

## *Introduction*

Woe to the cities in whose midst lies tinder!  
The people, breaking their chains,  
Take to self-help in terrible ways.

—Schiller (quoted in Tilly et al. 1975, 1)

Our Middle Eastern city is far from being an harmonious environment and the Middle Eastern Man is too tormented by the ravages of war and conflict all around him to make his transition to modernity smoothly and with a minimum of anguish.

—Crown-Prince Hassan Bin Talal of Jordan  
("Keynote Address," in Saqqaf 1987)

And these three things abideth—class, role, and network—  
and the greatest of these is network.

—(Quoted in Mitchell 1969, 1)

I first realized the true vitality of informal networks in the mid-1980s, after I had been assigned to Baghdad for sixteen months at the height of the Iran-Iraq war. Even in that suffocating police state, where the pressure of formal cadres was truly terrifying, informal ties and loyalties survived in a dormant state, sustained by roots that reached deep into the region's past. In fact, as the fear of a possible Iraqi defeat gripped the population, and as the traumatic shock of Iran's repeated missile attacks spread through the Iraqi capital, informal networks rose to provide the social and psychological support that Saddam Hussein's totalitarian machine could not deliver.

Back in the United States, my interest in the political significance of informal networks was further stimulated by the discovery of a growing literature on this subject by sociologists, anthropologists, students of Third World urbanization, and Middle East specialists. At the same time, I found myself drawn to the study of urban protest movements in the Middle East. Out of these various interests developed this book, which analyzes the contribution of informal groups to urban unrest in Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the period from the 1940s through the 1980s. This is, there-

fore, a comparative and interpretive work, focused on the intersection of three areas of investigation: informal networks, urban unrest, and the relationship between rapid urbanization and political instability.

Political unrest has become so prevalent in the Middle East that mere reference to the region often brings to our minds images of widespread turmoil and political disorder. To capture the ongoing political upheaval in the Middle East, one need only think of some of its most dramatic manifestations: the protracted and violent conflict in Lebanon (1975–90), the Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in the Israeli-occupied territories (which has been going on since December 1987), the Iranian revolution of 1977–79, some of the more belligerent manifestations of the so-called Islamic revival, and a variety of riots, usually motivated by cost-of-living issues (Iran, 1992; Jordan, 1989; Algeria, 1991, 1988, and 1986; Morocco, 1984 and 1981; Sudan, 1985 and 1982; Tunisia, 1984 and 1978; Egypt, 1977).

Clearly, these instances of political turmoil differ greatly in their underlying causes, scope, and significance. In most cases, however, it has been in cities, and especially in the largest ones, that the unrest has taken place.

This observation certainly applies to Egypt and Iran, two of the three countries we will investigate. In Iran, the 1977–79 revolution was almost exclusively an urban phenomenon, and so were the 1963 uprising and the turmoil of the 1951–53 period. Similarly, much of the unrest that occurred in Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s took place in cities—especially in Cairo, but also sometimes in the rapidly expanding provincial capitals of Upper Egypt, such as Minia and Assiut.

Lebanon presents us with a somewhat different picture, in that, between 1975 and 1990, no area, whether urban or rural, was spared the carnage. Fighting raged in Beirut, Tripoli, and Sidon, but also in the mountains of the Shuf, the valleys of the Bekaa, and the villages of the south. Yet even in the Lebanese case, it is in the cities, and especially in Beirut, that the key battles occurred, and that the destruction caused by the civil war was most visible. Repeatedly, events in the capital had a determining influence on the course of the civil war, and it is often their outcome that provided the background for further clashes in other parts of the country.

Beyond the experiences of Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon, however, this book focuses on cities because the predominantly urban nature of unrest in the Middle East is bound to become even more pronounced, given the rapid urbanization of Middle Eastern countries. Of all the major regions in the world, the Middle East and North Africa displayed the highest annual urbanization rates during the period 1950–80, a trend that should continue for the rest of this century.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, despite the spectacular growth of Middle Eastern cities over the last thirty years, and despite the fact that these cities, especially the largest ones, are becoming ever more clearly the centers of intense political struggles, the study of urban politics in the Middle East has received surprisingly little attention, whether from Middle East specialists or from comparativists.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the books, anthologies, and journals dealing with the politics of rapid urbanization in developing countries include relatively few works on the Middle East. Furthermore, the lack of comparative concerns that characterizes the few existing studies on Middle Eastern urban politics stands in sharp contrast to similar research on Latin America. In an attempt to partially fill these gaps in the existing literature, this book makes an explicit effort to apply to the Middle East ongoing debates among scholars of Third World urbanization, and to compare the politics of several Middle Eastern cities (instead of focusing on any one of them).

My examination of urban unrest in the Middle East will be conducted from the perspective of informal networks. I use the word *network* here to refer to groups of individuals linked to one another by highly personal, non-contractual bonds and loyalties. Four specific types of networks—clientelist,<sup>3</sup> occupational, religious, and residential—will be singled out for systematic attention.

One of the factors that prompted this focus on informal networks was the existence of a large number of studies showing that, throughout the Third World, rapid urbanization in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s had promoted the multiplication of informal associations, and that the stabilizing role played by these networks was one of the main reasons why, by and large, Third World cities had not experienced the kind of sociopolitical upheaval that had been anticipated by earlier writers.<sup>4</sup>

As an observer of the Middle East in the 1980s, I felt intrigued by such conclusions, if only because the political turmoil gripping cities across the region was at significant variance with the optimistic picture portrayed by this literature. Many colleagues, furthermore, were often quick to mention rapid urbanization as a primary cause of instability in that part of the world, and saw the dramatic growth of Middle Eastern cities as one of the major forces behind the development of Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>5</sup> Thus, was one to conclude that there is something specific about urbanization in the Middle East that makes it a more destabilizing process than in other areas of the world? Or is there actually no causal link between rapid urbanization and instability in the Middle East?

I decided that one way to address these questions was to examine the politics of a few significant Middle Eastern cities through the prism of infor-

mal groups. Such an approach seemed particularly appropriate, given the widely acknowledged importance of informal groups and loyalties in Middle Eastern politics, and given that networks play a central role in the arguments of those who have attempted to explain why rapid and massive urbanization has not generated widespread political unrest in the Third World. Would a focus on the Middle East (a region neglected by students of the politics of Third World urbanization) yield different conclusions?

An emphasis on informal networks also offered the attractive prospect of connecting the long-standing debates on the premodern Middle Eastern city, with more recent ones on the contemporary megalopolis. Such a linkage has rarely been attempted.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, indeed, urban historians of the Middle East continue to be fascinated by the subject of the "Islamic City," but they rarely address broader political and sociological questions and usually fail to explore the extent to which the features they see as characteristic of the traditional Middle Eastern city can shed light on the late-twentieth-century urban phenomena in the Middle East. On the other hand, political scientists tend to focus exclusively on contemporary urban forms. They are concerned primarily with the issue of whether city and government can cope with the massive loads created over the last few decades by staggering urban growth and mounting social, economic, and political problems. Accordingly, the kinds of processes on which they concentrate include rapid rural-to-urban migrations, the transformation of urban economies, the development of the "informal sector," acute housing shortages, inadequate transportation facilities, problems of income distribution and city management, class formation, and political unrest.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while historians are often tempted to stress the uniqueness of the Islamic, Arab, or Oriental city, political scientists emphasize that the problems faced by contemporary Middle Eastern cities can be found, in more or less similar forms, in Asian, Latin American, and African cities. Also, while historians concentrate on the continuities that Middle Eastern cities displayed throughout much of the premodern period, political scientists highlight the rapid transformations of urban politics in the region.

Clearly, the political scientist's approach is more likely to enable us to understand contemporary urban society. It is also deliberately comparative, which permits us to see contemporary Middle Eastern cities against the background of today's Third World cities in general. Political scientists, however, usually fail to look at Middle Eastern cities in the light of these cities' own pasts. Most often, they do not even care to get into the major issues that historians have identified about the historic Middle Eastern city.<sup>8</sup> They seem to assume that contemporary Middle Eastern cities have changed so much over the last fifty years that there is little to be gained from the analysis of their pre-

modern antecedents, if one's primary objective is to understand modern urban society and politics. Significantly, even when the study of a contemporary Middle Eastern city by a political scientist begins with observations on the traditional Middle Eastern city, one often gets the impression that these observations are perfunctory and unrelated to the rest of the work.

This absence of an explicit dialogue between historians and political scientists was also one of the factors that prompted this book's focus on networks. Since both historians and political scientists appeared to agree that informal groups have always been a building block of the Middle East's urban political economy, these networks seemed to offer a natural perspective from which one might analyze both continuities and changes in the Middle East's urban scene and therefore establish much needed bridges between the works of historians and those of political scientists.

Finally, an analysis of the role of informal networks in Middle Eastern politics also held the prospect of averting another weakness in the field of Middle Eastern studies: the tacit division of labor between political scientists, who focus primarily on macroprocesses, and anthropologists, who tend to favor studies of local communities. Few studies so far have endeavored to connect explicitly the concerns of anthropologists and sociologists with those of political scientists.<sup>9</sup> In this respect as well, an emphasis on networks seemed to have the potential of yielding new insights.

While a focus on networks looked therefore like a potentially very productive endeavor, it was not without problems. Some of these need to be mentioned briefly here, if only because they hampered my own research. Most significantly, precisely because of their informal nature and organization, networks are inherently more difficult to describe than groups such as political parties and trade unions, which have a clearly established membership, ideology, program, and organizational structure. An observer, for instance, often will find it difficult to identify the exact boundaries of the membership of a network or to understand how that network operates. Such obstacles, in turn, explain why the study of politics continues to center on institutional processes and structures, why so many scholars seem to remain unaware of the essential role that informal groups play in the lives of ordinary people, and why, as a result, so little energy has been invested in the systematic gathering of information on Middle Eastern networks. In this context, finding sources of information was in many ways the most difficult problem I faced. Informal networks—let alone their impact on political stability—are rarely made an explicit object of research. Information did exist, but it was usually scattered throughout a myriad of works. My main task was to try to piece this information together to present a coherent picture of what urban networks look like, and to develop hypotheses on the relationship between these networks and political stability.

Finally, although Middle East specialists have emphasized repeatedly the centrality of informal networks to political processes in the region,<sup>10</sup> they rarely have described networks in any detail. Too often, one gets the feeling that networks are invoked in the abstract, as a sort of invisible and mysterious force that explains, to some extent at least, the volatility, unpredictability, and fluidity of Middle Eastern politics. In contrast, this book not only describes particular networks, but also investigates systematically their impact on the urban political order. Similarly, although scholars have emphasized the key role that informal networks play in Middle Eastern elite settings,<sup>11</sup> they have paid much less attention to informal networks in the population at large, or to informal networks in the hands of counterelites. It is on these networks, and more generally on the politics of the street and the politics of counterelites, that this study focuses.

Having decided to examine urban unrest through the lenses of informal networks, I selected a few countries for comparisons. Since the Middle East is such a rapidly urbanizing area, it seemed particularly important to study the role of informal networks in some of the region's largest cities. In this respect, Cairo and Tehran were logical choices, because they were the largest two urban concentrations in the region between 1950 and 1990 (since then, Istanbul has overtaken Tehran). By 1990, according to the *very conservative* estimates of the United Nations, Cairo's population was well above nine million, while Tehran's was only slightly below seven million (see the Appendix, figure A.1).

Cairo and Tehran were also attractive choices because of their sharply different political evolution in the late 1970s. From 1977 to 1979, Tehran became the main theater of a mass-based, popular revolution that put an end to what had often been portrayed as the strongest regime in the region and replaced it with the world's first Islamic republic. No comparable sociopolitical upheaval took place in Cairo, despite the tumultuous student riots of 1972–73, the industrial strikes and demonstrations in the early to mid-1970s,<sup>12</sup> the January 1977 explosion, and various manifestations of Islamic militancy, leading up to Sadat's assassination on 6 October 1981.

In fact, even a cursory look at Egypt in the 1970s and 1980s reveals no serious and sustained challenge to the regime's stability, and points to the fragmented character and limited intensity, scope, and success of urban protest movements under Sadat and during the first decade of Mubarak's rule (1981–91). This is not to deny the problems that the Egyptian regime has had to face because of the existence of small but determined and violent Islamic fundamentalist groups. If anything, the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat was a dramatic demonstration of what the fundamentalist opposition can achieve. Moreover, while radical Islam was on the wane in Egypt between 1981 and 1985, it has picked up again since then.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Egyptian government consistently defeated the attempts by Islamic militants to confront the ruling elite directly, as in April 1974, January 1977, June and October 1981, and March 1986. Despite Sadat's assassination, the regime that issued from the 1952 coup has remained intact under Mubarak. Even if the Egyptian regime were to collapse tomorrow, one would still be faced with the task of explaining its extraordinary resilience during the 1970s and 1980s, despite the accumulation of economic difficulties and mounting demographic pressures.

Against this background, a comparison between Egypt and Iran (and Cairo and Tehran in particular) seemed to be ideally suited to test hypotheses regarding the impact of informal networks on urban political stability. Since Cairo and Tehran were comparable in size throughout the 1970s (with a clear but diminishing advantage in favor of Cairo), and since they also happened to differ considerably in terms of unrest at the end of that decade, they seemed to provide a reasonable basis from which one might assess the impact of informal networks on political outcomes. Of course, by focusing on informal networks, I would have to downplay or ignore many other variables that also affect internal politics. Nevertheless, as became rapidly clear, urban informal networks and their relationships to the central authorities seemed by themselves to go a long way toward explaining the resilience of the political order in Egypt and its demise in Iran.

For different reasons, I also found myself drawn to the Lebanese experience. After all, Beirut was the site of a ferocious civil war that lasted for fifteen years, and anyone interested in contemporary manifestations of urban unrest in the Middle East could hardly fail to note the significance of what happened in that country. Yet Lebanon was also obviously a unique case, and one that could not be compared directly to the other two. Three variables at least pointed to the peculiarity of the Lebanese situation. One was the very small size of the country and its population (about four million in the 1970s). Another factor was the special nature of Lebanon's "confessional" political system, in which each religious sect was assigned a fixed proportion of all governmental offices in the country. The third variable was the consistent and dramatic impact that international events and foreign actors had on Lebanese politics in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, one need only think of the role that regional rivalries and the Palestinian presence in the country played in the initial outbreak of hostilities, of the 1982 Israeli invasion and Iran's subsequent support of radical Shiite groups, or of Syria's growing involvement in the country's internal affairs, culminating in its virtual takeover of Lebanon in 1990–91.

These peculiarities notwithstanding, it seemed that, as in the other two countries, network analysis offered a perspective that was potentially very helpful in understanding both the initial breakdown of political order in 1975

and the intensity and protracted character and violence that ravaged Lebanon for the following fifteen years. Beirut was also interesting because of its staggering development after World War II. Between 1960 and 1970, in particular, the growth of Beirut and its suburbs alone accounted for about two-thirds of the increase in Lebanon's urban population, and the population growth rate of the Lebanese capital reached 6.5 percent per year (Tabbarah 1978, 5). As Tabbarah has noted, "Comparable rates for urban agglomerations varied mostly between 1.5 and 4.0 percent in the developed countries and between 2.5 and 6 percent in most of Asia and Latin America. Significantly higher rates for this period (1960–70) could only be found in the unusual circumstances of such boom towns as Baghdad (9.4 percent) and Kuwait city (12.2 percent)." By 1975, Beirut's population had reached 1.5 million, almost half of Lebanon's total population. In a way, Lebanon had become a city-state (Hourani 1988, 6). Thus, it was primarily as a result of Beirut's growth that, in less than one generation, Lebanon was transformed from one of the least urbanized countries in the Arab world to the most urbanized one outside the Gulf region (see the Appendix, figure A.3).

Finally, the choice of Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon also reflects this study's interest in the relationship between urbanization—more specifically, that part of it due to rural-to-urban migration—and urban unrest. In each of the three countries, rural-to-urban migration has greatly contributed to the growth of its capital, which makes it possible to investigate the extent to which migrants are a destabilizing force.

Granted, in the case of Cairo, the greater part of city growth (about two thirds) is now due to natural increase, and it is also true that a large and growing proportion of migrants to Cairo probably come from urban areas (figures are unavailable). Nevertheless, Cairo has remained an attractive destination for rural migrants. By one account, every year in the 1980s, at least another one hundred thousand rural Egyptians moved to the Egyptian capital—that is, twice as many as two decades earlier.<sup>14</sup> Thus, rural-to-urban migration may now constitute "only" about a third or even a quarter of the demographic growth of Greater Cairo, as opposed to 50 percent twenty-five years ago, but this must be balanced against the fact that Cairo's population is now more than twice what it was then. In the districts located on the northern and northwestern belts of Greater Cairo, the annual rate of increase in the 1980s ranged between 10 and 20 percent (Ayubi 1991, 168).

The case of Iran is equally interesting. In 1950, Iran's urban population was below five million, and the proportion of urban to total population about 28 percent. By 1990, however, some thirty-one million people, or about 57 percent of the country's population, lived in urban areas (see the Appendix, figure A.2). Therefore, the great majority of Iran's urban population is a prod-



uct of the last thirty years. And cities would not have grown so fast had it not been for unprecedented rural-to-urban migrations. By one estimate, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, migrants accounted for as much as 50 percent of the increase in Iran's urban population (Walton 1980, 282). Furthermore, in the two decades that preceded the Iranian revolution, "step migration—from village to town, then town to city—was no longer common; villagers were moving directly from communities of a few hundred to cities of over a million" (Mottahedeh 1985, 348). The figures are, once again, all the more staggering when one looks at the capital. In 1976, there were more than two million migrants in Greater Tehran, and an estimated 371,450 of them had moved to the Iranian capital in the preceding five years. The percentage of migrants in total population rose from 11 percent in 1956 to 12.9 percent in 1966 and to 15 percent in 1976.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, regarding Lebanon, rural-to-urban migrations were undisputably the driving force behind Beirut's staggering growth in the 1960s and 1970s. For Lebanon as a whole, estimates of the share of rural-to-urban migration in urban growth vary from 65 percent for the period 1965–80, to 44.4 percent between 1970 and 1975, and 82.1 percent between 1970 and 1982.<sup>16</sup>

### *Organization of the Following Chapters*

Part 1 (chapters 1 and 2) develops the major theoretical and comparative issues that form the background for this study.

Part 2 (chapters 3 through 7) puts the argument in historical perspective, by providing an overview of the role of informal networks in the politics of Middle Eastern cities from the medieval period up to the nineteenth century. More specifically, it demonstrates that while informal networks usually provided the "glue" that held together mosaic-like cities in which institutions were relatively weak, they also could operate, at times, as channels for political dissent.

Part 3 (chapters 8 through 10) constitutes the heart of this study. By using examples drawn from the political histories of Lebanon, Egypt, and Iran from the 1940s through the 1980s, it suggests that while informal networks often integrate individuals and groups into urban society, they also can provide paths through which alienated counterelites and marginalized segments of the lower classes can disrupt social peace.

The Conclusion summarizes the book's main implications, which are in the following five areas: (a) the changing features of urban networks in the Middle East, and their continuing relevance to the region's politics; (b) the ability of informal groups to function as effective vehicles for collective resistance to the authorities; (c) the conditions under which networks can change

their role from system-supportive to system-challenging; (d) the independent impact of Islam on contemporary forms of urban violence in the Middle East; and (e) the relationship between urbanization and political stability.

For those who do not require parts 1 and 2, a secondary pattern of reading would be to start directly with part 3 and the Conclusion, and then consult parts 1 and 2 for any further historical or theoretical background that might be needed.