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Author(s): Nikki R. Keddie

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Nikki R. Keddie

IS THERE A MIDDLE EAST?

The Middle East, as a geographical term, is generally used today to cover the area stretching from Morocco through Afghanistan, and is roughly equivalent to the area of the first wave of Muslim conquests plus Anatolia. It is a predominantly Muslim area with widespread semi-arid and desert conditions where agriculture is heavily dependent on irrigation and pastoral nomadism has been prevalent. With the twentieth-century rise of exclusive linguistic nationalisms, which have taken over many of the emotional overtones formerly concentrated on religious loyalties, it becomes increasingly doubtful that the Middle East is now much more than a geographical expression – covering an area whose inhabitants respond to very different loyalties and values. In Turkey since the days of Atatürk, the ruling and educated élites have gone out of their way to express their identification with Europe and the West and to turn their backs on their traditional Islamic heritage. A glorification of the ‘modern’ and populist elements in the ancient Turkish and Ottoman past has gone along with a downgrading of Arab and Persian cultural influences – indeed the latter are often seen as having corrupted the pure Turkish essence, which only re-emerged with Atatürk’s sweeping cultural reforms. Similarly the Iranians are increasingly emulating the technocratic and rationalizing values of the capitalist West, and in the cultural sphere identify with the glorious civilization of pre-Islamic Iran. This identification goes along with a downgrading of Islam and particularly of the Arabs, which has characterized both radical nationalists like the late nineteenth-century Mîrzâ Âqâ Khân Kirmânî and the twentieth-century Ahmad Kasravî¹ and more conservative official nationalists such as the Pahlavi Shahs and their followers. The recent celebrations of the 2500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy, for example, were notable for their virtual exclusion of the Muslim ulama, though religious leaders of other religions were invited, and their lack of specifically Islamic references. In both Iran and Turkey, traditional Islam has become largely a class phenomenon, with the traditional religion followed by a majority of the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie, but rejected or radically modified by the more educated classes. With the continued spread of Western-style secular education it may be expected that the numbers of

¹ On these men in English see Mangol Bayat Philipp, ‘Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani: Nineteenth Century Persian Revolutionary Thinker’ (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, Los Angeles, 1971), and Ervand Abrahamian, ‘Kasravi: The Integrative Nationalist of Iran’, *Middle Eastern Studies* (forthcoming).

people identifying with nationalism and with the West (or with the Communist rather than the Islamic East) will grow.

When laymen speak of the Middle East today they are often really thinking of the Arab world, which covers the majority of the Middle East's territory. Here alone in the Middle East a nationalist identification with the glorious past implies not a break with Islam, but rather a reassessment of it as a quint-essentially Arab religion. Ironically, if we speak of birth, discounting personal disbelief, there are more non-Muslims in the Arab world than in Iran, while a non-Muslim Turk in Turkey is a virtual impossibility. Yet we find many Christian Arab intellectuals extolling the virtues of Muhammad, the early pious caliphs, and Islam, while nominally Muslim Turks and Iranians speak instead of the stifling influence on their national essence of traditional Islamic institutions. Within the Middle East only in the Arab world did Islamic reformism become and remain a truly major intellectual current; and this is largely because a reformation was and often still is sought within the Arab-Muslim complex. In Turkey and Iran, after a brief life among some late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century intellectuals, Islamic reformism became the concern of limited circles of the *ulama*, while the advanced intellectuals turned to more secular ideas. None of this should be surprising in view of the universal tendency of linguistic nationalists, East and West, to read modern values into the ancient heroes of their own language. For the Iranians and Turks these heroes are either pre-Islamic or de-Islamicized in favor of their 'national' essence, while for the Arabs, Muslim or not, the most dramatic early heroes are Muhammad, the four pious caliphs who succeeded him, and their associates. Islam and nationalism thus blur together in the most publicized ideologies of the Arab world, however many non-Muslims and private skeptics there may be among the Arabs. Yet even the Arabs scarcely uphold the idea of an integrated Middle East going beyond the Arab world; if Turkish and Persian intellectuals despise the Arabs for corrupting their own superior national essence, many Arabs return the compliment by blaming their own decline on Ottoman Turkish rule. In their foreign and domestic policies as much as in their cultural attitudes the nations of the Middle East present more variety than unity; in these two areas even within the Arab world there exists a vast divergence of approaches and policies only slightly bridged by some uniformity in hostility, but not in policy, towards Israel.

Thus, since the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of secular nationalist governments after World War I, the Middle East has become largely a geographical expression for countries whose current orientations show more diversity than unity. The lay notion that the Middle East is somehow coterminous with the Muslim world is the farthest of all from reality – not only are the three biggest Muslim nations outside the Middle East – Indonesia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh – but even ignoring these three nations there are more Muslims outside the Middle East – chiefly in the Soviet Union, China, India,

and Africa – than in it. It is mainly the rough approximation of Middle Eastern borders to those of the first wave of Muslim conquest that gives the Middle East, as distinct from its Arab component, a special place in the history and culture of Islam.

It should be remembered that both ‘the Middle East’ and the ‘Near East’ are concepts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Westerners, and that they began in strategic circles, and only from there spread to scholarly ones, first in the West and then, to a far lesser degree, in the Middle East itself.¹ Beyond the convenience of time-honored usage, what may be said in favor of the concept of the Middle East as a real historical entity? It seems there are two major points in its favor. (1) Historical: the area very roughly coincides not only with the first wave of the Arab invasions, but with the three largest Muslim empires – the Umayyads, the early Abbasids, and the Ottomans. (2) Geographical: as noted above, it is a semi-arid area characterized by irrigation agriculture and pastoral nomadism. It is partially cut off by mountains or deserts from sub-Saharan Africa and the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. The borders with Soviet Muslim territories are more political than natural, however. There is also a cultural element: being part of Islamic civilization is a necessary though not sufficient condition of being part of the Middle East.

Once these positive points are granted, however, it should still be remembered that the Middle East is a somewhat artificial nineteenth-century abstraction, which for many purposes may not be especially relevant. Its limitations for current political understanding have already been noted, and it also has limitations for earlier periods. For pre-Islamic times the Middle East as defined by its current borders has no meaning. Such entities as Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, the Persian Empire, the area of Hellenistic influences, the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean lands, and the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires are all more meaningful. If one wanted a smaller number of entities, ‘Egypt and the Fertile Crescent’ for the earlier period and the Mediterranean lands for the later period would probably have best claim to choice. For the Islamic period, the actual borders of the great empires had more meaning than ‘the Middle East’ as defined today, while if a larger entity were to be sought it would have to be the Muslim world, *Dar al-Islam*, rather than any part of it. Cutting off the Middle East from the rest of the Muslim world in the teaching of courses often results in the neglect of major Muslim influences from outside the Middle East upon the Middle East – as in the spread into the Middle East of some major Sufi brotherhoods from India and Central Asia and the influence of Indian pre-nineteenth-century Islamic reformism on the Middle East. For some purposes the relatively Eastern Muslim world – Iran, Central Asia, and India – forms a unit, with its use of Persian as the language of court and culture, its permeation by Persian cultural models, and its preservation of Muslim

¹ See especially Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1964), pp. 9–10.

philosophy, as contrasted to the virtual obliteration of Hellenic philosophy in the Western Muslim world. Concentration on the Middle East, or more specifically on its Arab component, often results in regarding the whole period between the eleventh century and the nineteenth as one of decline, whereas later centuries saw major new developments both within the Middle East – in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires – and outside, in the Moghul Empire and the new Islamic syntheses that took place in Indonesia, Central Asia, and Africa. If it is true that the Muslim world is too unwieldy a unit for most ordinary mortal scholars to deal with, it should nonetheless not be forgotten that it is this unit rather than the Middle East that would have had meaning for its inhabitants in the past. On the other hand, as noted below, the Muslim world itself has serious difficulties as a political, economic, and social entity.

THE MIDDLE EAST FROM 1500 TO 1917: THE CASE OF IRAN

To proceed to a more specific discussion of the pitfalls of the concept Middle East: for the period *c.* 1500–1917, the Middle East within the borders stated above comprised the Asian and African parts of the Ottoman Empire plus Morocco, Iran, and Afghanistan. It is legitimate to ask whether this forms a meaningful unit for that period. In a fine paper, Edmund Burke III has argued that Morocco in this period differed fundamentally from the Ottoman Empire, being characterized by a tribal-based politics, a very limited role for the central government, an absence of large areas of settled agriculture, and a religious synthesis heavily based on popular religion.¹ For Afghanistan the case would seem equally clear – not even bordering on the Ottoman Empire, and having an almost completely tribal rather than bureaucratic structure, Afghanistan had more affinity to Eastern Iran, Central Asia, and Northwest Pakistan than to the Ottoman Empire, especially its settled and bureaucratized core.

The main purpose of this essay is to examine in some detail the case of Iran 1500–1917, to see if it constituted part of a meaningful entity called the Middle East, and, if not, to say what were some of the main differences between it and the Ottoman Empire.

First, it should be noted that any idea that they formed part of the same entity would have been more shocking to Iranians and Ottomans than such a notion is to the Persians, Turks, and Arabs of today. For the Persians and the Ottomans were bitter religious and military enemies who repeatedly fought over both doctrine and territory. From a modern Western viewpoint it is easy to see (Persian) Shi'ism and (Ottoman) Sunnism as two schools of a single Islamic religion, but to sixteenth-century Persians and Ottomans the doctrine of the other side was heresy – a culpable distortion of the will of God as conveyed by the Prophet, and more to be reviled than the errors of non-Muslim monotheists.

¹ Edmund Burke, 'Morocco and the Near East: Reflections on some basic differences', *Archiv. europ. sociol.* vol. x (1969), pp. 70–94.

The first royal act of Shah Ismâ'îl, founder of the Safavid dynasty, which established the Shi'ism of his realm, was to institute the public cursing of the first three caliphs – an act that could only appear as monstrous in Sunni and Ottoman eyes. The extermination of thousands of Shi'is early in the sixteenth century by Sultan Selim I had some counterpart in the forcible suppression of Sunnism in Safavid territory. Whereas earlier Sunni and Shi'i rulers had frequently tolerated those of the opposite school within their own territory, the Safavids and Ottomans were largely intolerant. Their rulers reviled each other for their heretical beliefs, and also waged a long and indecisive series of wars, motivated not only by doctrinal differences but equally by the desire to control rich territories lying in the borderlands of the two empires.

If attitudes towards each others' religious beliefs make it difficult for us to regard the Ottomans and the Iranians as belonging to a single entity, there is also some differentiation between the two peoples based on their organization of religious life. The clearly ranked and recorded hierarchy of the Ottoman ulama was not characteristic of the Iranian ulama. The early Safavids made some attempt at creating and ranking an officially recognized ulama, but this was gradually superseded by a far less formal system in which an alim's power and prestige were based on his following and his reputation for sanctity and learning – categories that fit into no clearly demarcated hierarchy. In Iran also the ulama were a stronger, more influential, and wealthier class than their Ottoman counterparts, having an independent power that grew until World War I, instead of declining in the course of the nineteenth century as it did in the Ottoman Empire. The objectively nationalist and anti-autocratic role of the Iranian ulama also distinguish them from their Ottoman counterparts. Many of them led the 1891 movement against a British tobacco monopoly and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11.¹

Culturally there was also a gap between the Ottomans and the Safavids. Although both revered the high Persian culture of the past, Safavid culture developed on independent lines, with its highly artificial and ornamental *sabk-i hindî*, 'Indian style' in poetry, its encouragement of Shi'i theological treatises, and its continued development of neo-Platonic philosophy, which in the Safavid period expressed a combination of rationalism, mysticism, and Shi'ism. This written culture interacted very little with that of the Ottomans. Only in the fine arts, particularly miniature painting, was there a similarity of styles.

Fundamental was the gap between the Ottoman and Iranian political and economic systems for most of the period under discussion. Iran's mountainous

¹ Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran 1785–1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period*; Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891–1892*, and 'The Roots of the Ulama's Power in Modern Iran', in Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972); and Ann K. S. Lambton, 'The Persian 'Ulamâ and constitutional reform', *Le Shi'ism Imâmite* (Paris, 1970), pp. 245–69.

and arid topography encouraged the expansion of tribal nomadism, and it has been estimated that nomadic tribes made up as much as half of Iran's population at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Like virtually all of Iran's rulers since the Seljuks, both the Safavid and the Qajar dynasties came to power at the head of tribal contingents, and the various rulers of the eighteenth century were of tribal origin and similarly relied upon tribal backing. Tribal contingents were the most important element in Iran's military forces for most of the period under discussion, whereas the Ottomans were able to build up both a formidable centralized military force and a largely non-tribal feudal cavalry. The attempts of the greatest Safavid ruler, Shah 'Abbās, to build up a slave force modelled on the Ottoman janissaries were partially successful, but the Iranian government had centralized military forces for a much shorter time, and of a much inferior efficiency, than their Ottoman counterparts. In the nineteenth century the gap between the Iranian and Ottoman military systems became greater than ever before. Ottoman reform efforts began with military reform and continued in that field, whereas nineteenth-century Iranian efforts at military reform were almost totally abortive.

The preponderance of nomadic tribes in Iran colored the whole political and economic system of the country. There existed a type of 'tribal feudalism' in which tribal leaders were virtually autonomous over large areas, while their relations to the central government were confined to the payment of a lump sum in taxes and the (sometimes doubtful) provision of cavalry in case of need. Tribal revolts and virtual independence for many tribes were frequent. For long periods the political organization of Iran somewhat resembled the segmentary structure within tribes, with the national ruler appearing as a balancer of different interests, a man who worked to 'divide and rule' and to keep any one segment of society from becoming too powerful rather than as an active controller of the social segments under him. In its heavily tribal and segmentary politics, Iran frequently resembled Morocco more than it did the neighboring Ottoman Empire.² (On the other hand, the strength of the official religion and of settled agriculture differentiate Iran from Morocco.) Both the Safavids and Qajars made efforts to build up a rationalized centralized bureaucracy, but they never approached the early or nineteenth-century Ottomans in rationality or organization, division of functions, or efficiency of tax collection. Only in the period of Ottoman decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did governmental disorganization at all resemble that of the Persians, and even here it was nothing like as extreme as the total disintegration and nearly constant civil war that characterized the Iranian eighteenth century. The main point is not that the Ottomans were superior organizers, although they may have been, but that, despite the large size of the Ottoman Empire, they had a more

¹ Charles Issawi, *The Economic History of Iran 1800-1914* (Chicago, 1971), p. 20.

² On Morocco see Burke, *op. cit.*, and John Waterbury, *The Commander of the Faithful: The Moroccan Political Elite - A Study in Segmented Politics* (New York, 1970).

organizable territory to deal with. The predominance of a settled agricultural population and the accessibility of the central portions of the Empire made it possible to rule directly over a large and revenue-producing population, while more distant areas could be ruled indirectly or limited to tribute relationships without threatening the total disorganization of the Empire. Tribal populations in peripheral areas of the Empire, or even in Anatolia itself, could not predominate over the settled element as they so often did in Iran. The Ottoman Empire at its height was far more rationally and hierarchically organized than the Safavid Empire, and Ottoman reform in the nineteenth century again carried rational organization to a much higher level than anything achieved in Iran in the same period. However limited the success of Ottoman reform before Atatürk, it greatly outdistanced the feeble Iranian efforts at reform.

If the Ottomans and Safavids at their height display a picture of deep religious and political enmity and very different modes of political and economic organization, the contrast between Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century is even greater. While direct enmity declined, except for some unpleasant incidents at the Shi'i holy cities in Ottoman Iraq and some tribal and other conflicts in the border area, the difference in development between Iran and the Ottoman Empire is striking. There is a superficial similarity, in that both Iran and the central portions of the Ottoman Empire were reunified at the beginning of this period – Iran in the last years of the eighteenth century and the Ottoman Empire in the early nineteenth. In Iran, however, the reunification was of an almost purely traditional sort, with the Shah playing a delicate balancing game of divide and rule, and treating Iran almost as a tribal territory, whose major subdivisions were ruled by members of his own family. In the Ottoman Empire modernization was the key to reunification, modernization first and foremost of military forces, and then of the bureaucracy and the top strata of society. This difference was due partly to the lack of a Persian centralized tradition for either army or bureaucracy, partly to longer and greater Ottoman contacts with the West, partly to the presence of more powerful reformers in the Ottoman Empire, and most of all to the fact that change was forced upon the Ottomans and not upon the Persians. The Ottomans began to lose territory to Western powers in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, and from the time of the accession of Sultan Selim III in 1789 Ottoman rulers worked toward creating a modernized military force. The urgent necessity of such a force was demonstrated by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, by the unruliness of virtually autonomous notables within the empire, by the rise of Balkan nationalist movements, and especially by the *de facto* independence of Muḥammad 'Alī in Egypt, his conquest of Syria, and his twice repeated threat to Anatolia and the capital itself. The relatively timid but pioneering military reformism of Selim III was followed by the well-prepared and successful military reforms of Mahmud II, beginning with a decisive break with the past in the destruction of the Janissaries in 1826. From then on military

reform, centralization, the construction of a modernized bureaucracy, and the ending of feudal land grants proceeded apace. In Egypt, which became autonomous in the nineteenth century, the break with the past was at least as dramatic. Here the stage was set by the Napoleonic invasion, which weakened both the Ottomans in Egypt and the Mamluk rulers and set the stage for the destruction of the Mamluks by the military leader Muḥammad ‘Alī and for his building up of a modernized army and partly modernized bureaucracy.

In Iran contact with the West was far smaller than in Istanbul or Egypt, and the pressures for modernization were far less. In the early nineteenth century this difference was not so clear, as war with Russia brought in British and French military missions which began to train Iranian soldiers in modern ways. After the loss of territory to Russia in the two treaties of 1813 and 1826, however, serious pressure was not felt again, and both Great Britain and Russia wanted to maintain and control Iran as a buffer state between their territories. Serious efforts at military reform were confined to Crown Prince ‘Abbās Mīrzā in the first third of the nineteenth century within his own province of Azerbaijan. It is probably no accident that this reformer was located on the Russian border where, more than anywhere else, the need for military modernization might be felt. ‘Abbās Mīrzā’s premature death in 1833, before he could come to the throne, left Iran without another serious military reformer. His father, Fath ‘Alī Shah, had not tried to spread ‘Abbās Mīrzā’s reforms to the central army, while the succeeding Shahs, Muhammad Shāh (1834–48), Nāsir ad-Dīn Shāh (1848–96) and Muzaffar ad-Dīn Shāh (1896–1907) took only half-hearted measures to modernize the army. One reason for the early success of civilian protest in the Persian Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 was the lack of a regular military force, outside the small Russian-officered Cossack Brigade, that could be effective against widespread protest. In the Ottoman Empire the Young Turk movement of 1908 depended upon adherents within a relatively strong army for its success.

Bureaucratic reforms were similarly limited in nineteenth-century Iran. Throughout the whole period until the Constitutional Revolution, virtually all offices and tax-collecting positions within Iran were up for sale, being farmed out at a kind of yearly auction. Some important offices were reserved for members of the royal family, but even these were paid for by annual gifts. Salaries for offices were low or non-existent, and each office holder was expected to recoup himself and make as much as he could by getting as much as possible from those on the level below him. Virtually all the expenses of this onerous system were borne by the ordinary peasant, artisan, or tribesman, while the government officials, landlords, and merchants were virtually untaxed. The word ‘bribery’ almost lost its meaning where almost everything within the government was looked upon as an opportunity for personal profit and was up for sale, so it should be no surprise that justice was similarly sold in many cases. Some protection for those at the bottom of the scale was found in guilds, village and

tribal councils, and appeals to the ulama, but in general the lower classes were fleeced without the forms of legality and rationality that characterized nineteenth-century bourgeois society. In the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire bribery and corruption were widespread, but there were at least major moves in the direction of re-establishing a centralized, salaried bureaucracy which would have loyalty to the central government. Tax reforms and at least rudimentary attempts at scientific assessment made taxation more rational, although not necessarily less oppressive.

Ministries in nineteenth-century Iran generally met wherever the minister happened to be, and there was no clearly defined hierarchy of officials below the minister. The minister regarded all the papers of his office as his personal property, and kept them with him when he was dismissed. There was rarely a functioning cabinet system, although some attempts were made to introduce it under Nâsir ad-Dîn. In all these respects Iran remained pre-modern, and contrasted with the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.¹

The role of the ulama was also very different in Iran than in the Ottoman Empire, where they did not effectively protest against secularizing reforms, or in Egypt, where after a brief 'Golden Age' of power following the French Occupation they were again brought to heel under Muḥammad 'Alî and his successors. In Iran the ulama helped block efforts at reform made by such reforming chief ministers as Amîr Kabîr in mid-century, Mîrzâ Husain Khân in the 1870s, and Amîn ad-Dauleh in 1897. In Iran the ulama were much more powerful than they were elsewhere in the Middle East. This was partly due to their greater financial collections and to the location of their leadership outside the borders of Iran and away from the power of the Shah, but it was also due to the weak, unreformed, decentralized nature of the Iranian government which prevented that government from standing up to an ulama that had public opinion largely behind it.² Secularizing reforms were almost non-existent in Iran. Unlike the Ottoman Empire, *waqfs* were not seriously controlled by the government. The ulama retained their control over the law courts and education – unlike Turkey and Egypt, there were almost no secular schools before the reign of Muzaffar ad-Dîn Shâh, which began in 1896. Before that there was only the Dar al-Funûn in Tehran, begun by Amîr Kabîr and educating boys of secondary school age for military and civil service careers, and two smaller schools of the same type, in Tabriz and Isfahan. The Ottoman Empire and Egypt, by contrast,

¹ See especially George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, vol. 1 (London, 1892), chaps. XIII–XV; for a more positive view of reforms see Hafez Farman Farmayan, 'The Forces of Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Iran: A Historical Survey', in William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (eds.), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1968); on Turkey see Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London, 1961), and Roderic H. Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire 1856–1876* (Princeton, 1963); and on Egypt P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (London, 1969).

² Algar, *op. cit.*

had a small but vital and growing network of Western style schools going back to the first military schools of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Again unlike the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, Iran sent hardly any students to the West to study, and it was the deliberate policy of Nâsir ad-Dîn Shâh to discourage this.

If Iran contrasted sharply with the Ottoman Empire and Egypt on the governmental and cultural levels, it did so almost equally in terms of its basic economic organization. Here some of the contrast goes back to the pre-nineteenth century past, and has already been discussed in part. It is important to note that the difference increased in the nineteenth century, as nineteenth-century Egyptian or Ottoman economic modernization was not matched by Iran. There was no official governmental effort to settle nomadic tribes, as there was in Turkey and Egypt, and though nomadism declined as a result primarily of the profitability of settled agriculture, it remained a far greater economic and political force in Iran than in Turkey or Egypt. A gradual increase in economic security against nomadic and other raiding and robbery was reversed during the Constitutional Revolution, and that Revolution finally brought a large share of governmental power to the representatives of a major nomadic tribe, the Bakhtiariis.

Pre-revolutionary Iran continued to have traditional feudal land grants which released their holders from tax responsibilities to the central government in return for (often theoretical) military or governmental service. The abolition of such feudal forms of landholdings was, by contrast, among the important reforms of Muḥammad 'Alî and of Mahmud II. Feudal dues and services on the part of the peasantry also remained more important in Iran than in the Ottoman Empire or Egypt well into the twentieth century.

Iran, like the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, was influenced by the nineteenth-century impact of Western capitalism and by entry into the new world market, but the pace of influence was markedly slower in Iran than further West. The cause of this difference in pace is to be sought not so much in the greater conservatism of Iranian society, which counts for something, but more in the location and topography of Iran. Not bordering on the Mediterranean, Iran was harder for Western countries to reach than were the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and, once reached, it presented more topographic mountain and desert barriers to trade. Although Iran became a purchaser of Western textiles and other manufactures and an exporter of raw materials and carpets, her share in world trade was absolutely much smaller than that of either Turkey or Egypt, and did not increase anything like as much in the period to 1917.² While concessions to Westerners were numerous, those that were successfully exploited in Iran were relatively few – the Indo-European telegraph

¹ See especially Gene R. Garthwaite, 'The Bakhtiyâri Khans, the Government of Iran, and the British, 1846–1915', *IJMES*, vol. III, no. 1 (Jan. 1972), pp. 24–44.

² Issawi, *op. cit.* p. 70.

lines, a Russian and a British bank, a relatively few miles of Russian-built roads and some dock facilities in the north, a British steamship service in the south, and the beginnings of British oil exploitation, Belgian horse-drawn trams in Tehran and a few miles of railroad from Tehran to the nearby shrine of Shah Abdul 'Azim were the only important results of a rash of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concession granting. Due to difficulties of transport of industrial materials and the tariff advantages given to European goods, both Iranian and European efforts to set up modern manufacturing plants in Iran were abortive.

Charles Issawi has recently contrasted the economic development of Iran with that of the Eastern Mediterranean countries, and one can here repeat his conclusions.¹ He notes that the need for swift communications between Europe and India led to regular steamship service in the Mediterranean and Red Sea in the 1830s and to railroads across Egypt in the 1850s. By 1914 there were 10,300 km of railways in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and the Sudan, and work was proceeding on the Baghdad Railway. Several modern ports were built, and steamers sailed on the Nile and the Euphrates. In Iran, by contrast, the baleful effects of Anglo-Russian imperialist rivalry resulted in the actual interdiction of railway development. Baron de Reuter's scheme for a railroad – part of his grandiose 1872 concession for the working of nearly all Iran's economic resources – was stopped primarily by Russian opposition, and beginning in 1889 the Russians secured a treaty which allowed them to stop all further railway development in Iran. Since the British, like the Russians, had decided that railways in Iran might be strategically dangerous to them, no railways were built. Iran also remained without a modern port, and without roads except in some cities and the few Russian roads in the northwest. Elsewhere all transport had to go by donkey, mule, or camel, and often over very difficult terrain. Iran's one navigable river, the Karun in the South, was opened to steam navigation as late as 1888.

Anglo-Russian rivalry helped stifle the economic development of Iran in areas other than railroads also. Iran's adjacency to India meant that the British wanted to keep it as an undeveloped buffer state, free of any facilities that might ease a Russian advance toward India, while the Russians were equally unwilling to expose their southern regions to British penetration. As Issawi notes, where Egypt alone had some 250,000 European residents in 1914, those in Iran were numbered in the hundreds.²

In the development of modern bourgeois property rights Iran also lagged behind the Eastern Mediterranean. There was no land law in Iran like the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman and Egyptian land laws until the 1920s. Although as in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, large landownership grew and flourished under the impact of a Western demand for cash crops and a growth of peasant indebtedness and loss of land, this trend was slower in Iran than farther West,

¹ *Ibid.* chap. 1.

² *Ibid.* p. 16.

and in Iran old feudal divided property rights and arbitrary confiscations of land by the government continued at a time when in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt large owners were able to take advantage of the new laws to assert their and their families' absolute claim to property.

The undermining of traditional handicrafts by Western competition also proceeded more slowly in Iran than it did farther West, although the trend was the same. In general Iran felt some of the same effects of the Western economic impact in the nineteenth century as did Eastern Mediterranean countries – the rise in cash crops, in large landownership, and in the export of raw materials and the import of manufactures from the West – but Iran felt them to a much lesser degree. Equally important to the present argument, the presence of some of the same economic forces in Iran as in the Eastern Mediterranean countries does not necessarily link the two into one definable region, for these same forces were felt everywhere that traditional economies came into contact with the West in the nineteenth century. It is of course arguable whether the difference in rate of change was more important than the similarity in direction of economic change, but it seems highly probable that Iran was more different economically from Turkey and Egypt in 1914 than in 1800.

The nineteenth century also changed the direction of Iranian trade, as well as that of other Middle Eastern countries, away from neighboring Eastern countries and toward the countries of Europe. Each Middle Eastern country became increasingly a raw material producer for Europe and an importer of manufactured goods from Europe, so that its economic life became more dependent on its relations with Europe and less dependent on its neighbors. A parallel development took place in cultural life, although less strongly in Iran than elsewhere in the Middle East. The small intelligentsia began to take its cultural and intellectual norms and challenges from Europe rather than from a development of indigenous traditions, and there were the bare beginnings of that European-style nationalism which was further to break up the Middle East in the twentieth century, while integrating its national components. The predominantly Western, rather than Middle Eastern, influence on Middle Eastern economic and cultural life was to increase in the twentieth century.

In summary, Iran, unlike the core areas of the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, was a vast, sparsely populated area with high mountains and large deserts, where the central government had to share its power with a mixed group of ruling classes comprising tribal leaders, ulama, large landlords, and even partially independent governors and other governmental officials. Particularly during the nineteenth century there was much less integration and centralization of the country and its ruling class than in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, as neither the ulama nor the tribes was brought to heel and no significant centralized army or bureaucracy was built.

It was in the course of the nineteenth century that the concepts of 'Middle East' and 'Near East' developed, but this should not lead us to believe that the

Middle East, within the borders now generally given it, had more reality in the nineteenth century than it does today. Nineteenth-century Europeans thought more in terms of the 'Near East', which might include the Balkans and usually excluded Iran and Afghanistan, than they did in terms of the current Middle East, a term which to some meant, logically enough, the area between the Near East, as defined above, and the Far East. All this is in any case Europocentric if not imperialist terminology, which should not necessarily be followed even if it had more objective reality than it does. What probably keeps the strange term 'Middle East' (What East is Morocco supposed to be in the middle of?) alive today is the cumbersomeness of any more scientific designation thought of thus far.¹

Having noted several points that differentiated Iran from the Ottoman Empire between 1800 and 1914, this essay can also point to a few factors that tied Iran to the Ottoman Empire in the same period. These fall into the category of reforming influences that emanated from the Ottoman Empire to Iran. In his military reforms in Azerbaijan in the early nineteenth century, Prince 'Abbâs Mîrzâ was influenced by Sultan Selim III's *Nizâm-i Jedîd*, and he used this name for his own army. Amîr Kabîr, the reforming chief minister of the mid-century, was similarly influenced by what he saw of the Tanzimat reforms on his trip to the Ottoman Empire, as was the reforming chief minister of the 1870s, Mîrzâ Husain Khân Sipâhsalâr-i A'zam, who spent years as Iranian Minister in Istanbul. Persian merchants and intellectuals travelled far more in the Ottoman Empire than they did in Europe, and many of their ideas of reform came from these travels. Many of the Western books translated into Ottoman Turkish were later translated into Persian – the popularity in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire of Fénélon's *Télémaque* is perhaps the chief example. The presence in the Ottoman Empire of the leaders of both the Bahais and the Azali Babis also helped influence their Iranian followers – in the case of the Bahais it seems clear that the Ottoman environment encouraged a more 'modern' orientation than the original Babis had shown, and the same may be said of individual Azali Babis who found refuge in the Ottoman Empire, such as the revolutionary writers Mîrzâ Âqâ Khân Kirmânî and Shaiikh Ahmad Rûhî. Istanbul was, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the center of a liberal to revolutionary Iranian community that had some influence in Iran. The late nineteenth-century Persian newspaper published in Istanbul, *Akhtar*, was widely read in Iran and helped spread modern and liberal ideas there. In the 1890s pan-Islamic ideas began to overcome Sunni–Shi'i hatreds, in face of the common threat to Sunni and Shi'i countries and cultures posed by the encroachments of the imperialist West. Abdülhamid II encouraged Sayyid

¹ A UCLA vice-chancellor who came from the State University of New York at Binghamton once asked me if I was studying 'SWANA', and when I asked what that was, he said it was Southwest Asia and North Africa. Perhaps some such new designation will catch on, though one may be permitted to doubt it.

Jamâl ad-Dîn al-Afghânî to use a Shi'i circle to write letters to the Shi'i ulama in Iran and elsewhere calling upon them to follow the lead of the Sultan-Caliph.¹ An Iranian prince in Istanbul, Shaikh ar-Ra'îs, wrote a reformist tract entitled *Islamic Unity (Ittihâd-i Islam*, the Ottoman and Iranian expression for 'Pan-Islam'), and pan-Islamic sentiments made some headway among the Iranian ulama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although these reformist ties are far from outweighing the differences noted above between Iran and the Ottoman Empire, they do form some background to the period from 1921 to 1941, when Reza Shah closely modelled his reforms on those of Atatürk in Turkey. Although exact degrees of influence cannot be proved, Iran's ruler did follow Turkey's in many of his reforms – the abolition of the capitulations, the establishment of state-financed factories and other economic enterprises, the unveiling and partial emancipation of women, the expansion of a modern secular educational system, the adoption of more modern law codes, the relative downgrading of the ulama and of Islamic traditions and the emphasis on pre-Islamic and nationalist values were all areas in which Reza Shah's reforms followed those of Atatürk, although some of these reforms would have been natural for any modernizer. Reza Shah had even wanted to establish a republic in Iran on the Atatürk model, but was dissuaded by opposition emanating primarily from the ulama and so decided instead to establish a new dynasty.² Reza Shah did not go nearly as far in his reforms as did Atatürk, but this was natural in view of Iran's far more backward initial position.

Just when Iran and Turkey were drawing together in manner and ultimately in treaty relations, Turkey and the Arab countries were pulling apart. The mutual disdain between Turks and Arabs noted at the beginning of this paper as a phenomenon of the contemporary Middle East was almost equally one of the period between the two world wars. Thus the Middle East seems to have been no more a cohesive, or even a cultural, entity in the inter-war period than it was before or since.

AGAIN, THE MIDDLE EAST

No doubt it would be possible to do a study of parts of the Ottoman Empire – particularly border tribal areas in Arabia, Iraq, and North Africa, and to show that they had scarcely more resemblance to the central Ottoman core or to Egypt than did Morocco, Afghanistan, or Iran. Any temporal or geographical unit that one chooses to divide history turns out to be in many ways unsatisfactory, so it is not surprising that the 'Middle East' should turn out so. The

¹ See Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamâl ad-Dîn 'al-Afghânî': A Political Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), chap. XIII, and 'Religion and Irreligion in Early Iranian Nationalism', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. IV, no. 3 (April, 1962), pp. 265–95.

² A detailed description of these events is found in the British Foreign Office documents of the period.

purpose of this essay is not to propose that we abandon speaking of the Middle East, even supposing the impossible, that such a suggestion could have more than the most minimal effect, given all the departments, centers, associations and even journals devoted to its study. The purpose here is rather to propose that we not reify concepts so as to distort our ability to look at history and reality afresh. Middle Eastern History is something we teach and write about as an approximation to a variety of past realities, none of which ever coincided exactly with the borders of the Middle East as we now define it. For some purposes the Muslim World is a far more meaningful unit, for others it would be the Mediterranean world, the Arab world, the traditional Iranian culture area, or the Ottoman or other Islamic Empires. A fictitious impression of Middle Eastern unity is created by an overstress on the similarities of the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, for example, or by listing the reforms of the Qajar rulers of Iran as if they were comparable to Egyptian or Ottoman reforms, when what is really striking about nineteenth-century Iran is the almost total lack of reform, even of the most elementary self-strengthening military variety. We must look within the Middle East for contrasts and outside the Middle East for comparisons, seeking knowledge even in China as the Tradition would have it.

This raises another point, that not even the broadest of the divisions suggested above, the Muslim World, is any kind of a satisfactory limit for scholarly understanding. If the Middle East is unsatisfactory as an entity, the Muslim World is scarcely more so. This is not only for the reason, much more obvious for the 'Muslim World' than for the Middle East, that it encompasses such a variety of peoples and cultures, but for the related but less obvious reason that Islam is much less a determiner of total life-styles than it has frequently been made out to be. The past, and to some degree continuing, training of scholars of the Middle East purely in Islamic Middle Eastern languages and cultures has led to serious distortions, with the reification of such concepts as the Islamic City and the Islamic Polity, which have very little concrete reality behind them. Muslim cities in formerly Byzantine territories were very much like the Byzantine cities that preceded them, whereas Muslim cities in Indonesia are much more like other Indonesian cities than they are like Muslim cities in the Middle East. Some of the phenomena that have been taken as typical of Muslim cities or polities are really characteristic of pre-industrial, primarily agrarian societies in general, while many illuminating similarities can be found between Muslim societies of the South and East Mediterranean and Christian societies of the North and East Mediterranean. Some features of feudalism appear in Middle Eastern societies even outside Lebanon, where they have been noted, whereas other parts of the Middle East, especially Egypt, may perhaps best be understood as hydraulic societies with analogies to North India and China.

If there is one thing besides Islam that characterizes the Middle East as a unit, it is probably the uneasy but still adapted blend of pastoral nomadism and settled life which has been found with varying emphases in the whole area.

This blend is also found in Central Asia and in parts of Pakistan, but it is not at all characteristic of Bangladesh, Indonesia, or some of the areas of sub-Saharan Africa where Islam has penetrated. Despite frequently repeated statements that Islam combines religion and politics, and that Islamic law and custom encompass the believer's whole way of life, it seems clear that prior and continuing forms of economic and social organization are and have been frequently more important than Islam in determining the way of life of a particular Muslim people or group. The life-style of pastoral nomads the world over is relatively similar whether or not they are Muslims, and the major differences in such life-styles have more to do with the animals they are herding and the terrain they traverse than they do with Islam. Similarly, peasants cultivating densely populated irrigated land have a relatively similar life-style in Egypt and in India, and it is even more obvious that Muslims and Hindus within an Indian village or Muslims and Christians in an Egyptian village resemble each other far more than they differ.

Within the Islamic world there has always been vast diversity, change, and development. For too long many Western scholars have taken 'Islamic' to be a synonym for a traditional interpretation of Islam developed by its jurists and theologians in the early Muslim centuries. The later centuries of Islamic history, when Sufism of various kinds was often predominant, are often taken as a deviation from the Islamic norm, as are the practices of countries relatively recently converted to Islam. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islamic reformism is often seen as a forced and somehow illegitimate interpretation of Islamic texts and practices – forced it is to a degree but probably no more so than various Christian reform movements. The viewing of the Islamic world in terms of norms to which any given society or period is a more or less imperfect approximation reflects a kind of abstract and idealist approach to history largely abandoned in Western historical works on the West, but not yet on the East.

The convenience for certain purposes of such abstractions as 'the Middle East' or 'the Muslim World' should not divert us from attempts at historical generalization, and not mere narrative, about the nature of politics, economics, and society within the subdivisions of this world. A key question for many Middle Eastern societies, and perhaps for all of the Middle East, is the impact of the presence of large numbers of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes on society as a whole. These tribes have been present in significant numbers ever since the Muslim conquests, but it is particularly since the eleventh century with the large-scale invasion of Turkish nomads into the Eastern Islamic world and the spread of the Bani Hilal in North Africa that nomadic tribes encroached increasingly on previously settled agricultural areas. It can be suggested that this brought a significant decline in the production of settled agriculture and hence in the economic surplus, a development of military and governmental institutions into a kind of tribal feudalism, and helped cause the cultural decline noted in the later Islamic centuries. The specific forms of integration of the

tribes into society as a whole, and the exact impact of a large-scale tribal presence on the later medieval Muslim world, have scarcely been discussed theoretically except by students of North Africa, and even there theoretical work is far from comprehensive or satisfactory. It will probably take highly conscious combined efforts of historians and social anthropologists to begin to deal adequately with this problem, or at least the increased study by historians of social anthropology and vice versa. It may indeed be possible to 'reconstruct' a picture of the Middle East after the eleventh century to include the various permutations and combinations of a nomadic-agricultural-urban synthesis, with the nomadic element dominating in the peripheral steppe and desert areas from Morocco through Arabia to Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the settled populations more predominant in the central areas.

As for the role of Iran, it cannot be cut off from the political, economic, and cultural synthesis that characterized the classical Islamic world which forms the background of the later Middle East. The Iranian contributions to the early Islamic world are too great and well known to list here – in scholarship, literature and administration they were overwhelming. The aim of this essay is not to cut off Iran from areas to its west but rather to use Iran in particular in order to take a new look at a supposed entity, the Middle East, and to see to what degree that entity has reality. For the period since 1500 the status of the Middle East, as traditionally defined, would appear to be more ambiguous than is usually granted. When taken as an approximate unit during the whole period from the Muslim conquest on, however, the term continues to have a valid meaning.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
LOS ANGELES