
INTRODUCTION TO ISLAMIC SOCIETIES



The history of Islamic societies will be presented in two dimensions: one historical, an effort to account for the formation of Islamic societies and their change over time; the other analytic and comparative, which attempts to understand the variations among them. Three methodological and historical assumptions underlie these approaches. The first is that the history of whole societies may be presented in terms of their institutional systems. An institution, whether an empire, a mode of economic exchange, a family, or a religious practice, is an activity carried out in a patterned relationship with other persons as defined and legitimized in the mental world of the participants. An institution encompasses at once an activity, a pattern of social relations, and a set of mental constructs.

The second assumption is that the history of Islamic societies may be told in terms of four basic types of institutions: familial, including tribal, ethnic, and other small-scale community groups; economic, the organization of production and distribution of material goods; cultural or religious, the concepts of ultimate values and human goals and the collectivities built on such commitments; and political, the organization of conflict resolution, defense, and domination.

The third assumption is that the institutional patterns characteristic of Islamic societies had their origin in ancient Mesopotamia in the third millennium BCE. The constellation of lineage and tribal, religious, and political structures created by the Mesopotamian city-states and empires set the foundations for the later development of Middle Eastern societies before and during the Islamic era. Later Middle Eastern Islamic societies were built on the infusion of ancient institutions with an Islamic cultural style and identity. These Middle Eastern Islamic institutions and cultures in turn interacted with the institutions and cultures of other world regions to create a number of variant Islamic societies. In the modern era these variant societies were again transformed, this time by interaction with Europe. Modern Islamic countries are each the product of the interaction of a particular regional form of Islamic society with different European political, economic, and cultural influences. Thus, the variation among modern Islamic societies may be traced to older patterns.

Parts I and II of this book examine the formative era of Islamic civilization from the revelation of the Quran to the fifteenth century. Part I begins with the Prophet Muhammad and continues through the classical Islamic era. This era gave rise to Arabic literature, Islamic religious teaching, and cosmopolitan artistic achievements – a complex of tribal-ethnic, religious, and courtly-aristocratic cultures from which all later versions of Islamic civilization derive. Here I attempt to explain the development of Islamic civilization in terms of its relationships to past patterns of Middle Eastern societies, and in terms of the cultural effects of urbanization, social change, and the formation of

new empires. Part II discusses the history of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries and attempts to explain the transformation of Islam from a complex of doctrines and cultural systems into the operative principles of Middle Eastern societies. In this period, Islam became the religion of the masses of Middle Eastern peoples, who formed new state and communal institutions (Shi'i "sects," Sunni schools of law, and Sufi brotherhoods) and redefined the relations of political regimes to religious bodies.

The emergence of Islamic civilization is striking for its basic continuity with late Roman and Persian antiquity. In political forms, modes of economic production, religious values, and family structures, it is basically similar to its predecessors. It shares the conceptual world of Judaism and Christianity. The major differences are the accidents of language and vocabulary, and historical and cultural references. Thus, Islamic civilization is not a different civilization from our own, but part of a shared European–West Asian heritage.

In its turn Middle Eastern Islam became a paradigm for the creation of similar societies in other parts of the world. Part III traces the diffusion of the Middle Eastern Islamic paradigm. From the seventh to the nineteenth centuries, Islam became the religion of peoples in the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, Anatolia and the Balkans, the Indian subcontinent, Inner Asia and China, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. In Part III we consider the forces behind the diffusion of Islam, and the interaction between Islamic religious values and existing cultures and societies. We see how Islamic cultural and political norms were subject to change and transformation as they interacted with already-established non-Islamic societies. We also examine the consolidation of Islamic regimes, including the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires, and Islamic states in Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere, and their varied ways of integrating political regimes, Islamic religious institutions, and non-Islamic values and forms of community.

By the eighteenth century the Middle Eastern paradigm for an Islamic society had been replicated, multiplied, and modified into a worldwide family of societies. Each was a recognizable variant on an underlying structure of familial-communal, religious, and state institutions. Each also represented a version of the various ways in which Islamic belief, culture, and social institutions interacted with the still-broader complex of human organization – including the non-Islamic institutions of political regimes; systems of economic production and exchange; non-Islamic forms of kinship, tribal, and ethnic communities; and pre-Islamic or non-Islamic modes of culture. We explore the relation of Islamic to pre-Islamic institutions in these regions. What were the similarities and differences among these numerous Islamic societies?

Part III concludes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Islamic societies were profoundly disrupted by the breakup of Muslim empires, economic decline, internal religious conflict, and the establishment of European economic, political, and cultural domination. These forces would lead to the creation of national states, to the modernization of agriculture, to industrialization, to major changes in class structure, and to the acceptance of secular nationalist and other modern ideologies. Part IV presents the successive phases of state formation and ideological development in the modern era. It shows how Muslim religious and political elites developed alternative responses to the challenges of Europe. Islamic reformism was the primary response of the religious elites starting in the eighteenth century and continuing to the present day Islamic revival. The reformist program appears in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the forms of neo-fundamentalist Salafi and Wahhabi movements, in both political and apolitical community building movements. It competes for the allegiance of Muslims with Sufi and neo-Sufi movements, and with Islamic liberalism. Apart from organized movements and articulated religious and intellectual positions, the Islamic revival is also marked by a diffuse Muslim identity built on political sympathies, internet contacts, and youth sub-cultures. The book concludes with an assessment of

the different types of Muslim identities and of the institutional interactions of states and religious movements.

This is not, it should be clear, an effort to define an essential Islam, but rather an attempt to develop a comparative method for assessing the role of Islamic beliefs, institutions, and identities in particular historical contexts. The mechanism I have adopted to do this – the expository framework – is based on the assumptions that Islamic societies are built on institutions and that these institutions are subject to internal variation, to variations in the relationships among them, and to variations over time. The limited number of institutional factors imposes a constraint that allows us to conceive this large subject in some ordered way, but also allows for the depiction of individual societies as concrete and different entities. By exploring the variation of institutions in differing contexts, we may be able to comprehend why Islamic societies are similar in general form and yet differ so much in specific qualities.

In this volume primary emphasis is placed on the communal, religious, and political institutions of Islamic societies rather than on technologies and economies. I subordinate economic to noneconomic institutions because the distinctive historical developments in Islamic societies in the last millennium have been cultural and political, and because differences of culture and institutions differentiate Islamic societies from one another and from other human civilizations. In Muslim societies the basic forms of economic production and exchange were set down in the pre-Islamic era. The forms of agricultural and pastoral production, handicrafts, manufacturing, prevailing systems of exchange, and technological capacities are all older than, and continue through, the Islamic era in their inherited forms. This is not to deny that there has been considerable variation in economic activity in and among Muslim societies – such as in the relative role of pastoral, agricultural, commercial, and manufacturing activities; or in degrees of poverty and prosperity; or in the distribution of wealth – or that these differences have important cultural and political implications, or that economic considerations are an essential aspect of all human values and social action. Still, the fundamental modes of economic production and exchange were basically unaltered until the modern era, and economic and technological changes were not the primary sources of political and cultural variation or of changes in class structure and social organization. Until the modern era economic activity remained embedded in communal and political structures, and class divisions in society did not determine, but were inherent in, state and religious organizations. Although cultures, sociopolitical institutions, and economic and technological forces can be autonomous causal factors in historical change, in the history of Islamic societies, cultural and sociopolitical forces have been the significant loci of historical individuation. Whether twentieth-century technological and economic change now calls into question the existence of an Islamic group of societies is an open question.

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PART I

*THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAMIC
CIVILIZATIONS*



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*THE MIDDLE EAST FROM c. 600
 TO c. 1000*

CHAPTER 1

MIDDLE EASTERN SOCIETIES BEFORE ISLAM



Islamic societies were built on the framework of already established and ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. From the pre-Islamic Middle East, Islamic societies inherited a pattern of institutions that would shape daily life until the modern age. These institutions included small communities based on family, lineage, clientage, and ethnic ties; agricultural and urban societies, market economies, monotheistic religions, and bureaucratic empires. Along with their political and social characteristics, Islamic societies also inherited many of the religious, literary, and artistic practices of the pre-Islamic past. The civilization of Islam, although initiated in Mecca, also had its precursors in Palestine, Babylon, and Persepolis.

Islamic societies developed in an environment that since the earliest history of mankind had exhibited two fundamental and enduring qualities. The first was the organization of human societies into small, often familial groups. The earliest hunting and gathering communities lived and moved in small bands. Since the advent of agriculture and the domestication of animals, the vast majority of Middle Eastern peoples have lived in agricultural villages or in the tent camps of nomadic pastoralists. Even town peoples were bound into small groups by ties of kinship and neighborhood, with all that implies of strong affections and hatreds. These groups raised the young, arranged marriages, arbitrated disputes, and formed a common front vis-à-vis the outside world.

The second was the creation of unities of culture, religion, and empire on an ever-larger scale. In pre-modern times, this tendency was manifested in the expansion of trade and the acceptance of common decorative styles and religious ideas, but its most important early manifestation was the emergence of the city-state in ancient Mesopotamia (3500 BCE–2400 BCE). The formation of cities in lower Iraq was a revolution in the history of humankind: it brought about the integration of diverse clans, villages, and other small groups into a single community. It led to new cultural and artistic achievements such as the invention of writing, the creation of great works of myth and religion, the construction of architectural masterpieces, and the fashioning of sensuous sculpture.

The first cities developed from the integration of small village communities into temple communities built on shared commitment to the service of the gods. The Sumerians, the people of southern Iraq, believed that the lands they inhabited were the property of the gods and that their primary duty was the construction of a great temple to worship the forces of the universe. The priests who presided over the worship were also judges and “political” chiefs. Moreover, the temple-cities were necessarily communities of economic as well as religious interests. The construction of the great temples required masses of organized workers; their rituals required specialists in administrative,

professional, and artisanal activities. The earliest cities were communities in which religious leaders and religious ideas governed the economic and political affairs of the temples' adherents.

ANCIENT, ROMAN, AND PERSIAN EMPIRES

Beginning about 2400 BCE, the temple-cities of Mesopotamia were superseded by new unifying institutions – kingship and empires. Kingship in ancient Mesopotamia emanated from two sources: the warrior or warlord houses of the ancient Sumerian cities and the tribal peoples of northern Mesopotamia. Between 2700 and 2500 BCE, city kings established ephemeral states among their neighbors. About 2400 BCE, Sargon of Akkad, the chief of pastoral peoples in northern Mesopotamia, founded the first of the world's empires. Sargon's empire soon failed, and the temple-cities temporarily regained their independence. From Sargon to Hammurapi, the great lawgiver (d. 1750 BCE), Mesopotamian empires rose and fell, but each one, although relatively short lived, reinforced the institutions of kingship and of multicity regimes.

Kingship as it developed from Sargon to Hammurapi increasingly assumed a sacred aura. Kings usurped the authority of priests and became the chief servants of the gods. They took over the priestly functions of mediating between the gods and the people. Kingship was justified as the divine plan for the ordering of human societies. Sacralized political power, as well as religion, became a vehicle for the unification of disparate peoples.

The successive empires of this ancient period also established the institutions that would henceforth be the medium for imperial rule. At the center was the ruler's household; the king was surrounded by his family, retainers, soldiers, servants, and palace administrators. Standing armies were founded; feudal grants of land were awarded to loyal retainers. Governors, administrators, and spies were assigned to control cities and provinces.

The superimposition of empires on smaller communities transformed local life and fostered the emergence of social individuality by providing the linguistic, religious, and legal conditions that freed individuals from absorption into clans, temples, and royal households. Temples were reduced to cogs in the imperial machine, and priests lost their judicial and political authority. The empires also intervened in small communities by freeing individuals from their commitments to clans and temples. To defend, administer, and maintain communications across wide territories required some decentralization of authority and greater mobility and autonomy for individuals. Warriors and administrators were assigned land and became independent proprietors. Merchants became entrepreneurs working with their own capital. Craftsmen began to work for the market rather than for the temple or royal household. A market economy emerged to facilitate exchanges among independent producers and consumers and progressively supplanted the older forms of household redistributive economy. The spread of markets and the introduction, by the seventh or sixth century BCE, of money as the medium of exchange transformed the economic structures of the ancient world. For increasing numbers of people, the cash nexus replaced patrimonial authority as the mechanism that regulated the way they earned a living.

Furthermore, the language of the dominant elites became the language of the cosmopolitan elements of the society; the remote and powerful gods of the king and the empire – the gods of the cosmos, organized into a pantheon – superseded the intimate gods of individual localities. Imperial law regulated the distribution of property, economic exchange, and relations between the strong and the weak. Ancient empires, then, not only were political agencies but provided the cultural, religious, and legal bases of society.

For ancient peoples, the empires symbolized the realm of civilization. The function of empires was to defend the civilized world against outsiders, often called barbarians, and to assimilate them into the sphere of higher culture. For their part, the so-called barbarians, mostly nomadic peoples,

wanted to conquer empires, share in their wealth and sophistication, and join the ranks of civilized peoples. Empires commanded allegiance because they were thought to represent civilized peoples. They commanded allegiance because kingship was perceived as a divine institution and the king a divinely selected agent, who – if not himself a god – shared in the aura, magnificence, sacredness, and mystery of the divine. The ruler was God’s agent, his priest, the channel between this world and the heavens, designated by the divine being to bring justice and right order to men so that they might in turn serve God. The king thus assured the prosperity and well being of his subjects. Magically, he upheld the order of the universe against chaos.

From these earliest empires to the eve of the Islamic era, the history of the Middle East may be summarized as the elaboration and expansion of the institutions formed in this early period. While parochial communities and local cultures were a continuing force in Middle Eastern society, empires grew progressively larger, each wave of expansion and contraction bringing new peoples into the sphere of imperial civilization. Empires came and went, but the legacy of interchange of populations – the movement of soldiers, administrators, merchants, priests, scholars, and workers – left a permanent imprint of cosmopolitan culture and a heritage of shared laws, languages, scripts, and social identity.

From Sargon to Hammurapi, Middle Eastern empires were restricted to Mesopotamia, but later Hittite, Kassite, and other “barbarian” empires brought Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and Iran into a common network. The empire of Assyria (911–612 BCE) brought Iraq, western Iran, and, for a time, Egypt into a single state. The Achaemenid Empire (550–331 BCE) incorporated eastern Iran and formed the first universal Middle Eastern empire – the first to include all settled peoples from the Oxus River to the Nile and the Dardanelles.

The Roman Empire

With the destruction of the Achaemenid Empire by Alexander the Great, the Middle East was divided into two empires. In the west, the successor states to the empire of Alexander became part of the Roman Empire. In the east, Iraq and Iran as far as the Oxus River became part of Persian empires – the Parthian Empire (226 BCE–234 CE) and its successor, the Sasanian Empire (234–634 CE).

The Roman Empire encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean basin from Spain in the west to Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt in the east. Rome was its capital, but in the fourth century a second capital was founded at Constantinople. With the fall of Rome to “barbarian” invaders, the remaining provinces, governed from Constantinople, constituted the late Roman or Byzantine Empire and continued to rule the Balkans, Anatolia, Syria, and some of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and North Africa. Its official language until the reign of Heraclius (610–41 CE) was Latin, although the ordinary language of Constantinople was Greek.

The emperor stood at the apex of government, in theory an absolute authority in all matters of state, law, and religion. Considered divine in the pre-Christian era, emperors after Constantine (306–37 CE) were thought to be representatives of God on earth. The ruler maintained the cosmic order and suppressed the evils that come from men.

In practice, emperors were not omnipotent. They were dependent on subordinates to carry out their decisions and were strongly influenced by their families and other aristocrats, advisors, and courtiers. The bureaucracies might not implement their wishes; their subjects might circumvent them. To help make their authority effective, emperors tried to rotate appointments and cultivate patronage networks and popular factions. To enhance their prestige, they sponsored court ceremonies and public festivals and placed their portraits on coins.

The Roman Empire ruled its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious populations through a political machine centered on the emperor, supported by his armies and bureaucratic connections to the cities. Local notables, wealthy and educated landowners, administrators, and lawyers governed the cities.

Cities controlled the land and the taxation of the countryside and supplied a portion of its revenues to the center. A shared Greco-Roman culture linked the elites and provided the rationale for the legitimacy and authority of the empire.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, however, this system was transformed. Professional bureaucrats were replaced by imperial favorites who undermined the civic notables by acquiring large rural estates. Great landed estates and large rural villas were established in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Cilicia, Cyprus, and Asia Minor. The church and its bishops took on ever-larger administrative roles. The new social regime was linked by a Hellenistic Christian – rather than by a Hellenistic pagan – culture.

In Egypt, aristocratic landowning families directly managed some of their estates using peasant labor, leased some to tenants under contract, and used sharecroppers on still other portions of their holdings. As the power of the aristocratic landowners grew, the regional economies declined. Still, a rural bourgeoisie encompassing lower landed gentry, entrepreneurial farmers leasing land, peasant village collectives, and merchants and artisans continued to exist in Egypt and Syria. The peasants and the poor, however, were alienated from the empire and ever more closely attached to their churches. The center was losing power in the periphery.

The consequences of these political and social transformations were marked in the economies and even in the physical appearance of the cities. As town councils lost control over taxes and land, cities lost their classical form. The agoras were turned into churches; the street grid pattern was cluttered with shops; theaters and baths gave way to houses built with enclosed courtyards walled off from the outside world. Churches remained the only public facilities.

The Sasanian Empire

The Sasanian dynasty was founded in 224 CE. The Sasanians grounded their authority in the symbols of ancient Iranian monarchy. Early emperors were considered divine, an echo of Hellenistic and Old Persian ideas of kingship. The themes of Assyrian palace reliefs – the ruler enthroned by the gods, the protector of the fertility of the realm, the heroic warrior – were repeated in Sasanian palaces. Everything from cylinder seals to gardens proclaimed the grandeur of the emperor.

The Sasanian Empire has been described either as a centralized state or as a feudal confederation. In fact, it was a hybrid regime. The power of the Sasanian dynasty was grounded in Iraq and southern Iran, where the state drew its revenues from cities, the taxation of agriculture, land reclamation, and the international Indian Ocean trade. Extraordinary Sasanian development projects – the Nahrwan canal and Diyala basin development, the canalizations of southern Iraq and Khuzistan, the development of Isfahan and the Helmand basin, the fortifications of Ctesiphon, the Darband and the Gorgan walls defending against nomadic invaders – are evidence of a strongly centralized state. Similarly, a hierarchical tax and civil administration, a justice system, an organized Zoroastrian priesthood, and a rigid class hierarchy imply a state with monetary revenues and centralized direction. The power of this regime was manifest in great military victories over the Romans that indicate a large standing army as well as feudal levies.

In Iraq, the state drew its power from the *dibqans* (landowners), soldiers, and courtiers, who manned the Sasanian army and tax administration. They were united by a shared eclectic culture, combining Greek philosophy and medicine, Byzantine architecture, Indian tales, and sports and games such as chess, polo, and hunting. This hybrid culture would flourish again in the ‘Abbasid age.

At the same time, the Sasanian Empire was a confederacy in which the Sasanians, as the Kings of Kings, ruled in conjunction with an aristocracy of Parthian clans. The great Parthian families were subordinate kings or feudal lords, rulers of vast provinces to the north and east of the Iranian plateau – from Azarbaijan to Gilan and Tabaristan to Khurasan – with royal and noble powers