

Part II: Weighing U.S. Priorities in the Middle East

Today, the United States faces different challenges in the Middle East than it did during the Cold War, when U.S. policy in the region was defined by its relationship to the Soviet Union and its allies.

The last decade has seen dramatic events that have turned U.S. foreign policy on its head and recast the U.S. relationship with the region. On September 11, 2001 a militant Islamist group known as al Qaeda, angry about U.S. policies in the Middle East, killed nearly three thousand people, mainly U.S. citizens, in coordinated terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. While most countries stood by the United States in its efforts to combat terrorism after September 11, this broad support decreased when the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003 and justified the war as part of the fight against terrorism. The war also strained relationships between the United States and Middle Eastern countries.

A more recent development will also affect the U.S. relationship with the countries of the Middle East. In December 2010, massive protests against authoritarian governments began to spread across the region. The protests have become known as the “Arab Spring,” reflecting the idea of a new season of political change among Arab speaking peoples. The struggle for more democratic governance is likely to affect the region in the years ahead.

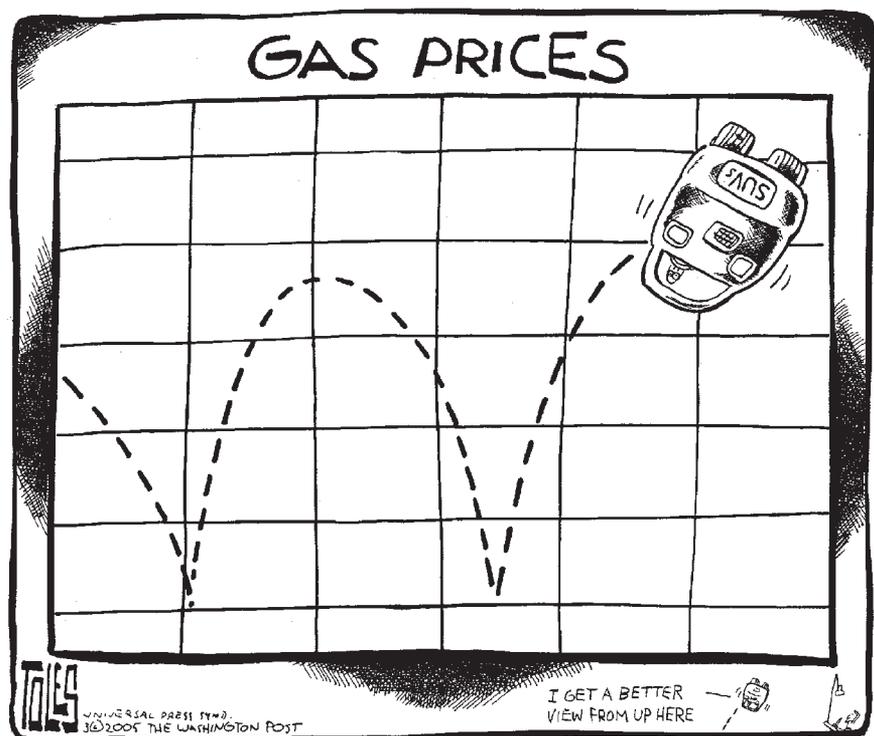
In the following pages, you will learn more about the Middle East’s connections to U.S. policy. You will examine the role of oil, Iran and Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the

Arab Spring. As you will see, all of the topics are linked to each other.

Oil Trends

Political instability in the Middle East tends to shake up the world oil market and increase gas prices. For example, oil prices climbed during the protests of the Arab Spring. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has taken steps to calm the world oil market during troubles in the Persian Gulf.

Worldwide demand for oil in recent years has been growing at about 1 percent annually. Economic expansion in the developing world has fueled much of the rise. Increased demand in rapidly growing economies like China and India has led to increased prices. In the United States, imported oil remains critically important. Today, the United States relies on the Middle East for about 9 percent of its oil needs. Oil accounts for about 37 percent of the United States’ total energy consumption.



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Why is the Middle East so important to the world oil industry?

The Middle East is the center of the international oil industry and is therefore likely to remain a critical region for the world’s economy. The region contains more than 55 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. Middle East oil is also the cheapest to produce. The cost of extracting a barrel of oil from Canada’s tar sand fields, for example, is many times greater than pumping a barrel in the Persian Gulf area. Despite the increasing use of alternative energy sources, the importance of Middle Eastern oil to the United States looks to remain high for the foreseeable future.

Because of the U.S. economy’s need for oil, many U.S. policies in the Middle East involve securing and maintaining access to oil. For example, the United States has carefully cultivated relations with Saudi Arabia since the 1940s because of its central importance to the world’s oil industry. Saudi Arabia works to ensure an uninterrupted and reasonably-priced flow of oil to the world economy. Government and industry are dominated by the Saudi royal clan, which numbers in the tens of thousands. Critics note that Saudi Arabia is an undemocratic, fundamentalist Islamist regime. For example, some Saudi textbooks teach that Christians are infidels, and women are not

permitted to vote or drive. Others note the funding for terrorism that flows from Saudi Arabia. U.S. criticism of Saudi policies has been muted.

Regional Security

Over the years, security concerns have defined many U.S. policies in the Middle East. For example, fears of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and concern about international terrorism fueled anxiety about Iraq and Iran after September 11, 2001.

“Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom. Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror... States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.”

—President George W. Bush,
January 29, 2002

■ **Iraq**

For twenty years, U.S. policy toward Iraq

has been headline news. U.S. efforts to contain Saddam Hussein’s regime continued after the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. At the urging of the United States, the UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions and limited the sale of Iraqi oil in order to keep Saddam Hussein in check. U.S. and British forces prevented the Iraqi air force from flying over northern and south-

U.S. Petroleum Consumption Since 1973			
<i>Figures are for thousands of barrels of oil per day</i>	Total Net Oil Imports	Oil Imports from the Persian Gulf	Total Oil Consumption
2010	11,793	1,694	19,180
2005	13,527	2,298	20,802
2000	11,459	2,488	19,701
1995	8,835	1,573	17,725
1990	8,018	1,966	16,988
1985	5,067	311	15,726
1980	6,909	1,519	17,056
1975	6,056	1,165	16,322
1973	6,256	848	17,308

Data from the Energy Information Administration.

ern portions of Iraq. (These measure continued for as long as Saddam Hussein remained in power.)

As part of the cease-fire agreement, UN monitors conducted regular inspections of Iraq to prevent the production of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. UN weapons inspectors also destroyed vast stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and their components. In late 1998, Iraq refused to allow UN inspectors a free hand in continuing their search for WMD and, in response, U.S. and British forces conducted a series of air strikes. Iraq then refused to allow UN inspectors to operate in Iraq at all until late 2002.

Why did the United States invade Iraq in 2003?

The United States stated that Iraq had WMD and that Saddam Hussein would use them to threaten the United States. U.S. President George W. Bush denounced Saddam Hussein as a ruthless dictator that endangered his own people, his neighbors, and the world. Additionally, in February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell argued before the UN Security Council that the United States had evidence of Iraqi links to al Qaeda. Although the UN resumed weapons inspections in 2002, the Bush administration questioned their effectiveness.

Debates about what to do about Iraq intensified. Many could not agree about the nature or urgency of the problem with Iraq or how the international community should respond. The Bush administration argued that the United States needed to take military action, and the U.S. Congress authorized the use of force. Although the UN Security Council did not authorize the use of force in Iraq, President Bush ordered the U.S. military to invade.

What has happened since the invasion of Iraq?

In the spring of 2003, a U.S.-led military coalition invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein's government. An intensive search for WMD began, but no conclusive evidence of WMD or direct links to al Qaeda were found.

The arguments the Bush administration had used to justify war were false.

By the summer of 2003, opposition to coalition forces had grown into an insurgency (or military resistance movement) made up of local and foreign groups fighting against the U.S. presence in Iraq. These groups were also fighting amongst each other, vying for power and often targeting civilians.

The war has taken a devastating toll on Iraqi society. As of 2011, estimates from various independent groups ranged from 100,000 deaths to over one million. Almost one in five Iraqis—over five million people—fled their homes after the invasion, often due to violence, unemployment, and insecurity.

The violence in Iraq has not ended. During the spring and summer of 2011, a series of bombings led to a surge in civilian deaths and caused the casualty rate for U.S. soldiers to reach its highest level since 2008.

The new Iraqi government has held two successful elections, but challenges to stability and democracy remain. Many Iraqis complain about the government's inability to provide basic services to the people, such as clean drinking water, electricity, employment, and security.

The costs of the war to the United States, in both lives and dollars, have also been high—as have the social effects that cannot be easily quantified. As of May 2011, the United States had spent at least \$700 billion in Iraq. In human terms, the cost has been steep. Nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers died in the Iraq War and over 32,000 were wounded. The injuries to soldiers are not only physical. Some estimate that 25 percent of soldiers returning from the war suffer from psychological issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse.

How has the Iraq War affected perceptions of the United States?

U.S. forces played a complicated role in the violence in Iraq. Although these forces were trying to create security and end the vio-

lence, the U.S. presence also contributed to the violence. Many groups throughout the region, already angry about U.S. support of Israel, were very unhappy about further U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Civilian deaths, imprisonment, and abuse by U.S. forces influenced many Iraqis to join insurgent groups and fight against the U.S. occupation.

Analysts also note that Iraq, which did not have an al Qaeda presence prior to the U.S.-led invasion, became an active area for al Qaeda and other terrorist operations. They argue that the military presence in Iraq helped terrorist groups—in Iraq and elsewhere—recruit new members. During the war, many foreign fighters came to the country to fight in the insurgency against U.S. forces.

The war also damaged relationships between the United States and Middle Eastern countries. For example, the U.S. relationship with Turkey, a longtime ally of the United States that borders Iraq, was significantly

strained by the war. In addition, U.S. claims of supporting democracy in Iraq and the region were met with skepticism about U.S. intentions and anger about the United States' use of military force.

“I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by another.”

—President Barack Obama, June 4, 2009

The conflict was generally unpopular internationally, and friction between the United States and other countries because of the Iraq War hindered international cooperation on other issues.

The war in Iraq remains one of the most controversial topics in U.S. and international



Jeffrey Wolfe. U.S. Army.

Iraqi women carry water home. U.S. troops were in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 and were a constant presence in the lives of Iraqis. The last U.S. military forces withdrew in December 2011.

politics, heightened by the failure of U.S. officials to find any WMD. The Iraq War will continue to play an important role in the debate about the U.S. role in the Middle East, including how it deals with the country of Iran's nuclear program.

■ Iran

The United States government worries that Iran has a program to develop nuclear weapons. The Iranian government denies it is developing weapons, but claims that as a signer of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) it has the right to develop nuclear materials for peaceful purposes. (All countries that have signed the NPT are allowed to acquire equipment, materials, and knowledge for peaceful purposes.) The dilemma for the international community is that it is difficult to distinguish between “good atoms” for peaceful purposes and “bad atoms” for military purposes.

How has the world responded to Iran's nuclear ambitions?

In a move supported by Washington and Europe, Russian officials proposed supplying Iran with fuel for its nuclear power plants that could be used only for peaceful purposes. Nevertheless, in 2009 Iran admitted that it had a secret uranium enrichment plant. In 2011, a UN report stated that Iran's nuclear program could have a military dimension. These events have heightened concern around the world. France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have negotiated closely with Iran to encourage it to end its nuclear program. Iran's hard-line president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has staunchly defended Iran's right to a nuclear energy program. His hostile language towards Israel has also heightened international anxiety about Iran's intentions.



Anti-aircraft guns guarding the Natanz nuclear facility, Iran.

Photograph by Hamed Saber. Licensed under the Creative Commons 2.0 Generic license.

“Iran does not have a right to nuclear military capacity, and we’re determined to prevent that. But it does have a right to civil nuclear power if it reestablishes the confidence of the international community that it will use its programs exclusively for peaceful purposes.”

—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,
July 15, 2009

In 2010, Iranian nuclear enrichment facilities sustained damage from a sophisticated computer virus, known as Stuxnet. The origins of the virus are unknown, but some experts believe that Israel and the United States were behind the attack. In addition, several key Iranian nuclear scientists have been assassinated in Tehran.

How has Iran changed since the Revolution of 1979?

The Iranian Revolution that first set off alarm bells has lost much of its fire. The reelection of a moderate, Mohammad Khatami, as president in 2001 with nearly 60 percent of the vote indicated that Iranian voters wanted



Photo courtesy of M. Ravanipour.

In mid-2009, hundreds of thousands of Iranians protested the results of the presidential election. Although the government tried to limit international press coverage, Iranians used cell phones and computers to upload video and photos of the protests to the internet.

to reform the Iranian Revolution. Khatami campaigned for tolerance, social reform, and a greater role for women in public life—a platform that appealed particularly to youth and women. But in February 2004, Iran’s clerics disqualified many liberal reform candidates from running for parliament. Many Iranians chose to boycott the 2004 election in protest of the government’s action.

Public demonstrations calling for reform and criticizing Iran’s clerics became more common.

“I would not be surprised if we see more of such protests in the future because the ground is ready. Our society now is like a room full of gas ready to ignite with a small spark.”

—Anonymous member of Iran’s Parliament, June 2003

The presidential election of 2005 turned Iranian politics on its head once again. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a conservative who supports the system of ruling clerics, took the wind out of the sails of the reformers. Ahmadinejad ran on a platform that focused on stamping out corruption and providing aid to the poor.

Why was the 2009 presidential election in Iran significant?

In 2009, Ahmadinejad stood for election for a second term as president against Mir Hossein Moussavi, a reform candidate, and two others. Ahmadinejad claimed to have won with 62 percent of the vote. The result surprised Moussavi’s supporters as well as international observers who expected victory for Moussavi or at least a closer election. Protestors took to the streets and claimed that Ahmadinejad and the ruling clerics had stolen the election by falsifying the vote count. Throughout Iran, hundreds of thousands took

part in demonstrations to protest what they regarded as a “stolen” election.

The government responded with force, leaving scores of marchers dead and thousands in jail. The Iranian government has admitted to torturing prisoners in the aftermath of the demonstrations. The decision by Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, to declare the election fair and his denunciations of the protests have further undermined the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of many.

“Death to the dictator.”

—Protest chant directed at Ayatollah Khamenei, September 2009

While the United States will continue to focus on Iran and Iraq, a broad long-lasting conflict presents another critical security challenge for the United States.

Resolving the Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Arab-Israeli peace process has commanded a large share of the United States’ diplomatic energy over the years. For the past two decades, the United States has played an important role in mediating the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In addition to playing host at negotiating sessions, the United States exerts influence through foreign aid and diplomatic pressure. Israel has long been a leading recipient of U.S. foreign aid. Arab-Israeli peace is important to the United States today because of the long history of friendship with Israel, because U.S. leaders see it as a way to reduce regional instability and conflict, and because Israel provides the United States with a powerful ally in an important region.

What is the U.S. perspective on relations with Israel?

Since its creation, Israel has occupied a special position in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. leaders have stood by Israel for several reasons. Israel has won the admiration of many in the United States as a model of democracy

and Western values in the Middle East. Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson were particularly committed to Israel’s struggle for survival.

Other presidents, such as Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush, viewed Israel primarily as a strategic ally in the region. They valued Israel for countering U.S. enemies in the Middle East, battle-testing U.S. weapons, and sharing intelligence information. Israel’s development of nuclear weapons (which Israeli officials have never admitted) with French help gave Israel added weight in U.S. policy.

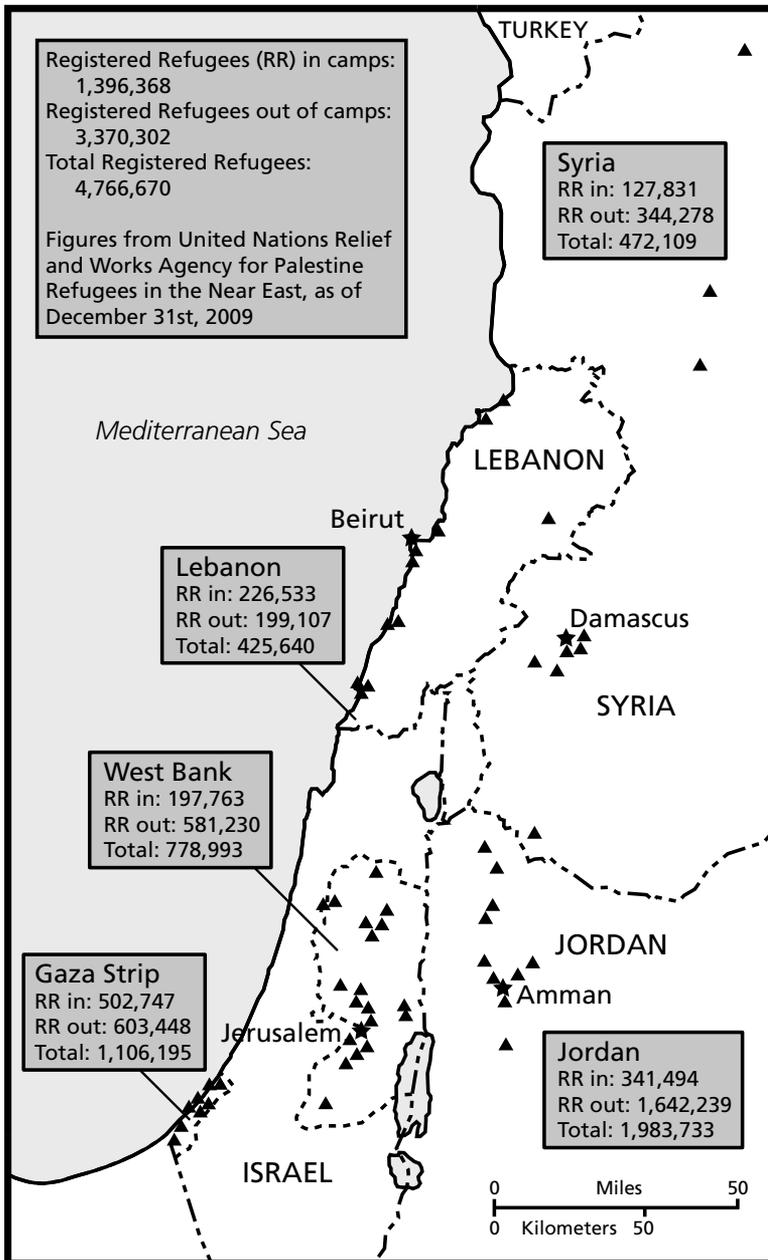
In recent years, U.S. support of Israel has attracted fresh attention. Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians under its jurisdiction has drawn intense criticism from around the world. For instance, the Israeli government has limited Palestinians’ daily travel to work and elsewhere through checkpoints at the boundaries. The Israeli government built a barrier to separate the Gaza Strip and Israel in the mid-1990s, and is constructing a barrier more than four hundred miles long to separate the West Bank and Israel. U.S. support for Israel has not wavered, even though it has been a source of resentment in the Arab world.

“America’s strong bonds with Israel are well known. This bond is unbreakable. It is based upon cultural and historical ties, and the recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.”

—President Barack Obama, June 4, 2009

What have been the major successes and failures of recent peace negotiations?

Over the last twenty years, negotiations to end the Arab-Israeli conflict have moved forward in fits and starts. At times, talks have produced positive outcomes. For example, the United States brokered peace talks between Israel, the Palestinians, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon in 1991. As a result of the negotiations, Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994 in which Jordan joined Egypt in officially recognizing Israel. (Mauritania is the only other



Palestinian refugees live throughout the world. These figures are for the region, where the bulk of Palestinian refugees live. The UN defines Palestinian refugees as people and their descendants whose normal place of residency between 1946 and 1948 was Palestine and who lost their homes and livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.

Arab state to extend diplomatic relations to Israel, although Israel has established low-level ties with Morocco, Tunisia, Oman, and Qatar.)

During the 1990s, negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians achieved significant breakthroughs. Israel accepted the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian

people while the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist in peace and security and renounced the use of violence. A Palestinian government, called the Palestinian Authority, was given control of day-to-day affairs in half the Gaza Strip and the main cities of the West Bank, except East Jerusalem. Palestinians established their own police force and began electing the officials who govern them.

But steps towards peace have also been hampered by many setbacks. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were scheduled to conclude a comprehensive, final agreement by May 1999. But political developments in the region, including the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by an Israeli extremist, put that deadline out of reach and the entire peace process in doubt. A year later, Palestinians launched a broad-based protest movement called the second *intifada* that led to clashes with Israeli forces. (*Intifada* is an Arabic word that means "shaking-off." The first *intifada*, a similar protest movement, took place in the region starting in 1987.) This wave of violence killed more than 950 Israelis and 3,200 Palestinians. Many were civilians.

How has leadership affected prospects for peace?

Oftentimes, the success of the peace process has hinged on the leadership at the time. For example, following the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, a more hardline prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, came to power. Netanyahu backed away from Rabin's pledge to continue the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the West Bank, contributing to a stall in negotiations. During Yasir Arafat's leadership of the Palestinian Authority from 1996 to

2004, he failed to crack down on militant Islamic groups such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas, and to stop them from conducting terrorist

attacks on Israel, contributing to worsening relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Both the United States and Israel saw

Israel and the Palestinians: What Are the Unresolved Issues?

Palestinian Statehood: Above all, the Palestinians insist on attaining full statehood. They want to control their own borders, form an army, and exercise the rights belonging to independent nations. Some Israelis fear that a full-fledged Palestinian state could endanger their security. They argue that an independent Palestine could be used as a staging ground for attacks against Israel. In the fall of 2011, the Palestinian Authority asked the United Nations to grant it statehood—a move the United States opposes.

Jerusalem: The status of Jerusalem is another important sticking point. East Jerusalem has religious significance for both Muslims and Jews. Israel captured East Jerusalem during the 1967 War. Prior to this, East Jerusalem and the West Bank were under the control of Jordan. Nearly 200,000 Israelis live in East Jerusalem today. Israel claims complete control over Jerusalem and considers it the nation's capital. The Palestinians want to establish their capital in East Jerusalem, where they represent a majority of the population. (The United States and most other nations do not recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.)

Jewish Settlements: Like the status of Jerusalem, controversy over Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories has stirred passions. Approximately 300,000 Israelis live in the West Bank. Most of them make their homes in modern suburbs ringing Jerusalem. Other Israelis have settled in more remote areas, often for ideological reasons. Many of the settlers, who use a large portion of the scarce resources of the area, vow that they will never accept Palestinian authority. Israel has insisted on maintaining control of the access roads that connect the settlements, effectively carving lands of the Palestinians into isolated pockets. The United States, Russia, the UN, and the European Union have repeatedly called on Israel to halt construction of new settlements, which they see as an obstacle to peace talks.

The Security Barrier: In the mid-1990s, the Israeli government constructed a barrier between Israel and the Gaza Strip to prevent the unauthorized entry of Palestinians into Israel and prevent attacks by terrorists. In June 2002, Israel decided to construct a similar barrier in the West Bank. Though not yet completed, the path of the barrier is disputed because it has incorporated disputed Jewish settlements, cut across Palestinian farmland, and made it more difficult for Palestinians in the West Bank to travel freely to work. When completed the wall will total more than four hundred miles.

Palestinian Refugees: More than 1.8 million Palestinian refugees live in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. (The total population of the West Bank and Gaza is 4.05 million.) As many as 4.7 million other Palestinians live scattered throughout the Middle East, mostly in Jordan. Palestinian leaders argue that all Palestinians—many of whom were forced to flee during the 1967 War—should have the right to return to their former homes in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Israel. Israeli authorities have resisted opening the Palestinian territories to unrestricted immigration and worry that Palestinians returning to Israel would eventually change the nature of their state. Israelis also note that more than 1.1 million Israeli Arabs already live within Israel's borders.

Water Resources: Finally, the right to water and water usage in the region is another significant stumbling block. Limited supply and water sources that cross borders remain significant obstacles to any peace settlement. The Israeli-Jordanian Peace Agreement of 1994 contains a water protocol. Other agreements between Israel and its neighbors will also be necessary to govern the use of this scarce resource.

Arafat's leadership as an obstacle to progress. His death in 2004, and the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority, led to renewed hopes for peace. Abbas renounced the *intifada* and made efforts to halt attacks against Israel. Israel, in turn, reduced military activity in the West Bank and withdrew from the Gaza Strip.

Both sides made plans for a new round of negotiations. But a split in the Palestinian leadership derailed the peace process once again. In January 2006, Hamas, capitalizing on the frustrations of Palestinians, won a slight majority of votes in democratic legislative elections and assumed control of the Palestinian Authority (Mahmoud Abbas was still president). Hamas, designated as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union, has both a political and military wing. It is an Islamist organization and its long-term goal is



Dale Stephanos © 1992 in the Haverhill Gazette.

to establish an Islamic Palestinian state.

Hamas and its rival political party, Fatah (Abbas's party) formed a unity government. But when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, President Abbas dissolved the unity government. Abbas' Fatah party retained control of the West Bank while Hamas established its own government in Gaza.

The division in Palestinian leadership and the prominent role of Hamas contributed to

2006 Israel-Hezbollah War

In mid-2006 a war erupted on the Israeli-Lebanese border between Israel and Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a political and military organization in Lebanon that many consider to be terrorist. Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, which led to retaliation from Israel and further violence from Hezbollah. The conflict killed more than a thousand militants and civilians, mostly Lebanese, and made large areas of southern Lebanon uninhabitable because of unexploded bombs. Many foreign nations evacuated their citizens from Beirut during the fighting. Israel invaded Lebanon but failed to find the soldiers.

This violence has a long history. Lebanon borders Israel to the north. Peace between Lebanon and Israel hinges on several factors. First, the relationship between Israel and Lebanon is connected to the relationship between Israel and Syria. Syria insists that it will sign a peace treaty with Israel only if Israel returns the strategic Golan Heights, which have been under Israeli occupation since the 1967 War.

Hezbollah's role in Lebanon also prevents Israel and Lebanon from being able to negotiate peace. The United States and the European Union consider Hezbollah, which cooperates closely with Iran and Syria, to be a terrorist organization. Iran is its single largest financial supporter, though it also receives significant funding from individual donations. Since Israeli forces left Lebanon in 2000, one of Hezbollah's goals has been to support the Palestinian cause.

worsening relations in the region. In December 2008, Israel forces clashed with Hamas fighters. Following Palestinian rocket attacks against Israel, Israel invaded Gaza in January 2009. Weeks of intense fighting killed more than one thousand Palestinians and thirteen Israelis. Tens of thousands of Gaza residents were left homeless, without electrical power, and without running water. Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire after three weeks of fighting and Israeli forces withdrew. Economic conditions in Gaza remain very difficult for its residents.

What is the status of the peace process?

The peace process between Israel and the Palestinians, if it still exists, is at a standstill. Hamas and Fatah signed an agreement in May 2011 to begin reunifying their governments in the West Bank and Gaza, a step they believe is necessary before a final agreement with Israel can be reached. But Israel is reluctant to negotiate with Hamas. Israel's unwillingness to stop construction of settlements in the West Bank is also an obstacle to negotiations. Ultimately, key issues between Israelis and Palestinians remain unresolved (see box on page 27).

With progress on negotiations stalled, Mahmoud Abbas requested in September 2011 that the United Nations recognize a Palestinian state. Israel insists that the Palestinians should achieve statehood through negotiations rather than the UN, a position the United States supports.

The Arab Spring has also shaken up relationships that were the underpinnings of the negotiation process. For example, Israel's relationship with Egypt, the first Arab country to recognize Israel, has been strained since Egypt's government was overthrown by popular protest in February 2011. Whether these tensions continue remains to be seen.

In addition, U.S. officials worry that Israel is growing isolated from other countries. For example, for many years Turkey had good relations with Israel and supported the U.S. approach to the peace process. But the death of Turkish citizens at the hands of Israeli sol-

diers in 2011 on a ship trying to bring supplies to the Gaza Strip has contributed to deteriorating relations between Israel and Turkey.

The United States remains a steadfast supporter of Israel, a position that is a source of anti-U.S. sentiment in the region and beyond. At the same time, the United States remains committed to resolving the conflict.

“I think that the need for peace between Israelis and Palestinians and the Arab states remains as critical as ever. It is a very hard thing to do.... And the truth is, in some of these conflicts the United States can't impose solutions unless the participants in these conflicts are willing to break out of old patterns of antagonism.”

—President Barack Obama, April 13, 2010

The Arab Spring

In December 2010, protests began against the autocratic government in the North African country of Tunisia. Hundreds of thousands of Tunisians took to the streets calling for an end to authoritarian rule. They also wanted more democracy, an end to corruption, and economic opportunity. The protests spread to more than a dozen countries in the region. In some, like Egypt and Libya, protests led to a change in government. In other countries, like Syria and Bahrain, protests have been met with fierce repression by the government.

The protests marked the beginning of what is likely to be an ongoing transition in the Middle East. As people struggle to establish more representative governments, periods of instability and uncertainty are inevitable. And while the outcomes remain uncertain, the Arab Spring will certainly affect U.S. policy toward the Middle East. As popular movements force authoritarian governments to change, the United States has had to reassess its policies in the region. In some instances the United States has supported demonstrators' demands, but in other cases it has been reluctant to criticize longstanding allies.

Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has forged alliances in the Middle East, many with leaders of authoritarian governments. In general, U.S. policy makers have paid much less attention to promoting democracy and human rights in the Middle East than in other parts of the world. Elsewhere, the United States often determines foreign aid, trade relations, and other aspects of foreign policy on the basis of political reform. But U.S. leaders largely ignored how U.S. allies in the Middle East govern within their borders as long as they helped keep affordable oil flowing and remained friendly to the interests of the United States.

The wave of movements that swept across the region in 2011—and the United States' varied response to movements in different countries—sheds light on the tension between values and interests at the heart of U.S. policy in the Middle East. However the Arab Spring unfolds, the United States will continue to have important economic and security interests in the Middle East. Many in the United States have applauded the democratic spirit of the Arab Spring, but some experts worry that divisions in Arab societies—long-suppressed by authoritarian rulers—could boil over, leading to conflict and instability and threatening U.S. interests.

The demonstrations present an opportunity for the United States to consider the basis for U.S. policy. Are economic and political

interests more important to U.S. policy than democratic governance and human rights? What should the United States do if these values and interests come into conflict? In the long run, is support for all forms of Middle Eastern democracy in the best interest of the United States?

What is political Islam?

One source of uncertainty amidst the political protests is the role that political Islam might play in any new governments in the region. Political Islam seeks to promote Islam within the political arena.

In almost all Middle Eastern countries, Islam is the binding force of society. Many in the Middle East, frustrated by their countries' politics, have turned to political Islam. Earlier political movements, such as pan-Arab nationalism, have failed. Corruption, mismanagement, and reliance on foreign support have weakened popular faith in Middle Eastern governments.

Islamist movements (movements of political Islam) have grown due to economic forces and political necessity as well. Economic frustration and insecurity have led people to turn away from their governments and toward Islamist movements for solutions. When the region's authoritarian governments suppressed public political participation, political discussion found sanctuary in the mosque. At the same time, it is important to note that not all

Osama bin Laden and the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

Osama bin Laden used his beliefs about Islam to justify his methods and attacks against the United States. For many around the world this raised concerns about Islam. Some wondered whether there are justifications for terrorism within Islam. For others, the events seemed to confirm a perception of Islam as a violent and fanatical faith. In contrast, many Muslims worried that their religion would be wrongly associated with the beliefs of bin Laden.

Like all religions, Islam is subject to interpretation. Most interpretations of Islamic tradition note a history of tolerance and peace. (The word Islam is related to the Arabic word *salaam*, which means peace.) Throughout much of history, Muslims have lived peacefully with followers of other religions. For example, many Jews fled the persecutions found in Christian Europe for the relative freedom of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. Islam permits the use of force in self-defense, but not the killing of innocents or civilians. After September 11, numerous important Islamic clerics from many branches of Islam and different countries condemned bin Laden.

religiously observant Muslims believe the Islam should be the basis of politics.

How has the United States regarded political Islam?

Political Islam's strength and appeal have increased in the Middle East since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In general, the United States has regarded political Islam as a threat

to U.S. interests because it often has an anti-Western stance. For example, the hostility of the Islamist government of Iran and the terror attacks by al Qaeda have added to anxiety within the United States about political Islamist movements.

But not all political Islamist movements are extreme or violent. Political Islamist groups are numerous, vary from country to country, and have a range of beliefs. Certainly, they do not all support the violence of al Qaeda or want a government led by strict religious leaders like in Iran. Some observers believe that political Islamist groups will be important participants in the new democratic processes emerging in the region.

In a speech in Cairo, Egypt addressed to the Muslim world, President Obama acknowledged tensions between Muslims and the United States.

“I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and dignity of all



Rowan El Shirmi. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic license.

Protestors in Cairo, Egypt, February 2011. Women played an important role in the protests.

human beings.”

—U.S. President Barack Obama,
June 4, 2009

What role political Islam will play in the ongoing evolution of politics in the Middle East is an open question and only one of many that policy makers must consider.

Below are five case studies of the many rebellions and protests against the authoritarian governments in the region. As you read them, consider how they might affect U.S. policy.

■ Egypt

The 2011 revolution in Egypt overthrew the undemocratic and repressive regime of President Hosni Mubarak. After eighteen days of protests by millions, Mubarak stepped down from power on February 11, 2011. He had ruled Egypt for close to thirty years.

Egypt under Mubarak had close ties to the United States and was a top recipient of U.S. aid. The United States considered Egypt’s sec-

ular government to be an important source of peace and stability in the region. For example, Egypt helped broker agreements between Israel and the Palestinians. In the early days of the protests, U.S. officials continued to identify Mubarak as a U.S. ally, but they changed their tone as the protests intensified. U.S. officials condemned the government’s attacks on peaceful demonstrators and called for an orderly and peaceful transition of power.

Although Mubarak stepped down after eighteen days of demonstrations, protests continued into the fall of 2011. The military’s reluctance to cede control over the country and the slow pace of change contributed to public dissatisfaction.

Once limited by Mubarak’s regime, Islamist groups have been free to participate in politics since the revolution. Many anticipate that the role of the Muslim Brotherhood—Egypt’s oldest and largest Islamist group—will be significant. In Egypt’s first parliamentary elections in November 2011, Islamist groups had a strong showing.



Protests in Hama, Syria against the government of Bashar al-Assad, July 22, 2011. At least half a million people participated in the demonstration.

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Change in Egypt (and throughout the region) has not been instantaneous, but rather a laborious political process as different groups struggle for power and to define their future. It is clear that Egypt and the Middle East have entered a period of transition.

■ Yemen

In early 2011, thousands of Yemenis took to the streets, demanding an end to the thirty-three-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East. Public dissatisfaction with unemployment and government corruption fueled the protests. The government responded with a violent crackdown on protestors, many of whom were students and youth. Hundreds have died at the hands of pro-government forces.

Prior to the demonstrations, the United States had considered President Saleh to be an ally in the fight against terrorism, providing him with military aid and scaling up U.S. counter-terrorism operations in Yemen. In August 2010, Amnesty International reported that U.S. pressure on the Yemeni government to stamp out al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Yemen contributed to a dramatic increase in human rights abuses by the government.

The United States initially refrained from publicly denouncing Saleh's repression of the protests, but changed its position a few months into the uprising. The United States has supported the efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—a union of Arab countries bordering the Persian Gulf—to broker a deal with Yemen's President Saleh to give up power.

Although protesters have remained largely peaceful, experts warn that the situation could descend into civil war and that an unstable Yemen could become a sanctuary for terrorists. In November 2011, President Saleh agreed to step down, though skeptics think he may try to remain in power.

■ Bahrain

In February 2011, protesters gathered to demand greater rights, equality, and a democratically elected government in Bahrain. The al-Khalifa family has ruled the small island kingdom as a monarchy since the 1700s. Government forces responded violently to the protests, and in March 2011 the Gulf Cooperation Council sent thousands of troops into Bahrain to help suppress the demonstrations. The government of Bahrain declared martial law and conducted mass arrests, and by October 2011 over 1,400 protestors, human rights activists, political opposition leaders, and medical workers that treated protestors had been imprisoned. Many were tortured and several died while in state custody.

Bahrain has been an ally of the United States for decades. The headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is located in Bahrain. The Fleet protects oil shipping lanes in the region and counters the influence of nearby Iran. The United States has sold \$1.4 billion of military equipment to Bahrain since 2000. The U.S. response to the protests in Bahrain has been muted compared to other uprisings in the region, and U.S. officials have not voiced clear support for pro-democracy demonstrators in Bahrain as they have elsewhere.

■ Syria

In 2011, protests spread throughout Syria denouncing government corruption and demanding an end of the dictatorship of President Bashar al-Assad. While President Assad has shown some attempts to reform the government, he has also fiercely crushed the civilian protests with planes, helicopters, tanks, and snipers. Reports accuse Syrian forces of killing individuals as they exited mosques, attacking mourners at funerals for protesters, and opening fire on youth marches. By December 2011, over four thousand Syrians had been killed and over fourteen thousand arrested.

Assad loyalists have also staged massive protests in support of the government. In some areas, armed opposition members have

clashed with security forces and insurgents have killed government supporters. Observers fear a civil war is underway in Syria.

The United States has historically had tense relations with Syria. The United States has placed Syria on its list of state sponsors of terrorism for decades, and has accused Syria of supporting militant groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Syrian ties to Iran have also unsettled the United States. In May, the United States issued sanctions against top Syrian officials. In late 2011, President Obama (and other world leaders) called on Assad to step down from power. The Arab League expelled Syria as a member and imposed sanctions on the Syrian government. The UN warned that Syria was on the brink of civil war and called for international intervention.

■ Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is an undemocratic, funda-

mentalist Islamist regime led by a royal family. Protests began in Saudi Arabia in early 2011. Police forces smothered the protests, which were much smaller than demonstrations in other countries. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, the Saudi government announced billions of dollars in new domestic spending—increasing benefits for the unemployed, raising salaries of government workers, and improving access to education and housing. In September 2011, King Abdullah granted women the right to vote and run for local office beginning in 2015.

As a regional power, Saudi Arabia's response to uprisings in the region has been significant. For example, Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to suppress protests. Although U.S.-Saudi relations have been strained by U.S. support for uprisings in the region, the two remain close allies.

Some Middle East experts see the continuing political developments leading to positive change. For example, the country of Qatar, where there had been no protests, recently announced it would hold democratic elections for a representative assembly in 2013. Others are not so hopeful. They worry that the changes will lead to instability that could produce local violence, regional conflict, and put resolving Palestinian-Israeli issues even further out of reach.

How the United States manages the challenges of its dependence on the region's oil, Iran's nuclear ambitions, and the Arab-Israeli conflict amidst the change of the Arab Spring is no simple task. U.S. leaders must also consider the United States' commitment to fundamental U.S. values like democracy and human rights. For example, what should the United States do if supporting a new democratic government means a rise in the price of oil, or a government that is more hostile to Israel?

In the coming days, you will have an opportunity to consider four options for U.S. policy toward the Middle East. Each is based on a distinct set of values and beliefs. Each takes a different perspective on the U.S. role in the world and its stake in the Middle East. You should think of the options as a way to help you better understand the contrasting strategies from which the United States might craft future policy.

After considering these options, you will be asked to create your own policy option that reflects your own beliefs about where U.S. policy should be heading. You may borrow heavily from one option, you may combine ideas from several options, or take a new approach altogether.