

The Middle East and the Near East: Paradoxes of Modernization

By **ULUGBEK KHASANOV**

Faculty of International Relations,
University of World Economy and Diplomacy,

The monograph under review is clearly not a routine regional collection but the outcome of a sustained collaborative effort by a research team. Its structure and authorship alone signal an ambition that transcends mere description of yet another cycle of crises and reforms: it seeks to re-examine what we mean by modernization in non-Western societies. In this respect, the volume compels a serious reconsideration of the very language we employ to discuss development and backwardness, progress and regression.

Amid a proliferation of publications that fragment the region into discrete "problem fields" (political Islam, rentier regimes, authoritarian resilience, etc.), this book stands out for its attempt to maintain a unified analytical framework—modernization as a multidimensional, contradictory, yet singular process unfolding across diverse societies with distinct historical and cultural starting points.

Professor Irina D. Zvyagelskaya's introductory essay merits particular attention. Written with restraint and without excessive declaratory flourish, it demonstrates how one can engage critically with the classical canon of modernization theory without reducing it to dogma. This is especially pertinent given that outdated schemas often persist implicitly in political and expert discourse, shaping discussions of "backwardness" and "catch-up development."

The turn toward Shmuel Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernities is presented not as a perfunctory nod to intellectual fashion but as a necessary analytical move grounded in a straightforward observation: serious engagement with Middle Eastern experience compels abandonment of the notion of a single trajectory leading to a singular model of "modernity." Here, the monograph moves beyond the familiar compromises characteristic of much Russian scholarship: non-Western societies cease to be portrayed as "pupils who failed to master the lesson" and emerge instead as actors who introduce their own normative expectations, their own syntheses of tradition and innovation, into the very fabric of contemporaneity. For theorists, this implies the need to recognize that notions of "development" and "lag" can no longer be treated as purely quantitative categories and demand thorough reconceptualization at the level of basic concepts.

Crucially, the introduction does not stop at Eisenstadt. It incorporates theories of extractive and inclusive institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson), dependency theory, rentier-state models, and debates over the role of tradition in modernization (Shevelev and others). These frameworks are not merely enumerated but systematically linked to regional material: rentier states to Gulf monarchies, extractive institutions to cycles of

reform and reversal in authoritarian regimes, multiple modernities to competing modernization ideologies in Iran, Turkey, and Arab republics. As an Arabist, I would note one aspect that perhaps merits further elaboration. While the volume successfully overcomes Eurocentrism in classical theories, it largely remains within the discursive framework of "modernization" and "development," albeit understood pluralistically. Contemporary global theoretical debates, however, increasingly feature decolonial critiques that interrogate this very lexicon as a legacy of Western epistemological dominance. This line of inquiry is virtually absent from the book. Its omission does not diminish the work's quality but opens a promising avenue for future research—a more rigorous interrogation of the boundaries of modernization discourse itself. Each section and chapter of the monograph illuminates highly relevant yet complex and contradictory processes that characterize the Middle East and Near East, revealing new dimensions of regional developmental paradigms.

Particular attention should be given to several contributions. Vasily Kuznetsov's chapter on tradition and modernity in the institutional design of political systems shifts the discussion to the level of concrete institutions and practices. Kuznetsov—an eminent Orientalist continuing the scholarly lineage of Veniamin Filshtinsky and Vitaly Naumkin, and a leading specialist on the Arab world—convincingly demonstrates that modernization has almost never entailed a complete rupture with tradition but rather its redefinition and integration into new structures. Tribal networks, religious authorities, and patrimonial ties do not vanish; they mutate, becoming mechanisms of resource distribution, channels of loyalty, and instruments of control. Methodologically, the chapter stands out from much of the existing literature by treating tradition not as a "vestige" or "obstacle" but as a fully legitimate component of contemporary political architecture. This serves as a salutary warning against simplistic dichotomies of "modernization = Westernization = secularization."

The Libyan and Syrian cases illustrate how tribal and confessional networks are incorporated into state mechanisms as tools of control and mobilization. In both instances, regimes that proclaimed a modernization agenda relied on thoroughly traditional forms of loyalty, redistributing resources through kinship and communal channels. These ties sustained stability for extended periods but, in critical moments, contributed to state collapse when loyalties proved stronger than formal citizenship. Through such cases, the monograph persuades the reader to abandon the conventional view of tradition as an unequivocal brake on progress. Traditional institutions simultaneously legitimate authority and channel social conflict; they obstruct inclusive forms of participation while providing resources for governability where modern bureaucracy is weak; they can serve both reformers and conservatives.

In my view, this represents one of the monograph's most methodologically sophisticated and substantively compelling conclusions. It enables a departure from normative binaries of "progressive" versus

"retrograde" actors and invites analysis of specific configurations of power in which tradition and modernity function not as antagonists but as elements of a single political field.

Leading orientalist Lyudmila Samarskaya, in her chapter "Israel: Partial Modernization in a Contemporary State," shares the most unexpected and, in my opinion, most successful ideas in the volume. Samarskaya, a specialist in the history of international relations in the Middle East and in Jewish and Arab national movements, offers a perspective on Israel not as a "Western outpost" in the region but as a complex hybrid construct in which a modern nation-state coexists with traditionalist enclaves enjoying special status. Haredi communities, living according to religious law and exempted from many civic obligations, emerge not as marginal curiosities but as integral components of the political system. Samarskaya subtly demonstrates how the Zionist project—originally conceived as secular and modernizing—was compelled to incorporate elements of religious tradition to preserve legitimacy and internal cohesion. This paradox—a high-tech society in which segments adhere to Talmudic school rules—is not an anomaly but the outcome of a deliberate political strategy. The chapter is valuable also for disrupting familiar oppositions of "West–East": Israel is simultaneously Western and Middle Eastern, and this is not a contradiction but the essence of its political order.

Equally timely is Evdokia Dobрева's chapter "Iran: Modernization in the Context of Islamic Values," which concludes the triad and ranks among the monograph's strongest texts. Dobрева, who studies the domestic and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic, regional conflicts, and security, presents Iran as a country in which religion does not merely coexist with modernization but formulates its ideological foundations. She traces consistently how Iranian elites—from the Constitutional Revolution of the early twentieth century to the Islamic Revolution of 1979—sought to reconcile developmental aspirations with the preservation of cultural identity and independence from the West. Particularly insightful is her analysis of the Islamic Republic's dual political structure, in which formal representative institutions coexist with religious supervisory bodies. Dobрева neither romanticizes this system nor delivers a moralistic verdict; she demonstrates that, for a significant portion of Iranian society, this project is perceived as legitimate—not because it is "democratic" by Western standards, but because it promises the preservation of identity and dignity.

Yet the monograph's crowning achievement, in my view, is the sixth and concluding section devoted to Afghanistan—the country that most radically calls into question the very applicability of the modernization paradigm. The two chapters by Ilya Guzhev and Evgeny Belkov form a complementary pair, with foreign-policy dimensions augmented by an internal analysis of the role of religion and tradition.

Russian researcher Ilya Guzhev's chapter, "Afghanistan: An Unreformable Country," is written with a sobriety that borders on anguish. Guzhev, an alumnus of the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University and a specialist in Afghan studies, demonstrates how

successive external actors—from the Soviet Union to the United States and its allies—have repeatedly attempted to impose institutional constructs that failed to take root in local soil. He neither blames Afghans for "backwardness" nor romanticizes their "resistance to modernization." Instead, he reveals a profound disjuncture between imposed institutions and local conceptions of power, justice, and legitimacy—a gap that neither financial aid nor military force can bridge. Guzhev meticulously examines the transformation of Afghan armed forces, the role of international assistance, and the failure of efforts to build a centralized state. Young scholar Evgeny Belkov's chapter "Afghanistan: Religion and Tradition in Taliban Politics" not only concludes the section but also the entire volume, and this placement is symbolic. Belkov, a doctoral candidate studying political Islam in Afghanistan, analyzes the Taliban not as a purely "traditionalist" movement but as a complex actor that employs religious legitimization while actively adapting to contemporary realities: conducting foreign policy, utilizing digital technologies, and managing infrastructure. Belkov demonstrates that the Taliban represent not a simple "return to the past" but a distinctive project of modernity in which religious norms and political pragmatism are so intertwined as to be inseparable. He neither idealizes the regime nor ignores its repressiveness, yet he insists that the Taliban must be analyzed seriously rather than dismissed as "archaic." This chapter serves as an important reminder that the world is not obliged to follow a single trajectory and that some societies choose—or are compelled to follow—paths incompatible with Western notions of progress.

The Afghan narrative candidly registers this asymmetry and thereby tentatively but fundamentally poses the question: Does a society have the right to say "no" to an imposed modernization, even if external actors deem it correct and progressive?

The collective format of the monograph deserves separate mention. This is not a mere "collection of articles" in which each author speaks independently, but a genuine collective intellectual endeavor marked by a shared understanding of complex developmental processes in the region. At the same time, the contributors preserve their individual voices, emphases, and stylistic registers: Zvyagelskaya writes philosophically and synoptically, Alekseeva conceptually and polemically, Yakovlev historically with precision, Kuznetsov institutionally with accuracy, Afontsev political-economically with rigor, Svistunova and Samarskaya with attention to detail and nuance, Dobрева, Tyukaeva, Ibragimov, Sukhov, and Kadyrmbetov with the immediacy of lived knowledge of their countries, and Guzhev and Belkov with the caution characteristic of young scholars working on sensitive topics.

This diversity of approaches constitutes the monograph's principal strength. It demonstrates that the theme of modernization in the Middle East admits no single correct answer and demands a multidimensional, polyphonic approach. Each chapter offers not merely information but intellectual innovation, and together they create a discursive space in which the reader is invited to participate as an equal.

Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of younger scholars—Dobrev, Belkov, Guzhev, Lazovsky, Kadyrambetov—whose chapters exhibit the freshness of perspective and willingness to revise established schemas that is often lost in academic routine. Yet they are complemented by established authorities—Zvyagelskaya, Alekseeva, Yakovlev, Kuznetsov, Afontsev—whose depth of knowledge and theoretical maturity set a high standard for the entire volume. This combination of experience and openness to novelty is a rare achievement for a collective project. The monograph edited by Professor I. Zvyagelskaya and her distinguished team does not propose a ready-made alternative doctrine. Instead, it consistently dismantles the illusion of linear, unidirectional movement toward a single model of “modernity,” revealing in its place a pulsating field of multiple, conflictual, and at times mutually exclusive trajectories. This makes the work essential not only for specialists on the Middle East but for anyone engaged in the theory of political development: after reading it, it becomes difficult to continue discussing non-Western societies in the simplistic terms of the schoolroom schema “tradition → modernization → democracy.”