

# Middle East in Transition

## LESSON 1: U.S. INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST UPDATE

Even though it is several thousand miles from the Middle East, the United States often finds itself directly involved in Middle Eastern affairs. For example, in 2003, the United States once again went to war against Iraq, this time overthrowing Saddam Hussein and stationing roughly 150,000 troops in the country. This update explores five areas of U.S. interests in the Middle East: the war on terrorism, Israel, oil, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and human rights.

### THE WAR ON TERRORISM

(insert before "ISRAEL" on page 32)

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States altered U.S. interests and strategy in the Middle East. Indeed, there are many terrorist groups based in the region, and anti-Americanism runs deep. Key factors fueling this anti-Americanism include: the presence of U.S. troops in several Middle Eastern countries; U.S. support for Middle Eastern regimes seen as corrupt and authoritarian; U.S. support for Israel; the continuing plight of the Palestinians; the ongoing military confrontation in Iraq; seeming American unilateralism and arrogance on the world stage; enduring economic despair; and, broadly, perceptions of cultural subversion and capitalist exploitation within the U.S.-led global economy. The vast majority of Arabs and Muslims condemn acts such as the 9/11 attacks. Unfortunately, legitimate Arab criticisms of the United States and its policies have often been twisted by fanatical rhetoric, such as that sometimes used in Middle Eastern schools and by Middle Eastern media outlets.

Clearly, the war on terrorism is one of the most complex wars ever undertaken. A key factor for the United States is that its success depends, to a certain degree, on cooperation from Middle Eastern governments. Frequently these governments have a difficult balancing act to maintain. On one hand, most generally want to cooperate in the war on terrorism. At the same time, they govern populations deeply opposed to U.S. policies and often sympathetic to the views of Islamic militants. Most Middle Eastern governments have provided some support to the United States in the war on terrorism, though some more than others.

**Regime Change in Iraq.** In 2002, after invading Afghanistan and removing the repressive Taliban regime from power, the United States turned its attention to Iraq as the next target in the war on terrorism. The Bush administration accused Iraq of continuing to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in violation of the cease-fire treaty Iraq signed after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. The U.S. government also argued that UN weapons inspections were incapable of dismantling Iraq's weapons program and that, if left in place, Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime could become a dangerous ally of international terrorists.

In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, overthrew the government of Saddam Hussein, and established a U.S.-led provisional government. As a result, the long and difficult task of rebuilding Iraq into a stable, secure, and democratic society will remain an important U.S. interest in the region for many years to come.

The significant increase in terrorist activity in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein has led to a debate over whether regime change in Iraq was a wise strategy for combating terrorism. President

Bush maintains that the strategy was sound, alleging that Saddam had contacts with terrorist groups such as al Qaeda and could have provided them with sanctuary or even WMD. Furthermore, administration officials argue that the war in Iraq contributes to the war on terrorism by allowing the United States to fight terrorists away from U.S. soil. Foreign fighters from around the world have come to Iraq to fight U.S. and coalition forces and disrupt rebuilding efforts. The administration also points to the importance of promoting democracy in the Middle East.

However, several investigations carried out by U.S. government organizations have challenged the administration's claims. In 2004, the independent commission established by Congress and the president to investigate the 9/11 terrorist attacks found that, while Iraqi intelligence officers had limited contact with al Qaeda members, there is no evidence that Iraq had developed a collaborative relationship with al Qaeda. Similarly, the Iraq Survey Group, the U.S. team investigating whether Iraq had WMD, concluded in 2005 that there is no evidence Iraq had any WMD in 2003.

Many analysts inside and outside the government have expressed concern that the war in Iraq has made the problem of terrorism worse by creating battle-hardened fighters who can go on to destabilize other countries. Concerns have also been raised that the war has fostered a surge in support for radical Islamists and al Qaeda in some areas. In January 2007, the outgoing U.S. Director of National Intelligence, John Negroponte, stated that al Qaeda's core leadership was "resilient," its hiding places in Pakistan were "secure," and it was "cultivating stronger operational connections and relationships" with affiliated groups across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In March 2008, in a speech marking the five-year anniversary of the war's start, President Bush reiterated his belief that the removal of Saddam Hussein has made the world better and the United States safer.<sup>2</sup> Public support for the war in Iraq, however, remains divided. Spring 2008 polls found that only one-third of Americans believe that taking military action in Iraq was the right decision.<sup>3</sup> Debate also surrounds whether or not the U.S. should maintain a presence in the country, and how the U.S. should address withdrawal (see the update for Lesson 2, "The Persian Gulf War and Its Continuing Aftermath," for more on the war in Iraq).

**Containing Iran.** In his first State of the Union Address in January 2002, President Bush labeled Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil." He accused the country of pursuing nuclear weapons and exporting terrorism. After 2003, tensions increased as U.S. officials accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi politics after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The United States is particularly wary of Iran's influence with Iraq's majority Shia population, some of whom have expressed a desire to establish an Islamic regime similar to Iran's. U.S. officials assert that Iran has been arming Shia militias in Iraq, leading to U.S. deaths. In addition, the U.S. is also concerned about Iran's ability to fuel violence throughout the region, particularly in Lebanon and Afghanistan, by providing support to insurgents.

Since 2006, the Bush administration has been developing a containment strategy for Iran. As a component of the strategy, the United States increased its military presence in the Persian Gulf in 2007 and 2008. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates indicated that the buildup would be a means of building leverage against Iran, which could be useful in diplomatic efforts. Other elements of the containment plan include the Gulf Security Dialogue, which emphasizes defense cooperation with the Gulf states, and continued funding for pro-democracy programs targeting Iran.

In 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described Iran as the “single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see.”<sup>4</sup> The many challenges presented by Iran, combined with Iran’s hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the country’s ongoing nuclear ambitions, make it clear that Iran will remain an important focal point in U.S. relations with the Middle East. See below and the update for Lesson 4, “Other Issues,” for additional discussion of Iran.

## ISRAEL

(insert before “OIL” on page 33)

The United States continues to be a strong supporter of Israel. It provides Israel with significant military assistance and extensive diplomatic and political support. The two countries signed a free trade agreement in 1985, and the United States is Israel’s largest trading partner. In 2008, Israel remains the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid, outside of Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

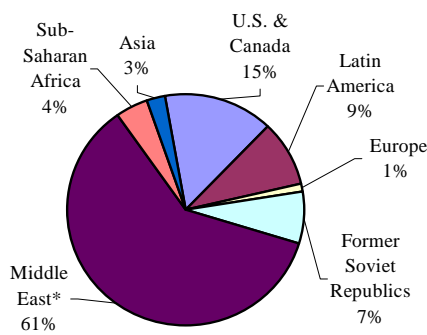
The United States and Israel have sometimes been at odds over the Arab-Israeli peace process. For example, the United States has refused to recognize Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as legitimate. Similarly, the United States and Israel have had major disagreements over Israel’s encouragement of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. The United States has at times objected to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian and Arab peoples living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Despite these disagreements, the maintenance of a free and independent Israel remains a primary U.S. interest in the Middle East. This special relationship frequently leads the United States to become involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. See the update for Lesson 3, “The Arab-Israeli Conflict,” for more information on the peace process.

## OIL

(insert before “PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION” on page 35)

The Middle East is also central to U.S. interests because of oil. The region produces one-third of the world’s oil, and has 60 percent of the world’s known oil reserves (see Chart 1).<sup>6</sup> The United States is by far the world’s largest single consumer of oil, accounting for 24 percent of total world oil consumption (see Chart 2). In 2007, about 23 percent of U.S. crude oil imports came from the Middle East. Sixteen percent of U.S. oil imports came from the volatile Persian Gulf area.<sup>7</sup>

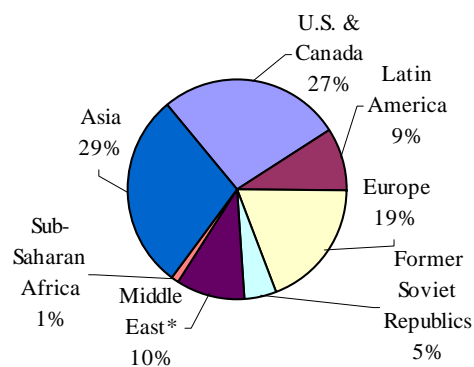
**Chart 1: World Crude Oil Reserves**



Energy Information Administration, “World Proved Crude Oil Reserves, January 1, 1980-January 1, 2008 Estimates,” January 14, 2008.

[Click here for larger view of chart](#)

**Chart 2: World Oil Consumption**



Energy Information Administration, “World Petroleum Consumption, Most Recent Estimates, 1980-2007,” March 28, 2008.

[Click here for larger view of chart](#)

The European Union imports over 35 percent of its oil from the Middle East, the vast majority of which comes from the Persian Gulf.<sup>8</sup> Japan imports over three-fourths of its oil from the Persian Gulf.<sup>9</sup> World oil demand is expected to increase by almost half by the year 2030, as the use of automobiles grows in places like India and China.<sup>10</sup> Middle Eastern oil is a central factor not only within the global economy, but also to global stability.

For decades, the United States' heavy reliance on Middle Eastern oil has been a concern for U.S. administrations. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the oil reserves under Iraq's control increased from about 10 percent of the world's known oil reserves to about 20 percent.<sup>11</sup> This was a major reason why the United States responded to the invasion so forcefully. When the United States went to war against Iraq a second time in 2003, some again saw oil as a motivating factor.

Since 2004, sky-high oil prices, made worse by instability in the Middle East, has led to intensified calls in the United States to reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil. Instability in the Middle East not only contributes to high oil prices, but also causes the United States to spend billions of dollars annually for military deployments designed to protect the free flow of oil. Critics also argue that oil sales help fund repressive Middle Eastern regimes that fuel anti-American sentiment and support terrorism. Environmentalists point to global warming and stress the urgent need for supporting and adopting energy alternatives. In his 2007 State of the Union Address, President Bush announced his "Twenty in Ten" plan to reduce U.S. dependence on oil. The plan calls for cutting the country's gas consumption by 20 percent in the next 10 years.<sup>12</sup> In order to meet this goal, the President signed the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007. The act requires fuel producers to use at least 36 billion gallons of biofuels in 2022, and sets a national fuel economy standard of 35 miles per gallon by 2020.<sup>13</sup> Other ways to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign sources of energy include expanding domestic capability to produce and refine oil, developing new technologies to reduce consumption, and developing alternative fuel sources.

## PREVENTING THE SPREAD OF WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

(insert before "HUMAN RIGHTS AND JUSTICE ISSUES" on page 37)

The United States has long been concerned about the spread of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Given the volatility of the Middle East, preventing the spread of these weapons to this region is a high U.S. priority. Nevertheless, it is generally known that Israel already has weapons of mass destruction, even though it has not formally admitted to possessing them. Iraq, Iran, Libya, and possibly others have either developed or tried to develop nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

**Iraq.** Much of the United States' focus has been on Iraq. Indeed, Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against Kurds in northern Iraq in 1988, as well as against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. In April 1991, Iraq accepted UN Resolution 687 as part of the terms for ending the Persian Gulf War. This resolution required Iraq to end production of WMD and allow monitoring by a team of UN inspectors. However, throughout the 1990s, Iraq's relations with the UN and the United States were difficult, with recurrent crises.

In 2003, the ongoing battle with Iraq over weapons inspections came to a head. Convinced that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD, was developing ties with al Qaeda, and was subverting the inspections process, the United States and Britain invaded Iraq and overthrew his regime. However,

as noted above, there is no evidence of Iraqi WMD or significant cooperation between the Iraqi government and al Qaeda.

Criticism of the American and British governments intensified after it was revealed in 2003 that some of the assertions made regarding Iraq's pursuit of WMD were incorrect, such as the assertion that Iraq had tried to obtain uranium from the African country of Niger. In addition, some U.S. intelligence officials have said they were pressured by the Bush administration to find evidence justifying the case for war. Others claim that administration officials simply ignored intelligence that did not fit their agenda. President Bush and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair have strongly denied the charges. While both leaders concede that there were not WMD in Iraq and that some intelligence was misinterpreted, they say that on the whole the intelligence suggested that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD.

**Iran.** The United States has also expressed concern that Iran may be pursuing WMD. In June 2003, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report accusing Iran of violating agreements intended to prevent Iran's nuclear energy program from being used as a cover for a nuclear weapons program. Since then, Iran has both cooperated with and frustrated the international community. Britain, France, and Germany have often taken the lead in trying to get Iran to cooperate through negotiations. Other countries, particularly the United States, have continually questioned Iran's willingness to give up its nuclear ambitions.

In 2005, negotiations stalled because of a dispute over Iran's uranium enrichment program. The June 2005 election of hard-line presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a compromise even less likely. Speaking before the UN General Assembly, Ahmadinejad reiterated Iran's inalienable right to enrich uranium for the production of nuclear fuel. Yet, while uranium enrichment can be used for the peaceful production of nuclear power, it can also be a key step in the production of nuclear weapons. In response to Iran's continuation of the program, the IAEA passed a resolution paving the way for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council. In April 2006, Ahmadinejad announced that Iran had successfully enriched uranium, but he stressed that this enrichment was for peaceful purposes. By December, the Security Council had imposed sanctions on Iran, and these sanctions were strengthened in March 2007.

The U.S. Intelligence Community's National Intelligence Estimate, released in December 2007, assessed the status of Iran's nuclear program and further complicated negotiations. The report found that Iran had previously pursued a nuclear weapons program, but in response to international pressure had halted the program in 2003. The report added that it is unclear whether or not Iran intends to restart its nuclear weapons program. Regardless, Iran's continued enrichment of uranium led the UN Security Council to impose new sanctions in March 2008. In June 2008, the negotiating countries presented Iran with a renewed proposal package. The incentives included direct talks and recognition of Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in exchange for an end to Iran's uranium enrichment.

**Libya.** One notable success in the campaign against WMD was achieved in December 2003, when Libya agreed to dismantle its WMD programs. This agreement followed months of secret negotiations with British and American officials. Libya allowed for inspections to verify

compliance, ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and signed the Chemical Weapons Convention. In return, the United States lifted trade sanctions and resumed diplomatic ties.

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND JUSTICE ISSUES

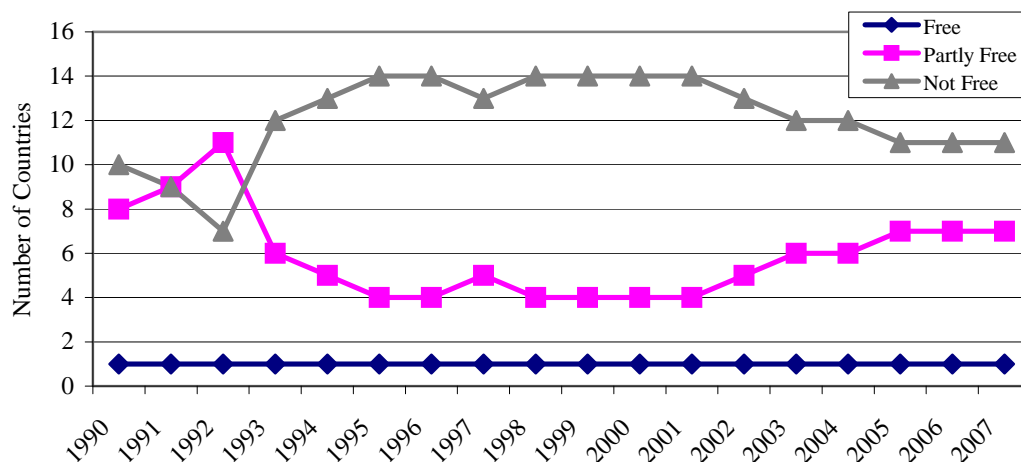
(insert after paragraph 1 on page 39)

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States has increasingly linked its efforts in the Middle East with the cause of promoting freedom and democracy. U.S. officials frequently cite the lack of freedom and openness in Middle Eastern societies as a major cause of popular frustrations, and a key factor contributing to terrorism.

The United States’ Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) promotes economic development, education, rights for women, and the funding of civil-society organizations. Another State Department program, Partnership for Learning, provides scholarships and exchange opportunities for students in the Muslim and Arab world. Still, American support for authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, the prison abuse scandal at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the United States’ support for Israel, and U.S. strategic interests in Middle Eastern oil contribute to skepticism about the United States’ pro-democracy and human rights actions and rhetoric.

While Arabs may be wary of U.S. intentions, many recognize the urgent need to improve human rights in the region. Indeed, progress has been made. In July 2002, the UN published the landmark Arab Human Development Report. This report was notable for the fact that it was written entirely by Arabs. It was highly critical and cited a “freedom deficit” and “women’s empowerment deficit” as major causes of the region’s relative lack of development. In June 2005, shortly after women were given the right to vote and run for office, Kuwait swore in its first female cabinet minister. In Iraq, the constitution approved by referendum in October 2005 included guarantees of religious freedom and individual rights, though women’s groups and secular leaders still expressed some reservations about the guarantees. And in 2007, Bahrain’s government established the National Human Rights Authority to promote human rights in the country. Despite such examples, in 2008, political freedom and protection of human rights remain very weak across the region. As seen in Chart 3, Freedom House ranks Israel as the only “free” country in the Middle East.

**Chart 3: Political Freedom in the Middle East and North Africa**



Source: Freedom House, *Annual Survey of Freedom*, Country Scores: 2008.

[Click here for larger view of chart](#)

Christopher L. Brown and Alyssa Smith  
© Southern Center for International Studies, 2008

---

<sup>1</sup> “On the March, Not on the Run; Global Terrorism,” *Economist*, January 20, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror,” Transcript, March 19, 2003, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/03/print/20080319-2.html> (accessed April 4, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> “Iraq,” Pollingreport.com, <http://pollingreport.com/iraq.htm> (accessed June 2, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, “On-the-Record Briefing in Route Egypt,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, July 30, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/89836.htm> (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Carol Migdalovitz, “Israel: Background and Relations with the United States,” Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (Library of Congress: February 26, 2008), p. 26, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/103702.pdf> (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Energy Information Administration, “World Production of Crude Oil, NGPL, and Other Liquids, and Refinery Processing Gain, Most Recent Estimates, 1980-2007,”

<http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/international/RecentTotalOilSupplyBarrelsperDay.xls> (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Energy Information Administration, “Petroleum Navigator,” Table: U.S. Imports by Country of Origin, [http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet\\_move\\_impcus\\_a2\\_nus\\_ep00\\_im0\\_mbb1\\_a.htm](http://tonto.eia.doe.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impcus_a2_nus_ep00_im0_mbb1_a.htm) (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, “EU Crude Oil Imports (volume and prices),” Table: Registration of Crude Oil Imports and Deliveries into the Community, 2005, [http://ec.europa.eu/energy/oil/crude/doc/2005\\_cce\\_eu.xls](http://ec.europa.eu/energy/oil/crude/doc/2005_cce_eu.xls) (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Energy Information Administration, *International Petroleum Monthly*, May 2008, Table 4.11: Japan—Petroleum (Oil) Imports, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/ipsr/t31.xls> (accessed June 11, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Energy Information Administration, *International Energy Outlook 2007*, (U.S. Department of Energy: May 2007), <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/ieo/oil.html> (accessed June 12, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Energy Information Administration, “International Petroleum Reserves and Resources,” Table: World Proved Crude Oil Reserves, January 1, 1980-January 1, 2006 Estimates, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/international/oilreserves.html> (accessed April 3, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> “Factsheet: Twenty In Ten: Reducing America’s Dependence on Oil,” The White House-President George W. Bush, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/03/20070320-2.html> (accessed June 13, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, “Factsheet: Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007,” The White House-President George W. Bush, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/12/20071219-1.html> (accessed June 13, 2008).