

# The role of religion in the middle east



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Religion is one of the most powerful defining forces of a culture. For example, stores would be closed on Saturday in Israel because that is the Sabbath in the Jewish religion. The hijab fashions in Muslim nations find their origin in the Koran's prescriptions for modesty among women. However, religion makes the most profound impact on a culture when it is sponsored by the State. For example, many Middle Eastern and African nations have adopted Sharia Law, where thieves are punished by losing a hand, adulterers are stoned to death, and those failing to conform to the dress code are lashed. Before the Muslim Expansion, the predominant religions of the region were Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. Tribal religions and local deities were also worshiped, as monism was not yet universal in the region. During the early seventh century C. E., Muhammad and his soldiers of faith left the Arabian Peninsula and spread their faith throughout the modern Middle East and Asia Minor. According to Cleveland (2004), this was able to happen because the Byzantine Empire of the West and the Sassanian Empire of Iran were becoming weaker after decades of warfare (p. 6). Since the Emperors could no longer adequately defend their territories, it was the perfect time for the fledgling Muslim Empire to take its place in history. Curiously, there is a strong tradition in the West of viewing the Middle East as a monolithic people of Arab extraction that are culturally and religiously similar. Although Islam is the dominant religion in the area, there are certainly ethnic and cultural differences as to how it is practiced (similar to the cultures formed around the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches in predominantly Christian nations). The three states that will be examined in

this paper are Israel, Iran, and Iraq: a Jewish state, a non-Arab Muslim state, and an Arab Muslim state. The choice of these countries will show the religious and cultural diversity of the Middle East as well as explain how these forces clash when they come into contact.

The Jewish State of Israel (formerly Palestine) is by far one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the Middle East. Because the Jewish people were scattered all over the world, today we have Jews with African, European, and Asian ethnic characteristics. At the beginning of Israel's settlement, people had divided themselves by ethnicity, but today they are more divided by sect (degree of religious observance) and social class (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, & Sharot, 1991, p. 280). Shortly thereafter, they had to learn to work together because hostilities with their Arab neighbours threatened the existence of the new state. Suffice it to say, Israel had become accustomed to a siege mentality—segregating themselves from Palestinian and other Arab groups, creating a modern apartheid. Politically, their reasons for holding the territory and seeking foreign aid are rooted in the conviction that the land is theirs by right, as promised by God in their Scriptures (Cleveland, 2004, p. 240). There was also the very basic fear of facing extinction at the hands of an unjust government such as Hitler's Germany and the pogroms sponsored by tsarist Russia.

However, even within the Jewish community, there are several splits. According to Ayalon, Ben-Rafael & Sharot (1991), there were reports of “ numerous conflicts, some involving violent confrontations, between religious and secular Jews over such issues as public transportation on the Sabbath, opening cinemas on the Sabbath Eve, burning bus stations, displaying

advertisements featuring women in swimming costumes or underwear, free movement of private transportation in areas close to religious neighbourhoods on the Sabbath... and the question of who is a Jew” (p. 279). In Israel, there are those that identify as ethnic Jews even though they do not participate in the religious traditions of Judaism. With this question of definition, there is an implicit question of whether an individual can consider themselves Jewish if they do not identify with the teachings with Judaism. However, these questions have been rendered moot for Israeli citizenship, as non-practicing Jews were also targeted by major world government. For other religions, identity is determined by practice such as profession of faith, attendance at places of worship, and prayer. In other words, there is no such thing as a non-practicing Muslim. However, the Jewish religious spectrum is from Orthodox to the secular and non-practicing (Ayalon, Ben-Rafael, & Sharot, 1991, p. 287). There are some Israelis that are atheist and do not observe any of the Jewish holidays or traditions and the Orthodox whose lives are still governed by laws written several thousand years ago. Most of Israel’s Jews fall somewhere in the middle, observing some of the traditions such as the Yom Kippur fast and Hanukkah.

Around the time that Greece and Rome were building their sphere of influence, Iran (formerly Persia) was one of the most powerful empires in the world known for its progressive system of justice and great learning and recognized as the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, the Ba’hai religion, and Mithraism (which shares much in common with modern Christianity). Having a history of conquering and being conquered, the Iranian people were influenced by several cultural and religious traditions. However, since the

twelfth century, almost 100% of the Iranian population embraced Islam (Cleveland, 2004, p. 33). Even so, the Iranians still resisted 'Arabization' and adopted the practice of their religion to Persian life and culture. For instance, unlike Arabs, most Persian Muslims are of the Shi'a sect. In addition, in pre-revolution Iran, professional women were not expected to wear the *chador* unless they were going to visit family friends or religious events (DeGroot, 2007, p. 113). However, women of the lower classes were generally expected to wear them at all times. As we have mentioned before, there appears to be an inverse relationship between religious observance and income, which would explain this phenomenon. The Islamic revolution of 1979 was a strong rejection of Western power and the separation of the sexes in all social fields, though females are still allowed access to higher education. Given that the West equates itself with all that is noble and just, this was a surprising leap into backwardness, according to Western cultural commentators. However, to fully understand, Keddie & Richard (2006) argues that we must take several factors into account such as the depressed standard of living for the middle class, rising unemployment and the decline of traditional values: "Once dependence on the West was associated with Western culture, and Western culture with moral decay, it was natural to seek Iran's salvation not in the Westernization pushed by the shah's regime but in a return to an idealized indigenous Islam" (Keddie & Richard, 2006, p. 188).

The revolution also brought about the enmity of Hussein's Iraq as the Sunni leader was apprehensive that the Shi'a majority would stage a similar revolution and wrest power away from him—a factor strongly contributing to

the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980's (Cleveland, 2004, p. 415). This was quite a change from the past where the people were not very closely controlled by the government. When the Ottoman Turks ruled in Iraq, they confined themselves to the large cities and the people in outlying rural areas lived by their own rules more or less. Turning these pockets of autonomous tribes into a nation was far more difficult than any one administration could bring (Cleveland, 2004, p. 204). In Iraq, there was always an enmity between the Sunni and Shi'a sects of Islam, and the nation was often beset with civil war. One of the more bitter cultural struggles are between those that want to adapt their faith to the modern era and the more conservative faction that want to preserve the social climate of their predecessors (Nakash, 2003, p. 262). Ethnically, Arabs comprise 80% of the population, however, slightly over half belong to the Shi'a sect and the minority were Sunnis. Sunni Kurds made up the remainder of the population, and they sought to remain culturally distinct from the Arabs (Cleveland, 2004, p. 205). Today, Iraq is occupied by the U. S. and a civil war between Sunni and Shi'a sects are raging.

In sum, religion has shaped these countries profoundly. Israel attempts to expand its borders because her citizens believe that the land was given to them by God, Iran vacillates between modernization and radical Islam as many young Iranians have become quite progressive, and the Shi'a and Sunni Muslims of Iraq are engaged in a great battle for supremacy. In these regimes, there is no room for compromise on an international or social level because the current leadership and prevailing ruling class in each of these countries believes that they are on the right path.

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