

5 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE Middle East



Turn on the TV, check the news online, or pick up a newspaper. No other part of the world generates as many headlines as the Middle East. Here is a look at this critical, troubled region and why it's so important to the United States.

1 What is the Middle East?

The term *Middle East* describes a region on the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The countries generally considered to make up the Middle East are mostly in Asia but also in Africa and even in Europe, where part of Turkey is located. (See *Mapsearch*, p. 11.)

But more than geography, it's cultural ties and historical rivalries that define the Middle East. The majority of people there are Arabs. The region also includes non-Arab countries like Iran, Turkey, and Israel. Most people in the Middle

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Holocaust** (*n*): the mass extermination of Jews and others by Nazi Germany from 1933 to 1945
- **Palestinian** (*n*): Arab person of the historical region of Palestine

East are Muslims, followers of Islam. But significant numbers of Christians also live throughout the region, and in Israel, more than 75 percent of the people are Jews.

2 How has the Arab Spring changed the Middle East?

The movement known as the Arab Spring actually began in the winter. In December 2010, a young fruit vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire to protest corruption and lack of freedom in his country. The incident led to widespread demonstrations that forced Tunisia's dictator to resign.

Tunisia's revolution sparked similar protests in Egypt and around the region in early 2011. That wave of protests, called the Arab Spring, resulted in the overthrow of dictators in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen.

Right now, attention is focused on Syria, where a pro-democracy

movement also sprang up in 2011 against Bashar al-Assad, the long-time ruler. Assad met protests with violence, igniting a civil war that so far has killed more than 60,000 Syrians and created more than 1 million refugees. Iran and Russia support Assad, and experts fear that Syria's violence could spread to neighboring countries.

Will the Arab Spring bring democracy to the Middle East? It's not clear. With many governments in a state of flux, radical Muslim groups have been taking advantage of the confusion. The U.S. is concerned that these extremists might impose strict Islamic law, as in





[Left] Egyptians in Tahrir Square in Cairo after President Hosni Mubarak resigned, February 2011. **[Above]** A girl at a protest in Cairo, March 2011. Social media played a big role in organizing protests.

Iran, and provide a safe haven to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, which staged the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. in 2001.

Still, the U.S. has been supporting groups working for democracy in the Mideast. Along with many in the region, the U.S. hopes that good and lasting change will come soon, if not immediately.

Rami Khouri, a scholar in Lebanon, is hopeful that change is coming. "We are slowly witnessing the unprecedented birth of the Arab citizen," Khouri says. "We will achieve two long-elusive Arab goals: self-determination and real sovereignty."

3 Why can't Arabs and Israelis make peace?

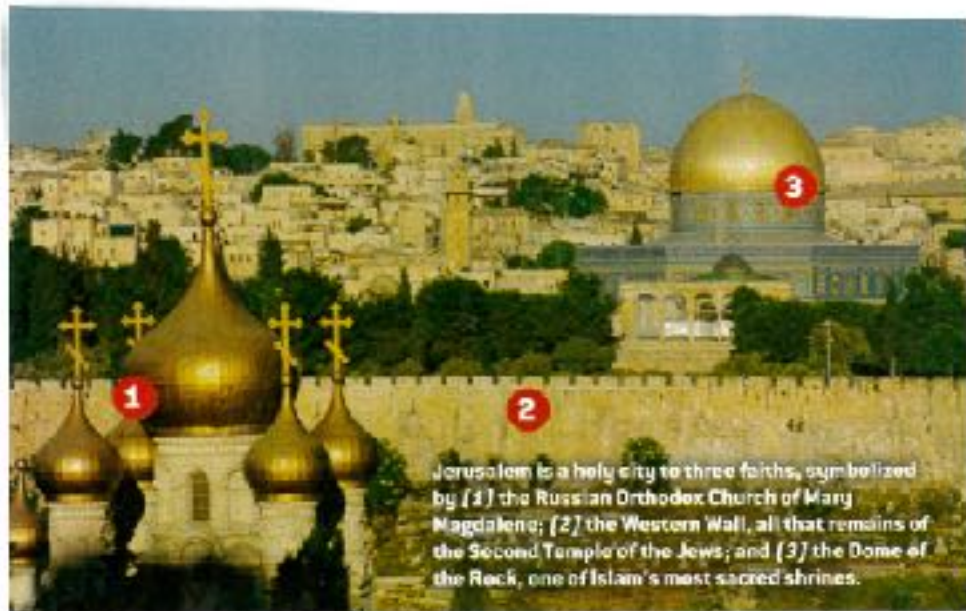
The Arab-Israeli conflict has smoldered for more than a century. Israelis and Arabs have repeatedly clashed over the small area that includes Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. The conflict has resulted in three major Arab-Israeli wars, along with countless terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians, raids and air strikes in retaliation, and grieving families on both sides.

For thousands of years, this area was the ancient homeland of the Jewish people. In 63 a.c., the region was seized by the Romans, who came to call it Palestine.

Following a Jewish rebellion in 70 a.d., the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and expelled most Jews. After Arab armies conquered the region in 636 a.d., Palestine became dominated by Arab and Islamic culture—though Christians and Jews have always remained.

During the 1800s, a steady stream of Jews immigrated to Palestine from Europe, seeking to escape anti-Semitism and restore a Jewish homeland. From the start, conflicts erupted with Arabs there. After World War II (1939–1945) and the **Holocaust**, during which

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Jerusalem is a holy city to three faiths, symbolized by [1] the Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene; [2] the Western Wall, all that remains of the Second Temple of the Jews; and [3] the Dome of the Rock, one of Islam's most sacred shrines.

6 million Jews were killed, the idea of a Jewish state gained wider support. Jews moved to Palestine in increasing numbers.

In 1947, the United Nations (U.N.) voted to divide Palestine into two nations, Jewish and Arab. Jews accepted the plan, but neighboring Arab countries rejected it. When Israel declared its independence in 1948, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria attacked the new nation. The war ended in 1949 with an Israeli victory. During the fighting, at least 600,000 **Palestinian** Arabs had fled from or were forced out of Israel, becoming refugees.

Today, Israelis and Palestinians maintain a tense standoff. About 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, which Israel captured in the Six-Day War of 1967. Israel controls the area's borders and Israelis have built settlements on what Palestinians consider their land.

The Gaza Strip is controlled by Hamas, a Palestinian group that calls for Israel's destruction and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States. Hamas periodically fires rockets onto Israeli towns, provoking crackdowns from the Israeli military.

Both Jews and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital.

The struggle over this ancient city—holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims—stirs great emotions.

Many Israelis and Palestinians—and the U.S.—support a “two-state solution.” That would involve creating a Palestinian nation from most of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. But that’s becoming less likely as the distrust between the two peoples deepens. Diplomats around the world have called for the U.S., a longtime ally of Israel, to broker a compromise. That goal has eluded every American president who has tried to intervene in this long conflict.

4 Is oil the main reason we care about the Mideast?

Although oil is not the only reason the U.S. and its allies care about the Middle East, it’s still very important. More than half of known oil reserves are in the countries around the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Nearly 20 percent of oil traded worldwide is transported through the Strait of Hormuz between Iran and the UAE.

The free flow of this oil is crucial. If war were to close the Strait of Hormuz, prices would skyrocket

and severely hurt the global economy. Recently, Iran threatened to block the strait unless the U.S. and the U.N. stopped pressuring Iran to end its nuclear weapons program.

To counter Iran, the U.S. has large military forces in and around the Middle East. Bahrain is the headquarters of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, while the military’s Central Command has forces in Persian Gulf countries.

5 Are women oppressed there?

Women in most of the Middle East have fewer freedoms than women in the West. According to a 2011 report by the U.N., Arab women suffer from inequality of opportunity, are forced to take lower-paying jobs, and rarely play a role in government. The same is true for women in non-Arab parts of the Mideast, such as Iran.

Saudi Arabia is particularly tough on women. They are forbidden by law to travel or study without permission from their father, brother, or husband. Women are even barred from driving. Elsewhere, however, in countries like Jordan and Israel, women have much more freedom.

According to the U.N., women’s inequality prevents progress throughout the Middle East. The report notes: “Society as a whole suffers when a huge proportion of its productive potential is stilled.”

—Charles Piddock

GREAT DECISIONS

What do you think?

Why should the U.S. be concerned about what happens in the Middle East?