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THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
A dynamic cultural realm

Dallen J. Timothy

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a vast region of many natural and cultural landscapes. It is a realm united (and divided) by physical geography, anthropogenic imprints and living cultures. It is one of the major clusters of humankind on earth and home to two ancient culture hearths (the Nile Valley and the Fertile Crescent/Mesopotamia), from which many innovations diffused to other areas of the world, including certain agricultural systems and products, written language, the lunar calendar, and the wheel. The Arabian Peninsula and the Levant later became a hearth for the diffusion of religion (Islam, Judaism and Christianity), which has touched every corner of the globe. As the previous chapter denoted, MENA is also home to an immensely diverse natural environment and varied ecosystems that make the area resilient, unique, and attractive for tourism.

This chapter describes elements of the cultural geography of MENA that have a salient bearing on the development of tourism. It briefly examines the peoples, cultures, and heritages that characterise the region and assesses the cultural and natural assets that together provide the foundations of a flourishing tourism system.

Influential empires

Throughout history, MENA has been affected tremendously by internal and external forces. It is home to some of the oldest human civilisations, particularly in the Nile Valley and along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers which, as noted earlier, spurred the development of many innovations that the world enjoys today. Some of the earliest evidence of nomadic peoples settling into sedentary communities dates from the Levant approximately 12,000 BCE and are believed to have derived from a steady food supply and ample water. Verifiable towns and cities have been excavated from the Neolithic period around 10,000 years BCE. Some of the earliest cities were Memphis (Egypt), Uruk (in present-day Iraq), and Jericho (Palestine), which were home to sizeable populations (Anderson 2000). Today, the remnants of many Neolithic cities and towns dot the ancient landscapes of MENA.
MENA: A dynamic cultural realm

From these earliest settlements, large empires developed, representing the forerunners of the modern concept of the state. The Sumarians dominated much of ancient Mesopotamia from 3500 to 199 BCE. The Egyptian Empire in various forms lasted from approximately 3050 BCE until being conquered by the Romans in 30 BCE. The Babylonians and Assyrians controlled much of the Middle East from 1895 BCE to 500 BCE. These were followed by periods where large swaths of MENA were under the imperial rule of the ancient Persians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans and Byzantines (Eastern Roman Empire) and many smaller empires. The height of the Byzantine Empire occurred in 550 CE at which time it controlled most of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. Soon after, however, the Muslim conquests shrunk the Byzantine Empire dramatically and ushered in the Arab Empire (632–1258 CE), which became the dominant force in the region and the most influential in terms of its cultural impacts which remain today. All of the countries of MENA today, except parts of Turkey and parts of a few North African states, were under the control of the Arab Empire. The most obvious vestiges of that realm are the Arabic language, Islamic religion, and Arab architecture (Lew, Hall, & Timothy 2015). The Ottoman Empire, centred in today’s Turkey, eventually became the ruling power over much of MENA from 1299 CE until its collapse in 1923 CE as a result of the First World War.

These empires all played a crucial part in the spread of ideas and innovations from their hearths to outlying areas, helping to create standardised cultural, agricultural, linguistic and religious practices. They became the hubs of invention and technology. They contributed much in the areas of medicine, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, art, transportation, military warfare, farm tools and equipment, and travel. The invention and diffusion of wheeled carriages and sailing vessels thousands of years ago in Mesopotamia were a colossal boost for human mobility. This resulted in increased levels of trade throughout the world. Places that were accessible by sea saw the most lucrative trade, although camel and carriage caravans were an important means of travel and trade throughout Southwest Asia and North Africa. Goods from Africa, Europe and Asia criss-crossed the Middle East, resulting in established transportation corridors and trade routes and the growth of nodes of commerce that eventually became important cities. Populations grew as trade grew, and elements of culture, including language, religion, food and agricultural production, and cultural practices, were dispersed along major trading routes (Shackley 2002).

Religious dominions

Much of today’s cultural landscape is directly connected to the religious heritages that dominate MENA, including those of Jews, Christians and Muslims (Sharkey 2017). The early Jewish diaspora began several hundred years BCE as many Israelites were taken captive, exiled and otherwise forced out of their homeland by various invading superpowers (e.g. Assyrians and Babylonians) and perhaps through early migration to what is now Ethiopia. During the Roman period, many Jews had spread to other parts of the empire, some of whom fled the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, or were taken as prisoners to Europe. The dispersion of Jews continued after the fall of Rome, during the Middle Ages and into the modern era, with millions of them living throughout Europe and other parts of MENA by the seventeenth century. After the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492, many ended up settling in North Africa, and other large Jewish populations settled in the Americas, Asia and Oceania from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, in large part through the process of European colonisation. At the time modern Israel was established in 1948, there were approximately 76,000 Jews in Palestine,
although most of these had arrived from elsewhere during the previous 40 years (League of Nations 1921). The countries surrounding Palestine had sizeable Jewish populations, in particular Iraq, Morocco, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia (Simon, Laskier, & Reguer 2002).

Soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostles began evangelising throughout the eastern Mediterranean in areas that are today in Turkey, Malta, Greece, Cyprus and Italy. Many of them met their demise during their missionary efforts and died as martyrs for the cause, yet their efforts to spread the Christian message were not deterred. Christianity spread throughout Europe and the Caucasus rather quickly until it eventually pervaded most of Europe and various parts of the Middle East (Evans 2017). Within a few centuries after the time of Christ, Christian churches were built throughout Europe, and church shrines associated with the life and ministry of Jesus had developed throughout the lands. Pilgrimages to the lands of Jesus from Armenia, Georgia and other countries in Europe began soon after the death of Christ, and Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land were commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, although it slowed considerably with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as certain Christian sects began prohibiting pilgrimage travel (Ron & Timothy 2019).

After its foundation in the early seventh century, Islam spread throughout much of the Mediterranean, Southwest Asia and North Africa by means of conquests, geographic expansion of various caliphates and empires, and eventually further afield through trade. Islam replaced Christianity in parts of Europe and the Middle East, as well as Buddhism and Hinduism in areas of South and Southeast Asia. The spread of Islam is one of the most influential factors that today define the boundaries of the Middle East and North Africa. The foundation of Islam as the primary religion in the Middle East was secured with the growth of the Arab Empire and later the Ottoman Empire, which had adopted Islam as the state religion and which, by the end of the seventeenth century, had usurped much of the populated territory of today’s MENA region. Islam is, perhaps more than any other cultural force, the most influential factor in regional politics, economics, education, law, social mores, tangible and intangible heritage, and tourism development (Timothy & Daher 2009).

Cultures of today

European colonialism had a crucial role to play in the development of the contemporary cultural and political landscapes of MENA. Through a series of conquests in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several European powers usurped land in North Africa from the Ottoman Empire. The British acquired Egypt in 1882. The French acquired Algeria in 1830, Tunisia in 1881 and most of Morocco in 1911. Spain acquired portions of Morocco and Western Sahara in 1912, and Italy took over Libya in 1911. During the mid-nineteenth century, the British gained control over much of the southeastern portion of the Arabian Peninsula (including southern Yemen, Oman and the Trucial States (now the United Arab Emirates)). These areas had not been colonised by the Ottomans, but the British intervened in the region to expand their own colonial interests.

Prior to the First World War, the Ottoman Empire continued to hold sovereignty over the areas of modern-day Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, much of Syria, coastal portions of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, much of Kuwait, and large portions of Iraq. With the WWI collapse of the Ottoman Empire, however, these territories were divided between French and British control. Syria and Lebanon came under French rule, while Iraq, Syria, Jordan and Palestine became British mandates/protektorates. Only Turkey and Iran remained independent throughout the European colonial period, although parts of both countries were under the heavy influence
of European powers. From the 1800s, there were many efforts by several colonies to become independent states, but most only succeeded between the 1940s and 1960s. The young states of the Arabian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula emerged as independent countries from British protectorate in the 1960s and 1970s, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, North Yemen and South Yemen (the two Yemens united in 1990).

Perhaps the most controversial element of colonial influence was the establishment of Israel in 1948. After the British Mandate of Palestine was established in 1922, the British government, under heavy pressure from the Zionist movement, agreed to establish Palestine as a homeland for the world's diasporic Jews. In response to centuries of antisemitism, suppressed rights and intensifying persecution, especially in Europe, Zionism commenced in the late 1800s with the primary goal of reclaiming the Jewish homeland. The UK's Balfour Declaration effectively opened the mandate's borders to Jewish immigration from across the globe, often resulting in the seizure of land and communities that were already inhabited by the local Arab population. This resulted in the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the homes and communities they had occupied for many generations. This, of course, raised considerable tension between the repatriated Jews and the extant Arab inhabitants, leading to frequent skirmishes and attacks against the diasporic returnees. In November 1947, the United Nations proffered a plan to partition the territory into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state. The Jews accepted the resolution, but the Arabs rejected it. As a result of this rejection, the ongoing battles with their Arab neighbours, and the growing need to provide homes for the despondent refugees from devastated Europe, on 14 May 1948, Israel declared independence, which was recognised soon after by several countries and eventually by the majority of countries. Many primarily Muslim countries in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa still do not officially recognise Israel's independence. Iran initially recognised the new state but withdrew its support in 1979 at the time of the Islamic Revolution. A day after Israel's declaration of independence, the 1948 Arab–Israeli War broke out between Israel and its Arab neighbours (the Arab League) and lasted nearly ten months. The existence of the State of Israel lies at the core of many of the security problems, wars and extremist activity that dominate the region's headlines.

Religion

As noted above, one of the main legacies of the Arab Empire was the Islamisation of MENA. Today, more than 90 per cent of the region's population adheres to Islam. In some countries, the number hovers close to 100 per cent (e.g. Algeria, Morocco, Yemen). Islam is divided between two major sects: the Sunnis and the Shiites. There are other Islamic factions as well, such as Sufism, Khwarj and Ahmadiyya, but these tend not to be closely associated with the larger sects. Even within Shia and Sunni Islam there are various subsects, branches and schools of thought that differ in several doctrinal ways and according to questions of prophetic succession (e.g. Alawites, Ismailis, Zaidis). Most of the countries of MENA have a Sunni majority. The exceptions are Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, where Shia Islam dominates, but these states also have significant Sunni minorities. Yemen's population is approximately two-thirds Sunnis and one-third Shiites, and most countries in the region are home to other minority Muslim populations.

While Islam is one cultural criterion often used to define MENA, there are millions of people who adhere to other religions (see Table 3.1). Christianity is the second most populous religion in MENA (approximately 15 million adherents), followed by Judaism and several other faiths. Christians comprise approximately 41 per cent of Lebanon’s population. Other countries with large Christian minorities include Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Iraq, Iran, Palestine and Turkey. The main traditional Christian denominations in the region include Maronites,
Coptic Christians, Melkites, Assyrian and Syriac Christians, Armenian Christians, Greek and Arab Christians, and various Orthodox sects. The Gulf States’ expatriate and guest workforce from countries in Asia (e.g. the Philippines), Africa, Europe and North America account for the high numbers of non-traditional Middle Eastern Christians living in several Gulf States (e.g. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE).

There are nearly 6.6 million Jews living throughout MENA, with the obvious majority residing in Israel. Before the foundation of Israel in 1948, hundreds of thousands of Jews were scattered throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Today, however, owing to harassment and discrimination in many of the countries where they had lived for centuries as well as Israel’s Law of Return, which gives Jews everywhere a pathway to live in Israel and receive Israeli citizenship, relatively few Jews live in the Middle East outside of Israel. Many were expelled from Arab states, while others chose to migrate to Israel and become Israelis. The exception to few Jews living in Arab states is Palestine, where thousands of Jews live in the West Bank, on land that has been appropriated from the Palestinians by the Israeli government for building Jewish
settlements. Although the Jewish population in countries such as Morocco, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran and Iraq has dwindled significantly through emigration since the establishment of Israel, many Jewish historic places, such as tombs, urban neighbourhoods and synagogues, and a few Jewish strongholds with small remnant populations (e.g. Djerba Island, Tunisia) remain in a handful of countries.

Besides the three Abrahamic religions, there are other faith-based minorities in MENA. The high number of ‘other’ adherents in countries such as Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE is also attributable to those countries’ large expatriate workforces. Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs make up the largest portion of the other believers, who come to the region largely from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Thailand to work in construction, services and domestic labour.

The ‘other’ category also includes Druze, the Bahá’í Faith and a handful of other small groups (e.g. Samaritans). Druze is an ancient monotheistic religion from the tenth century, founded partly on Islamic teachings but including additional dogmas that are not accepted by mainstream Islam, including reincarnation, Greek philosophy and ideas borrowed from Christianity and other faiths. They speak Arabic and practise secret ceremonies and rites that are passed down through initiatory rituals. Large Druze populations are located in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. The Bahá’í Faith was established in 1863 in Iran and Syria and is a syncretic creed that accepts the value of all religions and promotes the unity of humankind. Bahá’ís live throughout MENA but have a particularly strong presence in Iran and Israel (where the religion’s headquarters is located and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site) (Collins-Kreiner & Gatrell 2006).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity in this part of the world is a social group identity, often based on language together with religion and a shared history more so than racial characteristics. It does not follow a precise definition and frequently does not adhere to state boundaries. The majority of people in North Africa and the Middle East speak Arabic, identify as Arabs and, as already noted, practise Islam. However, there are some notable exceptions to this. Several parts of the region can be classified as Islamic but not Arab (Lew, Hall, & Timothy 2015). These include Turkey, Iran, much of Morocco, and northern Iraq (Kurdistan), and of course, most Israelis would not identify as Arabs or Muslims. While Arabness dominates the cultural landscapes of North Africa and the Middle East, there is a much wider assortment of ethno-linguistic groups in MENA than only Arabs. Table 3.2 highlights several of these and outlines the countries where they are most common. The Arabs are believed to have derived from the nomadic Bedouins that have roamed the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa for millennia, herding goats and camels. Their main sources of nourishment came from these animals and centred mostly on milk products and meat. Their animal husbandry traditions and itinerant lifestyles saw the development of many cultural characteristics that remain today and have important tourism implications: camel races, camel-based transportation, poetry and oral traditions, dancing, and a strong social order. As well, the languages and dialects spoken by the Bedouins were considered the purist form of Arabic and were therefore used to standardise the language throughout the region (Holes 2004).

Fearing that the Bedouins would continue to undermine Ottoman sovereignty in the region, in the late 1800s, the Ottoman rulers began forced Bedouin sedentism into towns and villages. While this had varying degrees of success, it did begin the gradual change amongst many groups from nomadic living to sedentary living with alterative employment and livelihoods, including tourism (Falah 1985). Later, in the twentieth century, based upon pressure from the emerging states in the region to have a stable and governable population, together with growing trade and its economic influence, many nomadic peoples gave up their itinerant lifestyles and settled in
organised communities, adopting agriculture and commerce as a more secure livelihood. With this change, cities have grown, and many indigenous tribes and ethnic groups in MENA have become involved in the tourism sector (Abuamoud, Libbin, Green, & Al Rousan 2014; Al-Oun & Al-Homoud 2008). Today, the Bedouins continue to have a strong sense of identity. While many Bedouins now live in permanent settlements, even in urban neighbourhoods, thousands continue to roam the deserts of North Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula (Chatty 2006; Keohane 2011; Dehau & Bonte 2007).

The southern parts of Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, and much of Morocco, are sparsely populated owing to their extreme heat and aridity, but the Sahara Desert has been the abode of the Berbers for thousands of years. Berbers (or Amazigh people) are indigenous to North Africa, and live primarily in Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia but are not Arabs. Many Amazigh tribes were traditionally sedentary farmers, although some of the southern tribes practised, and continue to practise, nomadic herding and transhumance. They speak a variety of dialects of Berber—a non-Arabic language. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of the Berber identity in North Africa, including native language use (Maddy-Weitzman 2011; Sadiqi 2014). One result of their efforts towards more equitable recognition has been Berber being recognised as an official language of Morocco in 2011 and in Algeria in 2016 together with Arabic. Between one-quarter and one-third of the population of Morocco speaks Berber, and approximately one-third of Algeria’s population speaks Berber. French is a common language of commerce and education in both countries as well. Hundreds of years ago, the Berbers converted to Islam through the Muslim conquests and Arab Empire, although they are known for practising a form of Islam that blends Muslim doctrines and practices with their native rites and rituals (Silverstein 2012).

The Berbers’ unique culture, language, food and traditional lifestyles have started to receive considerable tourist attention during the past 20 years, and many Berber communities in North Africa have involved themselves in tourism (Hoffman & Miller 2010; Rogers 2012), with some observers voicing concerns over how the industry might change these Sahara Desert natives the way it has other people in the region (Silverstein 2010).

The Persians, Kurds, Azeris, Balochs, Copts, Turks, Assyrians and other groups have also played important roles in the development of the Middle East’s cultural landscapes (Stewart

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Table 3.2 Examples of the peoples of MENA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethno-linguistic group</th>
<th>MENA countries with significant population</th>
<th>Language family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arabs</td>
<td>Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jews</td>
<td>Israel, Iran, Morocco, Palestine</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copts</td>
<td>Egypt, Libya</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assyrians/Chaldeans</td>
<td>Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berbers</td>
<td>Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel</td>
<td>Kemetic/Berber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turks</td>
<td>Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Libya</td>
<td>Turkic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurds</td>
<td>Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey</td>
<td>Indo-European</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circassians</td>
<td>Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persians</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Indo-European</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balochs</td>
<td>Iran, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Indo-European</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azeris</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Turkic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s compilation.
2013). They are culturally unique and speak distinct languages, occupy inimitable environments, and practise diverging forms of Islam and Christianity. As well, many of them are involved in tourism as service providers, yet they are not as intentionally sought out by tourists as an attraction as the Berbers and Bedouins are. Much of this can be attributed to the romanticised impressions of the latter that were so often the substance of travel writings and novels from the Middle Ages onward by the likes of Ibn Battuta, Leo Africanus and T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), and later through Hollywood-produced motion pictures.

**Geopolitics**

One of MENA’s unfortunate impressions on the world stage is its proclivity for conflict and war. This is not a recent development. The ancient nomads of North Africa and the Middle East were known for their ferocious fighting skills and tendencies, which they demonstrated through inter-tribal warfare and hostilities against imperial and colonial invaders. Berber tribesmen were frequently engaged to protect governors and places of governance during ancient and colonial times.

Many imperial actions pitted tribe against tribe and later colonial events resulted in outright war. The 1917 Balfour Declaration, which set in motion the establishment of Israel by designating the British Mandate of Palestine as the location for a ‘national home for the Jewish people’, was a pivotal turning point in the relationship between the Middle East’s Jewish and Arab populations. Neighbouring Arabs felt betrayed by the British, and the inhabitants of Palestine, who were Muslim and Christian Arabs with only a small Jewish minority, protested profusely. The consequences of this infamous pronouncement were the founding of a Jewish state and a persistent conflict between the Arabs and Jews of the Middle East (Watts 2008). The majority of states in MENA still have not recognised the establishment of Israel. Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Iran are the only exceptions, although as noted previously, Iran revoked its recognition in 1979 and is one of the most hostile countries against Israel.

Following the US terror attacks of 11 September 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan, the stronghold of al-Qaeda, the terrorist organisation responsible for the attack. The US and some of its allies invaded Iraq two years later, which was ostensibly for the purpose of deposing Saddam Hussein and his support for terrorism and to destroy his stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, which never materialised. While it achieved some of its goals, the US-led offensive contributed to the destabilisation of Iraq and much of the broader region, which allowed terrorist groups to get a foothold in Iraq. The Iraq War decimated much of the country’s infrastructure, cost thousands of lives, and created a power vacuum that resulted in belligerent groups fighting amongst themselves in a domestic context. A consequence of the 2011 US troop withdrawal was increased sectarian violence and power struggles within Iraq until a full-blown civil war broke out in 2014.

In December 2010, in response to long-time authoritarian regimes and people’s desire for a better life, a string of violent and non-violent protests began in Tunisia and quickly spread through North Africa and the Middle East. This ‘Arab Spring’ affected Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain more than other countries in the region and with the result that governments were overthrown, dictators were imprisoned and/or executed, and civil wars ensued (Gause 2011; Haas 2018). Following the fall of Yemen’s autocratic president in 2011, insurgent groups began controlling large areas of the country, and opposing political factions began infighting. After a brief period of rest and the formation of a unity government, civil war broke out in 2015, which has tangled not only political factions within Yemen but also involved Iran and Saudi Arabia in the country’s turmoil.
Another outcome of the Arab Spring was the Syrian civil war between the government forces supporting President Bashar al-Assad and various rebel organisations that had tried to overthrow the Assad regime. This also severely destabilised Syria, which led to conditions that allowed the establishment and growth of ISIS/ISIL (Islamic State), another terrorism organisation that ended up infiltrating and controlling large portions of Syria and Iraq between 2011 and 2018. The Syrian Civil War has had spillover effects into neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, which also suffered from ISIS-related insecurity between 2012 and 2018, in addition to its own internal conflicts related to the Kurdish minority and the insurrection of anti-government opposition groups (Gunter 2015). As of spring 2018, much of ISIS had been defeated by allied forces, although small pockets remained. The Arab Spring revolts also led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi and the collapse of the Libyan state. At the time of writing, Libya is divided between two factions and is plagued by continued violence and insecurity, and is considered by many commentators to be a ‘failed state’ (Lynch 2016).

This overview provides only a glance at some of the many conflicts that have long plagued MENA. Others include the Dhofar Rebellion/Omani Civil War (1962–1976), the Arab–Israeli War (1967), the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), the Turkish–Kurdish conflict (1978–present) and the Gulf War (1990–1991). Many other hostilities have lasted shorter periods of time (Davidson 2016; Heing 2017; Tucker 2010).

This troubled geopolitical history has stayed the hand of tourism development in several countries and areas of MENA (Mansfeld 1996). Tourists are especially cautious about travelling to risky destinations, which has affected the industry’s growth in the region. Nevertheless, even political tensions can be tourist attractions after the fact. Some localities have capitalised on this fact where war zones (active and former), hostile borders and areas of notable conflict have drawn significant tourist attention (Gelbman & Timothy 2010). Hostility in the Middle East has also spurred the development of ‘solidarity tourism’ or ‘justice tourism’ with the most prominent case being the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. There is a growing segment of travellers who travel in solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Isaac & Hodge 2011; Ron & Timothy 2019). They visit the Palestinians in the West Bank and participate in political rallies in a show of support for their struggle with Israel. On the other side, there is a large cohort of Israel supporters whose visits are motivated in part at least for the purpose of demonstrating solidarity with the State of Israel.

Cultural heritage

Colonialism, indigeneity, religion, ethnic identity, language and geopolitics are all part of the cultural heritage of the Middle East and North Africa. Because of harsh climatic conditions that made nomadism increasingly challenging, the domestication of plants and animals through agricultural practices, and the development of long-distance trade routes, towns and cities developed in the region and became nodes of transportation, commerce and governance.

Successive empires and later European metropoles took advantage of these nascent patterns of urbanisation to establish their colonial capitals from which they could rule and tax their colonial subjects. The ancient imperial footprint in MENA manifests today in the region’s vast collection of archaeological sites and ancient cities that testify of successive empires and their desires to conquer, destroy and rebuild. Cyrene, Libya, is an outstanding example of a Greek and Roman city on the Mediterranean coast. Baalbek, Lebanon, is home to one of the best-preserved Roman temples in the entire Levant. The Kasbah of Algiers is a prime example of Ottoman architecture. Iraq is home to exceptional remnants of Assyrian and Babylonian civilisations. The physical imprint of the Phoenicians, Byzantines and other superpowers is
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evident in many localities as well. Arab and Muslim urban design and architecture, including souqs and medinas, pervade the entire region from the time of the Arab Empire (Baker 2003; Timothy & Daher 2009). At the same time, the French, British, Italian and Spanish architectural influence on the cityscapes of MENA is unmistakable (Khirfan 2017). Much of the area’s built heritage centres on religion. Some of the most monumental mosques, churches, temples and synagogues anywhere in the world are located in MENA.

Transportation systems are another legacy of the empires and colonisers. Many of the highways and roads in MENA today directly overlay or parallel the transport routes established by imperial governors. Rome established the most omnipresent road network in the Middle East, and many Roman roads were the footings of today’s thoroughfares in the region. As well, some of the ancient ports dug, developed and reinforced by the Egyptians, Romans, Phoenicians and Greeks remain important seaports and harbours to the present day. Likewise, many railways established by European colonialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remain part of the transport infrastructure of the modern states of the region, while others have fallen into disrepair and are seen as heritage corridors (Orbaşlı & Woodward 2008).

Beyond its enormous catalog of material culture, MENA is home to a vast intangible heritage, which often swells people’s sense of identity and pride more so than the tangible past does—largely because the intangible patrimony better reflects resilience and resistance to outside forces. Languages, religious practices, music, dance, nomadic living, hunting skills and falconry, poetry and oral traditions all lay the foundation of the proud heritage of the Middle East and North Africa (Baker 2003). Regional food traditions strongly reflect this pride and the physical and social conditions that have determined people’s behaviours and needs since the beginning of time. Cuisine reflects humankind’s struggles with nature and environment, disease and poverty, wealth and opulence, colonialism and indigeneity. It is in essence a repository of the human story. Middle Eastern food reflects these issues well and has become one of the world’s iconic foods in the Middle East and outside the region (Zubaida & Tapper 1994).

**Conclusion**

Together with the natural environment described in the previous chapter, the cultural landscapes of the Middle East and North Africa reflect a proud heritage of a diverse people and set the backdrop for tourism development. While the wars and turmoil that have beleaguered this region for centuries, especially since nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial times, have inhibited the growth of tourism in some countries, this hampering effect is not seen universally as a negative issue. This is especially so where the tenets of tourism are perceived to be disharmonious with local social and religious standards (Ekiz, Öter, & Stephenson 2017; Hazbun 2006).

Successive empires that controlled most of the Middle East and much of North Africa during the past few thousand years left a significant imprint on the cultural and political landscapes. Urban design, architecture, political systems, religious traditions, and patterns of conflict are all connected to the region’s imperial and colonial history. The imperialists dictated the course of history and left behind pervasive evidence of outside control and subjugation. Colonial actions resulted in political boundaries that often do not correspond to tribal, linguistic or ethnic lines, and decisions made in faraway metropoles a century ago continue to perpetuate regional conflicts.

Despite all of this, MENA remains a vibrant region full of ancient cultures, historic sites, native hospitality, enigmatic places, and imposing deserts that draw seekers of ‘otherness’ from around the globe.
References


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