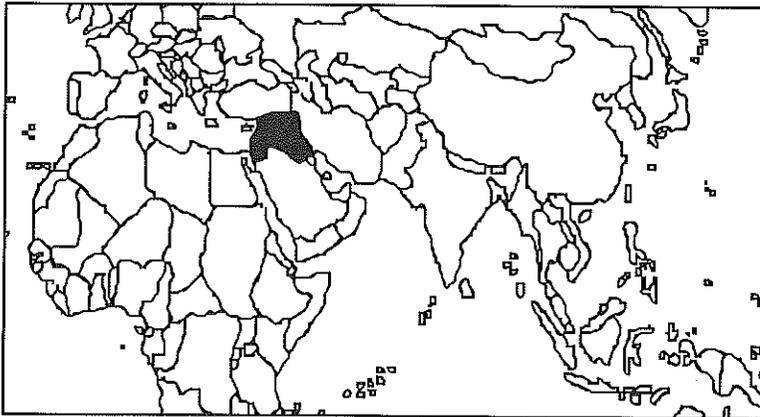


Figure 1

The Middle East as defined by the US Central Intelligence Agency

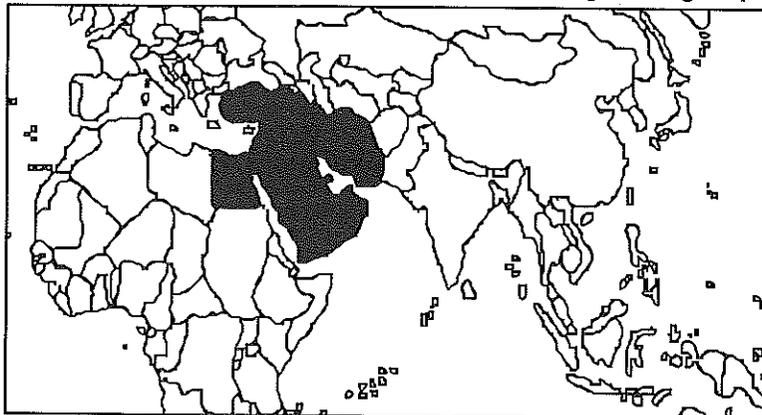


Figure 2

Of the three forms of location—exact, nominal, and relative location—the third form is the most commonly used to describe where any one particular region of the world is located. This form's main drawback, however, is its subjectivity and geocentricity; for example, using a Japanese geocentric perspective, the region of the world commonly recognized as the Middle East is located in the west; Hawaii, in the Middle East; and the United States and Canada, in the Far East.

The Middle East as defined by this study

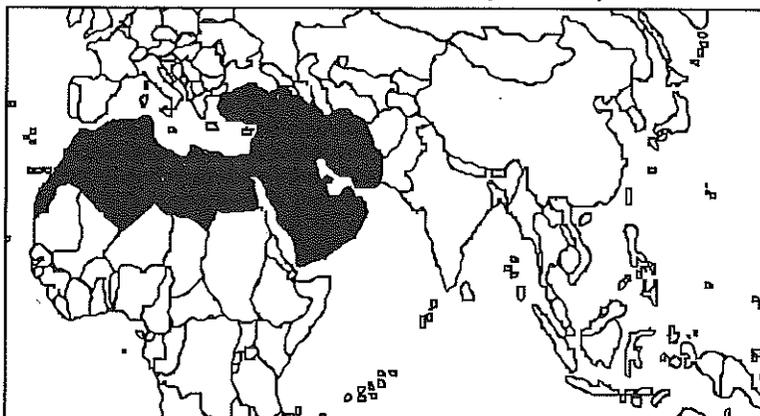


Figure 3

A more realistic approach to determining the boundaries of the Middle East has been advanced by a recent survey conducted by the University of Utah. As shown above in Figure 3, more than 90 percent of the Middle East experts in North America used geographical, historical, cultural, political, and economic commonalities to join 21 states including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen into a region known as Southwest Asia/North Africa.

Although this delineation of the boundaries of the Middle East may be just as suspect as any other, it is based on the region's shared geography; history; cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and racial affinities; and common politico-economic realities. For my study, I have adopted this delineation as the most objective, persistent, and sound division of the world into the region commonly known as the Middle East, as accepted by the vast majority of regional and area specialists. All of the countries included in this region share more with other states and groups within this area than they do with any other region or group. Some representative statistics for the various countries of this region are presented in Figure 4, which also gives the same information for the United States and Japan.

Selected Socio-Economic Statistics for the Middle East

Country	Area sq miles	Population 1997*	Income in US\$	Purchasing Power as % of US \$	Adult Literacy	Religion % Muslims	Food Intake % of FAO Min. Req'd	Life Expectancy
Algeria	919	29.4	3480	21	57	99	96	68
Bahrain	0.26	0.69	7800	-	84	100	-	74
Egypt	386	63.5	730	15	48	94	116	62
Iran	636	66.1	1500	22	66	99	114	67
Iraq	168	21.4	N/A	N/A	89	97	Below Minimum	67
Israel	7.9	5.5	12100	61	95	16	115	78
Jordan	37.7	4.2	975	17	83	92	102	72
Kuwait	6.8	1.9	16900	84	74	85	N/A	76
Lebanon	4	3.8	1400	N/A	80	70	99	70
Libya	679	5.4	6800	N/A	60	97	147	65
Morocco	172	29.7	1080	12	50	99	115	69
Oman	82	2.2	10020	37	35	98	N/A	70
Palestine	3.7	2.4	1760	N/A	76	90	N/A	N/A
Qatar	4.4	0.55	20820	N/A	76	95	N/A	73
Saudi Arabia	900	19.4	9510	43	62	100	116	69
Sudan	968	30.8	870	N/A	32	70	99	55
Syria	71.5	16.0	5000	N/A	64	92	120	67
Tunisia	63.4	9.0	4200	20	57	98	116	73
Turkey	301.3	64.6	4910	16	79	99	122	72
UAE	42.5	3.0	22480	85	71	96	N/A	73
Yemen	203.8	15.3	775	N/A	38	100	76	63
Total	5,474	394.8	-	-	-	-	-	-
USA	3,619	267.8	26800	100	97.9	4	138	77
Japan	144	126.1	27490**	85	100	0	99	80

Figure 4

Sources: *World Development Report 1996*; Boustani and Fargues 1991; *Global Studies 1997*; Ghosheh 1993

\* Population estimates for 1997 are extrapolated from 1996 United Nations data in *World Development Report*.

\*\* Japanese income is tabulated based on the volatile Yen/Dollar exchange rate in April 1997.

### Myth: The Middle East is an Arab region.

Using the boundaries established as Southwest Asia/North Africa, the Middle East embodies a mosaic of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups as shown in Figure 5.

Ethno-Cultural Groups in Southwest Asia/North Africa

Group	Estimated Population (millions)	Share of Population (percentage)	Geographic Concentration
Arabs (including Berbers)	230	59	Found in all 21 countries
Turks	50	12	Mostly in Turkey
Persians (Iranians)	40	10	Iran and Gulf States
Kurds	20	5	Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria
Azeris	15	4	Iran and Turkey
Black Africans	17	4.2	Sudan
Jews	5	1.2	
Others	17	4.2	

Figure 5

Sources: *World Development Report 1996*; Boustani and Fargues 1991; *Global Studies 1997*; Ghosheh 1993

As the chart indicates, while the Arab population represents the majority of the people in 18 of the 21 states that make up the region, other important groups are also associated with the region. Southwest Asia/North Africa is home to approximately 50 million Turks, 40 million Persian-Iranians, 20 million Kurds, 17 million Black Africans, and significant numbers of Azeris, Baluchi, Jews, Armenians, and Greeks as well as about 50 other different groups. This does not include the mixed groups such as the Arab/Berber populations of Morocco and Algeria or the Afro-Arabs in Sudan, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Turkey, the two most populous countries in the region, are predominantly non-Arab. Indeed contemporary Iranians and Turks—regardless of their ethno-cultural heritage—display rabid positive and negative nationalism. They are proud of being Turks or Iranians yet perhaps they are even more proud of not being Arabs. Moreover, the region has experienced several influxes of migrants, invaders, and traders. Many stayed and intermarried with local groups, and consequently the definition of an Arab or a Turk fails to specify a racial classification or a distinctive physical appearance. An Arab or a Turk may be white, brown, black, yellow, or, more likely, of a mixed racial and ethnic background (Spencer 1996). Because of this, those outside the region may confuse the ethno-cultural identity of the many groups that inhabit the region.

Racial, religious and cultural similarities make it extremely difficult to distinguish one group from another. Despite linguistic similarities and the fact that some languages in the region share the same script, have common vocabulary or may have evolved from the same ancient mother language, language is the primary distinguishing factor between the major groups in the region (Boustani and Fargues 1991).

### Myth: The Middle East is a Muslim region.

While the region has an overwhelming majority of Muslims, more than two-thirds of the world's estimated 1.2 billion Muslims live elsewhere. Indeed, the three largest Muslim populations are found in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These three countries have more Muslims than the combined population of the 21 countries included in Southwest Asia/North Africa (Ghosheh 1993).

As Figure 6 clearly shows, the region is associated with Islam; however, one must not ignore the fact that this area was the birthplace of other major religions that are still practiced and represented in this region.

Religious Groups in Southwest Asia/North Africa

Religious Group	Number (in millions)	Percentage of Population
Muslims	369	92.9
Christians	12	3
Jews	4.7	1.2
Other	9.1	2.7

Figure 6

Sources: Boustani and Fargues 1991; *Global Studies* 1997; Ghosheh 1993, 1994.

Christianity and Judaism have as deep an emotional and religious attachment to the region as does Islam. Bahaism and Zoroastrianism were also founded here. History has impacted on the relative number of adherents of each of these religions within the region, especially the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism (Esposito 1997). One can see a clear pattern where relatively newer religions claimed more followers as more people converted from the older religions. The number and relative share of Jews in the region declined over the years as many

Jews converted to Christianity and later to Islam. The same is true of Christianity, which once claimed the largest relative share of the region's souls (Esposito 1996 and 1997).

More recently, variable population growth rates and migration have impacted the relative shares of each religious group. Muslims, as a group, have a higher fertility rate than Christians and Jews (Ghosheh 1993 and Goldscheider 1996). On the other hand, Christians account for a larger relative share of immigrants who have sought new lives and fortunes in the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

In the post-World War I era, the region has also experienced waves of Jewish immigration. This pattern accelerated immediately after the establishment of the state of Israel, and more recently after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Goldscheider 1996).

### Myth: The Middle East is a desert region.

As Figure 7 shows, Southwest Asia/North Africa displays a tremendous diversity of climatic sub regions.

Average Daily Celsius Temperature for Selected Cities in Southwest Asia/North Africa

City	January		July	
	High	Low	High	Low
Alexandria	18	11	29	23
Cairo	18	8	36	21
Ankara	4	-4	30	1
Istanbul	7	2	27	18
Izmir	13	4	33	21
Tehran	7	-3	37	22
Riyadh-Sa	21	8	42	26
Jiddah	29	19	37	26
Tel Aviv	18	10	28	22
Jerusalem	13	5	31	17

Figure 7

The Middle East is often classified collectively as one topographic/climatic region. While all agree that much of the region's territory is characterized by an arid climate where evaporation exceeds precipitation, it would be a gross misrepresentation of the historical and geographical facts to ignore the rich climatic diversity that led to the region's emergence as a leading agricultural producer and innovator over the past few millennia (Spencer 1996).

Indeed, many parts of the Middle East have relied on food exports as the main source of hard-currency earnings. The agricultural sector continues to employ more people than manufacturing or services in most of these societies. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the region was a net food exporter. While that has changed due to demographic and economic factors, a few states in the region have increased their food self-sufficiency rate (for example, Saudi Arabia), and others continue to list agricultural products as their leading exports (Boustani and Fargues 1991).

The climatic diversity of the region is best evident in the largest as well as in the smallest of its states. While one may expect and can easily accept that the larger states like Iran and Turkey have various climatic regions including humid continental (rain year-round), micro thermal (cold and snowy), Mediterranean (hot dry summers and rainy winters), semi arid (minimal precipitation) and arid; the climatic diversity of the smaller states is more pronounced. Israel, with a territory smaller than the Japanese island of Kyushu, enjoys similar climatic diversity. Indeed, the tourist industry in Israel promotes the hot resorts of the south as a tourist haven for Europeans seeking a winter tan while at the same time promoting the thriving ski

industry 150 miles to the north. It is important to understand that while much of the region does not receive adequate precipitation—most of Saudi Arabia and Egypt get less than one inch of rain a year, other areas in the regions such as the Mediterranean, Caspian, and Black Sea coastal sub regions receive more than 64 inches of rain a year. These sub regions account for much of the agricultural production of the region since their climate allows for double or multiple cropping.

**Myth: The Middle East is an oil-rich region with a high standard-of-living.**

Income Comparison: Middle East vs USA vs Japan

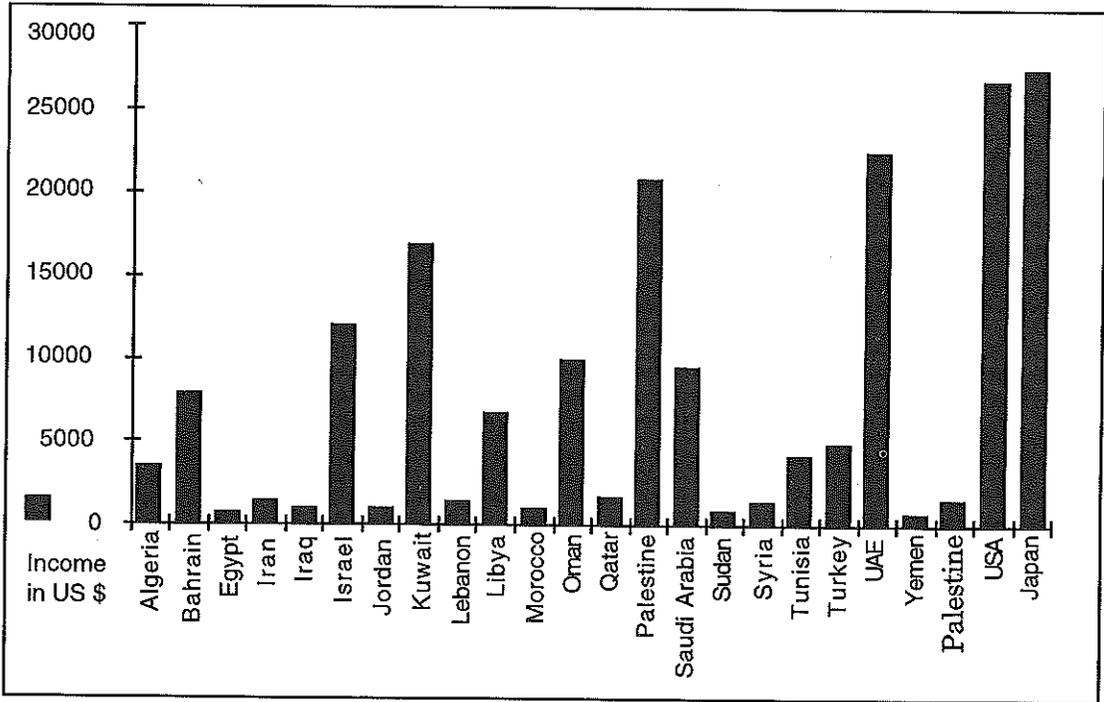


Figure 8

Although the region accounts for close to 66 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 25 percent of the world's natural gas reserves, we cannot say that the region as a whole is oil-rich because most of the reserves are concentrated in the Persian/Arab Gulf region as shown on Figure 9 below.

Oil Reserves in Selected Countries

Country	Percentage of World's Proven Reserves
Saudi Arabia	26
Iraq	10
United Arab Emirates	9.7
Kuwait	9.4
Iran	9.2
Rest of the Region	1.7
Rest of the World	34

Figure 9

Sources: *Petroleum & Energy Intelligence Weekly*

A majority of the countries in the region are oil-poor, oil-importing countries and have low standards of living (World Development Report 1996). Yet, the sparsely populated Gulf States—Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia—enjoy relatively higher standards of living and have experienced more rapid modernization financed by the flow of petro-dollars during the days of OPEC. It is important to note that even the major oil-exporting countries have experienced a sharp decline in oil revenue and an even sharper decline in per capita income as the result of revenue decline combined with rapid population growth (Ghosheh 1993). From their highest levels in 1981, oil prices, in real dollars, have tumbled to their lowest levels since the 1940s. Except for the short-lived increase due to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf War, oil prices have been declining in the 1990s as well. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia's and Libya's oil revenues decreased by 80 percent; Iraq's, by 60 percent; Kuwait, Algeria, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, by 50 to 60 percent (*The Europa Year Book* 1990).

The disparities in income are astonishing and have been, and probably will, remain a destabilizing factor in the region. Whereas the per capita annual income of Egypt, Yemen, the Sudan, and Jordan remains below \$1000, that in Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE exceeds \$12,000. Moreover, Israel, an oil-importing country, accounts for half of the high-income population in the region. Income in most of the oil-rich states has declined in the past few years as oil prices tumbled to their lowest level in 50 years (*Petroleum & Energy Intelligence Weekly*, April 12, 1997).

Per capita income is meaningless unless the cost-of-living variations within and between countries is taken into consideration. Comparing Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) allows us to draw better conclusions when examining living standards. The data reveals that only four countries in the region have PPP equal to or higher than 50 percent of that of the United States: Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, with a combined population of only 11 million or a mere 2.75 percent of the region's population. On the other hand, 230 million people have a PPP of less than 20 percent of the level of the United States. This means that about 60 percent of the region's population has a low standard-of-living. The remaining 37 percent has a PPP between 20 and 50 percent of that of the United States and is consequently considered to have relatively poor-to-intermediate income/living standards. Only one percent of the region's people have living standards similar to those of the average Japanese. A majority, about 60 percent, have less than one-fourth of the Japanese purchasing power (*World Development Report* 1996).

Needless to say, income disparities within individual states are alarming. Most governments do not even release data on income distribution for fear it will cause unrest. In Egypt and Jordan, government subsidies of bread, oil, sugar, and other basic foods have helped to sustain millions of people who live in poverty and have kept a lid on simmering social, political, and economic discontent. Tampering with those subsidies carries the risk of political and economic disruptions that few governments in the region want to face.

While statistics have not been released, there is wide-spread agreement that the gap between the rich and poor is massive and widening. In some countries, income disparities reflect ethnic, cultural, and linguistic divisions. In Israel, the socio-economic hierarchy places the Western Jews at the top, the Oriental Jews in the Middle, and the Non-Jews (Muslim and Christian Arabs) at the bottom. In Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain and, to some extent, Saudi Arabia, the division is along national lines whereby the natives enjoy a privileged life while most of the expatriates struggle to make a decent living. In Sudan, the division is along racial/cultural/religious lines with the northern Muslim Arabs having higher standards of living than their southern Black/Christian and Atheist compatriots (Boustani and Fagues 1991).

Small ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities often enjoy a greater degree of political and economic affluence: the Maronites of Lebanon dominate the government and the economy; the Alwaites in Syria; the Sunni Muslims in Iraq; the East Jordanians in Jordan, a country with a Palestinian majority; the Quptic Christians in Egypt; the Kuwaitis, Qataris, Bahrainians and Emiratis in their respective countries where the natives are a minority (Ghosheh 1993).

### **Myth: The Middle East is backward-looking and anti-western.**

Many people in America and other western countries condemn the region as backward-looking with a cultural and religious heritage that hampers efforts at modernization and development. One may argue that many in the region do look back but are not necessarily backward-looking. The region, throughout much of its recorded history, was the cradle of civilization; a base of world powers and empires; and a center of science, trade, and technology. For many, looking back is perhaps a desperate attempt to resurrect the glorious past when the region was prosperous, mighty, and influential. History, they may believe, holds many lessons, and studying history allows one to avoid repeating old mistakes and to duplicate, perhaps, the successes of the past.

Recent history has been very cruel to the region. Foreign domination, economic decline, cultural stagnation, political fragmentation, and technological and scientific lag are all symptoms of the region's decline as well as precursors of the challenges it faces. After the humiliation of military defeat and European colonialism in the twentieth century, the newly created states in the post-World War II era attempted to pursue programs of development and modernization. Most, if not all, pursued "westernization" as the perceived inseparable twin of "modernization." Indeed, some states like Turkey hoped for total political, economic, as well as cultural transformation. Turkey abandoned the Arabic script for the Roman alphabet; the Islamic Caliphate was replaced by a secular republican democracy; Turkey joined NATO and hopes to enter the European Union; Islam was marginalized and secularism became the symbol of modernity; religious schools were abolished; even a western dress code was enforced: the Muslim headgear was replaced by the western hat; women were not allowed to wear the veil; and men had to shave their beards or pay a beard tax. The "Young Turks" declared Turkey part of Europe and shunned their Eastern neighbors. After more than 70 years of persistent efforts to westernize and truly become part of the West, Turkey now realizes that while the Turks choose to be part of the West, the West may never accept them into the fold. The Turks remain "too poor . . . and too Muslim" to be accepted into the European fold (*The Economist*, March 8, 1997).

Today, many countries in the region have reached the conclusion that non-western societies can achieve modernization without abandoning their cultural heritage. Some enlightened leaders in the region realize that while importing technology is desirable, importing Western "social and political institutions can be deadly. . . the Saudis want to modernize but not necessarily westernize" (Prince Bandar bin Sultan 1994). Iran's more recent experience clearly demonstrates that modernization without westernization is possible. The current Iranian leadership pursued economic modernization and industrialization while going to extremes to ensure that Western influences do not "pollute" the indigenous Iranian culture (Lewis 1997 and Huntington 1996).

East Asia, which includes Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Thailand, has become a model for Southwest Asia/North Africa as well as other developing regions. The countries of East Asia are becoming more modern but certainly not more western. Pride in what is called "Asian values" has led to a

rediscovery of, and return to, their indigenous cultures. Leaders in these countries concluded, as Huntington points out, that "modernization and economic development neither require nor produce westernization." Those leaders vigorously pursue the former while forcefully avoiding the latter. The eye-opening developments in the most democratic regimes in the Developing World prove that "much of the world is becoming more modern and less Western" (Huntington 1996).

The emergence of religious political parties in Turkey, Israel, and India demonstrate that when given the choice, people reject westernization. The resurgence of Islamic parties and teachings in the most secular of Muslim states is no accident. Turkey abandoned the East but was rejected by the West and evolved into a torn country suffering from an identity crisis. The Turks finally realized that they need not westernize in order to modernize (Esposito 1996).

Iran, under the Shah, also pursued westernization. That program divided the country economically, culturally, and politically. Tehran and other Iranian cities became monuments of western-modernization efforts while the countryside saw few benefits from the petro-dollars invested in these westernization schemes.

At present, Southwest Asia/North Africa is undergoing significant politico-economic changes. The western-oriented elite who once dominated the political structure and consequently reaped huge economic benefits while the masses continued to languish in poverty are coming under mounting pressure. The people of the region not only reject western cultural domination but more importantly reject western policies in the region that ensure that the corrupt, westernized elite retain power even through undemocratic means. The United States and the West supported the Shah's brutal regime; French financial and military support encouraged the Algerian military to usurp power and deny the Islamic Salvation Front the victory it won at the ballot box; and the United States and the West continue to support autocratic monarchies in the Gulf that deny their people the most basic human rights (Huntington 1996, Lewis 1997 and Esposito 1997).

The gap between western principle and practice appears too wide for non-westerners to fathom. "Democracy is promoted but not if it brings Islamic fundamentalists to power; non-proliferation is preached for Iran and Iraq, but not for Israel; free trade is the elixir of economic growth, but not for agriculture; human rights are an issue with China but not with Saudi Arabia; aggression against oil-owning Kuwaitis is repulsed with massive force, but not aggression against oil-less Bosnians" (Huntington 1996). Iraq must fully comply with United Nations resolutions or face crippling sanctions while Israeli intransigence is rewarded with massive American and western aid; the United States and Western Europe can manipulate supply to prop up the prices of their exports but the price of oil, the region's main export, must remain artificially low.

### **Myth: The Middle East's religious and cultural traditions are undemocratic and hamper democratization efforts.**

The vast majority of Americans and other westerners perceive that Islam is "anti-democratic," even repressive. The Middle East, they conclude, cannot have democracy as long as it continues to hold on to traditional beliefs and outdated customs. Certainly, the region needs to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions in the world. The political regimes in the region are in desperate need of major reforms, or better yet, outright replacement.

The definition of democracy is rather illusive because democracy takes many forms and reflects regional, cultural, religious, and personal preferences. Perhaps there is an ideal form of democracy but experts could hardly agree on what it is and would seriously question whether that ideal is attainable. Many in America, and given

human ethnocentric tendencies understandably so, believe that the American version of democracy is the best and that others should, therefore, emulate it. Most of the people of Southwest Asia/North Africa are not familiar with the American political process, and those who have developed a keen interest in it are the first to admit that it is far from perfect. More importantly, they fully appreciate the reasons why it could not possibly be adopted in their region.

The people of the region see America not as the guardian of democracy and human rights but as the heir apparent to the British colonial power: America is associated with militarism and imperialism not democracy, liberty, or human rights (Lewis 1990). Many have seen America only through the missiles, fired by Israeli jets, that rained down on them or through the presence of military forces in the region from the United States or other western allies. Others have, with dismay, watched the United States support one dictatorship after another: the Shah; Saddam Hussein; the Monarchs, Emirs, and Sheiks who exercise absolute rule and tolerate no dissent; and the so-called presidents who regularly win landslides in "controlled" elections. Many have come to understand that America is interested in the very same things that drove the British and the French to carve up the region—the exploitation of whatever resources the region might have to offer. The power politics of the past have been adopted by the Super Powers of today. America has pursued the same old "Divide and Rule" tactics engineered by the British and the French before them. The Western powers protect these regimes in the name of stability. These "stable" regimes, in turn, continue to sell their western partners oil at the "right" price (Lewis 1990 and 1997, Huntington 1996 and Esposito 1997).

Nonetheless, the region's religious and cultural traditions, as well as historic experience, demonstrate that democratic ideals are popular and flourished long ago in different parts of Southwest Asia/North Africa. Bernard Lewis points out that "the idea of limited government is inherent and essential in Islam. The principal that the ruler is not above the law, but subject to the law no less than the humblest of his underlings, is central to classical Islamic teaching on the state" (*Foreign Affairs* 1997).

Many of the so-called modern ideas about democracy and government accountability were implemented in the Middle East centuries before the French and the American Revolutions. The American "electoral college" popular representation system resembles the Arab/Islamic "Baih" system, whereby leaders of the various groups met in a convention and selected/elected their leader(s), who were subject to popular scrutiny and to the highest ethical and moral standards. The Arabs and Muslims implemented these democratic ideals some fifteen centuries ago, more than a millennium before the French, British, or Americans contemplated them (Esposito 1996). Today, however, Southwest Asia/North Africa may be the least democratic region in the world: about half of its states are subject to absolute monarchs; most of the rest, to a dictatorship of one sort or another (Ghosheh 1992). "The unbridled autocracy that prevails in much of the Islamic world today is in large measure a byproduct of modernization" declares Lewis (1997).

Since Lewis equates modernization with westernization, the real culprit is perhaps westernization. By comparing the level of material well-being with the level of democratization in the region, one may quickly conclude that, with the exception of Israel, the higher the standard-of-living, the more repressive the government is likely to be. The oil-rich countries of the Gulf remain the most autocratic and repressive in the region. Oil- and petro-dollars have enabled these governments to escape popular scrutiny. Money has bought them time because they do not have to raise taxes, cut services, or simply be held accountable for dispensing the people's money (Esposito 1997). Moreover, the absence of democracy in the Middle East is largely explained by the continued interference of external powers in the region's political affairs. As long

as the monarchic and totalitarian regimes continue to serve the politico-economic interests of the world's great powers, they are protected from regional as well as internal threats.

Many Americans readily understand or accept the fact that religion can mix with politics. Indeed, in Southwest Asia/North Africa, Israel—held by many as the most democratic state in the area—allows religious-based parties to operate. The current Likud governing coalition is held hostage to the agenda of the Israeli religious parties. The same is true of Christianity. Liberation Theology is accepted as the religious-political mainstream in Latin America, and a similar trend can be found in Eastern Europe. The political might of the Christian Right in the United States is yet another example of how politics and religion can and do mix. In Islam, religious teachings provide the ground rules for an all encompassing economic, legal, political, and social system (Esposito 1997).

### **Myth: Islam is the next global threat.**

While no individual country measures up to America's superior military, technological, or economic might, some groups have pointed toward a possible alliance against the United States and the West. In his "Clash of Civilization" vision, Huntington predicts that the Eastern civilizations—Islamic, Confucianism, and Shinto—will pose a great threat and danger to Western civilization. Others have singled out Islam as the next "global menace." The Islamic Fundamentalist threat is described monotheistically and equated solely with radicalism. This threat becomes a convenient pretext for the western-supported dictatorial regimes in the region to crush political opposition and to suppress democratic forces and popular opposition. (Esposito 1996 and 1997).

The Islamic world is heterogeneous, with Muslim communities found in more than 120 countries. The Organization of Islamic States (OIS) has 51 member countries. There are as many factions, schools, and diverse visions in Islam as there are in Christianity or Judaism. Muslims around the world see themselves as the victims of attacks supported or perpetrated by the Christian West: in Bosnia, where Christian Serbs and Croats killed, displaced, and raped hundreds of thousands of unarmed Muslims; in the Palestinian-occupied territories, where Muslims are massacred while they pray and their land is confiscated to make room for western Jewish immigrants; in Lebanon, where the Christian Maronites continue to control the government and the army; in Burma and the Philippines, where Muslim communities fight for religious freedom and self-determination; in India, where Muslims have increasingly come under attack; in France and the United States, where Muslims face discrimination; and in most of the so-called Muslim states, where they are denied political participation and basic human rights by authoritarian governments installed and protected by the western powers.

Having been denied their political rights and facing what they see as an unholy alliance of their corrupt, elite, and western neocolonialists, some people have turned to violent struggle. It is important to note that the vast majority of Muslims, like Christians and Jews, are not Fundamentalists or radicals. Indeed, many Islamic political groups have been elected and have held positions of power in Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen, Kuwait, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. However, many leaders in Southwest Asia/North Africa capitalize on American and western fears of the "Fundamentalist" threat to deny their people their very basic rights and freedoms (Esposito 1995, 1996 and 1997; and Lewis 1997).

The demographic transition that most Muslim states are experiencing today has led to rapid population growth and to a growing number of Muslims immigrating to Europe and North America. The United Nations population estimates predict that

Islam will emerge as the world's largest religion early in the twenty-first century, largely the result of differing fertility rates, with Muslims states experiencing more rapid growth rates than Christian countries.

Both Islam and Christianity are universal religions, and both believe that they possess supercessionist ideology; that their message is the completion and fulfillment of heavenly revelations to earlier communities that had deviated from the straight path. The competition between Islam and Christianity for the souls of potential converts goes back some fifteen centuries. Over the centuries, this theological and religious competition has taken on political, military, and civilizational forms. Each religious community demonized the other and saw it as an aggressor and a threat to its very existence. Moreover, the Muslims have proved "more tolerant than imperial Christianity, providing greater religious freedom for Jews and indigenous Christians" while even today "Muslims have experienced levels of discrimination in society and the media in Europe and America that would simply not be tolerated by Christian and Jews" (Esposito 1997).

### **Myth: The people of the Middle East wear strange clothes.**

As the cross-roads of three continents and a bridge between many great cultures, Southwest Asia/North Africa has been influenced by many different cultures. For example, the introduction of the veil seemed like an appropriate adaptation to the arid sub regions. The cultural hearth—source of origin—of the veil is disputed, with some attributing its introduction to Indian traders from the north-western part of India—Rajasthan—while others contend that the Roman royalty introduced this practice to the region (Esposito 1996 and Lamb 1986).

While the source may be disputed, the veil seems to fit the environmental conditions of the arid Gulf region perfectly. Desert areas are characterized by aridity and radical changes in temperature between night and day. Moreover, the region's deserts are subject to strong "Touz"—sand storms. Anyone caught in a sand storm will testify to the pain inflicted by the sand grains as they fly at speeds of up to 100 kilometers per hour. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Bedouins—desert dwellers—cover most of their bodies, even their faces to protect themselves against the sun and sand.

It is perfectly natural for people anywhere to adapt to the physical environment within which they live. The way people dress, construct their houses, prepare their dishes, largely reflects their adjustment to the physical limitations and choices presented them by their environments. Over time and with the diffusion of ideas, customs, and traditions, many people have chosen to change their lifestyles as new ideas and behavioral patterns are incorporated into their cultures.

With the growing influence of western culture today, a vast majority of people in the region dress in western clothes. This is particularly true of men and of urban dwellers. Aside from the Gulf region, the costumes prevalent in the bustling cities of the region are a curious mix of what the western designers and low-cost producers in the Third World conspire to market. A few states, however, Saudi Arabia and Iran are the prime examples, continue to place severe restrictions on what their people wear.

### **Myth: In the Middle East, women will always be oppressed because of religious and cultural gender bias.**

Few will deny the fact that male chauvinism prevails in much of Southwest Asia/North Africa and that women are subject to restrictions, even discriminations, in many states in the region. However, it would be a huge leap to conclude that religion and religious culture are the causes of these restrictions. "The veiling and

seclusion of women is not based on a clear text of the Quran (Muslim holybook), but instead is borrowed from non-Islamic sources. The Quran itself does not mandate that women should be completely veiled or separated from men, but speaks of their participation in the life of the community" (Esposito 1988).

Indeed, the early periods of Islam witnessed women's liberation with the near abolition of slavery and the advance of women's rights: allowing women to own property and encouraging their education and their participation in civic, economic, political, and religious affairs. It seems most ironic that the prophet of Islam, Mohammed, married his boss, a businesswoman who made her fortune in international trade and who continued to work and prosper after her marriage and long after Mohammed began preaching the teachings of Islam. The prophet's other close female relatives have been instrumental in advancing women's rights and taking leadership roles in their communities. Ayisha, his daughter, led the faithful in prayer in the mosque and into battle as their commander (Esposito 1996 and 1997).

Islam, however, is subject to various interpretations. The same Islamic teachings that the Saudi Arabian government cites for restricting women have also been used to elect women leaders in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and other Muslim states. While only two percent of women participate in the labor force in Saudi Arabia, Turkish women make up about 40 percent of the labor force.

While some countries in the region have made more progress than others in emancipating women, it must be acknowledged that discrimination still exists and must be dealt with. However, it is grossly unjust to judge all the countries by the actions of a few and to accept the argument of the male-chauvinist leaders who have denied their women citizens their basic rights in the name of one religion or another. Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the name of Islam, enforce a certain dress code, restrict travel and movements, and prohibit mixing between the sexes. These and other actions, such as the ban on women driving and the stipulation that they must be escorted by a male relative when shopping, traveling, or walking, has no basis in religion. Religion is simply a cloak those leaders wear to justify actions that their history, tradition, and particularly religion would not condone or tolerate.

Westerners who hasten to judge Islam and Muslims by the actions of some deviant leaders must remember their own history. America has yet to elect a woman president and women make up less than 10 percent of the political and economic leadership—even though they constitute a majority of the population (World Development Report 1996). By contrast, the two largest Muslim democracies—while admittedly it may be stretching it to call both Pakistan and Bangladesh democracies—have elected women leaders. Muslim women were granted political, economic, and marital rights centuries before the West.

Islam promoted equality for all Muslims regardless of gender, race, ethnic, or national origin. The prophet Mohammed made that very clear when he said, "All human beings are equal, equal as the teeth of a comb. There is no superiority of a white over a black nor of any male over a female. Only the God-consciousness merit favor and the ultimate reward from God" (Zepp 1992). History supports the conclusion that "Islam and the Quran created major improvements in the status of women" (Zepp 1992). The fact that women in predominantly patriarchal societies continue to face discrimination is precisely because the Islamic ideals are not put into practice.

With the increasing level of literacy, education, and awareness, women's living conditions will change. The region will not prosper or modernize unless, and until, women play their rightful role in that process. As Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, said in a speech in the mid-1920s: "Our task is to catch up with the modern world. We will not catch up with the modern world if we only modernize half the people." That declaration holds true today as it did some seventy years ago.

## Conclusion

This study has countered myths with facts, and it is hoped that some light has been shed on many aspects of "Middle Eastern" life that may have been perceived as opaque, mysterious, or incomprehensible. Southwest Asia/North Africa represents a tremendous diversity in culture, religion, customs, traditions, political ideology, economic conditions, climate, and topography. Yet its people have the same dreams, aspirations, and fears as others around the globe.

A little knowledge can go a long way in countering stigmatization and prejudice. Mutual understanding demands learning about others with an open mind and accepting the idea that all cultures are equally valid no matter how different they may be. Global harmony requires that we understand and appreciate our differences while maintaining a healthy respect for each other.

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