Introduction

The Middle East is often regarded as an ‘exceptional’ region where democracy and democratization struggle to take hold. In the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratization, new democracies emerged in all the regions of the world, with the exception of the Middle East. Of all the global regions, the Middle East has the least number of democracies (Israel and Turkey only) and shows no signs of a shift away from authoritarianism toward democratization either (see Lust-Okar 2003; Weiffen 2004; Resul 2004; Carothers & Ottaway 2005; Hinnebusch 2006; Perthes 2008).

For this reason, the Middle East has gained a lot of scholarly attention in recent years. The lack of democracy, the persistence of authoritarian regimes and the radicalization of political Islam in the region gives rise to the question, what are the causes and conditions of authoritarian persistence and the lack of democracy in the countries of the Muslim Middle East? In fact, there are extensive debates on and various approaches to the causes and conditions of democratization that provide insight into the factors that facilitate and impede democracy in the Middle East.

Samuel Huntington perceives the phenomenon of Islam as a characteristic of the inevitable “clash of civilizations,” according to which conflicts and threats to global peace and security in the twenty-first century will be carried out along “civilizational fault lines.” His concept of a “clash of civilizations” originated in Bernard Lewis’s work ‘The Roots of Muslim Rage’ (1990). Huntington brings Lewis’s construct to the global level by arguing that humanity is divided among internally homogeneous civilizations. In his popularly cited article
from 1993, Huntington predicts that the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold War world will not be primarily ideological or economic, but rather that “the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.” Moreover, whereas international conflicts of the past involved alliances of nations adhering to one political ideology against an alliance of other nations with an opposing ideology, Huntington suggests that future world conflicts will not be carried out between ideological blocks but between “civilizations.” He anticipates a twenty-first century in which the revolutionary impact of globalization induces irrational violence along axes of religious values on which the “orientalism” of Lewis is based. Huntington shares Lewis’s opinion that religious values are at the heart of human civilizations, and he applies it universally. “The clash of civilizations will be the battle lines of the future,” he contends. His approach treats “Confucianism,” “Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” “Islam,” and “Western culture” as distinct cultural unities that are often played off against each other.

Cultural-essentialists like Huntington (see also Patai 1983; Kedourie 1992; Weiffen 2004) render the Muslim countries of the Middle East as a culturally exceptional region with strong aversions to development and democracy. In ‘The Arab Mind’, Raphael Patai (Ibid.) depicts Islamic culture as primitive, violent and irrational and the outcome of backward peoples with fanatical psyches. Some scholars correlate the region’s political history with Islamic culture, assuming that Oriental despotism is inherent to the political traditions of the Arab world. These culturalist arguments suggest that Islam is not compatible with democracy as it rejects the notion of the nation-state and the separation of state and religion. Lewis (2002) in ‘What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East’, for example, asserts that the region’s emersion in a cultural milieu is antithetical to modernity and its various accompaniments and has crippled the Middle East on its path to democratization. Elie Kedourie (1992) in ‘Democracy and Arab Political Culture’ considers Islam, Oriental despotism, clientelism, patriarchalism and patrimonialism part of the Arab culture

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1 It was published later as a book: “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” (Huntington 1996)


3 See, for an interesting criticism on cultural essentialist scholars: Kamrava (2007).