



# The Middle East

## A Brief Historical Sketch

**The first in a series of three papers prepared by the RAND Corporation for the League of Women Voters**

The term “Middle East” originated at the beginning of the twentieth century and denotes that part of the world that sits between Africa, Europe, and Asia. As its name suggests, from the earliest times, its geographic location made it a crossroads for competing civilizations on these three continents, as well as a heartland of successive empires.

Today, the Middle East comprises Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, Israel (including the Palestinian Authority), Jordan, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Libya and Sudan are sometimes also included within this designation. In total area and population, the Middle East and the United States are roughly equivalent.

### **Birthplace of Civilization and Monotheism**

The Middle East is often referred to as the “Cradle of Civilization.” Thousands of years ago, nomadic tribes settled near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—now in modern-day Iraq—and gradually developed an agrarian society that relied on irrigation. These peoples invented the first written language and made major discoveries in mathematics, astronomy, architecture, glassmaking, and metalwork. By about 3500 B.C., they had invented the wheel, and they were the first to use a sail as a way of capturing the energy of the wind.

The Middle East is also the birthplace of monotheism, the belief in the existence of one god or in the oneness of God. It has been the source of three related world religions—Judaism, whose beginnings date to about 1800 B.C.E., Christianity in the first century C.E., and Islam in the seventh century C.E. — all of which survive in the region. Today, however, the population is primarily Muslim.

### **The Rise and Fall of Empires**

By the time Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East in the fourth century B.C.E., it had experienced a succession of empires: Egyptian, Hittite, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Persian. In the second century B.C.E., the Romans began to assert control, pushing the Greeks out of power and gradually conquering the region. In the first century C.E., Christianity was born, and the Jews rose up against the Romans. Although much of the population was dispersed, Jews continued to live on the land, and modern Judaism developed from the rabbinical schools that existed for hundreds of years in the territory of the ancient nation. With the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the designation

of Constantinople as a Christian city (c. 324 C.E.), Christianity became the principal religion in much of the region.

In 330 C.E., the Roman Empire divided into western and eastern domains. After the fall of Rome, the surviving Eastern Empire—also called Byzantine Empire—and the Persians<sup>1</sup> fought for dominance until the seventh century. Exhausted from generations of combat, both sides were ultimately overrun by armies from the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabs brought with them their new religion, Islam, whose principles had been set forth in the *Qur'an* (*Koran*), the holy book that contained God's revelations to Muhammad (c. 570-632).<sup>2</sup> After a short period, Islam split into two main sects, Sunni and Shia. By the eleventh century, the military and political power of the Sunni Arabs was in decline due to the invasion of tribes from Central Asia and conflict with the Shiites, but Islam remained strong. Though challenged by the Christian Crusaders over the next two hundred years, Muslim forces regained control of the Middle East by the end of the thirteenth century largely because invading Turkish and Mongol tribes converted to Islam.

The rise of the Ottoman Turks in the fourteenth century marked the beginning of a reign that lasted until 1918. In addition to including most of the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire at one time encompassed the Balkan Peninsula in Europe as far as Vienna and the greater part of North Africa. However, the internal cohesion of the empire had seriously deteriorated by the mid-1800s, and an industrializing Europe gradually asserted its influence. The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 linked the Mediterranean and Red Sea and opened a direct water route from Europe to Asia, thus diminishing the importance of the land routes and making the canal an object of great strategic importance.

Europe and Russia nibbled at the borders of the Ottoman Empire but largely sustained it as a buffer between them until the Ottoman rulers sided with Germany in World War I. Preoccupied with its 1917 revolution, Russia dropped out, leaving England and France to advance their interests in the region by encouraging Arab revolts. Some Arab leaders sought to take over the old empire; others wanted separate states. Commitments from the Europeans, however, were vague or contradictory. Some agreements were public, such as the Balfour Declaration granting a Jewish state in 1917; and some were held secret, such as the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement between England and France to establish, if not explicit colonies, at least spheres of influence for the two European powers over most of the territory.

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<sup>1</sup> The Persians were predominantly Zoroastrians, followers of the prophet Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions, perhaps dating back as far as 1000 B.C.E. The issues of moral choice and the ongoing battle between good and evil lie at the core of its teachings.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad's connection to earlier prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus was acknowledged by the Muslims; but they believed that Muhammad was the final prophet, chosen by God to correct distortions of His word, and that the *Qur'an* (*Koran*) was the final revelation.

When the war ended, the League of Nations awarded Britain a mandate<sup>3</sup> over Iraq and Palestine, which included what today are the countries of Israel and Jordan and the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority. (The British already had Egypt under a Protectorate.) The French received a mandate for Syria, which then also incorporated an area that today is the country of Lebanon.

### **The Middle East in the Twentieth Century**

During the twentieth century, events took place in the Middle East that set it on a path that has had ramifications extending far beyond its current territory. Several of the most crucial developments are summarized below:

**The Founding of Saudi Arabia and the Emergence of a “Fundamental” Form of Islam.** Between 1919 and 1926, Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibn Saud successfully defeated his rivals<sup>4</sup> and unified about 80 percent of the Arabian Peninsula, including Islam’s holy sites of Mecca and Medina, into the separate areas of the Hejaz and Nejd. In 1932, Ibn Saud formally changed the name of the country to Saudi Arabia, and it has been governed by his family as an absolute monarchy without legislature or political parties ever since.

In Saudi Arabia, the law of the land is the shari’a (Islamic Holy Law) and the only religion permitted to worship publicly is Islam. The ruling family enforced a particularly strict version called Wahhabism,<sup>5</sup> which regards modern life as corrupt and degraded and demands a return to the pure principles and practices of Muhammad as they are understood by Wahhabis. Adherence to Wahhabism affects nearly all aspects of daily life, particularly those relating to the restricted status of women. Well-funded by oil revenue, Wahhabi schools, or madrassas, provide the only instruction that many Muslim children ever receive, not just in Saudi Arabia but worldwide. Wahhabi schools, preachers, and mosques financed from Saudi Arabia have promoted a fundamentalist culture throughout the world’s Muslim communities that is vulnerable to exploitation by Islamic terrorists.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In this case, the term *mandate* refers to a nation that has lost its sovereignty and has been placed under the control of another country. It was the responsibility of the nation with mandatory power to prepare those nations for the eventual resumption of their independent status, which the Europeans were loath to do.

<sup>4</sup> The last of these rivals was Hussein Ibn Ali, king of Mecca and leader of the Hashemite family (descendants of Muhammad), who had established his sons as kings of Iraq and Jordan.

<sup>5</sup> Founded by Muhammad ibn “Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), who in 1744 made a pact with Ibn Saud’s great grandfather in which each would support the other in unifying the Arabian Peninsula and spreading Wahhab’s interpretation of Islam.

<sup>6</sup> Another impetus toward terrorism can be found in the writings of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), who called for the strict observance of Islamic law. Born in Egypt, he was a teacher and, for a time, an official in the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Qutb studied in the United States from 1948-1950; however, he spent most of the rest of his life writing behind bars in Egypt until he was executed in 1966 for planning the assassination of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. His abhorrence of the racism and sexual mores of the American culture spurred his rejection of the West in general and the United States in particular. His experience in prison, watching the torture and execution of others, led to him to reject the secular power of the Muslim state. In its place he called for a Muslim theocracy under the rule of shari’a. His writings became a major influence in the development of Al Qaeda and what is today generally called Islamic fundamentalism.

In the long run, divisions within Islam itself are likely to play the most important role in determining the future of the Middle East. The Sunni sect comprises 85 to 90 percent of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. However, the number of Shias in the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and a large part of Pakistan roughly equal those of the Sunni populations there; and the Shias are the majority in Iran. The rift between the two sects dates back to the death of Mohammad and the fierce controversy over who would succeed him as Islam's leader. Down through the ages, there have been times and places when the two populations have intermingled and influenced each other. But despite opportunities for common cause—e.g., colonial rule, the Cold War, and the emergence of Israel—their relationship continues to be marred by intense hostility, as can be seen in Iraq today.

**Establishment of the State of Israel.** A small number of Jews had lived in Palestine throughout the millennia. In the late nineteenth century, the development of Zionism—largely a response to European anti-Semitism—led to a call for a Jewish homeland. Jews from Central Europe began to immigrate to Palestine in growing numbers. Russian pogroms<sup>7</sup> increased the rate of immigration to the Middle East and to other parts of the world as well. Partly because other countries, including the United States, were neither eager to confront Tsarist Russia on this point nor accept large-scale Jewish immigration,<sup>8</sup> the prospect of a Jewish homeland in an area held by the weakening Ottoman Empire offered a more attractive alternative to many Jews and to European governments.

The publication of the Balfour Declaration supported this approach. In a letter to Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild during the First World War in 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, a member of Lloyd George's government, asserted that

His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use its best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of the object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.<sup>9</sup>

Over time, however, it became clear that the Palestinians and the Zionists would come into conflict over the land. In the decade before and immediately following World War II, Jewish immigration to Palestine soared despite the objections of both Britain and the Palestinians. In 1947, having failed to reconcile the two populations and facing ever-increasing levels of violence, Britain withdrew from the Palestine mandate. The United Nations then approved a two-state partition plan with the Jews gaining about 55 percent of the land and the Arabs retaining roughly 45 percent. Because it was a holy site to Muslims,

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<sup>7</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Cossacks under the direction of the Russian government led violent mob attacks—pogroms—primarily against Jews.

<sup>8</sup> The United States, however, did permit significant Jewish immigration from Europe.

<sup>9</sup> This may also have been a *quid-pro-quo* for the financial support for the war provided by the Jewish community in Great Britain.

Jews, and Christians alike, Jerusalem was planned to be an international region administered by the United Nations.

As the date of independence neared, the Arab League<sup>10</sup> declared its support of the Palestinians; and fighting escalated on both sides until war formally broke out on May 15, 1948, one day after the British had departed, the State of Israel had been proclaimed, and the armies of Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt had crossed the borders. The war ended with partition but not peace.<sup>11</sup> Seven hundred thousand Palestinian refugees were housed in camps, largely on what is now the West Bank, and in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. Several hundred thousand more were displaced in the wars that followed.

Finally, the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, made peace with Israel in 1979.<sup>12</sup> By then, as a result of its victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel had retaken the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. The successive defeat of the neighboring Arab states by Israel further inflamed Islamic terrorists, and the peace agreement led directly to Sadat's assassination.

Peace today is likely to require a two-state solution in which a Palestinian state coexists with an Israeli state recognized by its Arab neighbors. This has proved to be an elusive goal, especially when it comes to the final issues of control of Jerusalem; Israel's withdrawal to its pre-1967 boundaries, including Jewish settlements in the West Bank; and the return of Palestinian refugees. Public opinion polls show strong support for peace on both sides, but the negotiations have always faltered on Palestinian demands for the right of return and control of Jerusalem and on Israeli security concerns.

Although the death of Yasir Arafat opened the door for hope with new leadership of the Palestinian Authority, the victory by Hamas—a fundamentalist Islamic organization dedicated to the destruction of Israel—in the most recent Palestinian election keeps the prospects as uncertain as ever. Israel began to implement a “unilateral” solution, withdrawing from Gaza and from some settlements from the West Bank and walling it off with a security fence. However, the outbreak of attacks by Hamas in Gaza and by Iranian- and Syrian-supported Hezbollah in Lebanon has caused Israel to declare that a unilateral attempt to achieve peace and security is no longer viable.

## The Importance of Middle Eastern Oil

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<sup>10</sup> Created in 1945, the Arab League is an organization currently comprising 22 states whose mission includes coordination of economic, cultural, social, and health affairs. Its charter forbids member states from resorting to force against each other. The seven founding states are Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen.

<sup>11</sup> Four wars followed—in 1958, 1967 (the Six-Day War), 1973-74 (the Yom Kippur War), and 1982. In the 1967 war, Nasser ordered the withdrawal of UN forces from Egyptian territory, barred Israel from the Gulf of Aqaba, and tried to mobilize surrounding Arab countries. Israel attacked first, destroying Arab air capability and capturing the Old City of Jerusalem, the Sinai, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. In 1976, the Arabs caught Israel off guard during a religious holy day and initially regained territory. However, Israel not only took back that territory but it also extended its control to the Suez Canal. In later years, much of this land was exchanged for peace.

<sup>12</sup> Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994.

In the minds of most Americans, oil is the essential link between the Middle East and the United States. According to varying estimates, the Middle East possesses half to two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves. Yet, because it was a major oil producer itself, the United States was a relative latecomer to the Middle Eastern oil market. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, British entrepreneur William Knox D'Arcy succeeded in obtaining the oil concession of three quarters of Persia for 60 years. By the 1920s, control of oil from Iran and Iraq was a British monopoly. In 1929, with U.S. government help, several U.S. companies were able to muscle in on the cartel. At the time, there had been no oil discoveries in the Arabian Peninsula. In 1933, shortly after King Ibn Saud renamed his land Saudi Arabia, he granted Standard Oil of California (now Chevron) a large concession in exchange for personal, interest-free loans totaling \$50,000. The first major oil deposit was discovered in 1938.

The strategic importance of Middle East oil first became apparent when the British and U.S. navies converted from coal to oil before WWI. That conflict was the incubator of mobile motorized combat, and WWII confirmed that oil was essential for victory in modern warfare. In the post-war period, cheap Middle East oil fueled the recovery of Western Europe and America's industrial expansion.<sup>13</sup> The economies of the United States and Europe grew increasingly dependent on oil from the Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s as the Arab oil boycott of 1973 dramatically demonstrated.

The myriad problems associated with that dependence are bearing down hard today. Looking toward the future, as Asia grows exponentially, access to oil and gas in the Middle East will be increasingly critical to competitiveness in a global economy. The uncertainties inherent in relying on a part of the world that is currently so unstable to satisfy a basic need pose a dangerous challenge for our security.

### **Perceptions of America in the Middle East**

Public opinion polls conducted in the Middle East show that America is regarded as the greatest threat to peace in the region. Support for Israel, stationing American troops on holy Islamic soil in the first Gulf War, and the current military presence in Iraq—all have contributed to rising anti-American hostility. While the appeal of American popular culture remains relatively strong, U.S. society is viewed by many Muslims (and by other conservative populations throughout the world) as an example of moral decadence. Moreover, television and the Internet make the economic disparities with the West quite stark in the eyes of young, uneducated populations unable to benefit from the global economy.

The "blame" for the lack of social and economic progress and a widespread sense of humiliation in the Middle East has been focused on the West in general, and

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<sup>13</sup> Because of Woodrow Wilson's post-WWI policy to end colonialism and promote independent democracies in the Middle East, for many years the United States was seen to exert a positive influence. Attitudes changed after 1953, when the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency brought down the democratically elected Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran for trying to nationalize Aramco, the British-Iranian oil company. In his place, it then installed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who was much more responsive to Western interests.

especially on America, which is seen as supporting repressive local regimes with arms and diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> One of the effects of this complex combination of humiliation, contempt, frustration, hatred, and envy can be seen in the rise of Islamic terrorism on an international scale. It is this subject that is explored in “Terrorism Past and Present,” the second paper in this series.

## Recommended Reading

Efraim Karsh and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East 1789-1923*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Beacon Press, 2004.

Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, Modern Library, 2003.

Vali Masr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, W. W. Norton and Company, 2006.

Milton Viorst, *Storm from the East: The Struggle between the Arab World and the Christian West*, Modern Library Chronicles Book, 2006.

*The RAND Corporation prepared three papers, of which this is the first, in a series for the League of Women Voters. The other two papers are entitled “Terrorism Past and Present” and “Strategies for a Secure World.”*

*This educational project is directed towards encouraging public conversation about how to achieve a secure world and promoting public understanding of the critical issues surrounding terrorism and the threats it poses to our security. It is possible that such conversations will lead to greater public engagement and involvement in encouraging our policymakers to explore the uncertainty, to apply new skills in their efforts to reduce it, and to take risks where necessary.*

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. support of many Middle Eastern states during the Cold War was a consequence of its concern for stability in the region as a buffer against Soviet expansion. The West lost influence in the 1950s with the attempted takeover of the Suez Canal by Britain, France, and Israel—even though the United States forced their withdrawal—and again in the 1960s when the United States declined to build the Aswan Dam and the Soviets took over the project.

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