

CHAPTER 6

The Middle East

The area known as “the Middle East” (so named because it was halfway to Asia—“the Far East”) is, from the point of view of U.S. foreign policy, the most troublesome region in the world. Think of the main strategic interests that we have there: oil, without which the economies of the developed countries (Japan as well as Europe and the United States) would go right down the drain, terrorism, and Israel, the only democracy and the United States’ only ally in the region.

Then think of all the conflicts going on there that have the potential to threaten those vital interests: the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the nuclear standoff with Iran, the war against terrorism, the war against Al Qaeda, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the possible destabilization of nuclear Pakistan, revolutionary movements aimed at toppling Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), terrorist groups in Lebanon and Gaza, instability in Central Asia—all the main U.S. allies and oil suppliers. And more revolutionary movements aimed at toppling the governments in Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon—all friends or allies of the United States, plus the subversion of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. Add to all this the widespread Muslim hatred in the Middle East toward the West and the United States in particular, and you have a truly dangerous situation.

Adding to our difficulties is the fact the Middle East seems to be impervious to reform, or at least the kind of reform the United States

seeks to promote. Of all the regions of the world, the Middle East is the least democratic, with only Turkey and Israel (and *none* of the Arab countries) classified as democracies. Similarly with economics: it is oil, not economic reform, industriousness, or hard work, that has been almost solely responsible for the newfound wealth of Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, the UAE, Iran, and Libya, the most prosperous of the Middle Eastern countries. Most of us like to think it is hard work and merit that pay off for countries in development, but in the Middle East it is the sheer luck—like winning the lottery—of sitting atop vast oil deposits that accounts for the difference between rich and poor states. In addition, *nowhere* in the Middle East have we seen the kind of sequences that we've seen so strongly in Asia and Latin America: economic development and industrialization lead to social change and pluralism, and pluralism socially leads to pluralism politically and, hence, to democratization. In the Middle East, none of these processes that figure so prominently in the comparative politics and developing areas literature has worked as they have in other areas.

A number of reasons have been suggested as to why the Middle East lags behind, why its development is so disappointing. The first reason is geography and climate: hot, infertile, desert conditions in much of the area. A second reason is foreign interference and colonialism, which drained its resources and skewed its path to development. A third reason is weak or absent institutions: weak parliaments, weak judiciaries, weak bureaucracies, and weak civil society. Fourth, there is the prevailing political system: regimes in power (Saleh, Assad, the Iranian Mullahs, the Saudis, King Hussein, Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein until the United States overthrew him) are powerful and oppressive while the opposition (democratic, socialist, fundamentalist) tends to be weak, divided, and unable to get to power.

All these reasons for the Middle East's lack of development are important, but the most important one may well be cultural or, more accurately, political-cultural. The issue is that both the Koran and Islamic sharia laws provide abundant justification for authoritarianism and top-down, male rule, but they are very weak on such topics as human rights, pluralism, citizen participation, and democracy. In addition, the Koran and sharia law condemn "usury," including the earning or charging of interest, which makes it very difficult to have

banks, lending agencies, or financial institutions. Currently, some of these difficulties are being overcome through so-called Islamic banks, but the barriers are still so large that foreign as well as domestic investors may prefer to put their money elsewhere. We cannot say that this Islamic political culture is determinative in holding back democracy and development, but it has certainly put powerful obstacles in the way. It is striking that *none* of the Arab Middle Eastern countries is a democracy or has made it to First World economic rank.

And yet, change and some limited development continue to go forward in the Arab world. Oil has been the main agent triggering development; without oil in the Middle East, you are usually condemned to continued poverty. In the oil-rich countries there is now more wealth than before; the middle class is growing larger; and those at the bottom of the social scale are rising. The governments of these countries are being obliged to provide more social services (health, education, housing, social welfare) and that in turn produces even more changes. Pluralism, civil society, and opposition movements are growing but are not yet sufficiently strong to supplant the governments in power. All this means that while there have been *no* democratic breakthroughs, the Middle Eastern countries are not stagnant either, and change is in the air. Popular movements are growing.

Socioeconomic Analysis

The Middle East has among the most skewed income levels in the world (see table 6.1). It has very rich countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, Israel, Saudi Arabia) and very poor ones too (Djibouti, Yemen). And many countries, not quite so poor, but not wealthy either, that the World Bank calls "lower middle income"—for example, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Syria. What it lacks are stable, progressing, developing countries in between the extremes that have good, solid prospects for the future. Turkey may be the only country that falls safely in this last category of stable, democratic, *upper*-middle-income countries.

In addition to the extremes between countries, income *within* these countries is terribly unevenly distributed. The gaps between rich and poor tend to be very wide. There is very little middle class on which a stable democracy can be built.

Table 6.1 Per capita income in the Middle East

Country	Per capita income (in \$)	Category
Afghanistan	—	LIC
Algeria	7,640	LMC
Armenia	5,900	LMC
Azerbaijan	6,370	LMC
Bahrain	34,310	HI
Djibouti	2,260	LMC
Egypt	5,400	LMC
Iran	10,800	LMC
Iraq	—	LMC
Israel	25,930	HI
Jordan	5,100	LMC
Kazakhstan	9,700	UMC
Kuwait	49,970	HI
Kurghyz Republic	1,950	LIC
Lebanon	10,050	UMC
Libya	14,710	UMC
Morocco	3,990	LMC
Oman	19,740	HI
Qatar	—	HI
Saudi Arabia	22,910	HI
Syria	4,370	LMC
Tajikistan	1,710	LIC
Tunisia	7,130	LMC
Turkey	12,090	UMC
Turkmenistan	4,350	LMC
United Arab Emirates	—	HI
Uzbekistan	2,430	LIC
West Bank and Gaza	—	LMC
Yemen	2,200	LIC

HI: High-income country; UMC: Upper middle income country; LMC: Lower middle income country; LIC: Low-income country.

But the situation in the Middle East is more complicated than that. If it were just a matter of large income gaps between the rich and the poor, we could say that the Middle East is just like Latin America in this regard, or perhaps like the Philippines, Indonesia, and other

developing areas. But it is not. First, in the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates), at least within the ruling family and among citizens, everyone is pretty well off. Oil is, in this sense, a blessing; on balance, it's better to be rich in oil than poor—like Yemen. On the other hand, oil can be a double-edged sword, the logic being this: if we are so rich (in oil), why should we work at all? Oil brings higher living standards, but it also brings complacency, laziness, a reliance on government largesse, and an attitude of “why work”?

In addition, because these countries are so rich and their citizens often averse to physical labor, they must import laborers from other countries. These include workers from Indonesia, the Sudan, the Philippines, India, Bangladesh, Palestine, and other countries. Often the conditions for these laborers, who are usually there for years without their families, are abysmal. They live in Spartan quarters and, while the pay is good, are treated shabbily by the host government. They are not allowed to mingle with the host country population, nor is there a path to citizenship for them. You can be sure that the host government's intelligence services also keep a close eye on them to prevent strikes, violence, and terrorist incidents. Hence, while the oil-rich states do not have a working-class proletariat of their own, they do have an imported one, in the form of all those imported workers of whom they maintain tight surveillance. But they also worry a great deal that all these imported workers might form a revolutionary, a destabilizing, or a terrorist threat within their own societies.

Social mobility works the same way. For the oil-rich Saudis, Kuwaitis, Bahranians, Qataris, and residents of the UAE, there is so much money around that one can rise in the social scale. Even Bedouins can rise in this way. But social mobility is *only* for Saudis, Kuwaitis, and so on. If you are a foreigner or one of those imported laborers mentioned earlier, there is no upward mobility for you. You are *completely outside* the indigenous social system. You don't fit! And, in the absence of any possibility of citizenship, there is no possibility for you to integrate into the local society or to improve your lot. You are a nonperson in the local society's terms.

But if you are a Saudi, a Kuwaiti, and so on, life for you can be very comfortable. *Everything* is paid for: education, health care, other amenities. The government does this purposely as a way of heading

off revolt or revolution. For here is the dilemma: the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf are still basically feudal monarchies: old-fashioned, very traditional, anachronistic, one would think doomed in the modern world. How can they possibly last? The answer is: by sharing the wealth, by providing elaborate social programs, by giving their peoples all they want. Here is one of the places in the world where the wealth has actually trickled down. And consciously so, as part of a concerted government and royal family plan to head off any possible revolutionary, or even democratic, movement by co-opting or buying off any possible middle- or lower-class discontent even before it happens.

Interestingly, the less-rich states of the Middle East have employed a very similar strategy. These are not the poorest or LIC states (they have no money) but the lower-middle-income (LMC) and upper-middle-income (UMC) countries whose economies have been growing, though modestly, in recent years. Here we are talking of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. In *all* of these, the regime in power, as a way of heading off Islamic fundamentalism or possible revolution from below, has been funneling money down into the lower levels of the social system. The programs include higher wages, better health care, education, better social programs, and a general raising of living standards. The strategy behind this effort is mainly political: to keep the regime that dispenses these programs in power, to benefit the emerging and middle classes, and to prevent opposition elements from establishing a strong base from which to topple the regime.

Countries like Yemen (North and South) and Djibouti cannot practice this strategy. They lack the funds for almost any kind of social program. Not only are they the poorest countries in the region but—and there is a correlation here—they are also the most unstable; their governments, most prone to being overthrown; they are the most likely to become failed states; and they are also most likely to become havens for terrorist activities. Here again we see a close relationship between international relations and comparative politics: those countries that are the least successful at development are likely to become the most problematic for U.S. foreign policy.

Israel is, of course, an exception to all these rules. It is a country *geographically* located in the Middle East. It is not Arab or Muslim, but a majority Jewish state with a large Palestinian minority. In cultural,

social, and political terms, it is Western and European more than it is Middle Eastern, though that is gradually changing. It has a high per capita income (comparable to the poorer countries of Europe, Greece, Spain, or Portugal) but not as high as Kuwait or Bahrain—though higher than Saudi Arabia. It is the *only* country in the Middle East that is democratic and the only one that is both democratic and developed.

Which gets us to the last set of questions: why have the other countries of the Middle East been so unsuccessful with both development and democracy? What is holding them back? Why have they not achieved like the Asian countries have achieved—indeed, at “miracle” growth rates? Why are they mired at roughly the same developmental levels as Latin America—but generally above the level of most of Africa? And why *no* democracies at all? What’s wrong with the Middle East, with the Arab countries, with the Muslim states? I’m including in these questions the rich states of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE because, while they’re rich, they’re certainly not democratic. And because I believe it’s not altogether fair if a country gets rich on the basis of oil alone without any other redeeming virtues, such as merit, hard work, and achievement.

The answers to these questions are complex. There is no one easy or simple answer. Part of the answer lies in the fact of colonial control—chiefly France and Great Britain—over this area for a long time and the failure of the colonial powers to develop local government, bureaucracies, educational systems, and armies. Part of the answer also lies in the absence of very many resources, other than oil, in the region: you can’t very well create more wealth if you have little wealth to begin with. Part of it lies in the rigid, hierarchical social structure of the area and the fact they are, for the most part, still tribal and ethnically divided societies rather than unified national ones.

A key explanation for both the lack of democracy and the lack of development in the region has to do with the structure of power in these countries. The facts are that most of these are strong, authoritarian, and top-down regimes (not just the Gulf monarchies but also Saleh in Yemen, Qaddafi in Libya, Abdullah in Jordan, Assad in Syria), while their oppositions are weak. Civil societies are either oppressed by the regimes in power or they are controlled by corporatist control mechanisms that turn them into government-run trade

unions, political parties, and interest groups. There is little social or political pluralism here, few checks and balances, and only a weak and not independent press. And if these strong states can control their secular opposition, the fundamentalists in their ranks, meanwhile channeling social benefits to the masses, they can stay in power for a long time. Meanwhile popular discontent is rising.

Finally, there is culture. Both the Koran and the sharia law tend to justify strong, authoritarian rule. Neither is supportive of democracy and pluralism. True, they emphasize consultation (with tribal chiefs) and the building of unity and consensus, but that is a long way from democracy. Nor have the recent experiments with strengthening parliaments in Jordan and Kuwait or the holding of elections in Algeria, Iraq, and Afghanistan (under U.S. direction) done much to strengthen democracy. Of all the Islamic countries of the Middle East, only Turkey is a democracy, and even that is subject to several qualifications. I am convinced that it is not just structure and institutions that hold the Middle East back but religion and culture as well.

Background and Context

The Middle East, like China and India, is the home of some very ancient cultures and civilizations, but relatively new nation-states. The Middle East was the founding center of the three main Abrahamic, monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the *Torah*, the *Bible*, and the *Koran*, as well as modern archeology tell the story of these early peoples. From as far back as history records, the Middle East was an area of conflict and competing civilizations: Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq), Persia (present-day Iran), Arabia, Egypt, Jews, Byzantium (present-day Turkey).

In ancient times, both Greece and Rome conquered and had a profound impact on large parts of the area. Greece and Rome brought their cultures as well as their conquering armies; the Middle East absorbed some elements of these Western cultures, while resisting others. From the first to the sixth century AD, Christianity also emanating from the West had a major impact; in later centuries, and continuing to today, the Christian communities would be persecuted and all but exterminated from the Middle East.

In the seventh century AD came Muhammed and the rise of Islam. In those days Islam was a particularly militant as well as militaristic religion; the question on everyone's mind, with large implications for policy, is whether that is still true today. That is, is Islam always an aggressive belief system or can it coexist peacefully with other religions and cultures?

Islam lays claim to being a universal religion and a universal polity, fixed and immutable. It is a community of believers backed by state power; there is no separation of church and state in Islam as there is in the United States. As it emerged in the seventh and eighth centuries, Islam moved from being a state to a far-ranging empire. Islam's conquests in a relatively short period of time were truly phenomenal: throughout the Arabian Peninsula, eastward into India (and eventually down the Malay Peninsula and throughout Indonesia), southward into Africa to include the Nile kingdoms of Egypt and the Sudan, westward across North Africa (Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco) and all the way to the Atlantic and then across the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain and Portugal, and northwest into Asia Minor (Turkey) and the Balkan countries of southeast Europe, including for different periods of time Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia, Hungary, and even southern Austria. Eventually, Islam was halted and turned back to its present-day borders as a result of defeats in Spain (the fifteenth century) and Austria (the seventeenth century).

After overrunning these other huge territories in what in Western Europe we think of as the Middle Ages, the Islamic lands were themselves conquered by invaders from the east. These included the Mongols and Genghis Khan in the twelfth century and, slightly later, the Turks who came originally from the steppes of Asian Russia. Some of these marauding Turkish tribes went directly to Asia Minor (hence, Turkey); others swept south into the Arab lands. What is striking about these conquests is that instead of the conquerors imposing their religion and culture upon the conquered, the conquerors themselves "completely surrendered" (Middle East historian Bernard Lewis's words) to the religion of the conquered: Islam. Then, as the ethnic Mongols and Turks eventually retreated back toward their home territories, they carried with them and implanted in present-day Turkey, southern Russia, and Central Asia the Islamic religion to which they had been exposed in their Middle Eastern conquests. That helps

explain why Azerbaijan, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and large areas of southern Russia are Muslim, and why we are justified in including Central Asia in this chapter on the Middle East.

After the Mongol and Turkish conquests had run their course, the Middle East continued to be pulled, and sometimes conquered, from three main directions: Persia in the east, Egypt in the south, and Turkey to the northwest. After the crusades, which only reconquered for Christianity and the West a narrow strip of land along the eastern Mediterranean (present-day Lebanon, Israel, and Gaza), the Islamic world continued to define itself in terms of its conflict with the West. This struggle would go on for a thousand years and more, beginning with expansionist Islamic clash with Christian, Orthodox Byzantium, and arguably continuing to today's "clash of civilizations" (Samuel P. Huntington's term). Meanwhile, in these centuries leading to what we in the West call the modern world, the Islamic world was beset by *internal* conflicts and less by external wars.

During much of this period, which seems hard to believe today, the Islamic world was the leader in science, mathematics, philosophy, and art, and not the West. While the West was still stuck in the "Dark Ages," the Islamic world built great cities, founded great centers of learning, and was generally more sophisticated and cultured than the West. But from the sixteenth century on, these trends were reversed, with the West forging ahead in terms of development and modernization, and the Islamic world came to lag behind. We in the West consider this in our histories a "natural" progression, but in the Middle East the reasons for the area's decline are a subject of immense consternation and self-examination.

The culmination of these criss-crossing trend lines (the Islamic world's decline and the West's increasing ascendancy) resulted in a century and a half of Western imperialism in the Middle East from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The two chief imperial powers in this part of the world were France and Great Britain, the former going into Egypt and present-day Lebanon and Syria, and the latter into Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Jordan, and present-day Palestine. These conquests were aided by the economic weakness of the Middle East, the continued existence of tribal politics and lack of a central state, and the long-term decline of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

Meanwhile, two other events or trends were underway that would profoundly impact the Middle East: (1) the discovery of oil, which was used to fuel Europe's industrialization, and (2) the gradual, uneven beginning of modernization in the Middle East under the impact initially of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity) and other ideas and technologies brought from the outside, as well as increasing self-examination on the part of the Arabs: who are we as a people and a civilization and why are we so far behind the West?

As imperialism began to give way in the twentieth century, the result was the division of the Middle East into the nation-states that we know today. However, the borders left behind by the imperialists, rather like the situation in Africa after imperialism, bore little resemblance whatsoever to the geographic, cultural, ethnic, and tribal realities of the area. They are, like the African countries, artificial states with artificial borders. That goes a long way toward explaining the continued ethnic and religious strife *within* these countries, the weaknesses of the state and central institutions (organized on ethnic rather than national lines), and the difficulty of following a national policy of development and modernization.

Independence in the Middle East came not all at once but in three waves. First, at the end of World War I, Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan were fully sovereign states. In the interwar period, second, 1919–1939, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, and Egypt achieved independence. Finally, after World War II, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel emerged as independent states. Certain other peoples—Kurds, Palestinians, other minority tribal and ethnic groups—founded communities, but not states, a source of continuing friction and problems.

The "new states" of the Middle East faced many of the same problems common to all new states: settling border disputes, establishing a national identity, creating such national institutions as bureaucracies and armies. But they were also torn by internal divisions and often revolts, by conflicts across borders, and by repeated wars, chiefly involving Israel and its Arab neighbors. Repeated interference by the former colonial powers, Britain and France, and now by the Cold War antagonists, the United States and the Soviet Union, added to the region's instability.

With the end of French and British colonialism after World War II, the United States became the major outside actor in the region.

We became both the policeman settling disputes, as between Israel and Arabs for existence, and the fireman putting out brush fires when they occurred. The United States by this time was heavily involved in the Middle East politically, economically, diplomatically, militarily, and through our private oil companies—this was the period when we became heavily dependent on Middle East oil.

The other former powers had been largely exhausted by World War II, but by the 1960s and 1970s the Soviet Union was again heavily involved in the area, particularly in Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq where the Soviets had invested heavily and built up considerable expertise. The Soviets were interested in oil but also in expanding their empire, securing a warm water port, establishing a string of Soviet puppet buffer states on its southern border, and making sure its own sizable Muslim minorities were not influenced by the rising Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and other countries. During the long Cold War, the Middle East was one of the hottest areas where the United States and the USSR faced off. And then, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the United States was truly left as the only outside power in the region. Previously, the United States and the Soviets had each “policed” their own respective client states and that had maintained a certain order in an otherwise chaotic area; now the United States was left as the region’s sole policeman, with all the costs on our part and rising resentments on the side of the Arab states that implied.

Change had, meanwhile, been inexorably occurring in the internal politics and societies of the Middle East that also affected the international situation. First came the rise of Pan-Arabism, largely led by Gamel Abdul Nasser of Egypt in its early years, a movement that sought to find common ground and common policies among all the Arab states. Concurrently, second, came the rise of Arab nationalism, socialism, and the secular, Baath political parties that governed for a time in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Meanwhile, third, social change was occurring in the Arab world, including the rise of a middle class and the growing impatience for change coupled with religious fundamentalism of the Arab masses. Fourth came the Iranian revolution of 1979, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and the growing popularity of the idea of a distinct Islamic model of change and development. Finally, the rising and continued demand for Middle East oil on the

part of Europe, the United States, Japan, and now China enabled some Islamic countries to become fabulously rich, while other nonoil countries remained poor and the gaps between rich and poor both between and within states continued to widen.

This history helps provide us with the background and context for discussing today’s Middle East and the manifold and dangerous problems that confront U.S. policy there. Among them are the following:

- The continuing and festering Israel-Palestinian conflict that if unresolved will continue to foster violence, conflict, and war.
- Rising Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa and throughout the Middle East that is very dangerous for U.S. interests.
- The war in Iraq: as the United States pulls out, there is no assurance that Iraq will not explode again in violence and civil war.
- The war in Afghanistan, presently going badly, and which may result in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.
- The war against Al Qaeda, currently concentrated in Pakistan, complicated by the impenetrability of the country’s northwest border territories, by the high stakes of nuclear weapons present, and by the fact Pakistan sees its interests in a different light than does the United States.
- The rising threat of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism in such oil-rich countries as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE; if these countries go down, the entire economies of Europe, the United States, and Japan will collapse.
- The presence of a nuclear capacity in Iran, which may give that country the long-sought “Islamic bomb” and trigger an attack by Israel or by the United States, or renewed general conflagration in the Middle East and beyond.
- The potential for violent instability in Central Asia, Georgia, and the Caucasus, another area rich in oil and natural gas that we and Europe are counting on as an alternative to unsettled and conflict-prone Persian Gulf oil, but which the Russians see as part of “Greater Russia.”
- The triumph of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza signals a more violent, more militant form of Islamic fundamentalism capable of actually coming to power.

There we have it: a region, perhaps more than any other, likely to explode in conflict and war, including nuclear war, and in which the stakes for the United States (oil, stability, security, our economy, Israel) could not be higher. In the next section we will be looking at some of the country-specific and regional hot spots within the area.

Individual Countries and Subregions

Egypt

Egypt, along with India, China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, and Mexico, has long been considered one of the most important countries in the Third World. With a population of seventy-five million, it is the most populous country in the Middle East, commands the entrance to the Nile River as well as the Suez Canal, and is a candidate for a permanent UN Security Council seat. According to a saying, as goes Egypt, so goes (much of) the Middle East.

Egypt has a long and glorious history: the pharaohs, the pyramids, one of the cradles of civilization in the valley of the Nile. It is a relatively new nation (since 1953) but a very ancient culture and civilization. Its influence in ancient history reached easterly into the Sinai desert and beyond, along North Africa, into the islands of the Mediterranean, and even across the Mediterranean—although some European countries are reluctant to admit that because of Egypt's African influence. Later, it was subjected to repeated interventions, invasions, and foreign occupations: Greece, Rome, Mesopotamia, Iran, Mongols, Turks, eventually France and Great Britain.

With a per capita income of \$5,400, Egypt is classified as a lower-middle-income country. It is not among the Middle East's oil-wealthy nations. Its population is too large for the size of its territory (effectively limited to the Nile River Valley; the rest is desert), and jobs and economic growth are not keeping up with population increase. Meanwhile, social pressures—rapid urbanization, high unemployment, a youthful population, a growing middle class, Islamic fundamentalism—are all building up. Egypt is one of those key countries listed earlier that could explode in social or political revolution.

Politically, Egypt was led by Hosni Mubarak. He was an authoritarian leader, a former military officer, not very much inclined toward democracy and human rights, and nearing the end of his life. However,

for a long time he had maintained order and stability, traits that we also value. The great fear at the policy level is that after Mubarak, Egypt will explode in revolution, chaos, or civil war. Both the Islamic and the secular opposition to the regime is growing, although religious fundamentalism is becoming dominant.

Egypt is important for many reasons. First is its strategic location in the eastern Mediterranean and along the Suez Canal and Red Sea. Second, it is a big country; if Egypt falls into chaos or the fundamentalists gain control, it is a really big deal. Third, Egypt has long maintained a peaceful border and more-or-less normal diplomatic relations with Israel, but there are both internal and external pressures to abandon that position. Fourth, Egypt is one of the largest recipients in the world of U.S. aid; if that aid fails to achieve its goals of Middle East peace, it will represent a terrible failure of U.S. policy. Finally, and related to the previous point, Egypt is essential to the success of a future Palestinian state; if Egypt's support for a moderate solution to the Israeli-Palestine peace process is withdrawn, the entire project is likely to fail.

Iran

Iran is another of those important countries that we need to worry about a lot. With a population of seventy-one million, vast resources including oil, and lying astride all the Middle East's main east-west and north-south trade, travel, and strategic routes, Iran is a country of large and vital interests. In earlier decades, through the 1970s, Iran was not just a partner of the United States but we saw it as an important regional power capable of keeping the Soviet Union at bay and maintaining peace and stability throughout the oil-rich, all-important Persian Gulf area. But since 1979, with its Islamic-fundamentalist revolution, Iran has turned hostile to the United States, and now with its efforts to build nuclear capability, including nuclear bombs, Iran has the capacity to destabilize the entire area.

Iran has, like Egypt, a long and glorious history as a civilization but a relatively short one (since 1906) as an independent nation-state. It is a proud nation, fiercely independent, its people having long resisted outside invasions. The Iranian plateau could be said to occupy the center of the Middle East; it also borders on troublesome Armenia,

Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Central Asia, and (across the Caspian Sea) Russia; it lies between and shares long borders with the two countries in which the United States is at war: Iraq and Afghanistan. Iran's per capita income is twice that of Egypt's and at least that much in comparison with its immediate neighbors; it is a well-educated country, very sophisticated, and with a large middle class. Perhaps the most important things to remember about Iran are: (i) it is Persian rather than Arab and very proud of that difference, and (ii) it speaks Farsi and not Arabic. These features set Iran off as different from all its neighbors.

From a comparative politics point of view, Iran was the first of the Middle East countries to have a revolution ushering in a fundamentalist Islamic regime. Excitingly, though we may not approve of the revolution's excesses and many of its policies, Iran nevertheless represents an effort to build a genuinely Islamic state, to develop an indigenous or homegrown model of politics, society, and development; and it serves as an example and inspiration to other countries. For good or ill, Iran may represent the future of the Middle East.

All these factors make Iran an extremely important country, in these terms the most important in the Middle East. Then if we add in Iran's nuclear program the Israeli threat to bomb and destroy these facilities, the pressures in the United States for us to do the bombing if the Israelis do not, and the possibilities that such actions could set off a general Middle Eastern conflagration that would destroy the Saudi and Persian Gulf oil fields and destabilize the entire area, we have a truly worrisome situation. Iran may well be the most important, and at the same time the most complex and the most volatile, of all the foreign policy problems with which the United States must deal.

Iraq-Afghanistan

Iraq and Afghanistan are two very different countries. But because they are linked in the eyes of the public and in U.S. strategic policy, we will treat them here under a single heading.

The United States militarily invaded and occupied Iraq in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This was done (i) to get a measure of revenge and satisfaction for those acts of terrorism, (ii) because we thought Iraq's ruling

dictator, Saddam Hussein, was developing weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and (iii) as part of President George W. Bush's and his neoconservative advisers' unrealistic campaign to, hopefully, bring democracy and freedom to the Middle East. The terrible mistakes and miscalculations of that campaign are well known: there were no WMDs; the terrorists of 9/11 had almost nothing to do with Iraq; we helped destroy the only institutions (army, police, bureaucracy, majority party) that might have held Iraq together; we were completely unprepared for the anti-American insurgency that developed; we had no thought-out exit strategy, and our nation-building and democracy-promotion efforts in Iraq were generally inept.

We will be rehashing these issues for a long time; perhaps now what we should concentrate on is future strategy: where do we do from here? Almost no one believes anymore that we can create a pure or a Jeffersonian democracy in Iraq. The question's now are: can we sustain an elected, middle-of-the-road, and reasonably competent government in Iraq; can that government prevent chaos and full-scale civil war from developing between Shia, Sunni, and Kurds; can that government keep the Al Qaeda terrorists at bay; and can that government maintain stability long enough (let us say, five years) for us to withdraw with some degree of honor, avoiding the debacle that followed the U.S. defeat and retreat from Vietnam, while also giving Iraq at least a shot at a stable and democratic future? Betting on those very large stakes, President Barack Obama has vowed to end the war in Iraq and bring our troops home—except that, instead of coming home, many of these troops are being transferred to the Afghanistan war.

Afghanistan is a much poorer, much less institutionalized, more violent, more primitive, more tribal society, with a far smaller middle class than Iraq. On several indices, Afghanistan is ranked only above Somalia among the 193 nations in the world as the least governable. The chances of succeeding at democracy-promotion and nation-building in Afghanistan are far lower than in Iraq, about the same odds as winning the lottery. You cannot base a sound policy on such low odds. You need either to give up and withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, leaving jet fighters and missiles to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for terrorist attacks on the United States, or you need to change the strategy. President Obama, for now, has opted for the latter tactic.

The issue is also bound up in America's domestic politics. Obama said during the campaign that he intended to pull out of Iraq, but if he now withdraws from Afghanistan too, it will confirm the public's long-held belief that Democrats are weak on defense. And that will likely cost the Democrats seats in the next election. So Obama is stuck: if he goes in deeper, he will draw the wrath of the large antiwar wing of the Democratic Party; if he withdraws, he loses congressional seats and maybe sacrifices his own reelection possibilities.

Meanwhile, the war itself is going badly. More American troops are dying. The Taliban controls up to 80 percent of the national territory. Democracy-promotion and nation-building are not working well. The government is precarious and the U.S. and NATO armed forces lack a plan. We have not yet captured Osama bin Laden who may be holed up in those impenetrable mountains of northwest Pakistan. At the same time, the fighting, bombing, and dying are now shifting to Pakistan whose own government is also under siege. But Pakistan's government (i) has nuclear weapons that could fall into the hands of Islamist radicals, and (ii) for nationalistic reasons, does not want U.S. military forces in its territory.

What to do? None of the options looks good. We can't stay there indefinitely because both our resources and the public's patience are wearing thin. But we can't withdraw either, certainly not precipitously, because the consequences of a full Taliban/Al Qaeda takeover of Afghanistan, and maybe Pakistan, too, are frightening: more violence, more conflict, more militant Islamic fundamentalism, more terrorist attacks on us and our allies.

It's a tough call but I've reached my own conclusions, which readers are free to disagree with. Lacking the language skills, the cultural empathy, and the necessary knowledge of Afghan society, I don't think we can succeed or win in Afghanistan. We can't win militarily and, given the country's low socioeconomic and institutional level, we can't succeed at nation- or democracy-building either. You can't build stability and democracy in countries that lack the cultural, social, economic, or governmental foundations for it. And if we can't win and we can't succeed with the current policy, we need a new policy that does work or else we need to get out. Hopefully, via air power, drones, and CIA machinations, we could then from a distance prevent those worst-case scenarios of the previous paragraph from coming to pass.

Israel-Palestine

The Israel-Palestine conflict is one of the most vexing and complicated issues in U.S. foreign policy. It is complicated for a number of reasons: (i) the issue is intimately caught up in U.S. domestic politics; (ii) conditions within both Israel and Palestine, as well as in the broader Middle East, keep changing; and (iii) the issue has the potential to set off a general Middle East war and conflagration.

Superficially, the issue looks like it is easily resolvable: the two-state solution. Under that approach, Israel's security would be assured and the Palestinians, long stateless, would get a state of their own, consisting of the West Bank and Gaza. The borders that existed before the 1967 war would be restored. Jerusalem would be divided between the two, and the Golan Heights would be demilitarized. It all sounds easy. Peace in the Middle East!

But now things get complicated. First, any American administration that deals with this issue must reckon with the power of the Israeli lobby, the most powerful foreign affairs lobby in the United States. The Israeli lobby does not take kindly to any criticism of, let alone pressure on, Israel. The lobby can mobilize immense amounts of votes, pressure, and money, to say nothing of the charge of anti-Semitism, against anyone who votes against Israel or seeks to force a solution on it against Israeli interests. Congressmen are scared stiff of the Israeli lobby, knowing that any vote against it is likely the kiss of death for the congressman's reelection possibilities. Even President Barack Obama, in pursuit of the two-state solution, after telling Israel to stop building new Jewish settlements in the West Bank, was forced to backtrack on his statement. The word on the street in Washington is: *never* buck the power of the Israeli lobby.

The second factor to consider is that conditions within both Israel and the Palestinian territories keep changing, with negative consequences for the peace process. In Palestine, the generally peaceful and accommodating Arab Christians have been driven out, going from 25 percent to 2 percent of the Arab population, leaving the territories in control of the more radical Islamic fundamentalist elements, the Palestinian Liberation Organization and Hamas. We should also note that the population of the Arabs is increasing much faster than population growth rates in Israel.

In Israel, there have also been major changes domestically. For a long time Israeli politics was dominated by European or Ashquenazi Jews, who were more reasonable and accommodating on the Palestine issue. Then in the 1970s, because of Jewish immigration from the Arab countries (Sephardic Jews) and Russia, Israeli politics became more conservative and hard-line toward the Arabs. These Jews tended to hate the Arabs and were unwilling to compromise with them; in addition, they believed that the main Arab or West Bank territories were the ancient lands of Samaria and Judea that God Himself had given to the Israelites. How can you urge compromise on someone who believes his recalcitrant policies derive from the word of God? Politically in Israel, this shift was reflected in the declining power of the Labor (Ashquenazi) Party and the rising power of the Likud Party, of which the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is the representative. In short, changing demographics and politics are pushing both Palestinian and Israeli officials into more extreme positions that are almost impossible to compromise.

The issue now has the potential to set off a full-scale regional conflagration, which is why the United States must worry about it. First, the Israeli state has over the years become a more militarized and armed state, including (by best estimates) over two hundred nuclear weapons that the Israelis, if attacked, surrounded, and cornered by the far more numerous Arabs, would probably not hesitate to use. Second, with the takeover of Gaza and much of the Palestinian government by Hamas, and of much of neighboring (to the north) Lebanon by the even more treacherous Hezbollah, Israel faces the prospect—and even the reality—of terrorist attacks, bombings, and shellings within its own territory and along and across its northern border.

Third, Israel's Arab neighbors, still often dedicated to the destruction of Israel, are getting stronger all the time, in terms of population, economic wealth, and military capacity. That is why revolutionary Iran's building of a nuclear weapons capacity is so dangerous from Israel's point of view and that of the United States. Because if Iran has nuclear weapons, it might be able to attack Israel with them or use them to neutralize Israel's current nuclear advantage. Neutralization of Israel's nukes might then enable the Arab states to attack and overwhelm Israel on the ground where they have the advantage: sheer population numbers. On the other hand, if the United States or Israel

seek to preempt Iran's nuclear program by bombing it to smithereens, that could set off a general Middle Eastern conflagration that could destabilize Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the other Persian Gulf states on which we, Europe, and Asia are absolutely dependent for our oil.

What to do? Can I confess that in this situation I don't know what to do, meanwhile recognizing that the issue may be outside of our ability to determine the outcome. About all we can do is to keep urging both Israelis and Palestinians to keep talking, be reasonable, see if they, with our help, can work out the differences. The two-state solution still seems the best bet even while its prospects seem dimmer than a few years ago. We need to try to keep the Israelis from acting precipitously (e.g., bombing Iran), while also putting pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program. But there is declining faith in the world, and in the U.S. government, that these policies will work. Meanwhile, the prospect that the Israel-Palestine and, more generally, the Israel-Middle East conflict could spin out of control is gaining currency. It is a very dangerous situation.

Central Asia

Central Asia is a brand new area for study. The five new republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgys Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) that make up Central Asia, plus Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the Trans Caucasus, were once part of the Soviet Union; since the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union disintegrated, they have become independent states. In this sense, Central Asia is like the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania): similarly once a part of the Soviet Union, now independent, and with interesting, comparable similarities as well as differences between them. These "new" areas offer wonderful opportunities for specialization for young scholars and policy analysts precisely because they are so new and there are few persons specializing in them. You can practically create your own area studies program all to yourself.¹

Since Central Asia was for a long time part of the Soviet Union, it is not usually considered a part of the Middle East, even though it shares many cultural and religious features with the Middle Eastern countries. Nor, since it is now independent, can it any longer be thought of as part of Greater Russia; culturally, ethnically, and religiously, it

is quite different from Slavic or European Russia. Though it borders on China's western frontier, it is not really a part of Asia as are the countries considered in the previous chapter, and it falls outside of the South Asian regional focus as well. So with all these differences, we will have to consider Central Asia as a new area unto itself, but with important links to the Middle East.

Historically, all the countries along the southern rim of Russia and just north of Iran and the Middle Eastern heartland had, culturally, socially, and religiously, been for many centuries part of or dependent on the Middle East. This is the area that lies on the shores of the Caspian Sea stretching eastward all the way to China. The Mongols, Persia, Russia, and China all had, at one time or another, contributed to the ethnic and cultural makeup of the area. However, the greatest influence came from the Turks who had migrated southward toward Central Asia and westward toward present-day Turkey from the Asian steppes. For centuries, most of this area had been dominated by three Islamic-Turkish states.

In the nineteenth century, as Russia under the czars expanded its territory toward the south, Central Asia and the Trans Caucasus came under Russian control. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the Soviet Union consolidated and expanded its role in this area. The fierce and often violent independence of these territories was subjugated to Soviet-communist control.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, all these territories of the Trans Caucasus and Central Asia became independent. None of them was well prepared for independence. They lacked institutions, functioning governments, or a political culture supportive of democracy. In this sense, they were like the Baltics or Eastern Europe after they also received independence from the USSR—except that Central Asia and the Trans Caucasus were far poorer and less developed than these others. Lacking democratic institutions and a firm socioeconomic base, most of the countries continued under a form of communist and authoritarian government that was not much different from what they had experienced under the Soviets.

If one goes back before Russian rule, however, all of these countries had been powerfully shaped by their proximity to, and the culture and civilization of, the Middle East. Of the new states of the area,

two were majority-Christian—Armenia and Georgia—but they had also been profoundly influenced by their exposure over the centuries to Muslim Persia and Turkey. The other countries, Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian countries of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, were majority-Muslim and had been strongly influenced by a full millennium of Middle Eastern culture. Tajikistan was predominantly Persian in culture and language, while the others were more Turkish culturally and ethnically.

A new Cold War is shaping up in this area, which could be profoundly dangerous in the future. None of these countries has a stable government. Georgia is the only democracy in the area, and its government is also shaky. Russia, though weakened after the collapse of the Soviet Union, still thinks of this area, like the Baltics, as part of "Greater Russia" and recently sent troops into Georgia to encourage its breakaway provinces of Ossetia and Abkhazia to rejoin with Russia. The United States and Europe also have strong interests in this area, in part because of the military bases (to assist in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) we have established there and, in part, because of vast fields of oil and natural gas that, especially in Europe, are seen as an alternative source from a Russia that uses its gas and oil to extract political and strategic concessions from its neighbors. Meanwhile, from the south and the Islamic world, Iran and its agents are meddling in the Caucasus and Central Asia and seeking to foment their brand of Islamic fundamentalism.

It looks as though the Caucasus and Central Asia will be unstable and volatile for many years to come, not only because of their own institutional and developmental weaknesses but also because a variety of outside powers are and will continue meddling in their internal affairs. To this dangerous set of influences we must add the fact that the Central Asian countries were among the places where, during the Cold War, the Soviets had positioned nuclear weapons and launch sites. While the United States and its allies have worked hard to control and get a handle on these weapons, some of these remain under the control of local authorities or have been sold to third parties on the private market—what we irreverently call "loose nukes."

Turkey

Turkey is the second largest of the Middle Eastern states in population (seventy-four million) but not in size. There is even some doubt as to whether we should classify Turkey as Middle Eastern. First, it is ethnically Turkish and not Arab. Second, while it is predominantly Islamic, it practices a generally milder and less fundamentalist form of Islam; officially, Turkey is a secular state. Third, Turkey has one foot in Europe—in more ways than one.

To begin, although Turkey's territory is mostly in Asia Minor, a small part of its territory lies across the Bosphorus waterway in what has traditionally been considered Europe. Also, Turkey is a member of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and is a leading candidate for membership in the European Union (EU), although its size, relative poverty (one-third the European level but considerably higher than most countries of the Middle East), and Muslim background make that problematic. In addition, Turkey is, along with Lebanon, the most Western of the Middle Eastern countries in terms of its thinking, culture, and parliamentary government. The most Western parts of Turkey are in and around Istanbul; as one travels farther east, however, the country becomes (i) poorer, (ii) less Western, and (iii) more Islamic and "Middle Eastern."

Turkey provides a bridge, not only across the Bosphorus but also across the continents between Europe and Asia, between East and West. Which way it eventually leans (or, most likely, both ways) is tremendously important. Long seen as a crossroads and occupying a strategic location, Turkey has historically been buffeted about in international crosswinds. Mesopotamia, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Mongols, and eventually Turkish tribes originating in Asian Russia have all successively conquered the territory that is today's Turkey. There are spectacular Greek and Roman ruins in Turkey, and Christians will recall that Saint Paul visited and wrote a number of his biblical epistles to the churches of what was then Asia Minor. Constantinople, now renamed Istanbul, was for a thousand years the capital of Byzantium and the center of the Eastern (Christian) Orthodox Church; after 1453 it became the capital of the Ottoman or Turkish (Muslim) empire until it collapsed in World War I. There is a lot of history in this part of the world.

Turkey is a crucial country, big and important. It has long been a U.S. and NATO ally, though recently, because of U.S. inattention, the war in Iraq, and U.S. policy in the Middle East more generally, that alliance has been strained. Turkey's allegiance to the West would also be strengthened if its application to join the EU were speedily accepted, but European publics are worried about having a big, poor, Islamic, at least semi-Middle Eastern country within their ranks, and all the trouble that might cause. Europeans fear Turkish immigrants will take their jobs, change their culture, and add to their terrorist worries, and that Turkey's membership might drag them into Middle Eastern conflicts peripheral to their interests.

When Turkey is rebuffed by Europe, it reacts by emphasizing its eastern connections. Those include borders and/or relations with Syria, Iraq, Iran, and, interestingly, Israel. But it also includes Turkey's reaching out to the big, important, and oil-rich Central Asian republics which, recall, have strong ethnic Turkish cultural and linguistic connections and which Turkey sees as a major target of its economic, political, and energy policies. In short, Turkey has an eastern policy as well as a western policy, and we would do well by assuring it stays in the western camp even while it serves as a moderating force in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Conclusion

It's likely that other areas of the world are more important for U.S. foreign policy than the Middle East. East Asia and Europe, East and West, come to mind. And on an everyday basis, because of immigration, Latin America has more capacity to affect us in our daily lives than any other area.

The Middle East, however, is today probably the most dangerous and volatile of all world areas. War, revolution, terrorism, even nuclear war could all break out at any time. Think of Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Central Asia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Yemen, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—all or several or a combination of these could explode at any moment. Now add in the fact that the United States and the other industrialized countries—Japan, Western Europe—are all absolutely dependent on Middle Eastern oil for jobs, industry, and the health of

our economies, all of which could quickly go down the drain if one or two of the countries listed earlier exploded in revolution, conflict, or civil war, and the oil were cut off. Then add in nuclear weapons—in Israel, Pakistan, Iran, and perhaps other countries, too. In any one of several scenarios, trouble in the Middle East could easily escalate into a region-wide, maybe even global conflagration.

And the trouble is that we can do little to affect the outcome. Quite a number of these conflicts are out of our control, beyond our capacity to influence them more than marginally. Again, think of Iran's nuclear weapons, the war in Afghanistan, the Israel-Palestine conflict, possible revolution in Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing states. How much can we change these things? Not very much. Now add in demographic change, social change, geography, and resource "haves" versus "have nots"—things that we cannot change at all and that themselves have the capacity to destabilize the area.

Obviously we want a stable and reliable (for purpose of oil supplies) Middle East. That means we should help the Middle East, especially the poor countries, with economic development, building infrastructure, and expanding civil society. We can help with literacy programs, education, and building universities, including university exchange programs. We can also help the Middle East with human rights improvements through modernization of the police, courts, and judiciary. Additionally, we can help with governance issues and the building of strong and effective institutions that can deliver effective social and economic programs. But at this stage we should not vigorously push democracy promotion in the Middle East. First, much of the Middle East, lacking the prerequisites, such as a strong middle class, is not yet ready for democracy. And second, by advocating too actively for democracy, we may well destabilize the very countries we depend on so heavily for oil, which are the last countries in the world we would want to see destabilized.

Former secretary of state George Shultz once told the author that he had to *fight* to keep the Middle East from taking 100 percent of his time. On the one hand, Shultz's comment, only slightly exaggerated, tells us how little time is left over for dealing with other important countries, regions, and issues. On the other, his comment suggests also how difficult, intractable, and dangerous this area is to American and even global international relations.

Note

1. In the early-to-mid-1990s, I was teaching at the National War College in Washington, D.C., at the highest rung (master's degree level) in the Defense Department's Professional Military Education (PME) Program. This was just at the time the Soviet Union was disintegrating and the Central Asian countries were becoming independent. The Defense Department recognized Central Asia's importance for energy and strategic purposes but, since it was a new area, DOD had no one with that particular regional expertise. So it plucked out a young woman whose previous expertise was Latin America, who did not know the languages, culture, history sociology, or politics of Central Asia, and told her "You are now our expert on Central Asia."

Suggested Readings

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