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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA:
PRIORITIES FOR THE 1980'S

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Social Sciences Research in the Middle East and North
Africa: Priorities for the 1980's

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I. INTRODUCTION

This report covers the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, hereafter referred to as MENA. The MENA region consists of all 21 Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran.

While the thrust of the report is to identify major research areas and priorities of research problems as seen by indigenous social scientists, the first part will give the overall setting of such concerns. Thus an overview of major trends and changes in the MENA region is given as a background for the following sections. Supportive data of this overview are presented in tabular form in Appendix A of this report.

In the second part, the report identifies the major research areas as well as specific research problems in the MENA region. This identification is based on data gathered from social scientists in several MENA countries visited by the author (Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, the Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq). Most of this data was collected through intensive interviews with key social scientists in these countries. In Egypt, the largest in the region, interview data was supplemented by a small-scale survey administered to 60 scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science, economics and education.

In the third part of the report an attempt is made to assess research capabilities and research obstacles in

the MENA region. Policy recommendations for the IDRC as a funding agency are made.

Throughout the efforts that went into the report, the guiding principle is development related issues. People who were interviewed or surveyed were told that our concerns are development related research needs and priorities. We did not impose a priori any particular definition of "development." We let each social scientist define "development" as he or she preferred and make his responses accordingly.

II. OVERVIEW OF MAJOR TRENDS

A. Undermining of Traditional Society

Most of the present socioeconomic trends in the MENA region are manifestations of one great dialectical process: the erosion of "traditional" structures on the one hand and the attempt to build "new" structures on the other.

No one can pinpoint the moment in which that process started. But most area observers would agree that 1789 was a dramatic turning point in the evolution of the MENA area. Napoleon's ships anchored at Alexandria, along with his soldiers, ideas, technology and scholars. Their initial impression on the people, then marching inland, and then their performance, all made a graphic demonstration of a civilizational confrontation between "modernity" and "tradition." The confrontation has gone on ever since. At times it has looked as if the triumph of modernity is near. Yet every generation in the MENA region witnesses a strong comeback of traditionalism, the latest of which is the so-called Islamic resurgence. The Iranian Revolution and the assassination of President Sadat are cases in point. But such episodes tend to recede in the face of a new wave of societal change triggered by other internal and external forces. Then, traditional structures receive further blows, leading to further erosion.

A few examples will illustrate this steady erosion. The demographic structure of MENA societies, governed for

centuries by the stationary imperatives of a traditional equilibrium of high birth rates and high death rates has been permanently ruptured. Under the impact of Western penetration, and the importation of medical technology, mortality has steadily declined while fertility has remained at more or less its previously high level. This situation, known to specialists as the "stage of demographic transition," is one of rapid population growth. The transition in the MENA region has in fact been a long stable era with no signs of attaining soon the "modern equilibrium," i.e., low birth and death rates.

Rapid population growth meant greater pressure on agricultural land. The latter is scarce to begin with, and its economic mode has traditionally been one of subsistence. Few agrarian enclaves were highly mechanized either by colonial European settlers or indigenous large landowners. Soon a growing rural population could no longer be accommodated in the hinterland. This fact, along with a multitude of other factors, triggered a century-long stream of rural-urban migration.

Pre-industrial cities of the MENA region have thus been subjected to waves of rural newcomers, with their own natural population increase. MENA cities began to double their populations every twenty years (some every ten years). The traditional structure of these cities was ruptured; but the pieces have persisted. Attempts to industrialize and modernize, while substantial, have still been too slow to

incorporate most of the newcomers in modern economic sectors. Thus, triple urban cultural tiers exist everywhere in MENA cities: one traditional, one modern, and one lumpen or parasitic.

Traditional economic structures were likewise undermined. Subsistence agriculture and pastoralism in the hinterland and crafts and guilds in towns were shattered by encroaching market forces of the outside world. Enclave developments, cash crops, and the trappings of modern technology created new modes of production and gave rise to new social formations, as one part after another of the MENA region was penetrated by the West and incorporated in the world capitalist system.

The well-ordered class and political structures of traditional society had persisted with little or no change from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. It was a world of caliphs, sultans, ulema, soldiers, bazaars, artisans, peasants and herdsmen. This mix of social categories was tied together by a combination of religious beliefs, coercion, fear and the imperatives of survival. Despite its internal tension and elite circulation, the system as a whole appeared to outsiders as quite static or stagnant. Once the upper echelon of the system was defeated or dominated by foreign intruders, i.e., colonial powers, the rest of the system underwent a long, often agonizing transformation.

Traditional family structure, extended and patriarchal, underwent similar if slower transformation. With the diminishing of family-centered crafts in towns and increased

migration from villages, a rising percentage of MENA population has become organized in smaller nuclear family structures. The rest has remained in extended family households but with markedly weakened authority held by the "patre familia." By sheer economic necessity or under the impact of a glowing Western model, a small but growing percentage of women sought work outside their homes.

Traditional formal education, limited to begin with, was religion-centered. Quranic schools trained the children of the well-to-do to read, write, and be well versed in matters of Islam. Some of the few graduates found their way to great centers of higher Islamic learning, e.g. Al Azhar, Zytouna, Mecca, Najaf, or Qam. The Western challenge induced some native reformers (Mohamed Ali in Egypt, Dawood Pasha in Iraq, Khair Eddin in Tunisia) to introduce modern education, and this began to appropriate the best and brightest of MENA children. The graduates were to become the new bureaucrats, technocrats, and professionals--lawyers, doctors, engineers, teachers and journalists. They formed the embryonic beginning of what some call the New Middle Class (NMC). From their ranks would spring most of the political leaders in MENA countries in the following decades.

These and other changes undermined traditional structures in MENA societies, but have not completely wiped them out. The social landscape of the region is still full of remnants of these structures, albeit half-standing, some twisted or distorted, and others like scattered blocks or rubble.

On some traditional structures modern ones have been grafted or superimposed. In some cases the traditional and the modern co-exist with varying degrees of tension and conflict. In others, the co-existence has evolved into a creative symbiosis of harmony and cooperation. In some instances, traditional forms facilitated the process of modernity, e.g. traditional kinship ties producing sprouting capitalism. In other instances, modern forms reinforced traditional life-style or belief systems, e.g. the "mechanized nomads," or the use of cassette tapes to disseminate religious sermons. In brief, both "modernity" and "traditionalism" have been unbundled by the men and women of the MENA region. Various groups have picked various items out of each bundle and tried to synthesize them in order to cope with a rapidly changing world around them. The syntheses are neither comfortable nor final. They are in continuous flux. And many people in the region feel trapped, strained, or victimized by their own synthesis. Some pay higher prices than others in the process.

B. Contemporary Social Order in the MENA Region

Social orders reproduce themselves in every new generation. With each reproduction, varying degrees of alteration take place. The undermining of a traditional social order in the MENA region, described above, was caused by four big waves of social change: the colonial experience, introduction of modern science and technology, the national struggle for emancipation, and oil production. Each wave has left its deep and lasting impact on all aspects of life.

The present social order in the MENA region is a product of previous orders intersecting with internal and global events of the last two decades. The symbolic point of its emergence may date back to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, to the death of Nasser in 1970, or to the 1973 fourth Arab-Israeli War. But whatever the hypothetical point of its conception, oil has been a decisive factor in the birth and shaping of the present social order. Oil has not only altered global relations between the MENA region and the rest of the world; it has also triggered manifest and latent forces of change in the intra-regional equation, within each country, and inside most men and women of the MENA region. To be sure, oil had been affecting the social landscape in a score of producing countries for the previous three decades. But it is in the last ten years that the oil-induced social changes have been phenomenally accelerated within those countries (Iran, Iraq, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria) and have spilled over dramatically into neighboring countries. The chain of causation may begin in some of the MENA countries but ends up in others, and vice-versa.

It would be an oversimplification to attribute all features of the present social order to oil. But it is not an exaggeration to contend that oil is the most important single factor in giving this order its unique characteristics. In this sense, oil has triggered as many qualitative and quantitative changes as each of the three previous waves--

