

## **The Arab and Islamic World: A New World View**

### 1. What is the “Middle East”?

The term “Middle East” was invented by Europeans in the mid-1800’s. Originally, it was an attempt to give a name to that portion of the British Empire west of India. It reflected a colonial perspective, one that viewed culturally different people as needing to be civilized and whose resources were waiting to be exploited.

As used today, it is an imprecise term. It can mean anything from the Arabian Peninsula and surrounding area to the entire region of non-European, culturally Islamic peoples living between India and the Atlantic Ocean. A more objective term is “Arab and Islamic World,” although this term stretches beyond India to South Asia and the Pacific Ocean. In this presentation, we will focus on the portion of the Arab and Islamic world extending from Morocco in the west to Pakistan in the east.

### 2. How People Lived

Before the arrival of European colonizers, most people in the Arab and Islamic world lived on the land in a way of life that was mainly agrarian, but with significant nomadic populations. The organization of rural society relied very much on clan and tribal structures. Tribal chieftains were the arbiters of disputes.

In urban areas, social organization and leadership was based more on leading families. Economic life was more dependent on trade.

Islam was the dominant religion in the region and it played a key role in defining the order and propriety of social relations. However, there were many non-Muslims, including Christians, Jews, Bahais, Zoroastrians, and many others.

Society was “traditional” but it was not unsophisticated. The Arab and Islamic world produced cities, hospitals, libraries and universities that surpassed similar developments in Europe for centuries. Generally, from the rise of Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the decline of the Ottoman Empire beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was tied together by empires or caliphates. There was a sense of unity in the region, but before the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were not nation-states as we know them today. Most people lived their lives in the towns and villages where they grew up, following the rules and social norms of their area. When, for example, the Ottoman Empire conquered most of the region, ordinary people did not develop an identity with and allegiance to the new rulers. Rather, they lived pretty much as they always had—they identified as people living in a particular place who had to contend with new laws and taxes enforced in the name of a new ruler.

### 3. Cultural Influences and Contributions

The Arab and Islamic world has a rich intellectual and cultural tradition. From music and poetry to mathematics, philosophy and architecture, it produced works of significant value that have influenced world culture.

Perhaps most important, Islamic scholars recovered and translated many ancient manuscripts that would otherwise have been lost, including works by Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates and Euclid among others.

Islamic scholars determined that the earth is spherical and calculated its circumference with remarkable accuracy hundreds of years before Europeans became convinced that the world was not flat.

Islamic musicians introduced the West to the lute, guitar and tambourine. Examples of Islamic architecture, like the Alhambra Palace in Grenada, remain in Europe nearly 1000 years after their original construction.

#### 4. Historic Interaction with Europe

European civilization can be traced back to Mesopotamia (the area where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers converge in present day Iraq). In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims expanded into Europe, eventually taking control of most of Portugal and Spain. The Muslim period in Spain lasted until 1492. During this period of nearly 800 years, there was on-going conflict between Christian and Muslim forces. Christian forces continually tried to re-conquer Spain and to gain control of the Holy Land, mobilizing 9 Crusades for that purpose.

#### 5. European Colonialism and the Fall of the Ottoman Empire

Between the fall of Muslim Spain and WWI, much of the Arab and Islamic world was dominated by the Ottoman Empire. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Empire was declining, and European powers began taking control of North Africa and of trade routes to Asia. France took what it called French West Africa. Britain took Egypt and what it called Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. By 1899, Britain had control of the southern and eastern coasts of the Arabian peninsula. In 1912, Italy took Libya. In 1915, the lands of the House of Saud became a British Protectorate.

As WWI was ending, it was apparent that the Ottoman Empire would not be able to maintain control of its remaining possessions. Sensing their impending victory, the European Allies began to negotiate how they would divide the spoils.

In 1916, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Francois George-Picot of France signed a secret agreement dividing Arab lands outside the Arabian Peninsula into their respective spheres of influence. Palestine, Transjordan and southern Iraq went to Britain while southeastern Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and northern Iraq went to France.

## 6. Rise of Zionism

In 1897, Theodore Herzl of Vienna convened the first Zionist Congress and began the organized movement to create a homeland for the Jewish people. Although the idea of Zionism had been around for some time before then, and there had been a small amount of Jewish immigration to Palestine, it was Herzl's efforts that gave Zionism organizational form and an international political identity. In the early days of Zionism there were considerable differences within the movement regarding strategy and tactics for achieving its ends. Some held that simple immigration was sufficient and opposed formation of a state. Herzl himself at one point proposed to the Ottoman Empire that the Zionist Organization would lease Palestine from the Empire. Others proposed establishing alternate or temporary homelands in Cyprus or Uganda, among other places. In the end, the movement rejected these plans and focused on Palestine. The Zionist Organization (later the World Zionist Organization) became increasingly active in recruiting Jewish immigrants to Palestine and in procuring land for them to settle.

## 7. Balfour Declaration

In 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour wrote a letter to Lord Rothschild that was printed in *The Times* of London. The letter committed "His Majesty's Government" to the creation of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. Notably, the letter used the term "national home" rather than "state," and called for protection of the "civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine." The Declaration was the result of secret negotiations between Britain and Zionist leaders. These negotiations occurred at the same time as Britain was negotiating, also secretly, the Sykes-Picot Agreement with France, and with Sharif Hussein, Guardian of Mecca, for creation of an Arab kingdom that would spread from Egypt to Syria and Jordan.

## 8. League of Nations Mandates

At the end of WWI, the victorious powers created the League of Nations. The League then created a system of "Mandates" in which the victors were given control over lands taken from the defeated powers. In the part of the Arab and Islamic world that was still under the Ottoman Empire, lands were divided in a way that basically endorsed the Sykes-Picot agreement. The Mandate system took several years to implement fully, but it was in place by 1923. The Mandates did not provide for self-determination of the people living in the Mandate areas. Instead, Palestine and Iraq went to the British. Lebanon and Syria went to France.

As a result of European colonial advances before WWI and the creation of the Mandates afterwards, for the first time in over 1000 years, virtually the entire Arab and Islamic world was under the control of colonizers that were linguistically and culturally foreign, and that displaced the unifying forces of the past.

## 9. Rise of Nationalism

Of course, the local people didn't suddenly identify themselves as being British, French or Italian. Although the details varied from place to place, the trend was that people in local areas began to resist the colonizers, to develop their own leaders, and to see themselves as national groupings. This process took place in a context in which "modernization" was forcing social and economic upheavals that, for example, caused people in the rural areas to be forced off of their land and into cities where they became workers in high-density environments. This process challenged their traditional values and sense of self.

In Palestine, these dynamics had the added dimension of the Zionist Organization's efforts to increase immigration of Jews to the area and to gain control of land for them to live on.

## 10. UN, Partition and Nakba

After WWII, the newly created United Nations sought to resolve issues of colonial control left over from the League of Nations. A particular problem was the increasing tension in Palestine as Jewish immigration increased. Like the League of Nations before it, the UN gave little consideration to the right of self-determination of the native inhabitants. In 1947, the UN adopted General Assembly Resolution 181 which called for the end of the British Mandate and for partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish States with economic union, and with Jerusalem subject to a special international regime administered by the UN.

At the time of partition, approximately 33% of the population of Palestine was Jewish, most having arrived after 1920. The new immigrants tended to settle in urban areas, and only 5.8% of cultivated land was owned by Jews. Nonetheless, partition gave 56% of the land of Mandate Palestine to the proposed Jewish state.

Arabs in Palestine opposed partition, and conflict between Arab and Jewish communities began the day after the partition resolution was adopted. Within 12 days, Zionist forces initiated a campaign to expel Palestinians from the area of the Jewish state. In short order, the Arab League, the Arab Salvation Army intervened, the State of Israel was declared, and Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan Intervened. When the Arab states signed an armistice in 1949, the new state of Israel controlled 78% of Mandate Palestine—that is, all except for part of Jerusalem and the West Bank, which was controlled by Jordan, and the Gaza strip, which was controlled by Egypt. In what Palestinians call the "Nakba" or "catastrophe", some 750,000 indigenous Arabs were displaced from their homes by Zionist forces and became refugees, ending up in camps in Gaza, the West Bank, and neighboring countries. Hundreds of villages were destroyed as were the institutions of Palestinian civil society. Only about 10% of the Arab population remained in what had become Israel.

## 11. National Liberation and Regime Creation

After WWII, movements to win liberation from colonial powers swept through the region. Generally, in addition to independence, these movements sought to reconnect with the rest of the region and with

other movements in the developing world. Many of these movements and their leaders were influenced by ideas of socialism and pan-nationalism and had a vision of a newly-liberated region re-taking its place in the world order. The US and Europe tended to regard these “radical nationalists” as dangerous to their interests. The Soviet Union saw them as potential allies. The movements themselves took aid where they could get it, but felt more at home with the Non-Aligned Movement that was gaining influence in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The Soviet Union aligned with the emerging revolutionary and nationalist movements against the colonial powers and their designated rulers. The West aligned with oil-rich monarchies, anti-communists and Israel against the “radical nationalists.” Intrigue, coups, proxy warfare, and sometimes outright intervention were commonplace, with the CIA-backed coup in Iran, the French-British-Israeli invasion of Egypt in the Suez “crisis,” and the arming of religious extremists in Afghanistan being probably the most well known examples.

## 12. Geopolitics, Oil and War

Unfortunately, jockeying for power, influence and oil took precedence over justice and human rights. Regardless of who their patrons were, emerging governments in the region sought foremost to maintain power and acquire wealth for themselves. In most countries, power was concentrated in the hands of a few. Opposition wasn’t tolerated. Most people continued to be buffeted by the social and economic forces that characterized life in an increasingly globalized world. For many in the region, war and conflict were commonplace. The process of creating new nation-states out of colonial holdings resulted in boundaries that were artificial and subject to tribal, ethnic and religiously-based challenges. In addition, the insertion of Israel and the displacement of native Palestinians that resulted from it destabilized the heart of the region.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, Cold War politics gave way to a “unipolar” political and economic order in which former colonizers and cold-warriors sought to secure their access to oil resources, to make the region open to “globalization” by world economic powers, and to assure the supremacy of Israel. They worked to achieve these ends by supporting regimes they considered friendly and by undermining or deposing those that were not. Examples are many: Hosni Mubarak of Egypt became a major recipient of U.S. aid, Saudi Arabia negotiated major arms deals, Saddam Hussein of Iraq was deposed in a plan by the U.S. to install a new government which it hoped would be headed by its chosen one, Ahmed Chalabi.

But things don’t always turn out as planned: Mubarak was overthrown by his own people, and Chalabi was rejected by the Iraqi people.

## 13. Why Do We Always Talk About Palestine When We Talk About the “Middle East”?

Palestine is a thread that runs through the entire modern history of the Arab and Islamic world. In some ways it is a metaphor for the region as a whole:

- it holds a central place in the development of multiple religions;
- European believers and secular colonizers alike sought to control it regardless of the rights and wishes of generations of inhabitants;
- it became a focal point of contention between imperial powers and part of the spoils of war divided among them;
- it became a central element in the development of Arab identity and nationalism;
- and, it was used by autocrats and kings alike to keep their populations focused on external conflict rather than on internal problems.

Today, Palestine continues to be a focus of Euro-American intervention in the region and, in that sense, represents a continuum with the colonial past.

#### 14. Arab Spring

In December 2010, a protest movement began in Tunisia that spread quickly across the region. Millions of people stood up in their respective countries to throw out autocrats and family dictatorships and to win fundamental human rights. These uprisings were widespread, popular and largely non-violent. They inspired the region and the world as they showed a deep-seated yearning for recognition of the basic dignity of people by their rulers and of nations by the international community. But as has happened so frequently in the past, foreign powers looked for ways to influence the outcome, autocratic leaders fought back to retain their hold on power, and sectarian extremists moved into the void. In most cases, the popular uprisings lost out to armed factions and the Arab Spring became a dream deferred.

#### 15. Fragmentation and Conflict

Many of the themes of the past have come to play important roles in the present:

- Foreign powers picked sides, factions and leaders and supported them with military aid and diplomatic muscle;
- Old autocrats were replaced by new ones;
- Popular movements yearning for dignity were overwhelmed by armed factions;
- Sectarian extremists linked their ambitions to the history of colonialism and conflict: the Crusades, European powers dividing up the region among themselves, creation of Israel by foreign Zionists, and unrealized dreams of a new order that could capture the pride and accomplishments of the past.

The result has been fragmentation and conflict on an unprecedented scale.

These events continue to unfold. As they do, the people of the region endure staggering human catastrophes. They can only dream of the long-sought goal: a region free of foreign domination, in control of its own destiny, and in which its peoples are free to pursue their hopes and aspirations.