



10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

THE MIDDLE

**PART
1 of 2**

Everyone has a hard time understanding the world's most volatile and complicated region. Here are the basics from Ethan Bronner, former Jerusalem bureau chief of *The New York Times*.

The Middle East is often called the Cradle of Civilization. It's where writing began, where the idea of an all-powerful God took root, and where the first known cities arose.

More than half the globe's people—its 2 billion Christians, 1.7 billion Muslims, and 13 million Jews—trace their spiritual origins there. Perhaps because of its long history, the Middle East is a region consumed by religious strife—not only between Jews and Muslims, but also between Muslims and Christians and among the various branches of Islam.

The Middle East also holds the world's largest oil and gas reserves. Because the U.S. relies on those resources, the tribal and religious tensions that **plague** the

region are all the more significant to us.

The Middle East played a pivotal role in the defining news event of this century: the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the U.S. All 19 hijackers were from Middle Eastern countries, as was Osama bin Laden, the plot's Saudi mastermind. As a result of the attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people, tens of thousands of U.S. troops have fought two wars—in Iraq and Afghanistan—over the past 11 years, and more than 6,000 American soldiers have died.

The region has been in the headlines a lot recently. The U.S. and its

allies are concerned that Iran is trying to build nuclear weapons. Syria is **engulfed** in violence. And after decades of brutal dictatorships, the citizens of several Arab countries have been demanding democracy and greater opportunity. Their revolts are known as the Arab Spring. It's still unclear how these movements (which have already toppled longtime dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) will ultimately play out, but they will certainly have a major impact on the region and the world.

So the Middle East isn't just part of our history; it's vital to our current and future interests. Here and in the next issue of *Upfront*, we'll examine 10 questions that help define the region, its conflicts, and why it's all so important to the U.S.

 **WATCH THE VIDEO**

© REUTERS/MOHAMMED SALEM/ANOV (PROTESTORS)

June 2012:
Egyptians celebrate the conviction of ousted president Hosni Mubarak.

DISCUSS
THIS
ARTICLE



1 What is the Middle East?

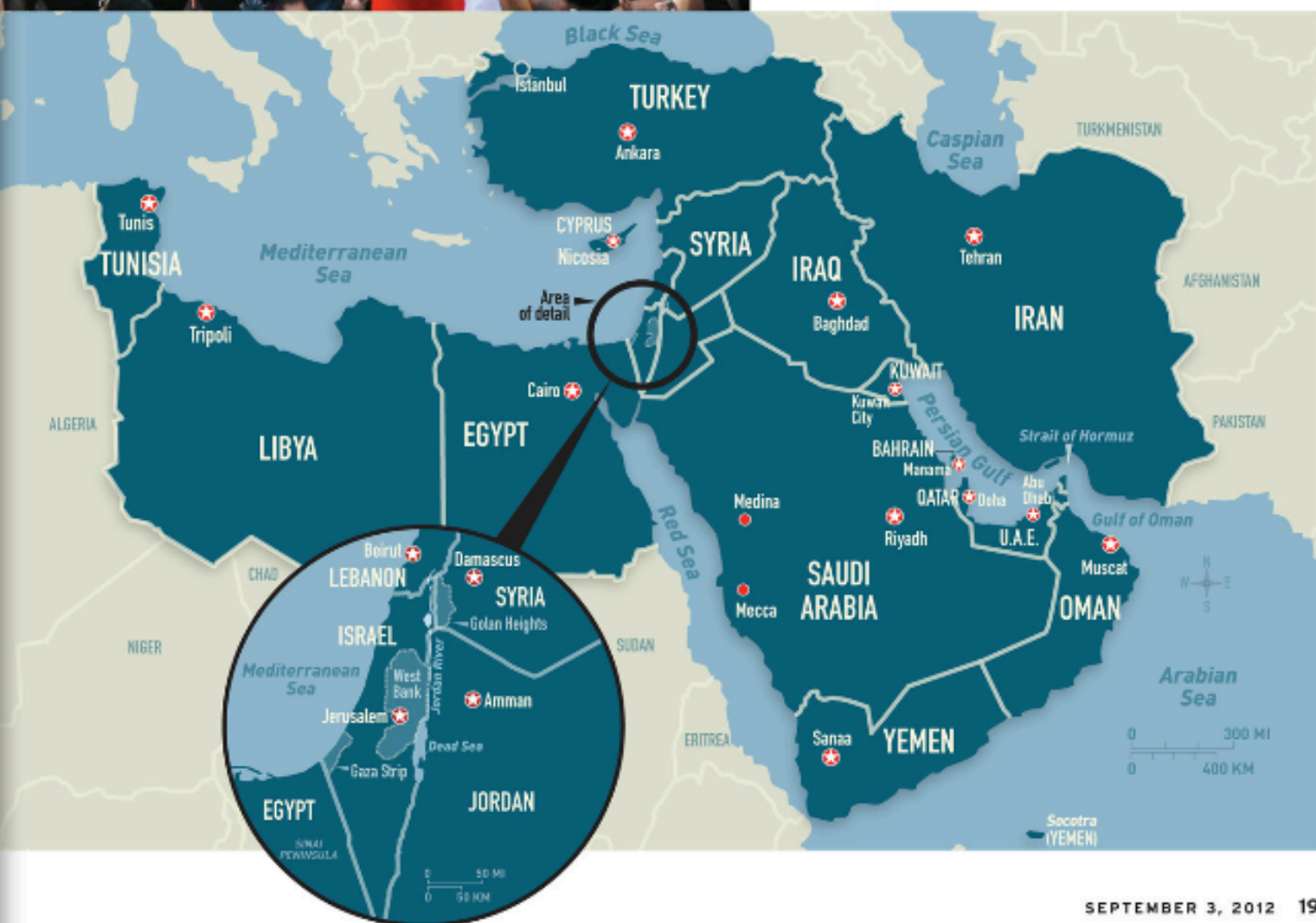
The Middle East stretches from the Arab countries of North Africa, into Asia, and all the way through Iran in the east. The Persian Gulf region—which includes Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—is known for its oil wealth.

The region is made up mostly of Arabs, but it includes Persians (in Iran) and Turks (in Turkey). Most people are Muslim, but there are also significant numbers of Christians in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian areas, and most Israelis are Jewish.

Arabic is the dominant language of the Middle East, but Iranians speak Farsi, Turks speak Turkish, and Israelis speak Hebrew.

Many Americans mistakenly think of Afghanistan as part of the region, and it's easy to see why: Most Afghans are Muslim and they write their languages in Arabic script. But technically, Afghanistan is considered part of both South Asia and Central Asia. ➔

EAST

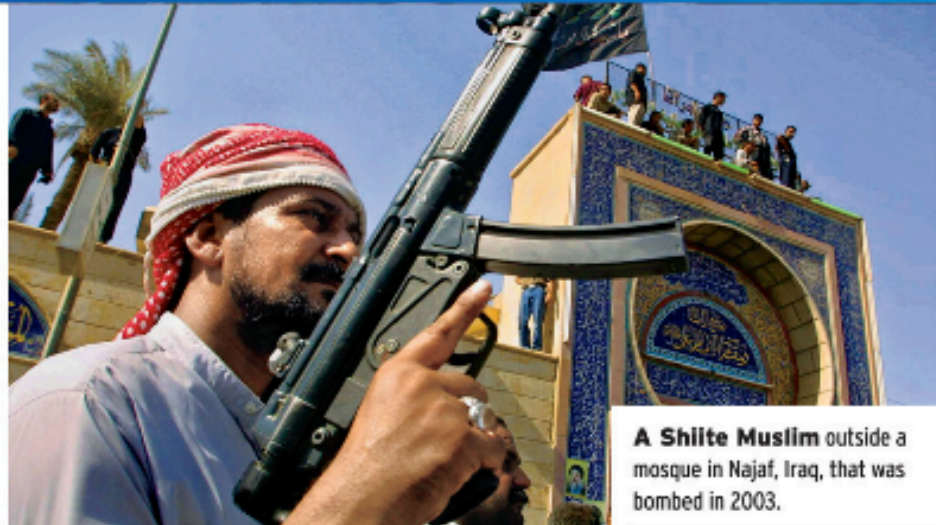


2 Who are the Sunnis and Shiites, and why do they always seem to be killing each other?

It all goes back to a 1,400-year-old feud in Muhammad's family. Muhammad founded Islam in the 7th century in what is today Saudi Arabia. (Muslims believe Muhammad was a descendent of Ishmael, son of the Jewish patriarch Abraham.)

When Muhammad died in 632 A.D., a succession struggle occurred between his wife's family and his daughter's family. That dispute grew into a deep division between what became the two main branches of Islam, *Sunni* and *Shiite* (sometimes called *Shia*).

There are some differences in how they practice—such as how, where, and when they pray—but both groups believe that the Koran is the holy book and



A Shiite Muslim outside a mosque in Najaf, Iraq, that was bombed in 2003.

Muhammad was the world's last prophet.

Because Islam has always been closely tied to political power, the two groups became political rivals (like Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland). There's a long history of discrimination and mistreatment on both sides.

About 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni. But Iran, which is mostly Shiite, has often supported fellow Shiites fighting discrimination in countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. In Syria, the situation is reversed: President Bashar al-Assad and his family and supporters are members of a Shiite branch of Islam

known as Alawites. They're fighting Syria's Sunni majority, which is supported by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni powers. Thousands have been killed.

Sunni-Shiite tensions that were long held in check by powerful dictators are coming to the surface with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring revolutions. Rami Khouri, a political analyst in Beirut, says these tensions will likely get worse in the short term.

"In the long run," Khouri says, "these identities will become less important, but that requires democratic statehood and productive economies."



In Jerusalem: A Palestinian woman passes Israeli boys

3 Why can't the Israelis and Palestinians make peace?

One of the great dramas of the modern Middle East was the founding of Israel in 1948. The Jews had been vulnerable exiles without a country of their own since they were expelled from their ancient homeland by the Romans

around the time of Jesus Christ. At the end of the 19th century, Jews known as Zionists began arguing that Jews needed a state of their own. When 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, the idea gained wider support.

The problem was that over the previous 2,000 years, their ancient homeland had not remained empty, and when significant numbers of Jews began moving back in the early 20th century, tensions erupted with the Arabs already living there. In 1947, the United Nations voted to divide Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. But Arabs rejected this plan, and war broke out the following year. When the war ended in 1949 with an Israeli victory, Israel's existence had been secured, along with the seeds of Arab anger.

There have been several Arab-Israeli wars since, the most important in 1967, when Israel crushed the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, capturing large chunks

of land from each. With those occupied territories came hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Today, 2.5 million Palestinians live in the West Bank, which Israel still controls.

Both Israel and the Palestinians support a "two-state solution," with an independent Palestinian state in most of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The problem is where to draw the borders. Israel is reluctant to give up territory it says is necessary for its security. Equally tricky is the status of Jerusalem, which is holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The result has been a stalemate, with occasional violent rebellion by the Palestinians and harsh Israeli crackdowns in response.

The only hope for resolution, say many experts, is for a U.S. president to force both sides to compromise. But that goal has eluded every president who has tried to mediate a settlement in this longstanding conflict.



Supporters of the Syrian regime carry a massive banner of President Assad at a rally in Damascus.

4 Is it all about oil?

A century ago, the British discovered oil in Iran. In 1938, Americans found even more oil in Saudi Arabia. The result has been deep U.S. and European involvement in the region to make sure governments there provide the oil-thirsty West with energy. That has often come at the expense of the people living in the Middle East and has helped keep corrupt regimes in power.

Before the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia was little more than a vast desert populated by **nomadic** tribes and ruled by a king. Oil brought enormous wealth, a lavish lifestyle for elites, and influence in the region and the world.

The Arabs used that influence in 1973 when they imposed a months-long oil embargo to protest U.S. support for Israel and badly damaged the American



More than half the world's proven oil reserves are in the Middle East.

economy. Recently, Iran threatened to close off the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil passes, in response to pressure over its suspected nuclear-weapons program.

Oil certainly does play a role in U.S. policy in the region. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman says it's "oil that constantly tempts us to intervene or to prop up dictators." Indeed, U.S. dependence on Mideast oil is one reason why Democrats and Republicans both talk so much about energy independence.

5 Why does the Arab world have so many dictators?

Although the region is in the midst of what may be a historic transformation toward greater democracy, the Arab world has a stubborn history of dictatorship. Long after it became less common in other parts of the world, Arab leaders, both monarchs and military men, have continued to hand off power to their sons and preserve authority with brutal secret-police forces.

There are exceptions in the region: Israel is a democracy (although it rules undemocratically over Palestinians in the West Bank), as is Turkey. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolts, Tunisia and Egypt have held elections, but both remain unstable and the future of democratic reforms is unclear.

There are many theories about why the Arab world has been so unreceptive to democracy. One is that Islam, with its emphasis on divinely inspired rule, and Arab culture, with its focus on patriarchal power, are not compatible with democracy.

Many find this explanation offensive. "Anyone who says Arabs cannot be democratic is a racist," says Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator with Israel.

Others argue that Arab dictators have cleverly put off democracy by playing up the danger that Islamist forces would take over and insisting that a strong leader is needed to stand up to Israel.

But this tendency toward authoritarian governments may be changing now with the Arab Spring revolts.

"This idea that the Arab world was immune to the movement toward democracy has been shattered," says Frederic Wehrey of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "And it's refreshing." ●

LOOK FOR PART 2 in the Sept. 17 issue of *Upfront*: Five more key questions about the Middle East, on democracy, women's rights, and more.

10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE

MIDDLE EAST

PART
2 of 2

Everyone has a hard time understanding the world's most volatile and complicated region. Here are the basics from Ethan Bronner, former Jerusalem bureau chief of *The New York Times*.

DISCUSS
THIS
ARTICLE

The Middle East isn't just a lesson in a history textbook. The conflicts that rage there are vital to our current and future interests.

Part 2 of *10 Things You Need to Know About the Middle East* looks at more issues that are central to understanding what's going on in the region: women's oppression, conflict between Iran and the U.S., Israeli democracy, America's relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the impact of the Arab Spring.

Part 1 of the article (Upfront, Sept. 3) covered:

1. What is the Middle East?
2. Who are the Sunnis and Shiites?
3. Why can't the Israelis and Palestinians make peace?
4. Is it all about oil?
5. Why does the Arab world have so many dictators?

▶ PART 1: WWW.UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM

Women in Manama, the capital of Bahrain, in April

6 Are women more oppressed in the Arab world than elsewhere?

Arab nations are among the very worst in the world in terms of women's freedom, according to a United Nations report. More than half of Arab women are illiterate. The percentage of women who die in childbirth is double that of Latin America and four times that of East Asia.

In most Arab countries, women have very limited rights. They are dependent on their fathers or husbands to carry out basic activities like opening a bank account or getting a passport. In most Arab countries, divorce and inheritance laws favor men. In Saudi Arabia, women are banned from driving. Few women have political power.

The role of women in a society is important not only because it affects half the population directly, but also because it's a key indicator of a country's overall health and success. In countries where women are more equal, there's greater productivity and democracy. As a result, one of the big challenges for the Arab world is providing power and opportunity to women. "Society as a whole suffers when a huge proportion of its productive potential is stifled," notes the U.N. report.

Westerners are often upset when they see women in the region covered head-to-toe. But how Arab women dress is not necessarily an indicator of how much power and freedom they enjoy. Other restrictions—like Saudi Arabia's ban on women driving—are meaningful but not as important as political rights.

"For me, the struggle is not about driving a car but about being in the driver's seat of our destiny," says Manal al-Sharif, a Saudi women's rights activist.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof says that injustice against women is the central moral challenge of the 21st century. Fighting against gender inequity is also practical, he says, because it has positive effects on many other social and economic problems.



Hardline Iranian students burn an American flag in Tehran in 2011 (above); President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (below right).

7 Why does Iran seem to hate the U.S.?

The tensions can be traced to two dates: 1953 and 1979. In 1953, America's C.I.A. engineered a coup in Iran, reinstalling Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was friendly to the U.S. Then in 1979, an Islamic revolution overthrew the Shah, and a mob of Iranians took over the U.S. embassy in the capital, Tehran, holding 66 Americans hostage for 444 days.

Since then, neither country has had an embassy in the other. Each suspects the other of seeking to undermine its government and way of life. Iran sometimes calls the U.S. "the great Satan." The U.S. and its allies complain that Iran supports terrorist groups like Hezbollah.

But Iranian public opinion is hardly uniform. Many young Iranians feel warmly toward the U.S. and are frustrated with their own government. In 2009, after accusations that the presidential election had been rigged, hundreds of thousands of Iranians protested in the streets and were brutally suppressed. A video of a young woman at a protest being shot by a government sniper went viral and prompted international outrage.

Today, the main point of conflict between Iran's leaders and the U.S. is Iran's suspected quest for nuclear weapons. Iran says its nuclear program is for energy and medical research, but American and European leaders suspect Iran wants to build a nuclear bomb, possibly to use against Israel, a staunch U.S. ally. So the U.S. and other world powers are trying to persuade Iran to stop enriching uranium, the key ingredient in a bomb, by imposing economic sanctions. Israel has threatened to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, and the U.S. has suggested it might do so if sanctions fail. Iran says that would prompt a severe counterattack. This dispute is one of the most tense in the world today, with a real risk of deadly conflict breaking out. ➔



Many young Iranians feel more warmly toward the U.S. than their own government.

8 Can Israel be both a Jewish state and a democracy?

Israel was founded in 1948 as a Jewish state in the aftermath of the Holocaust, but about a fifth of its citizens are not Jewish. There are 1.6 million Arabs, both Muslim and Christian, who are Israeli citizens because they (or their forebears) stayed after 1948. In theory, these Israeli Arabs have full rights. But in practice, many suffer discrimination in jobs, housing, and education.

Many countries have minorities that are poorly treated. But the challenge in Israel is more acute because it's a state built by and for Jews. And while Israel's Declaration of Independence states that the country "will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex," few would argue that it has fully done so. For example, Israeli Arabs are often inspected more closely at the airport than foreign Jews are.

But it's also true that Israeli Arabs have greater political freedom and power than Arabs in most other Middle Eastern countries. They can vote, they have representatives in the Israeli Parliament (currently 14 out of 120 seats), and they are judges (including one on the Supreme Court) and professors.

The bigger challenge for Israel is the 2.5 million Palestinians living in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied since the 1967 Six Day War; they enjoy none of the rights or privileges

Inside Israel, there are 1.6 million Arabs who are Israeli citizens.



Arab Israelis have more political freedom than other Arabs, but they still suffer discrimination.

of Israeli Arabs. For years, Israel and the Palestinians have been negotiating about setting up an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. "Until the Israeli occupation of the West Bank ends, Israel can never solve its democracy problem," says Azmi Bishara, a former Arab member of Israel's parliament who now lives abroad.

9 Is Saudi Arabia really a U.S. ally?

Countries, like people, face tensions between their interests and their values. If a rich friend offers you a job that you need but he mistreats others, do you take the job or protest his behavior by saying no? Is someone like that an ally you want to rely on? These are the kinds of issues that the U.S. faces in its relations with Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis are a steady provider of oil, a key business partner for American companies, and they share Washington's deep suspicions about Iran.

But Saudi women are not permitted to go out unaccompanied by a man, nor are they allowed to vote or drive.

Saudi law forbids the building of churches. The government censors the media. Saudi religious authorities pay for schools around the Muslim world that spread anti-Western ideas and, some say, sponsor terrorism. These are violations of what Americans consider core values—democracy, equality for women, and freedom of religion and expression.

Sometimes, however, political reality demands that American presidents work closely with countries they would not normally befriend, and this has long been the case with Saudi Arabia.

But some say the U.S. must prod its



President Obama with Saudi King Abdullah at the White House in 2010

allies to behave in a manner more in line with American values.

"We now see," says Robert Danin of the Council on Foreign Relations, "that it is not in our interests, and not in our friends' interests, to stand silent while they deny their own people the very things we want for ourselves."



Egyptians celebrate the victory of their first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, in June.

10 How might the Arab Spring change the Middle East?

In December 2010, a 26-year-old fruit vendor in a small town in Tunisia got fed up with abuse by local officials and set himself on fire in protest. This touched off demonstrations across the country, which soon spread to Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and other Arab countries. In all cases, the rallies were organized through social media like Facebook and Twitter.

In the almost two years since, rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have been driven from power, and civil unrest has been ongoing in several other countries. This turmoil has become known as the Arab Spring.

Most scholars see the Arab Spring as a very hopeful development because for the first time, average Arabs are demanding democracy and greater opportunity. But thousands have been killed and the fighting continues, especially in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad has refused to step aside despite a civil war and international pressure.

The Arab Spring also raises important questions, starting with who will ultimately hold power in the countries where dic-

tators have been removed? In June, an Islamist named Mohammed Morsi won Egypt's first-ever democratic presidential election.

This doesn't have to be a bad thing: Egyptians trust their spiritual leaders as uncorrupt and reliable. And perhaps the Islamists will govern more moderately than expected. Morsi, for example, has vowed to respect Egypt's Christian minority and to uphold Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. But Islamist rulers may also become more extreme and fail to improve the welfare of their people.

What is clear is that whatever kind of democracy emerges in the Arab world will not be a copy of democracy as we know it, with a clear separation of religion and politics. But many longtime observers of the region believe democracy is coming.

Rami Khouri, a political analyst in Beirut, Lebanon, has been watching the



Arab Spring Upheaval

- Regime Change
- Major Unrest

revolutions closely and believes democracy is in the Arab future.

"We are slowly witnessing the unprecedented birth of the Arab citizen," Khouri says. "This has never happened before on such a scale; and it will go on for some years. . . . We will achieve two long-elusive Arab goals and rights: self-determination and real sovereignty." •

[▶ WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

© AP IMAGES/AR MABIL (EGYPT CELEBRATION)