CHALLENGES TO PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Preface

The war on terrorism declared by President George W. Bush after the September 11th, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington thrust Iraq into the center of events in the Middle East.

Within a year of the attacks, Bush had moved from his focus on Afghanistan and the Al-Qaida organization, which he held directly responsible for the attacks, to a broader interest in regimes like Iraq that supported terrorism and were developing weapons of mass destruction. Even though some critics in Congress thought that this development revealed a lack of clarity about administration goals, Bush declared Saddam Hussein a threat to world peace and called for a "regime change" in Iraq.

By the summer of 2002, the American military seemed to be planning a full-scale invasion of Iraq, and Congress began a debate over a resolution granting Bush the power to use any means necessary, including force, to remove Saddam Hussein from power. As Bush attempted to focus world attention on Iraq, tensions between the Israelis and Palestinians increased; suicide bombers attacked civilians in Israel with alarming frequency, and Israel—holding Arafat largely responsible for the attacks—used political and military force to attempt to drive him from office. The peace that so many had thought was so close after the Gulf War and the Oslo Accords had disappeared.

This book attempts to examine the question of why peace seems so difficult to achieve in the Middle East. It does not offer a comprehensive history of the region or encyclopedic profiles of countries; rather, it offers a short introduction to the Middle East by examining a number of challenges to peace. Its argument is that the problems of the Middle East are particularly difficult to resolve because they are layered, with one problem or issue lying on top of another.

For example, disagreements between the Israelis and the Syrians over the Golan Heights in some ways reflect current political and economic realities, but the disagreements also have to be understood in the context of the legacy of European imperialism, since the boundaries of both countries were drawn European powers. But European imperialism is not entirely to blame here. The Ottoman Empire controlled the region before the Europeans, and their control involved tax and land policies that influenced the development of the area. The

conflict also rests on conflicting aspirations of Arab and Jewish nationalism, and these conflicting versions of nationalism are not entirely independent of religious and ethnic differences.

While it is true that one will encounter complexities in every area of study and in every part of the world, the Middle East seems to be a place where the layering of issues is especially important. Another way of explaining this is to say that in the Middle East, the past imposes itself upon the present in a particularly aggressive manner. This book suggests that students of the Middle East have to follow the example of archeologists who need to strip away layer after layer of earth in order to uncover the truth they seek.

The idea for this book took form over the last ten years as I taught a Middle East course to undergraduates. I searched for but was unable to find a short introduction to the Middle East that I could assign to my students that still allowed me the time to examine in depth a select number of timely and important topics. Most introductory texts were too long and covered topics that my students weren't really ready to address. One should be able to use this book and still devote a significant amount of attention to other issues one considers to be important, such as modernization, Islamic revivalism, or political development.

By focusing on conflict and the problems standing in the way of resolving conflict, this book does not mean to suggest that the Middle East can be understood completely in terms of conflict. No single issue defines the Middle East. But since this is the issue that often first attracts students to the study of the Middle East, it seemed to be a useful topic for organizing the book.

This book is unique in that it begins with an analysis of American perceptions of the Middle East. Part One is devoted to three areas where common American perceptions stand in the way of understanding. Many Americans believe that the oil-producing countries are rich and powerful and exert a sinister influence on world affairs. Chapter One attempts to show that oil wealth has actually been a mixed blessing in the Middle East.

Chapter Two looks at the influence that the Gulf War has had on American sensibilities. This should be especially relevant at a time when another Gulf War is a strong possibility. Chapter Three addresses an issue that no other introductory text on the market has dealt with seriously: stereotypes of Muslims and Jews. These stereotypes are important because they affect the way in which Americans relate to Muslims and Jews in general, and they are important because they influence the way foreign policy in the United States is developed and legitimized.

Part Two examines the way in which history lives in contemporary events. Chapter Four introduces the general topic of imperialism and suggests that today's politics are influenced by the memories of European intervention through the Mandate period. Chapters Five and Six focus on Arab and Jewish nationalism. Many of the current disagreements between Israelis and Palestinians can be understood more fully once the origins of these movements are clarified. Chapter Seven offers a short history of what was once known as the Arab-Israeli conflict and is now known as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Part Three of the book looks at the changes that have taken place in the Middle East. Chapter Eight looks at the tension between tradition and modernization by focusing on the case of Iran. It also introduces the topic of political reform

by examining the drive for democratization in Jordan and Kuwait. Chapter Nine addresses the issue of terrorism by examining three forms of terrorism: religiously motivated terrorism, politically motivated terrorism, and state-sponsored terrorism. Finally, Chapter Ten looks at the growing disillusionment in the Peace Process. After what many people considered to be a promising beginning in 1993 with the Oslo Accords, the Peace Process seems stalled. Not only has the violence continued, but serious negotiations seem completely abandoned. This chapter considers two perspectives on the Peace Process. Could the problem be that the Palestinians do not really want peace, or could the problem be that the Israelis do not, in fact, want peace? A growing number of people subscribe to one of these views. In any case, peace will be difficult to achieve until this issue is resolved. A commitment to the possibility of peace does not, in itself, produce peace, but progress toward peace is not possible without it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Introduction

In spite of the seemingly endless efforts of diplomats and heads of state, in spite of the contributions of international organizations, and in spite of the loving work of ordinary people uniting to increase understanding and communication, peace in the Middle East remains elusive. This book explores what can best be described as challenges to peace in the Middle East, from the legacy of imperialism to the introduction of new tensions by international terrorism. In other words, it attempts to provide an introduction to the problems and issues that stand in the way of any serious resolution of tensions in the region.

Because of the centrality of the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians to the Middle East, special attention will be devoted to it. The contention of this book is that the problems of the Middle East are particularly difficult to understand because they do not exist in isolation; they are layered on top of one another. Every time one issue is examined, another issue emerges that must be studied before the first can be understood thoroughly. The next issue leads to another, and the process continues with new complexities continually asserting themselves. While it is true that in any area of study one will encounter complexities, the Middle East seems to be one place where the layering of issues is particularly significant, where the past imposes itself upon the present.

In a sense, one must approach the Middle East as an archeologist would, gently exploring the earth and stripping away layer after layer in order to discover the facts and to see how they relate to one another. In the end, some uncertainty always remains about whether one has really found the truth. Have time and the elements hidden the facts? Or has the archeologist approached his or her subject dogmatically, imposing his or her view of the world on the facts in such a way as to distort them and actually to erect barriers to understanding? Even the dominant theories and perspectives in the scholarly world can turn out to be nothing more than bias cloaked with academic language.

LANGUAGE

So how does one begin to study a subject as complex as the Middle East? The first issue that must be addressed is language. Many languages are spoken in the Middle East, but the most important for the purposes of this book is Arabic. Since Arabic does not use the English alphabet, variant spellings of Arabic words are common in English. This text follows the approach to transliteration in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* but be aware that as you begin to read widely in the field of Middle Eastern studies, words that are familiar to you may be spelled in unfamiliar ways.

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Words used to define an area of study sometimes reflect a particular perspective or interpretation of the subject itself. Consider the debate over abortion. If one uses the term "unborn child" in the debate, the implication is that abortion is wrong because it involves taking a meaningful, human life. If, on the other hand, one uses the term "fetus," one suggests that while potential life may exist, abortion is actually a medical procedure that does not terminate a meaningful, human life and that women can therefore make the abortion decision themselves. The terms of the debate actually narrow the possibilities for true inquiry.

The same is true of the Middle East. There are a number of words that conjure up deceptive images that stand in the way of clarity in study. For example, the word *jihad* is often misused. It is often translated as "holy war," and suggests that Muslims are violent and extreme in their perspective on life and in their actions. To some the word suggests that Islam and terrorism are the same. The word actually means "struggle," and refers first and foremost to the struggle of the individual for purity and goodness of the soul. The word can also be used in a political context to refer to the necessity of defending the religion or a country that honors Islam from its enemies. There is nothing frightening or unusual in this attitude. Both Judaism and Christianity recognize that self-defense is sometimes necessary. The concept of *jihad* can be expanded in disturbing ways by those who wish to use the word to promote their political agendas, but any concept in any religion can be abused.

Expressions designed to define political activity can also be presented in a misleading manner. The words "militant" and "protester" are used—often without any justification—to describe individuals or groups in order to promote a political perspective. If someone is a "militant," he or she is not only dangerous, but is involved in what is probably illegitimate political activity. On the other hand, if someone is a "protester," then he or she is simply attempting to register a claim of justice against a more powerful opponent. The tradition of political speech in the West stigmatizes militancy and legitimizes protest.

Other terms are also used in problematic ways. For example, "left wing" and "right wing" are used in the West to apply to extremist perspectives. In the United States, for example, Democrats and Republicans are considered mainstream political groups, but anarchists are "left wing" and neo-Nazis are "right wing." These are useful political terms, but they can be used to attack political opponents by denying that they fit within mainstream politics. It is much too easy to use these convenient political terms to create a misleading picture of politics in the Middle East. The moment someone is identified as "left wing" or "right wing" that person is presented as an extremist of some sort. It would be misleading, for example, to label the Labor Party in Israel as a "left wing" organization or to label the Likud Party as "right wing," although the Labor Party might include some people who could rightly be described as "left wing" and the Likud Party might include some people who could rightly be described as "right wing." Both groups, however, exist within mainstream politics in the Middle East, even if they are unfamiliar to many in the West.

The phrase "Muslim Fundamentalism" is also misleading. Fundamentalists are those who return to what they believe is a pure or literal understanding of their sacred texts and then base their lives in an uncompromising way on that understanding. The term probably came into existence in the twentieth century as a way for Christians to define new protestant movements in the United States. In

some ways it seems convenient to take a familiar term like "fundamentalism" and apply it to an unfamiliar phenomenon with the hope that it will aid understanding. But many Muslims reject the idea that those referred to as Muslim Fundamentalists are really returning to the roots of their religion. In many ways, the groups often identified as Muslim Fundamentalists have developed new ideas that depart from tradition. In particular, the Fundamentalist belief that the state as a governmental entity must be ruled by *sharia,* or Islamic law, reveals that these groups are accepting the modern nation-state as the foundation of their views.[1] It is important to recognize that those called Muslim Fundamentalists disagree with one another about basic issues of faith and action; the term is at the very least too vague. Whether or not one accepts the notion that Muslim Fundamentalists accurately represent traditional Islam, it should at least be clear that the term should not be applied to terrorist groups. In the Western press, a Muslim Fundamentalist is a murderer who is devoted to the destruction of the United States, but Islam does not sanction the murder of innocent people.

GEOGRAPHY

What is the Middle East? The term itself is problematic. It was invented in 1902 by an American naval historian Alfred Mahan to describe the area between Arabia and India from the military perspective of a time when European foreign policy defined much of the world. Since its creation, it has come to be used by almost everyone, even though it is now used to describe a much larger area than was
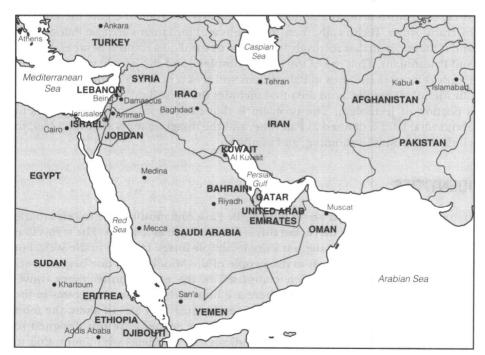

Figure 1   The Middle East

originally intended. What exactly is comprised by the Middle East? It describes at the bare minimum an uncertain but large area that includes countries from Egypt in the west to Turkey and Iran in the east. Some include countries south of Egypt such as the Sudan and Ethiopia, and most include countries west of Egypt such as Lybia, Algeria, and Morocco. Does the Middle East include countries east of Iran such as Afghanistan and Pakistan? Perhaps. This is all a matter of dispute, but in spite of the problems with the term, almost everyone has accepted it for the sake of convenience. Since the term was not coined by the people of the region, its meaning must always remain somewhat vague. It is probably more important for students to gain some familiarity with the region than to accept a particular definition of the Middle East. One should pay attention to where countries are in relation to one another. These relationships are more important than shifting labels.

The same is true for the term "Palestine." It does not appear in the Hebrew or Christian Scriptures; Jews and early Christians spoke first of Israel, and then later of the division of Israel into two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Judah (the word "Jew" means people of Judah) and the southern kingdom of Israel. After the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in the year 70 A.D., the term Palestine (meaning the land of the Philistines) was commonly substituted for Judah and Israel as a way of eliminating what was for the Romans a troublesome Jewish identity. The word Palestine continued to be used through the time of the Ottoman Empire, although it designated a general area rather than a specific country. By the time the French and English began to pay attention to the Middle East in order to advance their imperial interests, Palestine included what is today Israel and Jordan, as well as parts of what are now Lebanon and Syria. In 1922, the British divided Palestine into two parts in order to create the country of Transjordan. Technically, then, all Israelis and Jordanians are also Palestinians and it therefore makes relatively little sense to speak of a dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. That use of the term is obsolete, and the people who now commonly refer to themselves as Palestinians and seek a new, independent state usually identify Palestine as an area that includes the West Bank, Gaza, and perhaps a portion of Jerusalem. The problem is that there is no universal agreement about what land is defined as Palestine, and the disagreements about this lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and conflict.

IDENTITIES

In order to speak sensibly about the Middle East, one must be able to refer to the various people who live there, but this is not as simple as it seems. The terms that are commonly used often suggest a single, simple image to those in the West, but when one looks more closely at the people of the Middle East, one begins to appreciate the tremendous variety comprised by the people under every convenient label used to define them. There are hundreds of different groups in the Middle East; the following three are chosen because they are, in a way, the most basic for an understanding of the region. These remarks are not designed so much to define these identities as to indicate the problems with attempting to define them.

What is an Arab?

The term "Arab" has no accepted derivation, although it seems to have been used at one time to distinguish nomads from city dwellers. The term has also been used to identify those from the Arabian peninsula, whether they are nomads or city dwellers, who participate in the way of life common to the region. Although one could take an etymological approach to this question and trace the use of the term in history and literature, this would not necessarily be helpful to understanding the contemporary use of the word. An Arab is more than someone who simply speaks Arabic, but he or she does not possess a single, identifiable trait based on beliefs, dress, diet, or action. Arabs are not a race. Arabs live both in the city and in the country and are influenced by the social traditions of their various locales. Many Arabs are Muslim, but some are not, and most Muslims are not Arabs. According to the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, only one of the five largest Muslim countries (Egypt) is an Arabic country:

Indonesia	144 million Muslims
Pakistan	92 million Muslims
Bangladesh	90 million Muslims
India	90 million Muslims
Turkey	50 million Muslims
Egypt	44 million Muslims
Iran	44 million Muslims
Nigeria	40 million Muslims
United States	6 million (estimated)

There are millions of Christian Arabs. Approximately 8–12 percent of the Arab population around the world is Christian, and there are Jewish Arabs as well.[2]

Many have a single image of Arab women, but there is in fact great diversity here as well. Some Arab women are very traditional; they wear traditional clothing and play traditional roles within the home. However, many Arab women do not wear traditional clothing, are highly educated, and serve in their countries' legislatures as leaders of their people. There are Arab women who work as doctors, lawyers, and educators.

Some scholars have suggested that Arabic identity has to be understood as socially constructed; in other words, rather than having a distinct meaning, the term reflects an evolving sense of identity, sometimes generated by the people themselves and sometimes imposed upon them from without.

What is a Jew?

Tremendous variety is also found among Jews. There are, first of all, three major divisions of the religion, based on different understandings of revelation: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. The Orthodox believe that the *Tanach* [Hebrew Scriptures, including *Torah* ("teaching"), *Neviim* ("Prophets"), and *Ketuvim* ("writings")] is divinely revealed, but the Conservative and Reform Jews believe that the Tanach is a human document, although inspired by God. The Orthodox also believe that the Talmud (study, a book of laws, religious debate, ethical inquiry, and stories) is

divinely revealed, while the Conservative and Reform see the Talmud as a very important book in their tradition, but not a book that is binding on them in any way. The view of revelation has obvious consequences for practice. While the Tanach and the Talmud provide a center of focus for all Jews, the Orthodox tend to be more traditional in their practice, although there are exceptions, and the Conservative and Reform tend to be more liberal in their practice, although there are again exceptions.

Crossing the boundaries of these three branches of Judaism are ethnic and racial distinctions that are also important. The two largest ethnic groups are Jews of Spanish descent (Sephardim) and Jews of German and Eastern European descent (Ashkenazim). These groups add their own flavor to Judaism, with different social traditions, different melodies to traditional songs, different pronunciation of Hebrew, and different foods. There are other important ethnic and racial distinctions because Jews live in almost every part of the world. There are Jews from China and Japan that do not look like Jews from Spain or Germany, and until recently, there was a large community of Black Jews in Ethiopia, many of whom now live in Israel. While all these different people share a religion, they don't always understand one another or cooperate with one another. There are the normal tensions, misunderstandings, and animosities among Jews that one would expect in any religion. In the state of Israel, there is a heated controversy about the legal definition of a Jew. Since the Orthodox are recognized by law as the group empowered to (among other things) perform Jewish marriage ceremonies, certify divorces, and recognize conversions, this controversy is both serious and emotional. At this point, for example, the Orthodox community in Israel would not accept as Jewish someone who was converted in the United States by a Reform rabbi. In addition to this, the Orthodox movement does not accept women as rabbis, whereas the Conservative and Reform movements do. In recent years, Conservative and Reform Jews have fought to have their branches of Judaism accepted under Israeli law on an equal basis with the Orthodox.

In spite of these differences, all Jews share a belief in one God, which is articulated in their most fundamental prayer (or declaration of faith), the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. Blessed is His glorious kingdom for ever and ever." Traditionally, this prayer is recited three times a day. Jews everywhere believe that God requires that they strive to lead lives devoted to goodness as defined by their fundamental texts. The Ten Commandments announce what are widely known as the foundational beliefs of the Jews, but according to tradition, there are actually 613 commandments (*mitzvot*, which really means "good deeds"). What are these good deeds? They are defined with remarkable simplicity by Hillel, a Jewish teacher and contemporary of Jesus, who was once asked to explain the whole Torah. He said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to others. The rest is commentary; go and study." Additional guidance comes from the part of the Talmud known as the *Ethics of the Fathers:* "The world is sustained by three things: by the Torah, by worship, and by loving deeds." The quest for a good life guided by these principles represents a lifelong goal for Jews everywhere.

This statement about the religion is not sufficient, because there are observant Jews and nonobservant Jews. Some Jews follow the dietary restrictions of the

Torah or Talmud and do not eat pork, but some Jews eat pork and see no problem with the practice. Some identify with the religion even though they have lost their faith in God. Is an Arabic-speaking Jewish atheist in Yemen still a Jew? Is he or she an Arab? No clear answer presents itself.

What is a Muslim?

There are many different kinds of Muslims. The most visible division, however, is between the Sunni and the Shii. When Muhammad died in the year 632 C.E., a dispute arose about who his proper successor should be. Many supported Abu Bakr, who was Muhammad's father-in-law and close adviser. The system of caliphs ("deputies" or "successors") was soon established under him, with leaders chosen by a committee and sworn to allegiance. Others believed that leadership should remain within Muhammad's family and supported his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Although Ali was finally chosen as the fourth caliph, he was murdered and his rule was not passed on to his son. The central difference between the Sunni ("those who accept customary practice") and the Shii ("the party [of Ali]") had to do with the religious status of the leader. The caliph was responsible for protecting the religious community, but he was not seen as someone with special religious authority. The Shii believe that only a direct descendant of Muhammad should serve as the leader (Imam) of the community; his link with the Prophet gives him special inspiration and insight into the religion. Over the years, additional differences developed between these two groups as they responded to the developments of history. Today, approximately 90 percent of Muslims are Sunni, but the Shii continue to make an important contribution to the religion and to the world.

With over a billion Muslims in the world, it should be obvious that there is a great variety among them in appearance, habits, dress, language, and practice. Some Muslims in the Middle East follow traditions handed down by French colonialists, wear Western dress, and speak French. Others follow Arabic traditions, wear the traditional dress of their region, and speak Arabic. There are caucasian Muslims, Chinese Muslims, and African-American Muslims; their acceptance of God as the center of their lives is what identifies them, not the color of their skin. There are approximately 140 million Muslims in Indonesia and over 270 million in the Indian subcontinent. The southern provinces of the former Soviet Union contain more than 50 million Muslims. In other words, more Muslims live outside the Middle East than inside the Middle East. One practice commonly associated with Islam is the tradition of veiling for women. However, the Quran does not actually require that women wear a veil in public. The Quran demands modesty, but not a particular kind of dress. The veil itself comes from Persian and Byzantine traditions, even though it is often assumed in the West that the Islamic view of women is defined by the veil. Women in Muslim countries have not always been given the opportunities actually offered to them by the Quran. Religion and social tradition have not always grown together.

Muslims share a belief in one God (Allah) with Jews and Christians. Islam literally means submission to God, and the word "Muslim" comes from the same root, meaning one who submits to God. The fundamental text for Muslims is, of