Why does the Muslim world lag behind the rest of the world in terms of economic development and political democratization? A small cadre of comparative political scientists struggled with this problem during the 1980s and 1990s, but after September 11, 2001, the question spawned an academic industry overnight. An army of experts, many self-anointed, has since exhausted frightening quantities of ink and pixels in offering answers of varying quality. The most enduring explanation remains the “culturalist” hypothesis—Islam alone explains this structural backwardness, and if not for its despotic traditions and norms, all the lands now Muslim would be swimming in prosperous capitalism and liberal politics. First posited by generations of Orientalists, of whom Bernard Lewis is most prominent, and then brought into the mainstream by scholars like Daniel Pipes and Samuel Huntington, the culturalist rubric still resonates in intellectual discourse and popular airwaves, despite intense criticism from regional specialists.

*Modernization, Democracy, and Islam* is the latest salvo in this debate, and its core argument is unequivocally anti-culturalist: Islam is not incompatible with either modernization or democracy. On increasingly crowded academic bookshelves, though, the volume is also noteworthy in other ways. Its primary editor, Shireen Hunter, now director of the Islam Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., has wrestled with the connections among Islam, democratic regimes, and economic growth for decades, far predating the current wave of interest. Under her guidance, only a handful of the book’s chapters are focused exclusively on the Middle East rather than the broader experiences of over 1.2 billion Muslims, thus avoiding a common mistake—fewer than a quarter of the world’s Muslims are Arab—and presenting opportunities for genuine comparative analysis. Further, unlike many U.S. tomes written on Islam, the list of contributors includes leading authorities from outside the United States.

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such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim, Giacomo Luciani, and Elizabeth Picard.

In her introduction, Hunter articulates the key challenge: Why do so many Islamic polities suffer from the twin deficits of economic underdevelopment, relative to their human potential and capital endowments, and enduring political autocracy, as indicated by these states’ puzzling isolation from two global waves of democratization? Nineteen chapters divided into three thematic sections tackle this question, offering an eclectic array of answers that share little save their antipathy toward the culturalist thesis. Indeed, the contributors use such a mix of theoretical and methodological tools drawn from disciplines ranging from theology to economics, that the volume lacks any sort of analytical unity. Nonetheless, for what the book offers—a cacophony of voices, united in their disagreement of the Islam-as-destiny approach—the chapters deliver persuasive analysis.

The first third of the book employs historical tools to argue that Islam is not inherently inimical to modernity. Compelling contributions include those by Tamara Sonn and Timothy McDaniel, who locate the roots of social toleration and political rationalism deep inside modern Islamic political thought. Another valuable contribution is Heather Deegan’s critique comparing the culturalist thesis to Weberian cynicism about non-Protestant societies decades ago. Deegan elucidates how the same reasons marshaled today to justify why Muslim societies have failed to enter the ranks of high-income countries in the modern era—e.g., their religion rejects secularism, their traditions embrace parochialism, their values stand alien to the free market—were also wildly popular in describing Latino-Catholic and Asian-Confucian societies after World War II. Yet since the 1980s, most of Latin America and East Asia have reached comparatively high degrees of modernization, as measured by GDP per capita and democratization.

The quality of chapters in the first third of the book is frustratingly inconsistent. Some offer little insight into the explanatory weight of culture in economic outcomes, instead engaging in purely descriptive analyses. For instance, Valentine Moghadam’s chapter concludes that gender equality in Muslim societies is central for sustained and equitable development. Indeed, but how does this relate to the causal connection between Islam and modernization? After all, culturalists argue that Islam has been historically more restrictive of women’s freedom than Western civilization has, and that this pervasive exclusion of women from public life is exceptional to the Muslim world. Opponents of culturalism respond that Islam is neither pro- nor anti-modernity—governments mobilize religion for various ends that are conditioned more by elite interests rather than ideological affinities. For example, India combines significant de-
degrees of mass religiosity with impressive macroeconomic performance and
democratic longevity. Cynics who forecast the end of the Indian experiment
decades ago have been waiting for Godot. Unfortunately, these sorts of sys-
tematic arguments are not found in this book.

The second thematic section is concerned more with democratization than
development. By far the most rigorous section of the book, these chapters
offer institutional explanations for why Arab societies seem locked in politi-
cal stagnation, even as other authoritarian regimes across the world began
steadily dissolving in the 1970s. Notably, Elizabeth Picard’s and Giacomo
Luciani’s writings illustrate the pivotal role of bloated security establishments
in maintaining the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East. After
independence, a perverse pattern of post-colonial nation-building emerged
in which the military apparatus assumed dominance over civilian politics
while the rentier state blunted the demands of popular participation by buy-
ing acquiescence with oil money.

The combination of these two factors rendered impossible either a vibrant
civil society or an autonomous private sector. Moreover, as Mohammed
Ayoob’s chapter on the Middle East clarifies, the U.S. and European gov-
ernments have long offered strategic support to friendly autocratic regimes
during and after the Cold War, driven largely by their interests in defending
Israel and procuring access to hydrocarbon supplies. In short, Ayoob argues,
“variables other than that of Islamic exceptionality explain the resistance to
democratization in the Greater Middle East.” Political economists and so-
ciologists will find promising hypotheses and evidences in these analyses,
many of which deserve further treatment in book-length projects.

The final third of the volume consists of case studies. Counterbalancing the
previous section’s focus on the Arab region, these chapters examine non-Arab
countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Muslim polities of Cen-
tral Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. An intriguing cross-case comparison reveals
that the institutional endowments each country inherited from a prior political
era were formative determinants of their current regimes. For instance, thanks
to its history as the seat of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey found itself with ex-
perienced administrators and centralized political structures after World War
I, enabling the Kemalist state to transition into republicanism and plant the
seeds for future democratization. In contrast, late-developing Muslim states
face particular challenges due to the structural circumstances of their linkage
to the international political economy. Chuka Onwumechili’s chapter on sub-
Saharan Africa argues that systemic economic constraints imposed by external
governments and institutions, such as aid conditionality and unfavorable trade
terms, depress the earnings potential of key export sectors and contribute to sluggish growth, compounding political lethargy.

The book suffers from one more blemish—it ignores the complicating phenomenon of Islamism. Many culturalists argue that even if Islam in the abstract is compatible with democracy, many Islamist movements are not. While moderate Islamists have participated in democratic politics successfully (Turkey’s AK Party is the benchmark case), more radical groups make little pretense about the freedoms they would abrogate and the theocracy they would impose should they ever win power. Though a minority, these extremists are as much a part of the global Islamic landscape as moderates: how, then, should they be incorporated into the rules of the political game? The volume ignores this issue, but it is one that cuts to the heart of the Islam-democracy debate. The Algerian experience of the early 1990s, in which military annulment of an Islamist electoral victory triggered a decade-long civil war, continues to haunt Western policymakers hesitant to endorse Islamist opposition groups against authoritarian regimes. Most observers divide into two camps: those who believe Islamists must be integral to any Muslim democracy, and those who believe they symbolize unabashed despotism dressed in religious garb. The volume would have been stronger had it tackled this complex issue, especially since Islamist movements constitute the strongest anti-regime forces in many Muslim countries, including Egypt and Pakistan.

Overall, the book accomplishes its goal of besieging the culturalist thesis with so varied a mass of rebuttals that the reader is bound to find at least one compelling argument against it. So comprehensive is the scope—and so clear the emphasis of breadth over depth—that this collection could well serve as an introductory reader. Particularly laudable is the shared emphasis on how international factors, such as external pressures from the West, have shaped economic and political outcomes in Muslim countries. The repeated comparisons between Muslim and non-Muslim states, such as between the Middle East and Latin America, is useful, as analysts have much to learn by comparing across disparate regions. As the book makes clear, however, comparisons within the Muslim world stand as perhaps the most powerful refutation of incompatibility theory. For if Islam explains all, how do scholars account for the extraordinary variation between poor and democratic Indonesia, wealthy yet autocratic Qatar, and somewhat-wealthy and somewhat-authoritarian Malaysia? The contributors demonstrate that despite its alluring parsimony, the culturalist thesis flounders when subjected to analytical scrutiny. There are numerous reasons why the Muslim world has failed to attain economic wealth and democratic stability on par with the West, but Islam is not one of them.