

Islamic Reform and Social Transition in the Middle East: A World History Approach

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Abstract: *A study of the social development in the Middle East from the perspective of world civilization history will help us better understand the complex Middle Eastern society today and grasp the trend of its development. The Middle East, which enjoys a brilliant history, declined in the modern period and is still underdeveloped today. Countries in the region are currently in a crucial period of transition – a stage of “transitional politics” toward modern democracy after they abandoned traditional centralism. Islam, which remains at a low level of secularization, has too many nonreligious functions, thus making the relationship between politics and religion even more complicated. The outdated social production mode in some Middle Eastern countries has to a large extent hindered their political, economic and religious development. The stagnated development of Islamic secularization also has affected the progress of Middle Eastern society. The Islamic reform will not only result in the self-improvement of the religion but also is bound to fuel the region’s profound social transition.*

Key Words: *Islamic Reform; Social Transition; Middle East; World Civilization*

I. The Middle East and the Development of World Civilization

As is well known, the Middle East is the cradle of many ancient civilizations, such as the Babylonian, the Nile Valley, the Mesopotamian, the Hebraic and the Persian civilizations. It is also the birthplace of the world’s three major monotheistic religions--Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Moreover, it gave birth to strong empires spanning across European, Asian and African continents including the Persian, the Arab and the Ottoman Empires. The region has added a resplendent chapter to the annals of world civilization. Instead of being an insignificant region, the Middle East made major contributions to the development of human civilization in the ancient and Middle Ages.

Human civilization first emerged in certain areas and gradually spread across the world. By the end of the classical ages, four cultural centers had come into

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The Development of Civilization in the Middle East and in the World¹

Stage of development ²	Main features	Middle East
Tool age: 2.5 million-6,000 years ago	Primitive culture; the creation of tools; primitive society; lower, middle & upper Paleolithic age; Neolithic period.	The Nile & Mesopotamia, cradles of human civilization. The use of pottery, bronze & stone tools in the late Neolithic period. ³
Agricultural age: about 5,800 ys fr 4,000 B.C. to A.D.1763	4,000-500 B.C.: ancient civilization, cropping, animal husbandry, slavery; 500 B.C.-618 A.D.: classical civilization, feudalism; 618-1500: prosperous Oriental civilization, Middle Ages in Europe; 1500-1763: rise of European civilization, Renaissance.	Sumerian culture, the earliest known civilization, 3,200 B.C. ⁴ Egypt unified in 3,000 B.C. Babylonia founded in 1894 B.C. Persian Empire 550 B.C.-A.D.330; Arab Empire 632-1055; Ottoman Empire 1290-1922.
Industrial age: about 210 ys fr 1763 to 1970	1763-1870: 1st industrial revolution, mechanization; 1871-1913: 2nd industrial revolution, electric age; 1914-1945: electric home appliances, mixed economy; 1946-1970: 3rd industrial revolution, computers.	Attempt to reform and modernize under the impact of the industrial civilization; Western powers' colonies & semi-colonies in the 19th century. The rise of national liberation movements, causing a bloc of independent nations in the 1970s.
Information age: since 1971	1971-1992: 1st information revolution, computers, information; Since 1993: 2nd information revolution, networks, virtual space & biological revolution.	Since the end of WW II, a stage for big power rivalry and a region of chronic wars and chaos. Struggling to pursue modernization against all the odds.

¹ The "stage of development" and "main features" are quoted from *The Third Wave of Research on World Modernization* by He Chuanqi published at www.china.com.cn. The author Prof. Wang is responsible for the rest of the information – "Middle East" in the table.

² The division of the stages is based on the development experience of pioneers of human civilization. Civilizations do not develop in a synchronized manner in different nation-states.

³ William L. Langer, ed., *An Encyclopedia of World History (Ancient and Medieval)* Chinese version, (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 26-27.

⁴ William L. Langer, *ibid*, pp. 45-46.

being in East Asia, India, Western Asia and Northern Africa and Europe, with Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity as their respective ideologies.⁵ These cultural centers were strengthened and expanded in the Middle Ages. The Persian, the Arab and the Ottoman Empires, as carriers of civilizations, played an important role in strengthening and expanding the Western Asia and Northern African cultural center. However, civilizations do not necessarily depend on empires as their carriers. Dynamic civilizations and values will long endure once they emerge. Although the empires perished, these past civilizations remained brilliant in the Middle East. In the tool age and the agricultural age, the Middle East did not lag behind but was ahead of the rest of the world (see the table above).

The whole world became connected with the emergence of the industrial civilization and capitalism. The Middle East declined in the industrial age (the modern period), left vulnerable to the capitalist industrial civilization. After the 19th century, the Middle East was gradually reduced to colonies or semi-colonies of Western powers. Nevertheless, rulers in the region had made strenuous efforts to pursue reforms and build prosperous countries and strong armies. These included Lebanese Emir Fakhreddine II's plans to create a "Greater Lebanon" in the early 17th century, several Ottoman caliphs' attempts to modernize and establish a new order in the empire in the early 18th century and Egypt's Governor Mohammad Ali's adoption of policies aimed at prospering the country and strengthening its military in the early 19th century. Following the series of technical reforms, countries in the Middle East began to carry out political reforms and modernization drives on an institutional level in the mid-19th century. A number of modern independent nations were founded after World War I, leading to the emergence of a bloc of such nations in the 1970s. Despite all the efforts, countries in the Middle East are still mired in underdevelopment today. Most countries have yet to complete the first modernization. Only a few are advancing toward the second modernization.⁶

II. Middle Eastern Countries' Stages of Development

Today, countries in the Middle East lag behind the development trend of world civilization. Considering the general rule for the political development of countries in the world and the specific conditions for the political development of Middle Eastern countries, it is believed that the Middle East is generally in a period of social transition today—a transition from a traditional, underdeveloped society to an advanced, developed and modern one. In terms of political development, most countries in the region are shifting from traditional absolutism to modern

⁵ Qian Chengdan, "An Approach to World History Studies," *Historiography Quarterly*, No.3, 2005, pp. 8-9.

⁶ The first modernization refers to the transition from the agricultural age to the industrial age. The second modernization refers to the transition from the industrial age to the information age.

democracy. Like social transition, which always takes a long period of time to complete, modern democracy cannot be realized overnight. The Middle East is expected to undergo three stages of political development – traditional absolutism, transitional politics and modern democracy.⁷

The stage of traditional authoritarianism and absolutism mainly refers to the period when the region was under feudal absolutism, including the period when it was occupied by colonists who practiced absolutism, and the stage before it began the transition to modern democracy. The stage of modern democracy refers to the period when modern democracy is established in the region after it becomes highly developed politically and economically. The stage of transitional politics refers to the period when the region moves from traditional absolutism to modern democracy. In fact, this stage (otherwise known as the stage of developing politics) is a period difficult to define exactly. French scholar Maurice Duverger said that the political regimes in underdeveloped societies vary greatly, and it is extremely difficult to classify them by a strict standard.⁸ Disagreements among academics are only part of the story. For example, they may call the political system of a certain country in the stage of transitional politics “totalitarianism” as compared to traditional absolutism, “new authoritarianism” as compared to old authoritarianism, “semi-democracy” as compared to modern democracy and so on.

The political analysis we are conducting is not limited to a single country but covers the whole region with more than 20 countries. More importantly, the stage of transitional politics is a stage of dynamic development. Given the countries’ social, historical and cultural disparities and developmental gaps, their political development took different forms as they moved from traditional absolutism to transitional politics. Some countries established centralized regimes after they abolished feudal absolutism. Some countries did not scrap traditional absolutism but practiced “enlightened absolutism” in varying degrees. Other countries put in place political regimes that were democratic to a certain extent although some of them were only ostensibly democratic. As a result, it is difficult to define the countries’ political development. Nevertheless, “transitional politics” can depict the changing political landscape in Middle Eastern countries.

Of course, political development and transition cannot be achieved in isolation. Politics is a reflection of the economy, and the economy is the basis of politics. All political changes are based on certain economic conditions. The following table illustrates the relationship between the political regime and related factors in the three stages of political development in the Middle East.

⁷ Jinglie Wang, ed., *The Middle East towards the 21st Century* (Beijing: China Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 1999), p.7.

⁸ Maurice Duverger, *Sociologie de la Politique: Eléments de Science Politique*, translated by Yang Zugong (Beijing: Huaxia Publishing Co. Ltd., 1987), p.284.

The Stages and Models of Political Development in Middle Eastern Countries⁹

Stage of political development	Traditional absolutism	Transitional politics	Modern democracy
Political regime	Absolutism	Developing diversified political regimes	Democratic political regime, the separation of powers
Economy	Natural economy	Developing commodity economy	Mature commodity economy
Culture	Unified traditional culture	Crisis of faith and morality	Diversified modern culture
Political legitimacy	Tradition, divine power & conquest	Nationalism, and nominal parliament and elections	Democracy, power conferred by the people & a modern legal system
Supreme leadership	Sovereign, religious leader or other leaders	Constitutional monarchy, charismatic leadership, other	Constitution, elected leadership
Political party system	No political parties	Single party or multiparty	Multiparty system

The above table is only a basic description of the three stages--past, present and future--based on a general survey of the political development in the Middle East. It should not be interpreted mechanically. More importantly, a transitional period is a complicated, changeable and unstable stage of development, as compared to traditional and modern society, which are relatively stable. The political development of countries across the world, especially Middle Eastern countries, has shown that a country cannot shift directly from traditional society to modern society, but must undergo a long period of development before achieving that goal. It should be noted that although it takes place in the political sphere, political development hinges on economic development. In other words, it should be commensurate with the economic foundation, while being restricted by other factors such as social and historical conditions and culture. Political development, in turn, can promote or hold back economic, social and cultural development.

Today, both modern democracy featuring the separation of powers and centralist and semi-centralist regimes exist in the Middle East. The former category is rather simple, only covering Israel and Turkey. The latter category, however, is much more complicated. It covers many nationalistic countries that gained independence shortly before or after World War II, some countries that have kept

⁹ Jinglie Wang, ed., *The Middle East towards the 21st Century* (Beijing: China Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 1999), p.8.

the monarchy and theocracy. The political development in the world and in the Middle East has testified to the basic principle of the interaction and mutual restriction between politics and economy. It should be pointed out that an authoritative rule is indispensable to Middle Eastern countries although the Western scholars argue that democracy is still absent there. "Moderate authoritarianism" is crucial to safeguard political stability and coordinate all kinds of forces as the countries pursue institutional and economic development. War-torn Iraq and Afghanistan provide telling examples in this regard.

III. Islam and Middle Eastern Society

1. *Islam's stage of development.*¹⁰ The Islamic "door to creation" is believed to close after the 10th century. "Al-Farabi, the founder of Islamic philosophy, pondered politics from a philosophical perspective. However, this train of thought came to a halt after his death."¹¹ Today, in the eyes of some Western scholars, Islam remains a closed and conservative religion generally in a period of slow development. It has deep-seated influence in the Middle Eastern countries. Most of the Islamic countries with secular political regimes are still unable to get rid of the influence of the religion. With an extensive social foundation, Islam is not only a religion but also a political and ethical concept and a social organization in Islamic countries in the Middle East. It is almost omnipresent, from the daily lives of ordinary people to culture, education, politics and the economy. Then, is Islam a special religion? Nowadays, Islam is believed to have many similarities to Christianity before capitalism emerged in Europe, especially their exclusiveness and to have too many non-religious functions. In other words, its religious functions and non-religious functions have yet to be separated. It should therefore be concluded that Islam is not a special religion. From a historical point of view, it should not be labeled "a special religion." Its being different or "special," as is usually perceived, testifies that it is at a relatively low level of secularization in some countries.

Of course, Islam's secularization is uneven in this region. It is at a high level of secularization development in Turkey, whereas in some countries, it stays at a low or an intermediate level. Government featuring the fusion of politics and religion has been the traditional model of government in the region for the past 1,000 years. The relationship between politics and religion is an important yardstick by which to judge the development of Islam. Iran is the only country in the region that has established a theocratic regime in the real sense. Saudi Arabia practices an alliance system of chief and imam. Turkey, by contrast, is completely a secular country. The

¹⁰ Major views in this section are taken from *Political Thoughts in the Contemporary Middle East* edited by Jinglie Wang (Beijing: Contemporary World Press, 2003), pp.8-14.

¹¹ Mohammad Khatami, *From the World of the Polis to the Polis of the World*, translated by Ma Shenggui and Tawana (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Publishing Corporation, 2002), p. 2.

preamble of the Turkish Constitution states that as required by the principle of secularism, there shall be no interference whatsoever by sacred religious feelings in state affairs and politics. In some Western scholars' views, the Turkish model may represent the orientation of political development in some Islamic countries in the Middle East. In that case, other countries may still have a long way to go in this direction.

2. *Pressing concerns of Islamic countries in the Middle East.* Islamic countries in the Middle East have made remarkable achievements in their political, social and economic development since they gained independence decades ago. However, they still face many pressing problems that hinder their further progress:

Subtle changes in the relationship between politics and religion. Secularization is regarded as a major goal by many Middle Eastern countries in their modernization process. However, they tend to encounter a lot of problems and resistance as they pursue secularization. Turkey, as a secular country, has confronted persistent challenges posed by religious forces seeking state power and "Islamization" since the 1990s. The Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria almost subverted the country's nationalistic regime in democratic elections in the early 1990s. With Shiite-ruled Iran and Sunni-ruled Sudan fueling Islamization across the region, some political oppositions from different countries attempt to undermine the governments under the camouflage of religion, thus complicating the relationship between politics and religion in the Middle Eastern countries.

The strenuous task of national integration. Although decades have passed since countries in the Middle East gained national independence, forging a national identity and achieving national integration remain an uphill task. Islamic and Arab nationalism fueled the Middle Eastern countries' efforts to eradicate colonialism to gain national independence. However, Pan-Islamism and Pan-Arabism have also had some negative implications for these countries' national identity and integration. Radical factions in some countries have even vowed to put religion absolutely before the state. The chronic civil war in southern Sudan, the Kurdish issue haunting Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the power struggle between different religious factions in Lebanon, the separation of Cyprus and the crisis that resulted from different races and religious factions contending for power in Iraq – all these are evidence that achieving national integration is a painstaking and time-consuming endeavor for Middle Eastern countries.

Political legitimacy and succession crisis. In modern, democratic societies, political legitimacy comes from the modern legal system. However, the source of political legitimacy in Middle Eastern countries is diversified: modern legal systems, legendary leadership, monarchy and religious leadership. In some countries, so-called "evergreen politicians" have been in power for 20-30 years. These leaders' firm grip on power has on the one hand helped maintain social and political stability in their countries and on the other hand highlighted these countries' underdeveloped political democracy and potential crisis over leadership

succession.

Social and economic underdevelopment. Unlike other countries and regions, countries in the Middle East pursue economic development in a region plagued by lingering chaos and armed conflicts. Despite the fact that they have achieved remarkable economic development since the end of World War II and that some countries have even joined the club of rich countries, the Middle East has yet to lift itself from underdevelopment as a whole. Middle Eastern countries do not have a reasonable industrial structure. The few rich countries earn high incomes by exporting raw materials. Their main exports are primary materials, with industrial goods taking up only a small fraction of their export mix. In particular, electromechanical products and vehicles of transportation, which exemplify a country's industrial development, account for less than 2 percent of their exports. Seven of the 50 countries on the 2006 UN "least developed countries" list are in the Middle East.¹²

Despite the efforts of several generations, the Middle Eastern modernization process still has much to be desired, with its prospects being quite elusive. Modernization is a distant goal to some countries and territories in the region.

IV. Islamic Reform and Social Transition

In history, elites in Middle Eastern countries--rulers, leaders and social aristocrats--never stopped trying to change the underdeveloped situation in the region. Some social reforms and revolutions were carried out. But thorough religious reforms or revolutions never took place.

As early as over 10 years ago, I proposed that Islamic reform should be historically essential to the further development of Middle Eastern society (Islamic society). Without Islamic reform, Middle Eastern states are not able to fulfill their deep social transition or make remarkable social progress.¹³ Today, it can be said that this opinion has proven to be a common understanding.

In the long course of history, 10 years is just a short period, but it is quite an important period of development today when the world is progressing rapidly. Despite this, when we survey the fairly underdeveloped Middle East, we can hardly see a sign of forthcoming Islamic reform in the foreseeable future.

Then, how can we explain this? What has adversely affected or blocked the religious reform? From the angle of the history of world civilization, I believe explanations can be given from the following aspects, while considering the changes in the setup of international relations and the development of Middle Eastern society:

¹² Refer to <http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1030/4631585.html>.

¹³ Jinglie Wang, ed., *The Middle East towards the 21st Century* (Beijing: China Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 1999), pp. 5-6, 58-60.

1. *The advanced mode of production has not been introduced into Middle Eastern society.* Since the 1760s, the world has experienced three industrial revolutions. The first industrial revolution ushered the human beings to the steam era, and modern industry rapidly sprang up. It not only changed the social class structure, political relations and international relations, and people's lifestyles, thoughts and value trends, but also accelerated the urbanization process. The superiority of capitalism to feudalism was fully displayed. The second industrial revolution led the world to the electric era, when the political and economic modes of capitalism matured and the world capitalist system was established. In the mean time, the imbalances of political and economic development in major capitalist powers exacerbated, posing a severe threat to world peace and stability. The third industrial revolution brought the human beings into an era of knowledge-based economy. With its unprecedented depth and width, the revolution greatly changed the socioeconomic structure and people's lifestyles. Further, it prompted adjustments of the international economic structure.

The three industrial revolutions, or reformations of social production mode, not only exerted remarkable influences on the "social object"—the social development, but also inevitably affected the "social subjects"—people, communities and nations. The reformations of social production mode also improved people's quality of life and remolded the characters and spirit of different nations, processes that are indispensable to modernization. Researchers used to neglect the importance of remolding the national spirit, but this article will emphasize this point.

Analyzing the development of human society as a whole, we can conclude that the differences and political and economic imbalances of countries and regions determine that the countries and regions, including those in the Middle East, are not at the same level of development. Given the special situation in the Middle East, its political, social and economic development has lagged behind the other regions in the world. In particular, its social production mode is far behind that of the developed countries, causing widening developmental gaps between them. This is the main reason why Middle Eastern countries have long failed to lift themselves from poverty and underdevelopment. The underdeveloped social production mode has had deep and enormous influences on Middle Eastern society, as illustrated by the region's past and present.

Generally speaking, countries in the Middle East have not really experienced the three industrial revolutions. As a result, their defects become evident as they seek modernization.

2. *Middle Eastern society has failed to accept the ideologies of the rising classes in Europe.* When Europe sank into the Dark Ages, Arab countries in the Middle East translated a large number of Greek and Roman classics they had preserved into Arabic. These works were later taken back to Europe, becoming one of the cultural origins of the Renaissance.

However, entering the modern period, Middle Eastern countries were still obsessed with their superiority complex about their "golden era" in the Middle Ages, when the rising capitalist class with strong powers brought by industrial revolutions in Europe started to slash the "barbaric and uncivilized" regions and nations. Many thoughts of the then rising class should be highly regarded. For example, during the Renaissance in the 14th-16th century, the capitalists advocated humanism that underlines love of and respect for man. They celebrated humanity in opposition to feudal theocracy, and also advocated the "liberation of individuality" and "human nature." The Enlightenment challenged the authority of the church and the feudal system, advocating reason as the basis for human thoughts and actions. Deism and atheism were held in high esteem at that time, while enlightened absolutism, democracy and religious tolerance were promoted. According to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, adopted in 1789 in France, freedom, property, security and the right to resist oppression are "natural and imprescriptible rights of man."¹⁴ The declaration also put forth basic capitalist principles such as "popular sovereignty" and "separation of powers." The kernel of these ideas is still valid today. Popular sovereignty, separation of powers and democracy have been widely adopted in the construction of the political systems in many countries. Meanwhile, anti-feudalism, humanism and religious tolerance remain important conditions for getting rid of underdevelopment and building a harmonious world. Yet, some countries in the Middle East did not accept these ideas completely. Of course, the Western colonialists' expansion and their oppression over their colonies also hindered Middle Eastern countries' acceptance of these advanced concepts to a certain extent. As a result, some Middle Eastern countries are still under the influence of theocratic absolutism, the fusion of politics, religion and religious extremism.

3. *Limitations of Middle Eastern countries' social reforms in history.* As previously mentioned, Middle Eastern countries made great efforts to carry out social reforms aimed at prospering themselves in history. For example, Lebanese Emir Fakhreddine II designed a "Greater Lebanon" plan in the early 17th century; several caliphs of Ottoman Empire tried to conduct modernization and establish new orders in the 18th century; Egypt's Governor Mohamed Ali implemented policies to make his country rich and build up its military might in the early 19th century. Following these technical reforms, countries in the Middle East began to carry out political reforms and modernization drives on an institutional level in the mid-19th century. A number of modern independent nations were founded, leading to the emergence of a bloc of such nations in the 1970s. It should be noted that Middle Eastern countries have made great achievements as they pursue modernization. But these social reforms, due to the limitations of the Middle Eastern countries, did not completely change the undeveloped situation of the

¹⁴ Excerpted from *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, The Learning Company, Inc.

region.

The limitations of the social reforms mainly refer to the underdeveloped social production mode, which has not been changed despite all the reforms. The mode of production of the agricultural age, or the pre-industrial age, of course cannot improve productivity by a large margin, nor can it possibly help Middle Eastern countries catch up with industrialized countries.

Today, countries in the Middle East are turning into places where social elites and talents gather. For example, Egypt has produced four Nobel Prize winners. Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia is the first Arab astronaut. Researchers from the United Arab Emirates have left their footprints on the Antarctic ice cap. Former UN Secretary General Butros Butros Ghali is an Egyptian. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, an outstanding woman from the Kingdom of Bahrain, was the president of the 61st session of the UN General Assembly. In the Middle East, these elites, like brilliant pearls, have not yet been brought together to make a pearl necklace, i.e. to forge a synergy that can create bigger social values. The Middle East, as a whole, lacks enough elements of modernization--the root cause of the historical limitations of the social reforms in the region. In the final analysis, the problem is that Middle Eastern society has not experienced a real and complete transformation of mode of production.

4. *A victim of great power rivalry.* In history, countries in the Middle East used to be colonies or semi-colonies of Western powers. They were bought in or sold out among these great powers and were divided into different spheres of influence. After becoming independent, the countries were not able to eradicate the "legacy" of colonialism. For example, territorial disputes and cross-border ethnic issues are still haunting the Middle East, leading to chaos and conflicts in the region.

Big Western powers' policies towards the Middle East, especially the U.S.'s double standard, have not only further complicated the situation in the Middle East, but also triggered the confrontation between Middle Eastern nations and big Western countries. Ever since the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks, some Western countries which are very sensitive to terrorism and extremism tend to demonize Islam and Arabs. Further, the Greater Middle East Initiative, which is aimed at rebuilding the Middle East, has aggravated the confrontation. The United States has failed to bring peace, stability and development to this region despite its military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. U.S.'s military occupation and slaughtering civilians, maltreating prisoners and abusing *the Qu'ran* are sinking the country deeply into the war swamp. Even the Washington-sponsored new Iraqi Government is unsatisfied with U.S. behaviors. A spokesman of the Iraqi parliament publicly called U.S. soldiers "butchers" at a UN meeting on Iraq on July 22, 2006, and demanded an early U.S. withdrawal from Iraq.¹⁵ Besides, the United States is always tilted in favor of Israel, a stance that was evident in the recent 2006

¹⁵ Refer to <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/zd/news/2006/07-23/762516.shtml>.

conflict between Israel and Lebanon. It blocked the adoption of Qatar's ceasefire motion at the UN Security Council. As a result, the Palestinians and Lebanese once again became the victims of U.S.' Middle East policies.

The Arab-Islamic countries in the Middle East can do little to help war-torn Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, making it possible for religious extremist forces to grow and expand in the region.

5. *The Middle East has been plagued by wars and conflicts since the end of World War II.* The Middle East is the most turbulent area that has suffered the largest number of wars and conflicts since the end of World War II. Major wars include six Arab-Israeli wars (the Palestine War, Suez War, Six-day War, October War, Lebanon War and Second Lebanon War), the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, decade-long Afghanistan War and the three wars after the Cold War—Gulf War, Afghanistan War and Iraq War.

Chaos in the Middle East has the following characteristics:

Lasting for a long time. The Arab-Israeli conflict has lasted nearly 60 years to date. The three wars after the Cold War also had long-lasting consequences such as the economic sanctions imposed after the Gulf War, the stalemate in Iraq and the persistent instability in Afghanistan.

Causing tragic losses and damages to the countries involved. The calculable losses inflicted amount to hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars. With these expended materials and personnel, "another Middle East can almost be created."¹⁶ The wars and conflicts not only consumed large amounts of wealth, but also badly damaged social productivity. Worse still, the chaos had negative implications for the introduction and development of the new social production mode.

The vicious circle from arms race to wars. The Middle East has long been the biggest ammunition market in the world. The turbulent environment and frequent conflicts prompted every country to compete with each other in purchasing ammunitions. The countries' military budgets keep soaring. The region now is bogged in a vicious circle: "Wars lead to new rounds of arms race, and growing arsenal brew new wars."

6. *Underdeveloped socioeconomic situation.* There is no doubt that the establishment of national independent states in the Middle East paved the way for the region's modernization process materially and institutionally. However, its underdeveloped socioeconomic situation caused by a mixture of political, social, economical and international factors has not completely changed since the end of World War II. A few rich oil-producers in the region do not base their fortune on scientific and technological development and renovation, but on natural resource exports. The countries that got rich first introduced modern modes of consumption from developed countries instead of their modern modes of production. Also, rich oil-producing countries in the Middle East hire a large number of foreign

¹⁶ The Israel-Lebanon conflict that broke out in mid July 2006 killed more than 1,400 people, injured another 5,000 and inflicted economic losses of more than \$10 billion. Refer to <http://english.cri.cn/3126/2006/08/08/264@124079.htm>.

immigrants, resulting in a change in the population structure in the region (Foreign immigrants in UAE, Kuwait and Qatar account for 70 to 80 percent of these countries' total populations). The Middle East is viewed as home not only to a "renter" class, but also to "rentier" states. Given these facts, oil-producers in the Middle East are not developed countries, although they have already joined the "rich countries' club." It should be made clear that what decides the development levels and the outlook of a society is not the mode of the style of the material life, but the mode of social production, which is a basic Marxist view on religious and social transitions. Admittedly, the mode of social production in the Middle East has been gradually improving since the end of World War II, as evidenced by modern oil derricks erecting in the Persian Gulf areas, rising iron and steel industry in Anatolia, dockyards in Alexander, tremendous irrigation equipment and hydropower stations in Aswan, the Grand Artificial River in Libya, and the ammunition industry in Iran. Nevertheless, these changes are only partial. The Middle East still has a long way to go before realizing modernization.

V. Conclusion

The Middle East is in a transitional period and faces a lot of social contradictions. The contradictions have been made even worse in some countries with the rulers' mishandling of the various problems. As a result, confused and disappointed people are turning to traditional religion for solutions to these endless social problems and realizing a happy life in the future. Political oppositions in different countries are using religion as a political tool and persuading people to "return to religion." In the late 1970s, an Islamic Revolution took place in Iran. In the 1990s, the Islamic Salvation Front almost overthrew Algeria's nationalistic government. The Prosperity Party came to power in Turkey in the 1990s, too. In recent years, the Muslim Brotherhood has been participating in the parliaments of Egypt and Jordan. Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections in early 2006. All these are signs that non-secularization is making a comeback in the Middle East. The trend highlights the complexity of the development process in this region. Some scholars argue that without a thorough Islamic reform, the Middle East cannot achieve its social transition in a real sense.

As above mentioned, some Middle Eastern countries are not only underdeveloped in terms of their social and economic development but also slow in terms of their religious secularization. The region faces a lot of internal conflicts and rigorous external challenges. Islam is currently at a critical juncture. Islamic reform is regarded as an inherent requirement for further development in Middle Eastern society.