

# Media and Culture in the Middle East

## *An Introduction*

The Middle East and North Africa (used interchangeably with the Middle East) remain at the crossroads of competing histories and interests, a site for encountering political, economic, and social experiments, and a place for making sense of global debates. *The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East* features contributions from various disciplines that assess the past, present, and the struggle for the future of media and cultural resources, analyze forms of media organizations and expressions, as well as examine producers, audiences, and users in the region. It offers fresh insights into old debates about Orientalism, development, religion, and culture. It also opens new vistas for emerging questions on the roles of intellectuals, artists, movements, minorities, women, and youth.

The Handbook pays specific attention to some of the drastic transformations that took place in the Middle East since the beginning of the twenty-first century, which nonetheless had implications for the rest of the world. Among these are the “War on Terror” and the US-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of Gulf countries as new centers of cultural and media power, and evolving interregional rivalries and alliances. Other critical junctures include the Arab uprisings (2010–), the permanent state of conflict, and the ensuing humanitarian crises, which irrevocably changed the sociopolitical landscape and created ripple effects across the region and beyond.

Changes and continuities in media and culture are at the forefront of the analyses presented in the Handbook. The transformation of media systems (from state monopoly to clientelist commercialization) is interwoven with the political-economic changes in other sectors that have swept the region since the 1980s. Moreover, the explosion onto the scene of satellite television, followed by public access to the internet, has been heralded as the most unambiguous indication of the forces of globalization, renewed faith in the role of communications for social change, and the prospects for democratization through media. Such transformation has not only paved the way for new business and cultural avenues but also created new sources of social and political authorities that rival

*The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East*, First Edition.

Edited by Joe F. Khalil, Gholam Khiabany, Tourya Guaaybess, and Bilge Yesil.

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and subvert established hegemonies to certain degrees. The regionally and internationally recognized media “brands” from the Middle East have been an essential topic in global communications since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Moreover, the advent of a digital Middle East has complicated the media landscape, multiplying venues for information and entertainment and empowering independent content creators. The expansion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) markets and the push toward what has been dubbed a “knowledge-based” economy are likely to transform the region further, simultaneously increasing precarity and ushering in entrepreneurial and innovative opportunities. Despite these changes, however, the Middle East continues to suffer from the persistence of authoritarian politics, the resurgence of conservative forces, and enduring corruption and cronyism.

There is now burgeoning literature that engages with the transformations in news and information systems across the region, particularly emphasizing citizen journalism and alternative media. Scholarly analyses of journalistic practices have multiplied in light of the involvement of regional and international actors in a great power game in Syria, the emergence of ISIS and the fight against it, and the rise of (semi-) autonomous Kurdish regions in northern Syria. In the field of entertainment, the salience of Egypt and Syria as hubs of cultural production has been diminished due to the Arab uprisings, and eclipsed by the multiplying centers of cultural production. At the same time, Turkey emerged as a leading exporter of television series. Turkish shows have presented international audiences with particular expressions of secular and Muslim, Westernized and traditional modernity, first in the Middle East and then expanding to Latin America, the Balkans, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Last but not least, new technologies and platforms have brought a vast catalog of film, television, and music from the Middle East to the attention of international audiences. Netflix, for example, has a steady stream of Arabic, Turkish, and Farsi content with collections such as “Celebrating Arab Cinema” and “Made in Turkey.” Given the developments in communication technologies and changing distribution and consumption patterns, media from the Middle East are no longer limited to diasporic audiences or accessible only via unauthorized websites.

The Middle East is also in the throes of sociocultural and political changes. The constantly reinvigorated revolutionary fervor in Iran (2009–), the Arab region (2010–), and Turkey (2013) reveals the region’s sociocultural, political, and economic disjunctures. Social movements in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, and Turkey, to mention just a few, have spotlighted the contentious politics across the region. Minorities, women, LGBTQI+, and the youth all play an essential role in these mobilizations and demand political, economic, and social change, often entering into alliances with international solidarity networks.

Since the turn of the century, momentous changes in the Middle East’s politics, economy, technology, and culture generated opportunities and risks for media and cultural producers, activists, and marginalized groups. It is not surprising that interest in Middle East media and culture has moved beyond the confines of area studies to become integral in core curricula and at academic conferences about politics, globalization, and international relations. This Handbook is an essential guide to understanding these changes in light of the global social mutations and the region’s cultural transformations. It expands the common understanding of Middle East media to include mass media,

digital/social media, alternative media, visual culture, and the arts. It provides conceptual and empirical analyses through the lens of media, culture, and history. As much as possible, our contributors include established and emerging academic voices whose work has not been widely circulated in Anglo-Saxon academic spheres.

## Defining the Middle East

Among the legacies of the Middle East's popular uprisings are the changing perceptions about the region being in the grip of an authoritarian spell that had slowed down the flow of time. The myth of authoritarian survival in the region is so deep and intense that the uprisings came as a shock to the West. One colorful description of the uprisings was "Arab Awakening," which, considering the long struggle for democracy in the region, raises the question of who was actually sleeping. The failure of Arab uprisings is now equated with the "Islamic failure to democratize," and the myth of "Islamic" exceptionalism keeps marching on. Needless to say, this presumed inability of a significantly large world population to embrace democracy and, consequently, change is hardly "exceptional."

Nevertheless, what if we begin to move away from methodological nationalism and think about capitalism as a global system – or, to be precise, as imperialism – and consider the majority of capitalist states and reconsider the region as not in isolation but as an essential link in the chain of what has invariably been called the world system? In that case, it is easy to see capitalism not as a Siamese twin of democracy but as a system of political coercion and economic destitution. The power of capital (domestic and international) in the Middle East comes out of the barrel of a gun.

The old polarity of the Cold War and the assertion that democracy is essentially capitalist raises an uncomfortable question about the relationship between capitalist development and democracy in general, particularly in the Middle East. We can trace the analytical problem about the relationship between capitalism and democracy to the broader issue of the origin and expansion of capitalism. In particular, what Martin has labeled as "the specific line of causality and sequence of capitalist socioeconomic and political development" (2012, 38). This specific line of causality is central in a particular evolutionary view of history as a sequence of steps and progress towards greater freedom. It is one of the reasons that the Middle East has been regarded as exceptional and has some kind of transgression of the "law of history."

A specific line of causality and sequence of capitalist socioeconomic and political development also informed the modernization school. Its proponents saw the development of capitalism in what is now indiscriminately labeled as "the Global South" as unproblematic and mechanical, changing societies from static, agricultural, and primitive to dynamic, industrialized, urbanized, and rational nation-states. Yet, in most cases, particularly in Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* (1975, 45), political participation was never a priority. As Peter Golding has pointed out, Lerner was careful to place "institutions of participation" (e.g. voting) at the end of causal chain—nothing being worse than unready electorate. The "development," of course, did take place. Now the region and its mediascape are totally unrecognizable from what they were in the early

twentieth century. Yet, democracy is as elusive as ever despite a media explosion in quantity, quality, and political terms.

What is labeled as the Middle East is a geographically leaky term. The term is a construct, a strategic concept by the British Empire. As Sreberny (2001, 102) has argued, the region is “a highly differentiated region, along many different kinds of social variables.” Even the Arab World, in which there is a strong and real feeling of collective identity, is highly differentiated and can be divided into three groups: the rentier states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Libya, Iraq, and Algeria), the strategic states (Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Morocco), and the peripheral states, which are actually peripheries within the periphery (Sudan, Mauritania, Western Sahara, Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros islands). The periphery states do not play a significant political role in the region, and it is no accident that they remained “immune” from the revolutionary fervor of the “Arab Spring” in 2011. To be sure, even these groupings can be a little misleading, for in each some variations and diversities cannot be ignored. For example, Egypt is the most populous country in the Arab Middle East, and more than 22% of the region’s people live there. Compare this with Lebanon, another country in the “strategic states” group with only a 1% share of the region’s population. Egypt has been under authoritarian rule, while Lebanon has a sectarian power-sharing structure of governance. The two countries have played a significant political and cultural role in the region. Despite their differences, both countries have been essential media and cultural production hubs. Above all, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the countries in the “strategic states” group remain the weakest link in the region. This is where the heart of Arab revolts did beat the strongest.

Of particular importance in recent decades has been the emergence and “formation of large capital-groups that dominate the respective economies of the new regional block” (Hanieh 2010, 23). The members of the small Arab states gathered under the umbrella of the Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) with a total population of 59.4 million, according to the latest data by the World Bank, of which almost half are migrant workers, have a combined economic output of over \$1.3 trillion. It is important to remember that some of these GCC countries’ gross per capita domestic product is much higher than the average of OECD member countries. Notably, the Gulf capitals have also been central to regional media’s rise, development, and expansion regionally and globally. One of the striking features of the region is the wide variation among countries in terms of their population, literacy rates, expenditures on health and education, and gross national product (GNP) per capita. There is a close correlation between the wealth of countries and access to means of communication and investment in cultural preservation.

A crucial and related factor in the apparent disconnect between capitalism and democracy in the region is the role of arms manufacturers (alongside oil companies). Their profit depends on particular political arrangements in the region. For some writers (Harris 2016), militarization has been the overriding factor determining the region’s trajectory. According to Harris, since the 1970s, the region has been in almost a permanent state of war, including national-expansionist projects with US support: Israel in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and the Sinai; Iraq into Iran (1980s); Saudis in Yemen; and Iranian expansionism in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Imperialist interventions, rather than acting as a catalyst for democracy, have delayed the fall of dictatorships. Pushing

the economic and political leadership of the region toward the Gulf monarchies has been one significant outcome of this permanent state of tension. As a result, military expenditure in the region remains among the highest in the developing world, with only a few countries matching this level of military spending. What is idiosyncratic about the Middle East is precisely related to such figures, which stem from its peculiar colonial legacy. In Henry's view (2003), the region's most important and distinctive characteristic is neither religion, language, nor culture, but a colonial legacy that has continued to paralyze it. As Timothy Mitchell (2011) has argued, the existence of "Western democracy" has depended on the undemocratic Middle East.

## Cultures of the Middle East

There is much debate over the meanings and characteristics of culture in the Middle East and North Africa. Scholarship in the humanities tends to celebrate the region as a cultural mosaic where communities come together to represent a variety of ways of life, including the arts, beliefs, customs, rituals, religion, and arts. At the same time, literature in the social sciences considers such diversity as one source for the region's political, economic, and sociocultural predicaments, often characterized by resistance to change. Still, news reporting and popular media tend to represent the region as one where cultures are in perpetual conflict. Informed reporting blames a constellation of factors – colonialism, authoritarianism, religious interpretations, economic disparities, and sociocultural norms – which, they argue, turned the region into a breeding ground for radicalized groups. However, recent Western reporting, particularly over the last two decades, characterized the Middle East as a site of (positive) rage and rebellion where youth demographics play a significant role in the region's political and sociocultural movements. In much of the framing of the Middle East and North Africa, persistent tropes continue to dominate how regional cultures are described, from eighteenth-century European travelers' and artists' works to twenty-first-century digital media content (e.g. film, animation, video games, and others).

The mosaic framework of ethnicities, languages, and cultures is anchored in Orientalist scholarship that describes the Middle East at the crossroads of civilizations, where East meets West. Herein lies the epistemological and ontological distinctions that characterize Orientalism (see Chapter 1). Historically, the region has been home to various religious sects, including Eastern and Western Christianity; Shia, Sunni, and Sufi Islam; Druze; Judaism, and others. The Middle East is also multiethnic, with Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, Imazighen, Assyrians, Circassians, Jews, and others living in cosmopolitan cities like Casablanca, Istanbul, Beirut, Cairo, Tehran, and in the modern metropolises of the Arabian Gulf. Echoing the region's ethnic and geographic diversity is a multiplicity of Semitic, Indo-European, and Turkic languages. While Arabic is the most dominant, Hebrew, Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish languages and community vernaculars exist (such as Coptic and Tamazight). The diversities, including religious identities, in the region as a whole and in each country are nothing new, and the cultural plurality was such that it would have stretched the limits of the imaginations of the

most passionate postmodernists. The data from Ervand Abrahamian (1982) of Iran in the nineteenth century is very illuminating. For example, the city of Kerman, with a population of only 49,000, contained separate districts for Twelvers, Karimkhanis, Shaykhis, Sufis, Jews, and Zoroastrians. However, the vision of cultures peacefully coexisting and prospering seems to mask political and economic realities that underscore a different interpretation (see Chapters 9, 42). The cultures of the Middle East are shaped by both exogenous and endogenous social, political, and economic forces. At the core, a cultural mosaic's image reveals unity and division.

As a political reality, Middle East cultures represent several independent states constantly reasserting their differences and distinctive identities. The volatility of politics in the Middle East reflects a long and complex history of competing forces and shifting alliances of different and often opposing political-economic ideologies. Particularly noteworthy is the region's association with images of conflict and rebellion, which dates back to the age of the Greek, Roman, Islamic, Persian, and Ottoman empires. The age of British, French, and Italian colonialism cultivated internal conflicts while succeeding in partitioning the region into local and international areas of influence. By the end of the Second World War, the Middle East and North Africa became associated with independence and liberation movements fueled by the rise of nationalist ideologies, the politicization of ethnic and religious identities, and ongoing international proxy wars. These twentieth-century conflicts coincided with the emergence and widespread use of mass media to promote nation-states internally and externally. With the press, radio, and television widely accessible, mass media increasingly became central to the processes of acculturation and socialization across the region. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the region was further marked with conflicts, particularly the US-led "War on Terror" framed as a response to the attacks of 9/11 and promoted through media campaigns to "win the hearts and minds." In contrast to the "Middle East terrorism" frame, the second decade of the twenty-first century offered the image of freedom-yearning rebellious youth driving political change from Lebanon's 2005 Cedar Revolution to the Iranian protests of 2022. The region's cultures emerge as a process of contingency and contradiction shaped by unstable internal and external power relations.

The Middle East is a place of vibrant cultural practices where complex and competing histories, economies, politics, and identities exist. This starting point reflects several factors, including the massive displacement of people that began at the opening of the twentieth century and is still ongoing, and the parallel increase in transnational migration (within and from the region). In addition, economic liberalization, the introduction of new technologies, and the development of different business models became the basis for the emergence of hybrid cultural, social, and religious practices (see Chapters 2, 4). Similarly, the development of the modern Middle East was not just among certain political, intellectual, and economic classes but also the region's communities in their everyday life (see Chapters 5, 6, 7). As a result, there is a need to revise the conventional conception of Middle East cultures in two crucial ways. First, rather than focusing exclusively on romantically celebratory or naively pessimistic visions of Middle East cultures, it would be helpful to highlight complex, often contradictory

material, intellectual, spiritual, and affective features that characterize them. Second, there is a need to recognize that Middle East cultures, like all cultures, are not static. It is essential to interject into contemporary debates about the region's resistance to change that Middle East cultures are constantly changing. Just consider the last two decades characterized by the emergence and growth of various processes of creating and consuming cultural artifacts. From reality television to social media, various cultural forms and genres have introduced different standards of behavior and challenged existing sociocultural norms (see Chapters 11, 12, 13).

## Media Dynamics and Trajectories

Today's Middle East media of different types (print, radio, television, digital) are globally integrated, more diverse, and numerous, and their audiences/users are active and empowered. The complexity and diversity of media in the Middle East are such that they are not a subject anymore but a discipline on their own. In the twenty-first century, media in the Middle East is a core topic in global communication, international relations, anthropology, sociology, political science, and emerging fields such as digital humanities. The complex Middle East media scene, with its multiple flows and trajectories, multilayered levels of influence, and often conflicting outcomes, is a manifestation of media confluence. This interrelation of different media and the involvement of media users completely reconfigures the public space by making visible news, actors, and discourses previously hidden. The Middle East's historical development, diversities, and commonalities situate the region's mainstream (traditional or legacy) and alternative (activist and independent) media infrastructure, practices, and content.

For the first part of the twentieth century, the region's mediascape seemed less puzzling to the observer. After their independence, each state was a master of its media territory, and citizens were tributaries of the national media. The only exception to this rule was radio, a transnational medium that maintained its propaganda mission. Following Western and Soviet modernization models, states focused on broadcast and print media as vectors of progress and social development. For example, large-scale media projects started in the 1970s and culminated in the launch of ArabSat (1985), Türksat (1994), and Iran's Omid (2009). The 1990s liberalization of economies radically transformed the media landscape across the region. Adhering to the recommendation of the World Bank and the IMF translated into a top-down "liberalization process" characterized by "state capitalism" in which the media is a central target. For example, the locus of media power transitioned from a regional media economy formerly led by Cairo and Beirut to a transnational ultraliberal market dominated by the Gulf countries. Alongside these actors, other Middle Eastern players are also involved: Turkey and Iran entered this Arabic-speaking market through entertainment and/or news channels. Such reconfigurations are consolidated with new transnational media and advertising players, and the emergence of regional media production centers in Dubai, Doha, and Istanbul.

The current media landscape is characterized by three interdependent territorialities: the national, the regional, and the global. Nationally, media have become increasingly polarized and focused on the local market. More than ever, regional media have expanded beyond the inter-Arab market even when Iranian and Turkish content distribution is subject to political constraints. Despite the growth and sophistication of regional and national media, the region's audiences continue to be the target of public diplomacy efforts at the international level. From the US-sponsored Al Hurra Television to China Global Television Network (CGTN), international state broadcasting channels continue to be the pillar of public diplomacy towards the region. At the same time, its emerging markets remain attractive to foreign media conglomerates. Except for Iran, the major trends that shape the media in the world are also present in Middle Eastern countries: franchised channels (e.g. CNN Turk and Arabic) and publications (e.g. *Time Out*) to format television shows (e.g. "The Voice") and streaming services (e.g. Spotify). In brief, the region has become increasingly integrated into the global media market over the last 20 years.

With the introduction of the internet in the 1990s, traditional media, particularly print and television, began their digital transformation, coinciding with the rise of online forums for transnational communication among different publics. By the 2000s, the introduction of blogging ushered a movement towards citizen journalism, culminating in a plethora of independent online news portals (e.g. Nawaat and Mada Masr). Together with social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, they developed new forms of citizenry (see Chapters 13, 18). But the adoption of digital tools was not restricted to advancing political objectives. New kinds of entertainment production, distribution, and advertising, from YouTube and Twitch to Instagram and TikTok, are introducing different types of consumption and new monetization avenues (e.g. social media marketing and influencers). What started as a gradual digital transformation has been expedited during the Covid-19 pandemic with the consolidation of homegrown music and video-streaming services (e.g. Anghami, Shahid, and others) as significant media players in the digital media economy.

The various social movements and international public attention brought a range of underground forms of self-expression to light. Broadly defined, these alternative media are those communicative practices and artifacts that fall outside the mainstream state or corporate communication. Across the Middle East, individuals and communities have resorted to various forms of cultural production using multiple media. For example, the ideologues of revolutionary, liberation, and independence movements of the twentieth century have used primarily avant-garde art (e.g. poetry and music), low-tech tools (e.g. fliers, cassette tapes), and any accessible broadcast or print media (e.g. offshore radio and television) to recruit and mobilize local, regional, and international support. In the 1990s, the gradual liberalization of state-owned media coupled with slow and uneven democratization processes contributed to the emergence and development of independent information platforms. Citizen and activist journalists and public intellectuals, together with dissident political figures, came to define the 2000s' alternative media. The series of social movements of the last two decades were characteristic of alternative media's growth and diversity, widespread use of digital affordances, and regional and international support and networking.



The Middle East media's structure, growth, and influence are ushering in a period of flux. For instance, regional commercial mainstream media seem to increasingly focus on national audiences following the interests of their owners (e.g. MBC and Saudi Arabia). Similarly, Western, state-supported media seem to have lost interest in the region's shifting geopolitical alliances while Russia, China, and Turkey are growing their media and cultural spheres of influence. Within traditional media's highly partisan landscape, alternative media focus on local news and information that echo the needs of marginalized groups and minorities. At the same time, social media platforms, local and regional streaming services, and e-games platforms offer new venues for (dis)information, user-generated content, and entertainment. These various media have entailed changes in production, distribution, and exhibition, and in the process, they also multiplied the venues for political and cultural expressions. Coupled with the massive presence of educated and connected youth, disenfranchisement from traditional politics has given rise to movements of emancipation from the state and the established socioeconomic order throughout the region.

Although the shifts in Middle East media are qualitatively and quantitatively significant, some of its research remains attached to cultural or technological determinism. For example, Islam remains the vital and, in many cases, essential *bête noire* for the region's cultural and media controversies. From this angle, religion has remained a central and defining characteristic of an "Islamic world" and the region's media. This supposedly essentialist perspective would demonstrate, without a doubt, the incompatibility of Islam and Muslims with modernity (see Chapter 2). In this scenario, Islam is given an independent life, its content considered uniform regardless of history, broader material and demographic changes, or the nature of the state, politics, and geography. How ironic, then, that something that causes so much change (Islam) should be conveniently unchanging. Despite the exaggerated claim of the decline of the state and the actively continuous neglect of its role by globalization theories, states in the region have unexceptionally remained contradictory entities and sites of struggle for many competing interests. They are also the most prominent media proprietors, and continue not only to censor and oppress but to facilitate, regulate, and expand the media infrastructure (see Chapter 10).

In addition to a research thread primarily focused on Islam, there is a seemingly technologically deterministic approach to some of the research on Middle East media. This research examines the sociocultural impact of media technologies, practices, and content, from printing presses and cassette tapes to satellite television and streaming platforms. It focuses on the tension between the modern (technology) and tradition, the global (mainly Western) and the local. But by and large, Middle East media research contributed to analyses of the links between infrastructure, content, and society and has offered comparative cross-national studies, industry-specific research, and increasingly user-specific explorations. Understanding the region's culture, society, politics, and economy requires recognizing these diverse and complex media scenes with their ongoing mutations, contradictions, and continuities. The multigenerational research, largely represented in this Handbook, undoubtedly contributes to de-Westernizing Arab media studies and enriching its theoretical and methodological approaches.

## About This Volume

In this volume, we adopt a holistic approach to the questions of the Middle East by integrating both media-centered and culture-focused approaches and by drawing on the humanities, arts, and social sciences as theoretical and empirical tools of analysis and explanation. With its 43 contributions, the *Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East* aims to:

- Challenge and deconstruct the monolithic perception of the Middle East as a ‘one big’ geopolitical, cultural, and even media entity.
- Capture the vibrant dynamics between the region’s countries (notably the Arab states, Turkey, and Iran) and between these countries and the world (mainly focusing on the links with Europe and the United States).
- Stress the commonalities of a Middle East culture and acknowledge the existence of dynamic, historically diverse cultures.
- Expand the common understanding of Middle East media to include mass media, digital/social media, alternative media, and the arts.

We are aware that our goals are reasonably inclusive and ambitious. As will be evident from the contributors’ brief biographies, we have invited established and emerging scholars from media, communication, cultural studies, and journalism, as well as the arts, anthropology, sociology, political science, and so forth. These distinct regional interest areas present a fertile mix that can stimulate classroom discussions and future research. Curious readers are invited to initiate comparisons across the Middle East’s subregions, countries, and communities and consider theoretical approaches, methods, disciplines, and subfields. Reflecting on the selection process for contributors, we must acknowledge our limitations in soliciting contributors and ensuring equal representation of the region’s lively and diverse media and cultural scenes, despite our varied national backgrounds, academic affiliations, disciplinary approaches, and research foci. We implemented a rigorous selection and review process for which we should thank the broad community of Middle Eastern scholars for their support of the project and our authors for their willingness to contribute, then revise their chapters as requested.

Unlike traditional handbooks, we have included two types of contributions. While essays in Sections 1, 2, and 6 cover the most prominent conceptual topics and serve as a theoretical umbrella of meta-narratives, the chapters in Sections 3, 4, and 5 serve as exemplars, case studies, or illustrations of culture and media in the Middle East. The diversity of Middle East media and culture organically emerges as scholars bring their own interests, knowledge, experience, and context to their research. Together these essays and chapters provide multiple entry points and pathways for the reader to explore the plurality and diversity as well as the complexity and vibrancy of the region’s media and culture. The authors are experts and participants in the cultures they describe and are engaged in research in media and the many cultural practices included in this volume.

*The Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East* is organized into six sections. Together, they suggest how contemporary media and culture in the Middle East matter on conceptual, structural, and material levels. It highlights how everyday life intertwines cultural, artistic, and media contexts, texts, and practices. The introduction is intended to delineate current ways of thinking about media and culture in the Middle East.

The first section, *Theories, Ideologies, and Problematics*, addresses some salient problematics reflected in the Middle East's study of culture and media. Five short essays address how the region has been a laboratory for cultural, political, and economic experimentation and how, in the process, various forms and interpretations have emerged in regional contexts. In this section, the authors examine Orientalism, modernity and modernization, hybridity, and cultural studies as critical theories of media and culture, their meanings, and their implications in/for the Middle East context. The second section, *Politics, Gender, Minorities, and Class*, features short essays that delve into some of the region's most contentious debates on culture and media. These discussions are crucial undertakings in an era marked by rapid transformations. The definition of political agency, gender roles, minority rights, and class struggles are fundamentally reconfigured and marked by stark differences in various places within the region—sections one and two offer conceptual frameworks and contextual anchors that bind culture and media. Contributors offer entry points for the more empirical work presented later and set the tone for the reader to explore mainstream and alternative media in the region as socio-cultural, political, and economic sites.

In the third section, titled *Media Industries, Markets, and Technologies*, contributors identify and interpret current media configurations, their development, and historical, political, sociocultural, and economic significance. The chapters address the trans-regional connections related to the emergence of media industries that are national (locally based) but have reached outside their immediate borders, regionally and globally. This section offers a macro view covering media policies, the press, television and streaming, film and archives, and the digital Middle East. Building on these overviews, section four offers case studies of traditional or legacy media institutions, while section five explores vibrant alternative or independent media scenes. In section four, *(Mass) Media, Cultures, and Contexts*, the contributors address the links between text and cultural practices in multiple regional contexts. Authors analyze texts and flows, ideologies, representations, formats, and spectacles, including censorship laws and news practices, film and television productions, funding and advertising models, and religious, gender, political, and cultural media content. Drawing on a wide range of fresh insights from fieldwork research, contributors reveal links between media content, context, and everyday life in multiple communities across the Middle East.

Section five, *Alternative, Independent, and Social Media*, recognizes a range of media and cultural practices often associated with activism and self-expression. From independent online news publishers to minority media and digital images to street art, these forms have become the self-expressive tools of marginalized, underrepresented, or underserved groups across the region. At the same time, these alternative media have challenged existing mainstream, often state-controlled and market-driven, traditional media.

In section six, *Perspectives*, contributors focus on current and future directions in studying culture and media in the Middle East. What are some of the pressing questions? What challenges (conceptual, methodological, or practical) face looking at culture and media in the Middle East? What are some of the emerging phenomena or trends? These questions outline the various contributions to this section. By placing this section at the end, we hope it presents pedagogical and research choices to continue exploring media and culture in the Middle East.

Departing from the assumption that the Middle East has a single culture and produces totalistic media narratives, and therefore that the region's people, civilizations, and their current media activities are mutually complementary rather than clashing, we offer a handbook that maps out active links between the various cultures and media in the region and beyond. The *Handbook of Media and Culture in the Middle East* is written primarily for scholars and teachers in the humanities and social sciences. It is designed to include perspectives and experiences from around the region without limiting any discussion necessarily to a single national, ethnic, religious, or other defined scope. The Handbook examines the dimensions of culture and media in the Middle East relevant to the twenty-first-century debates and challenges while at the same time anchoring the analyses in historical and geopolitical contexts. It is principally positioned as the foundation for the next era of research on media and culture in the Middle East.

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