

# ISLAMIC NATIONALISM AND THE MIDDLE EAST



*Oil Fields in the Middle East*

## Unit Overview

Driven by a spirit of nationalism, the nations of the Middle East worked to move beyond colonialism and to redefine themselves as modern nations. Their leaders often modeled their efforts on the governments of the West and promised major improvements. When these pledges were unfulfilled, countries turned to dictatorships or theocracies established by Islamic reformers. These, too, failed to provide political stability. Since the region contained massive oil reserves, it was also impacted by foreign interference and Cold War competition. Let's see how it all happened.

Timeline of Events	
1979	An Islamic fundamentalist government was established in Iran.
1980-1988	The Iran-Iraq War was fought.
1990-1991	Iraq invaded Kuwait and was defeated in the Persian Gulf War.
2001	Major terrorist attacks occurred in the United States.
2003	Iran was occupied by a coalition led by the U.S. and Great Britain
2005	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president of Iran.

**STOP: Answer Section A Questions**

## Independence and Islamic Revival

Following World War I, the countries of the Middle East worked to free themselves from **imperialism** and their colonial status. **Nationalism** was the driving force of this movement. Although many Arab and Persian territories won their independence by 1945, they remained economically tied to the West. Americans and Western Europeans continued to own the industries, to control the banking system and to provide money for development. Westerners also promoted **modernization**. This included the adoption of governments based on western laws and the separation of religion from politics. Arab leaders promised economic improvements and greater social justice, but for many, life changed very little.



**Map of the Middle East**

Since their leaders failed to solve their problems, people became disillusioned and blamed western influence for the lack of progress. Some idealistic Arabs focused on **Pan-Arabism**, the concept of uniting all Arabs in a single state. It would destroy **Israel**, challenge the West and gain economic independence. Regional, **ideological** and religious differences, however, made this an impractical dream. By the 1970s, many Muslims began to demand a return to the **Sharia**, or Islamic law. They argued that a reliance on Islamic principles was the only way to bring about effective change. The idea of an Islamic revival kicked off an intense debate across the Muslim world between extremists and moderates. Muslim reformers continued to demand that political power be returned to religious leaders. Some called for peaceful measures to accomplish a new order; others were willing to engage in acts of **terrorism** to accomplish the goal.

**STOP: Answer Section B Questions**

## **The Islamic States and the Cold War**

Both the United States and the Soviet Union recognized the strategic value of the Middle East. The region's enormous oil reserves and key waterways caused the superpowers to compete for allies as part of the Cold War. For example, the United States send aid to **Turkey** to prevent a communist takeover in 1947. It also supported the **shah** of Iran due to his anticommunist stance. In some respects, however, the Soviets had an advantage here.



*An Oil Rig in the Persian Gulf*

The Arab nations did not trust their former colonial rulers from Western Europe and resented U.S. support for Israel. **Iraq, Syria and Libya** became Soviet **client states**, a term used to designate countries dependent on a stronger nation for financial and military support. Although **Egypt** declared itself a nonaligned country, it accepted millions of dollars in aid from the Soviet Union. In the Arab-Israeli conflicts, the United States sold weapons to Israel while the Soviet Union supplied the Arab states. As the Cold War ended, global concern focused on the development of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East. It was rumored that Israel possessed nuclear weapons. At the same time, military experts believed that Iraq was stockpiling chemical and biological armaments. This added to the continuing unrest that developed as a result of major changes in Iran in the late 1970s.

**STOP: Answer Section C Questions**

## Iran's Revolution

The nation of Iran traced its roots to the Persian Empire and became one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the Middle East. Although the majority of the population consisted of Persian-speaking Iranians, many other groups also settled here. Islam was the country's predominant faith. Unlike its neighbors, most Iranians considered themselves **Shiite** rather than **Sunni** Muslims. The vast oil reserves of Iran attracted the attention of the western powers. They supported Iranian leaders that best served their interests. By 1945, Iranian nationalists, led by **Muhammad Mosaddiq** challenged this practice. They obtained enough votes within the Iranian parliament to nationalize the country's oil industry. This set off a complex chain of events involving **Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi**, Britain and the United States. Consistent with its **containment policy**, the U.S. wanted an anticommunist leader in Iran and assisted the shah in removing Mosaddiq in 1953. Most Iranians resented this interference. However, the American government continued to back the shah with weapons and advisers for the next twenty-five years due to his anticommunist stance.



*Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Royal Family*

Even though he had U.S. backing, Shah Pahlavi realized his position was precarious. To calm the unrest and to gain respect for Iran within the international community, he used oil profits to modernize the country. Along with improved highways and bridges, Iran extended rights to women and redistributed some land to peasants. Following the western model of the **separation of church and state**, the shah eliminated government offices held by religious leaders. This did not quiet the opposition. The number of protests increased. In many instances, those who opposed the shah were arrested, tortured, executed or sent into exile.



*Mural of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Beirut's Shiite district*

The harsh crackdown by the shah encouraged many Iranians to rally around **Ruhollah Khomeini**, an **ayatollah**, or Shiite Muslim legal expert. He denounced the shah's regime as a violation of Muslim law and spoke out against the negative effects of western influence. The shah's fear increased as public demonstrations grew larger, and he fled the country in 1979. Religious leaders declared Iran an **Islamic republic** and established a **theocracy**, a form of government controlled by religious authorities. The revolutionaries quickly made new laws to reform what they labeled as corruption. For example, legislation that extended rights to women was revoked, and all forms of western media, including books, movies and music, were banned. When Shah Pahlavi was permitted to enter the United States for medical treatment, militant Muslims seized the U.S. embassy in the capital city of **Teheran** and held fifty-two Americans hostage for over a year. The Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers also encouraged other Islamic states to replace their governments with theocracies.



*Protesters Tearing down a Statue of the Shah*

Although the revolution did not spread to other countries, the prospect frightened Iran's neighbors. This was certainly true in **Iraq** where the Sunni leadership feared an uprising by an inspired Shiite majority. Therefore, **Saddam Hussein**, Iraq's dictator, invaded Iran in September of 1980. Although both sides launched several final offensives, the bloody conflict dragged on and resulted in thousands of military and civilian deaths. Both sides finally accepted a United Nations ceasefire agreement in 1988. The end of the **Iran-Iraq War** and the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 offered opportunities for more moderate views to surface in Iran, but the election of 2005 awarded the presidency to **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, an extremely conservative Islamic hardliner. He reaffirmed Iran's commitment to destroy Israel and refused to comply with a United Nation's resolution demanding the suspension of the country's nuclear program.

**STOP:** Answer Section D Questions

## **Wars in the Persian Gulf**



The Iran-Iraq War did little to deter the ambitions of Saddam Hussein. Because he argued that the region was actually part of Iraq, the dictator ordered his troops to invade the oil-rich country of **Kuwait** in 1990. Along with increasing the number of oil fields under Iraqi control, the conquest of Kuwait provided an opportunity for the landlocked country to have access to the Persian Gulf. Americans viewed the invasion as a threat to **Saudi Arabia**, a strong U.S. ally in the Middle East, and as disruption to the flow of oil. The United States, under the direction of **President George H.W. Bush**, formed a military **coalition** that included nations from Europe and the Arab world to force the Iraqis out of Kuwait. They were successful. Although Saddam Hussein was defeated, he continued to hold power in Iraq when the conflict ended in 1991.



*Coalition Troops from Egypt, Syria, Oman, France and Kuwait*

Saddam's defeat in Kuwait inspired Shiite uprisings in southern Iraq against the Sunni-led government. These were brutally crushed by the Iraqi military. At the same time, the **Kurds**, an ethnic group in northern Iraq, rebelled. Saddam responded by ordering the use of chemical weapons. The United Nations intervened and established **no-fly zones** to protect the Kurds and Shiites from aerial attacks. Because Saddam had used profits from the sale of oil to buy armaments abroad, a number of **sanctions** were placed on Iraq to curtail this

practice. The U.N. also ordered the country to stop manufacturing chemical weapons. Iraq, however, frequently ignored the no-fly zones and denied access to U.N. inspectors. Pressure from the international community along with American and British airstrikes eventually convinced Saddam to admit the weapons inspectors in 2003.

The United States and Great Britain were adamant that the Iraqis possessed weapons of mass destructions and intended to deploy them. President George W. Bush also accused Iraq of harboring organizations that led to terrorist attacks on the U.S. in 2001. Although they had no backing from the United Nations, President Bush and British Prime Minister **Tony Blair** planned an invasion of Iraq in 2003. This led to the occupation of Iraq and the capture of Saddam Hussein, who was tried and executed for crimes against humanity. Although Iraqis viewed the demise of Saddam as a positive outcome of the invasion, many resented this intervention. Therefore, British and American troops continually confronted guerrilla attacks and resistance fighters when the large-scale battles ended. Peacekeeping forces worked to restore order, but building a new government was a complex task for the Iraqi people. Because most of the country's citizens have only lived under dictatorships, there was almost no experience with representative government. Religious differences and ethnic nationalism have made collaboration and compromise difficult.

## **What Does It All Mean?**

Shaped by a history of colonialism and Cold War competition, the Middle East continues to be conflicted by a variety of forces. Religious differences, nationalism and opposing goals are all issues with the potential to spark unrest and violence. The region's large oil reserves guarantee the intervention of foreign powers, but environmentalists warn that competition for water resources is likely to be a source of controversy in the near future. At the same time, terrorism represents a serious threat throughout the Middle East. Groups such as al-Qaida and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have limited the possibility for peace and stability. Meanwhile, other regions of the world experienced dramatic changes as well. The nations of Africa also emerged from their colonial past. New governments were challenged by civil wars, economic hardships and struggles for civil rights.



## **Additional Resources and Activities**

[Main Points Worksheet](#)

[After Thirty Years of War, Young People Leave Iraq: Article and Quiz](#)

[After Thirty Years of War, Young People Leave Iraq: Writing Exercise](#)