

Middle East in Transition

LESSON 4: Other Middle Eastern Issues

Many issues divide the Middle East. This update addresses four prominent regional concerns: Islamist movements; water resources; the Kurds; and Iran.

ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

“Islamists” are those Muslims who wish to follow a strict interpretation of Islam. Many Islamists are moderates who support the democratic process; however, some would use violence and terror to create a government that follows a strict, traditional interpretation of Islam. These Islamists are called “radical Islamists,” and because many Middle Easterners are dissatisfied with their government and their overall situation, some have looked to radical Islam for solutions. The turmoil surrounding radical Islam shows that the Islamic world is divided on what it means to be Muslim, and on what constitutes a legitimate Islamic government.

A closer look inside the region’s countries reveals the complex nature of Islamist movements in the Middle East. Here, we examine Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the role of Islamists in Middle Eastern elections. The special case of Iran is discussed in the last section of this update.

Egypt. In Egypt, violence between the country’s long-standing radical Islamist opposition and the secular government of President Hosni Mubarak heated considerably in the 1990s. Militants targeted government officials and foreign tourists in their attempt to destabilize the regime, and the government engaged in torture and repression of its Islamist opponents. By the turn of the century, however, violent opposition had subsided, partly because radical Islamists were somewhat discredited after the 1997 massacre at Luxor (see *The Middle East in Transition*). Radical Islamist groups announced cease-fires. More moderate Islamists, such as the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, sought to work within the political system to create an Islamic state. In 2000, despite government efforts to discourage their participation, candidates tied to the Muslim Brotherhood won the second-largest bloc of seats in the country’s parliament, though this was still only a small percentage of the parliamentary seats. In 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood won a record 20 percent of the seats.¹

In 2005, Mubarak won reelection claiming 88 percent of the vote in Egypt’s first ever contested presidential election.² The poll, however, was criticized for being a weak show of democratic reform, largely because of the restrictions placed on the eligibility of candidates. Less than a quarter of eligible voters turned out, as they did not believe that there was any real choice in the process.³ In 2007, voters approved 34 amendments to the Egyptian constitution, including a ban on religious-based parties and sweeping new security powers for the government. Turnout was again roughly 25 percent and the outcome was again sharply criticized both inside and outside the country.⁴

Despite the lull in radical Islamist violence since 1997, militant Islamic groups have continued to gain support in parts of Egypt. Indeed, there is evidence that radical Islamist violence could again become a serious problem. Since 2004, bombings in the Sinai Peninsula have killed well over 100 people.⁵ Support is particularly high in areas where poverty and unemployment are

widespread. The government's tight, often repressive grip on Egyptian politics has also played a role. Finally, it is important to point out that Egyptian militants remain active in international terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the location of Islam's holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. Since the country's beginning in 1932, it has been ruled by the al-Saud family. It officially practices a strict form of Islam, known as Wahhabism, and the country's laws are based on the *Sharia*, the sacred law of Islam. Importantly, despite the Islamist nature of the Saudi Arabia, for decades it has been one of the most important U.S. allies in the Middle East. The country is the world's largest exporter of oil and the third-largest exporter of oil to the United States after Mexico and Canada.⁶ Throughout the 1990s, the United States stationed thousands of troops at Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan Air Base as it contended with Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. By late 2003, however, the United States had pulled virtually all of its troops out of Saudi Arabia. This pullout was in part to prevent Islamic extremists from using the American military presence as a rallying cry.

Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers involved in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States were Saudi, and September 11 may have served as a wake-up call for the monarchy. Indeed, a series of terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia in 2003 and 2004 showed the Saudi government that it too had become a target of Islamist terrorists. In response, the government stepped up its efforts to crackdown on militant Islamists. It also made tentative steps toward political and economic reform. In 2005, after the death of King Faud, reform-minded Crown Prince Abdullah took the throne. Municipal elections also took place in 2005, as male Saudi citizens were allowed to cast votes for half the members of 178 municipal councils. These were the country's first-ever nationwide elections. Still, the monarchy remains in firm control. In 2007, the arrest of reform activists and other limits on political expression led many to believe that the government was backing away from the reform process.

Iraq. Since 2003, the U.S. military presence in Iraq has drawn militant Islamists from across the world to the country. In 2007, it is estimated that up to 3,500 of the roughly 25,000 insurgents in Iraq are foreign fighters.⁷ These fighters are estimated to be responsible for 90 percent of the suicide bombings.⁸ To combat the influx of foreign fighters into Iraq, the United States has launched several large raids against insurgent strongholds, and it has captured hundreds of foreign fighters.⁹ The United States has also pressured Syria to curb the flow of new insurgents crossing its border into Iraq.

Local Iraqi insurgents, particularly former supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime, historically viewed Islamist militants as adversaries. However, the two groups have found some common ground in trying to disrupt the current U.S. attempts at nation building. Still, in 2007, a growing rift has emerged between the two sides, as Sunni insurgents are angered by the brutal tactics used by al Qaeda in its efforts to unite rebel groups fighting the U.S. occupation. This rift added to the complex and numerous battle lines found in the troubled country.

Elections. The popularity of Islamist groups in the Middle East can be seen in the strong support these groups have received in elections in recent years. An alliance of Shiite parties won a majority of seats in Iraq's January 2005 election for the national assembly. In April 2005,

Islamist candidates won sweeping victories in Saudi Arabia's municipal elections. In June 2005, the Islamist group Hezbollah and its ally the Amal Movement won 35 of 128 seats in Lebanese elections. Throughout 2005, the Islamist group Hamas participated in local Palestinian elections for the first time and gained significant representation. Then in 2006, Hamas won a stunning victory in Palestinian national elections. In Egypt, the opposition Muslim Brotherhood won a record 20 percent of seats in December 2005 elections. And in 2006, Islamist candidates won seats in Kuwait and Bahrain.

In many cases, the extensive social welfare programs offered by Islamist groups—in such areas as health and education—boost these groups' popularity. For this reason, Islamist groups are frequently seen as a preferable alternative to the secular governments, which are often perceived as corrupt, neglectful, and oppressive. Importantly, Islamist victories at the ballot box have raised a dilemma for the United States and its secular allies in the region. To respect democracy, they may have to accept the rise of groups opposed to their interests. Even more, some of these groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, are viewed as terrorist organizations. Fear over the rise of Islamist groups has led several secular Arab governments to ban popular organizations. For its part, the United States has tried to walk a fine line, expressing support for the democratic process while refusing to deal with groups it considers to be terrorists.

Water Resources

Competition over scarce water resources in the Middle East continues to be a potential source of conflict. The Middle East is by far the world's driest region. While the region contains 5 percent of the world's population, it has less than 1 percent of the world's renewable freshwater resources.¹⁰ Water scarcity and increasing consumption could combine with political rivalries to spark new conflicts in the region.

Of particular concern are the inequities in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Israel's population is almost twice the size of the Palestinian population, but it uses 7.5 times more water. In the West Bank, Israeli settlers use 9 times more water per person than Palestinians.¹¹ This imbalance suggests that any lasting peace plan will have to address a more balanced distribution of water resources. However, Israelis worry that if they grant Palestinians the right to control water resources in their areas, Israel's own water security would be jeopardized.

A second example includes Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. These countries share the water resources of the Euphrates River, and Turkey and Iraq benefit from the Tigris River. Turkey's \$32 billion Southeastern Anatolia Project, an ambitious program to construct twenty-two dams along the Tigris-Euphrates river basin, has created serious concerns in Syria and Iraq. Tensions exist because the dams regulate the flow of water into these downstream countries. Long-standing political divisions have kept the three countries from developing a regional plan regarding water usage in the Tigris-Euphrates river basin. Add to these political divisions high population growth rates and increasing irrigation needs, and it becomes clear why some are worried about stability in the area.

THE KURDS

Another important regional issue is the future of the Kurds, an ethnic group that lives primarily in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey and is predominantly Sunni Muslim. The Kurds have never had their

own nation-state; however, for many years Kurds have struggled to create one. Kurdish separatist movements have sometimes turned to politics. Other times they have resorted to violence and fighting. Kurdish efforts have often been frustrated by numerous internal rivalries. Importantly, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey have refused to consider Kurdish independence. All three governments have at times brutally repressed the Kurds.

In late 2002, the prospect of war in Iraq refocused international attention on the Kurdish issue. It was widely feared that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would prompt Iraqi Kurds to fight for an independent state in northern Iraq. Turkey was concerned that Turkish Kurds would then join the struggle in an attempt to create a larger, independent Kurdistan. As war became imminent, Turkish officials prepared to send large numbers of troops into northern Iraq to prevent a Kurdish uprising. As the war began, the United States sought to allay Turkish fears by assuring Turkey that the United States would protect Iraq's territorial integrity. At the same time, the United States recruited Kurdish forces to aid in the fight against Saddam's regime.

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Kurds have worked to establish their place in post-Saddam Iraq. Some Kurds continue to argue for an independent state. However, most see that political realities will not allow an independent Kurdistan, at least not at the present time. They see that their efforts are better spent expanding Kurdish influence within the Iraqi government, and/or working to create more autonomy within a federal Iraq. As to the former, Kurds have already won some significant political victories. For example, Kurdish leader Jalal Talibani was named president in 2005. Although the Iraqi presidency is a largely symbolic office, Talibani's position is significant in that he is the first Kurdish head of state in a predominantly Arab country.

As to more autonomy, the Kurds maintain a separate government in Iraq's northern provinces that does not generally coordinate its actions with the central government. The Kurdish militia, or *Peshmerga*, serves as the armed forces in Kurdish territory and remains largely separate from the Iraqi armed forces. Importantly, control over Iraq's oil reserves has sparked a fierce conflict between Kurds and other groups living in the country, particularly because northern Iraq has a significant portion of those reserves. In the spring of 2007, a draft law was proposed that would distribute the country's oil wealth to its provinces or regions based on population. This draft law offered some hope that tensions over oil could be lessened. Also in the spring of 2007, a key step toward holding a referendum on the disputed northern city of Kirkuk, as called for in the constitution, was taken by the al-Maliki government. The plan would resettle and compensate thousands of Arabs who were settled in Kirkuk by Sadaam's regime after it had forcibly removed Kurds from the area.

Turkish leaders are particularly concerned about the increasing autonomy being achieved by Iraqi Kurds. They say it is feeding the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. In June 2004, the group ended a cease-fire dating back to 1999 and resumed its fight, citing attacks by Turkish troops and the Turkish government's refusal to meet its demands. These demands included a full amnesty for some 5,000 fighters and the release of Abdullah Ocalan, the group's imprisoned leader. More broadly, the PKK seeks to establish an independent Kurdish state. PKK fighters frequently attack Turkey from bases in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. These attacks have worsened cross-border tensions.

Many Turkish Kurds do not support the most radical Kurdish separatist groups, aiming simply to obtain greater cultural freedoms and an end to discrimination. Since 2004, the situation of Kurds in Turkey has improved somewhat because of pressure from the European Union (EU). Turkey hopes to gain entry to the EU and, to this end, has initiated reforms to protect human rights and minority interests.

IRAN AND REGIONAL STABILITY

In May 1997 elections, a liberal Muslim cleric, Muhammad Khatami, became Iran's president. This election was widely viewed as a groundbreaking event. Voter turnout was almost 90 percent and Khatami won a stunning 69 percent of the vote.¹² He overwhelmed the candidate backed by Iran's conservative religious establishment. At his swearing-in ceremony, Khatami called for a "dialogue of civilizations" and declared himself ready to improve relations with the West. However, Khatami's efforts to implement reform were regularly blocked by the country's more powerful, conservative Muslim clerics. The conservative Guardian Council used its power to annul laws passed by the parliament, close pro-reform newspapers, imprison journalists, and block reformist politicians from running for office. Frustration with the slow pace of reforms grew, especially among Iranian youth. Their dissatisfaction led to increasingly bold protests and growing disillusionment. Many began calling for Khatami to resign.

In the fall of 2001, U.S.-Iranian relations improved somewhat as Iran became an unlikely ally in the United States' effort to overthrow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Iran had long opposed the Taliban and actively supported the Northern Alliance, the group of rebels in northern Afghanistan that had been working to oust the Taliban. Nonetheless, U.S.-Iranian relations took a downturn in January 2002 when President Bush labeled Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil." He accused the country of pursuing nuclear weapons and exporting terrorism. Since 2003, tensions have further increased as U.S. officials have accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi politics and pursuing nuclear weapons.

As parliamentary elections neared in early 2004, the Guardian Council responded to calls for reform by banning nearly one-third of the candidates running for office. Almost all of the banned candidates were reformers. Many Iranians became angered or indifferent about Iranian politics and voter turnout was low. As a result, Iran's conservatives easily won a majority of seats and took control of parliament. In 2005, Khatami's term came to an end with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a religious and social conservative. Ahmadinejad's election placed conservative factions in full control of Iran. Since his election, Iran's ongoing nuclear program has led to a significant confrontation with the United States and other Western states. In April 2006, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had successfully enriched uranium. President Bush and others in his administration stressed that "all options were on the table" in dealing with Iran's nuclear program. These options ostensibly included military action. By December 2006, the UN Security Council had imposed sanctions on Iran, and these sanctions were strengthened in March 2007.

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