1 The Contemporary Middle East and North Africa

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Any study of the experiences of women in the contemporary MENA region has to consider both the volatile history of this part of the world and the cultural characteristics of the countries in which the Emiratis, Omanis and Saudis who are featured in this book live and work. This chapter begins with a brief description of a period of time that has often been called the 'Golden Age' of Arabic civilisation during the Abbasid Caliphate of 762–1258 CE. This provides a bleak contrast with the economic, political and social challenges that confront the entire MENA region today. Section 1.3 describes these in some detail and also considers the impact of the 2011 Arab Spring on the MENA region and the emergence of fundamentalist Islamic groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS). Drawing on recent reports by the United Nations, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and the world's leading consulting companies, it also examines the economic, political and social status of women in countries in the MENA region. Section 1.4 explores the practical implications of this book for public- and private-sector organisations in the region and describes the economic and business case for improving the economic participation of women in regional labour markets – an issue we return to in greater depth in Chapter 8. It also outlines the broader potential implications of this transformation for the medium- to long-term development of all the national economies of this deeply troubled part of the world.

1.2 THE MENA REGION IN THE PAST

We Arabs used to be at the centre of world culture. We invented mathematics. We were the scholars and scientists. The world used to

turn to Arabia for its knowledge and books. And now look at us. We are the poorest people in the world, backwards, tribal and illiterate. Why? Because we have let ourselves be led around like dogs by our leaders, by thieves. Now, with our revolution, we are saying no. We are saying we are dignified. We are proud.

Anwar Hamady, a Yemeni academic (Fleishman, 2011)

Today, the MENA region consists of nineteen countries, stretching from Morocco on the Atlantic coast of Africa to the borders of India and Pakistan in the East. In 2016, it was home to approximately 350 million people (more than three times the population in 1970) and contained about 20 per cent of the global Islamic population of approximately one billion people. Within this region we find Arabia which was, between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, part of one of the most extensive and advanced civilisations in the world: the Abbasid Caliphate. In 1000 CE, the cities of Baghdad, Cairo and Damascus were major hubs of free trade and international commerce, open markets, technological and industrial innovation and major centres of intellectual enquiry and learning. This region was, by the standards of the time, home to one of the most affluent civilisations in the world, the other being China (Morris, 2011: 331–384). In the words of one scholar of Islamic science:

> Proximity to Indian trade routes, a vibrant multi-ethnic culture and safe distance from the traditional military dangers posed by the Byzantine Greeks helped establish Baghdad for centuries as the world's most prosperous nexus of trade, commerce, and intellectual and scientific exchange … Urban merchants and traders generated the surpluses of cash and leisure time that made the scholarly life possible in the first place. In the division of labour that characterised Arab city life, there was ample room for the thinker, the teacher and the writer
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> *(Lyons, 2010: 60 and 160).*

What is arguably the oldest multi-faculty higher education institution in the world was founded in the ninth century at Fez in Morocco,

and between the ninth and thirteenth centuries the *Bayt al-Hikma* in Baghdad (or, as some Islamic scholars call it, the *Medinat al-Hikma* – 'City of Wisdom') was not only the epicentre of scholarship and research in the Muslim world; it was the leading centre of learning for the entire occidental world at this time. It was supported by generous financial endowments from a succession of Abbasid caliphs and 'it came to comprise a translation bureau, a library and book repository, and an academy of scholars and intellectuals from across the empire' (Lyons, 2010: 63). Here and at other scholarly centres and schools, such as those at the Al Azhar mosque complex in Cairo and at Al Andalus in Spain, many theoretical advances and practical innovations were made in architecture, agriculture and horticulture, algebra, anatomy and medicine, astronomy, cartography, ceramics and glass making, chemistry, economic theory, engineering, mathematics, numerology and optics (including the first known *camera obscura*, later used by Roger Bacon to study solar eclipses) and in psychology and psychotherapy, by the scholars who worked together in what was, by the standards of that time, a generally tolerant, liberal, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment.

While Europeans struggled until at least the twelfth century with the most rudimentary mathematical and philosophical concepts, the Abbasid caliphs who reigned from the eighth to the thirteenth century promoted and encouraged an open, enquiring and more rationalistic version of Islam. The ideas of earlier Persian, Roman, Egyptian and Hindu scholars (particularly their numerical system which we know today as 'Arabic' numerals), as well as the works of Aristotle, Archimedes, Euclid, Galen, Hippocrates, Plato, Ptolemy, Pythagoras and many others were retrieved, recorded, studied and further developed by the Islamic and Nestorian Christian *ulama* [1] who worked at the *Bayt al-Hikma*, while Europe endured the Dark Ages following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century CE. Muslim scientists, such as Avicenna and Averroes, were mapping the heavens and wondering about the origins of the cosmos, while their European contemporaries could only gaze at the complex

movements of the solar system and the stars with little more than baffled bewilderment. More than 100 of the most visible stars in the night sky owe their names to astronomers from this time.

Astronomy is just one example of the enormous debt that Europe owed to Islamic proto-science. Many scientific and mathematical words that we now take for granted can be traced back to this time, including *alchemy, algebra, alcohol, alkali, azimuth, elixir, sine, zenith* and *zero* (al-Khalili, 2012: 241). The dissemination of this knowledge was increased exponentially by using a revolutionary new writing material called paper – invented by the Chinese between the second and third centuries BCE. Without the dissemination of the accumulated knowledge of the *Bayt al-Hikma*, as several scholars have recently demonstrated, the later innovative work of luminaries such as Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler or Galileo might never have happened, and there may have been no European Renaissance ('rebirth') during the sixteenth century and, later, an industrial revolution in England in the mid- to late eighteenth century (al-Khalili, 2012; Lyons, 2010; Masood, 2009; Saliba, 2007).

The destruction of Baghdad and the *Bayt al-Hikma* in 1258 by the Mongol warlord Hulagu Khan marked the end of what is now widely recognised as the Golden Period of the Arabic civilisation and Islamic proto-science, and as increasingly conservative and otherworldly rulers and *imams* came to dominate the different regions of the Caliphate, support and sponsorship for scholarly and scientific pursuits declined markedly during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, the knowledge generated at the *Bayt al-Hikma* and other centres of learning in the Caliphate would soon find fertile ground in which to germinate and grow in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, particularly after the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (Diner, 2009: 71–95). The eventual triumph of the more strict and doctrinaire caliphs that superseded the Abbasid rulers of the thirteenth century meant that very few rulers in the MENA region re-embraced the proto-science their predecessors had pioneered and simply ignored many of the new

technologies generated by the first industrial revolution in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until it was too late (al-Hassan, 1996; al-Khalili, 2012). Furthermore, even in the extensive and long-lasting Ottoman Empire, its rulers failed to understand the economic and military threat posed by the new European powers that began to emerge during the eighteenth century until it had become far too late to counter their global military and economic expansion during the nineteenth century; as a result, the Ottoman Empire was 'gradually overtaken by the dynamism of Europe' (Rogan, 2015: xviii).

Hence, when Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, 'he might almost have come from Mars', so great was the economic and technological gulf between the emerging European powers and the countries of the MENA region; and 'by the time that Sadik Rifat Pasha, the Ottoman ambassador to Vienna warned that the Europeans were flourishing thanks to a combination of science, technology and, "the necessary rights of freedom", it was already too late' (Ferris, 2010: 268). By 1920, all of the MENA region was either directly controlled or encircled by European imperial powers, and by the middle of the twentieth century, the discovery of oil in several locations ensured that many of those would be drawn into the political and military affairs of the region from that time to the present day (Diner, 2009; Saliba, 2007).[2] And, as Ferris has observed, those states that possessed oil (and gas) wealth were transformed from small fishing, herding and trading communities 'into economically more vertical societies where the few who controlled the oil became rich and the rest stayed poor. Such inequities were offensive to Islam – which, like Christianity had originated a religion centred on the poor and devoted to social justice – but the attempts of Muslim leaders to redress them by resorting to wealth distribution through state socialism failed' (Ferris, 2010: 269).

It would be fairer to say that this strategy has 'largely failed', because while it has led to rapid GDP growth, extensive infrastructure development and some economic diversification over the past thirty years, we will see in subsequent chapters that it is no longer a

sustainable medium- to long-term strategy for any country in the Gulf States and the broader MENA region. We return to look at the lessons that can be learned from this 'Golden Age' of Arabic trade, culture and learning for the future of the region and the prospects for the millions of women who live there at the end of Chapter 9 and in the Postscript to the book.

1.3 THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES FACING THE MENA REGION TODAY

The problem of modern Islam, in a nutshell, is that we are totally dependent on the West – for our dishwashers, our clothes, our cars, our education, everything. It is humiliating and every Muslim feels it. We were once the most sophisticated civilisation in the world. Now we are backward. We can't even fight our wars without using our enemies' weapons.

Omar Nasiri, a former Moroccan *jihadist* (Ferris, 2010: 272)

Making the leap from the thirteenth century to the second decade of the current century, we find that the MENA region, overall, lags behind most of the rest of the world on many key metrics and indicators of economic, political, social, scientific and educational development, even though many countries in this region have benefitted greatly from the wealth derived from their oil and gas industries over the past half century. These metrics and indicators include:

- The low average per-capita income growth for the citizens of most countries in the MENA region over the past five decades, combined with a marked concentration of wealth among the ruling political elites of all countries in the region (*The Economist*, 2016e, 2014a and 2013; United Nations, 2015a, 2009, 2005 and 2004).
- Endemic national, civil, ethnic and religious conflicts in every Muslim country in the MENA region. In 2016, the most notable examples of this were Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen, with growing civil unrest in several other countries such as Lebanon, Oman and even the KSA. Some 10 million people have been rendered homeless by these conflicts and more than 230,000 have been killed (including

at least 30,000 children). About two million people have fled these conflict zones, and this, in turn, has led to a major refugee crisis in several North African countries and the European Union.

The prevalence of autocratic governments and non-democratic political systems across the entire MENA region. Countries in this region are also characterised by the lowest political freedom scores of any region of the world, as measured by the existence of participative and open political processes, accountable and equitable legal systems, freedom of speech and expression of thought, independent news media and unrestricted Internet access, and established political rights and freedoms such as the right to vote in transparent democratic elections and the freedom to take part in civil activism (Freedom House, 2016b; Human Rights Watch, 2015; United Nations, 2009, 2005 and 2004).

A notable lack of legal accountability, transparency and governance standards among the ruling political and business elites of many countries in the MENA region, as well as high levels of corruption and fraud. For example, of the 19 countries in the MENA region just 2 were ranked in the top 50 'least corrupt' countries in the world in 2016 (Bahrain and the UAE), and 84 per cent were ranked in the top 50 of 175 countries in Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index. Only six countries in the region had scores above 50/100; anything below this score and corruption is deemed to be 'a serious problem' (Transparency International, 2016).

Even the most stable countries in the region – primarily those that have benefitted greatly from an abundance of oil and gas, such as the UAE, Oman, the KSA, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain – have not yet built economies or stable political and civic institutions that would survive for long if their natural resource pipelines were switched off tomorrow. It is true, however, that the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have all made efforts to use their resource wealth to begin the long process of building more diversified, knowledge-based economies, and a handful of their largest companies are internationally competitive (Hertog, 2010a; Hvidt, 2013).

Other indicators of regional under-development include the comparatively low amount of capital spent on research and development (R&D) in both basic and applied scientific research in the region. In 2013, the fifty-seven member countries of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference invested just 0.81 per cent of their combined annual GDPs on R&D. The Muslim world as a whole spends less than 0.5 per cent of their cumulative GDP on R&D, compared to an average of about 5 per cent in countries affiliated with the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). In the MENA region, Israel is the clear leader, spending about 4.4 per cent of its GDP on R&D and invests a significant proportion of this in research at its national universities. In addition, countries in the MENA region have fewer than 10 scientists, engineers and technicians per 1,000 people, compared to an average of 40 in emerging economies and 140 per 1,000 in the industrialised world (*The Economist*, 2014a and 2014b; al-Khalili, 2012: 283). There are a few signs of increased spending on scientific research in a few countries, albeit from a very low base. Qatar, for example, increased annual funding on R&D from 0.8 per cent of GDP to 2.8 per cent in the early 2010s. Turkey, which is not part of the MENA region but is a predominantly Islamic country, increased its funding by an average of 10 per cent a year from 2005 to 2010, and its output of scientific papers rose from 5,000 to 22,000 a year between 2002 and 2009. Moreover, countries in the MENA region register very few scientific or industrial patents – approximately one per million of their population each year. In 2013, the ratio was 77.6 per million in Canada and 123.2 per million in Singapore (*The Economist*, 2014a and 2013b).

The 2005 United Nations Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) had noted that the entire MENA region imported fewer scientific and academic books than the United Kingdom alone imported in 2004, and Cambridge University Press published more academic books that year than the *entire* MENA region (United Nations 2005: 34). In 2012, Harvard University alone produced more scientific papers than the combined output of all the

universities in seventeen Muslim countries in this region (*The Economist*, 2013b); a situation that was largely unchanged from both the early 2000s (*The Economist*, 2002) and the mid-1990s (Segal, 1996). Between them, universities in the MENA region – excluding Israel – contribute less than 1 per cent of the world's published scientific papers (*The Economist*, 2014a: 9). Furthermore, while the MENA region has produced just 3 Nobel Laureates in Science since 1901 there have been 193 Jewish Nobel Laureates (out of a total of 855 honourees) and a single Cambridge College (Trinity) has produced 32 Nobel Laureates during this period of time (Jewish Virtual Library, 2015).

It is also evident that there are very few elite, world-class universities in the MENA region. There were, for example, only five universities in the entire MENA region ranked in the Times Higher Education and Webometrics top 500 global universities in 2016 and 2015, and four of those were in Israel (Times Higher Education, 2016 and 2015; Webometrics, 2015). An examination of the distribution of world-class universities by country of origin reveals a similar picture: the United States has 142 universities ranked in the top 500, followed by China and Germany with 40 each, the United Kingdom with 34, Spain with 27, Canada with 24 and Australia with 16. The nineteen countries of the MENA region, excluding Israel, had just one university ranked in the global top 500 in 2016 and 2015. There are more than 1,000 universities in the MENA region, with the highest-ranked ones being the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, and both are in the Times Higher Education and Webometrics top 300. Israel is also the highest-ranked regional nation-state, with four universities ranked in the top 500. Saudi Arabia, with approximately fifty accredited universities and colleges of further education, was the only Arabic country that had a university ranked in either the Times Higher Education or the Webometrics top 500 global universities in 2016 and 2015, the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (Times Higher Education, 2016 and 2015; Webometrics, 2015). However, with this single

> exception, the higher education (HE) sector of the predominantly Muslim countries of the MENA region is notable primarily for the absence of world-class universities (Forster, 2017).

In addition to these metrics and indicators, the low economic, political, educational and legal status (EPELS) of women in MENA countries has been extensively documented. Globally, only Sub-Saharan Africa countries have a lower EPELS score than Middle Eastern countries on measures of the participation of women in political, economic, professional and social activities and their legal and social rights. These gaps have been and remain particularly acute for millions of uneducated women in the region (Kelly and Breslin, 2014; United Nations, 2016 and 2015a: 107–116; United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2014a; World Economic Forum, 2015b). In the political domain, for example, even in those countries that have held political 'elections' of some description over the past twenty years, less than 10 per cent of those elected were women. 'Women in power', the United Nations AHDR noted in 2005, 'are often selected from the ranks of the elite or appointed from the ruling party as window-dressing for the ruling regime.' And efforts to address this deficit 'have often been limited to cosmetic empowerment in the sense of enabling notable women to occupy leadership positions in the structure of the existing regime without extending empowerment to the broad base of women; a process that automatically entails the empowerment of all citizens' (United Nations, 2005: 9 and 51). This report also noted that:

> The traditional view that the man is the breadwinner blocks the employment of women and contributes to an increase in women's employment relative to men. Women thus encounter significant obstacles outside family life that reduce their potential. Most limiting of these are the terms and conditions of work: women do not enjoy equality of opportunity with men in job opportunities, conditions, or wages; yet alone in promotion to decision-making positions
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> *(United Nations, 2005: 8).*