

## THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY

Begin with a personal story:

I was, not so long ago, part of a study tour to Saudi Arabia, an oil-rich country and the largest on the Arabian Peninsula.

Our group arrived at a Holiday Inn, modern and representative of such hotels found throughout the world. The only difference was that portraits of the rulers of Saudi Arabia were over the reception desk in their Arab headdresses.

In the lobby was a cart with a large brass coffee server serving dates and Arabic coffee. In the evening, the two women in the group, of which I was one, and the other members ate together buffet style. The next morning when I went down to breakfast, I saw a few of the male members of the group having breakfast in the hotel café; so helped myself to some orange juice and joined them.

Before long, however, I was approached by a waiter and told: I'm sorry Ma'am; but you'll have to sit in the family section. And sure enough, there on the other side, behind a latticed partition, sat Georgina, the other female member of the group, enjoying her breakfast.

This story illustrates an important fact about the Middle East:

the tension between the old and the new, the contrast between ideas and customs coming from the outside confronting indigenous values and long-held practices.

What is the Middle East?

History and ideology have complicated the issue.

However, the term is still widely used, although somewhat arbitrary, and is generally considered to include the Arab states of the Arabian Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, Turkey, Israel, and Iran. In addition to this Middle Eastern core, other states should be added because of economic, religious, or cultural associations. Thus, the states of North Africa should be considered to be a periphery.

Simply put, the Middle East consists of an Eastern Mediterranean, Turkish, Iranian, and Arabian core with a North African periphery.

The Middle East has fascinated scholars and observers and been the focus of great power attention for three major reasons:

1) The Middle East is commonly known as the cradle of civilization.

Evidence of the earliest known humans has been found in East Africa. But the Middle East had human inhabitants very early and seems to have produced the earliest integrated civilizations, agricultural villages, and developed towns, and religious-political systems.

2) The Middle East has intense religious meaning for the peoples of the Western world.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all originated in the area, and the most sacred holy places of these three monotheistic faiths are located there.

3) The area has great strategic significance.

It is situated at the hub of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and is a bridge and crossroads between them. In the past, it linked important trade routes connecting Europe with Asia and Africa. Today it is a critical communications link, vital both economically and militarily.

A number of strategic waterways point out the importance of the area: the Bosphorus Straits (linking the Black Sea to the Mediterranean), the Suez Canal, and the Musandam Peninsula overlooking the entrance to the Persian Gulf.

4) Oil is the major resource of the Middle East.

It is abundant, of unusually high quality, and exported in huge quantities. It is an essential energy source for the industrialized states and for many developing countries.

The differences among the nations of the Middle East should not obscure their similarities. These include:

1) the heritage of Islam

2) the presence of foreign influences, sometimes in the form of colonization

3) the concentration of leadership in the urban upper and middle classes; peasants and workers are only beginning to enter the political realm

- 4) the rise of new elites of technocrats and military officers, often challenging the traditional family-based elites
- 5) the importance of pan-Arabism and Islamism
- 6) underdevelopment in the Arab world due to repression, discrimination against women, and inadequate education systems, the findings of a UN study written by Arabs

## **EGYPT: A RIVER AND A PEOPLE**

“Egypt is the gift of the Nile,” wrote Herodotus 2,500 years ago. The mighty river, flowing north to the Mediterranean, attracted nomadic peoples to settle on its banks as early as 6000 BC.

Birthplace of one of the greatest civilizations the world has known, modern Egypt still retains the glory of the pharaohs in the extraordinary monuments they left behind, found over the entire country.

After 2200 years of foreign rule, the government of Egypt was finally put in the hands of Egyptians following the Revolution of 1952. Gamal Abdul Nasser, leader of the Free Officers, emerged as leader by 1954.

A champion of pan-Arabism, Nasser was succeeded in the presidency by his vice-president, Anwar Sadat. Sadat waged the 1973 war with Israel but then traveled to Jerusalem in search of peace.

In 1979, he co-signed the Camp David Agreement, which regained the Sinai for Egypt and established peace with Israel. Sadat’s peace was viewed by the Arab world as no less than a betrayal; and it cost Sadat his life at the hands of an assassin.

Since 1952, Egypt has been an independent country and a republic about three times the size of New Mexico, with a population today of close to 70,000,000 people.

Hosni Mubarak, a former Air Force commander, followed Sadat in the presidency in 1981. He has dealt firmly with Islamic fundamentalism. Mubarak was elected to a fourth six-year term in 1999, making him the longest-serving head of state in the country’s independent history. His victory margin was 94 percent, two points less than in 1993, when as per usual he was the only candidate. Although there are opposition parties, the Egyptian government functions as a one-party dominated state. The party of President Mubarak is called the National Democratic Party.

## **TURKEY: BRIDGE IN ANATOLIA**

Turkey is the bridge between Europe and the Middle East, both physically and culturally.

The Ottoman Sultans ruled the entire Middle East for centuries; and traces of Turkish influence remain in all of the countries once controlled from Istanbul.

Turkey was the first formerly Ottoman Muslim land to establish a republic and to achieve democracy as well as the first to look westward, to Europe and North America, for cultural models.

Following Turkey's defeat in World War I, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, embarked on a rapid modernization program, including establishing a secular democracy, the introduction of Latin script and European dress, and the adoption of equal rights for women. The capital was moved from Istanbul to Ankara.

Today, Ataturk is Turkey's national hero. His picture is everywhere, a bust or statue, preferably on horseback, in every park. Quotations from his speeches and writings are on every public building. He is almost synonymous with the Turkish Republic. His achievements in turning a dying empire into a forward-looking nation state were taken as a model by 1950s Egyptian president Nasser and the Shahs of Iran.

Since Ataturk's death, Turkey has experienced three military coups and considerable political turbulence.

In theory Turkey is a multiparty democracy on the Western European model, although in practice it has proved more of a semi-democracy with the military wielding considerable power behind the scenes.

A prospective member of the European Union, a member of NATO, Turkey was a strong US ally during the Cold War years. With an Islamist party in power and concerns over the war in Iraq (especially over the country's Kurdish population), differences with Washington have emerged. Turkey's concerns stem from the fact that it has a 17 percent Kurdish minority and has only recently reached a political accommodation with this ethnic group.

Turkey is about the size of Texas and has a population of 66,494,000 people.

## **IRAN: THEOCRATIC REPUBLIC ON THE PLATEAU**

Most of Iran consists of a high plateau ringed by mountains. Much of the plateau is covered with uninhabitable salt flats and deserts—the Dasht-i-Lut being one of the most desolate and inhospitable regions in the world.

Most of the country receives little or no rainfall.

Due to Iran's geographic diversity, most of the population is divided into a large number of separate and often conflicting ethnic groups. Ethnic Iranians (or Persians) constitute the majority, about 51%. The largest ethnic minority group is the Azeri (or Azerbaijani) Turks, who live in northwestern Iran. They make up about 24% of the population.

Turkish dynasties originating in Azerbaijan controlled Iran for several centuries and were responsible for much of premodern Islamic Iran's political power and cultural achievements.

In the late nineteenth century, Azeris were in the forefront of the constitutional movement to limit the absolute power of Iranian monarchs. They formed the core of the first Iranian Parliament.

Most Iranians belong to the Shi'ite branch of Islam; and the country has been the core of Shi'a Islam for centuries. Less than 8% of the population (Kurds, Baluchis, Turkmen and about half the Arabs) is Sunni.

Iran was in chaos at the end of World War I, when the commander of the only organized force in Iran at the time, the Cossack Brigade, seized power in a bloodless coup in 1921.

Reza Khan was crowned as shah in 1925, founding the two-ruler Pahlavi dynasty. A great admirer of Ataturk, he set out to modernize the country.

In World War II, Iran was officially neutral; but Reza Khan was exiled to South Africa because he was thought to be too friendly with the Axis powers. His 22-year old son, Muhammad Reza, succeeded him. After the war, the Shah assumed near absolute power and Iran firmly aligned itself with the west.

The government of Muhammad Reza was repressive, but Iran was rapidly modernized. Illiteracy was reduced, women emancipated, land holdings redistributed, health services improved, and a major industrialization program embarked upon.

The 1974 oil price revolution became the Shah's undoing. He allowed US arms merchants to persuade him to squander Iran's vast new wealth on huge arsenals of useless weapons. The flood of petrodollars lined the pockets of a select few, while skyrocketing inflation made the majority worse off than before.

Responding to growing opposition, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran on February 1, 1979. Khomeini's intention was to set up a clergy-dominated Islamic republic—the first true Islamic state in modern times. He went about achieving this with brutal efficiency. Opposition disappeared; executions took place after meaningless trials; minor officials took the law into their own hand, and policies were implemented to promote similar Islamic revolutions elsewhere.

The main opponent in this primordial battle between Islamic right and ungodly evil was (and continues to be) the USA.

In 1980, Saddam Hussein made an opportunistic land grab in southwest Iran, taking advantage of Iran's domestic chaos. Although Iraq was better equipped, Iran drew on a larger population and a fanaticism fanned by the rhetoric of the *mullahs* (Muslim teachers). A cease-fire was finally negotiated in mid-1988, with neither side achieving its objectives.

Khomeini died in 1989. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was appointed his successor as Iran's spiritual leader. As chief of state he is appointed for life and has great power over the elected portions of the government. In 1997, Muhammad Khatami easily beat another candidate to become president. Although handily reelected in 2001, there has been virtually no liberalism since Khatami came to power, because hard line factions, dedicated to the Islamic Revolution, control the corridors of power within the government.

Oil was discovered in Iran in 1908, making the country's oil industry the oldest in the Middle East. Until 1951, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company produced, refined, and distributed all Iranian oil. After the 1951-1953 nationalization period, when the industry was closed down, a consortium of foreign oil companies—British, French, and American—replaced the AIOC. In 1973, the industry was again nationalized and was operated by the state-run National Iranian Oil Company.

Iran: the size of Alaska; 66,129,000 people; longest coastline on the Persian Gulf.

## **IRAQ: MODERN MESOPTAMIA**

The Republic of Iraq is a young state in a very old land.

Ages ago in the fertile valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, a great civilization was born. This land was known as Mesopotamia, from the Greek meaning "between two rivers," and is now part of modern Iraq.

It was here the human beings first began to cultivate their land and where writing was invented.

Recent history has dealt less kindly with Iraq.

In modern times, Iraq became a British mandate in 1920, with Faisal ibn Hussein as its king. Since the mandate ended in 1932, Iraq's economy has been based on oil production and exports. Its oil reserves are the fifth largest in the world.

The new kingdom was far from being a unified nation. It was more of a patchwork of warring and competing groups. The Muslim population (80%) was divided into Sunni and Shi'a, with the Sunnis forming a minority but controlling the government and business and dominating urban life. Kurds, concentrated in the north, made up approximately 15% of the population.

On July 14, 1958, the monarchy was overthrown in a military coup and Iraq became a republic, ushering in a period of instability characterized by a series of coups and countercoups that continued throughout the 1960s.

On July 17, 1968, a bloodless coup by the Ba'ath Party, a secular socialist party founded in Syria in 1942, put General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr in power.

In 1979, Saddam Hussein replaced al-Bakr as president, the revolution in Iran took place, and relations between the two countries quickly sank to an all-time low, leading eventually to full-scale war.

Saddam was born in Tikrit, birthplace of Saladin, hero of the Islamic world in the Middle Ages against the Crusaders. Unlike Saddam, however, Saladin was a Kurd.

Saddam has never stood as a candidate in an election, and he serves as commander of the armed forces but has never served in the military.

He does have great personal courage and a gambler's instinct in decision-making. Like most gamblers, though, he is often wrong, two glaring examples being the invasion of Iran and the occupation of Kuwait.

Iraq is a republic controlled by the military and the Ba'ath Party. Its president, Saddam Hussein, rules a tribal system that has placed his relatives and tribal associates in positions to control the military and the security services. The authorities have used minorities including Christians to maintain power for a number of years. The most important minorities who remain outside the government include the Shi'ite Muslims and the Kurds.

Of his two sons, the elder, Uday, has been elected speaker of the National Assembly and serves as chair of Iraq's Olympic Committee. The younger son, Qusay, formerly served as commander of the Republican Guard, and was appointed head of the military committee of the Revolutionary Command Council.

The most disturbing feature of Saddam Hussein's rule has been his determination to make Iraq the possessor of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons as a major world power. Iraq unilaterally suspended the work of the United Nations Special Commission tasked with finding and destroying these weapons in 1998. The work of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (Unmovic) begun in 2000, under the directorship of Hans Blix, as found by the US to be unsuccessful.

Over the last 13 years, Iraq has fallen from one of the most prosperous Middle Eastern states to one of its most economically devastated under economic sanctions placed by the United Nations on the country. No-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq have been in existence since 1991 and 1992.

All Iraqi governments since 1920 have attempted to create a single political community from a diverse medley of peoples.

## **ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES**

One of Israel's leaders commented that Israel is in but not of the Middle East. The state is, indeed, distinct from its neighbors by virtually every criterion on which differentiation might be made—political, ethnographic, geographic, economic, and military.

Because of the interacting circumstances of its advent and early evolution, the state was a virtual island of isolation; it related to its neighbors only in military operations.

Israel is a secular, parliamentary and democratic republic with a dual executive. The head of state is a largely symbolic president—a post held presently by Moshe Katzav. The head of government and current prime minister is Ariel Sharon, who leads the right wing Likud Party. The Knesset is Israel's parliament, a single-chambered house of 120 members. It is located in Jerusalem.

Israel is about the size of the state of New Jersey and has a population of close to 6 million people. Eighty percent of that population is Jewish; the remaining 20 percent is Arab. These Arabs are descendants of Palestinians who did not leave the area in 1948 and are citizens of Israel. The majority is Muslim but some are Christian and Druze.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been one of major disputes of the Middle East. In 1947, the United Nations voted to divide Palestine into Jewish and Arab states—a decision that was rejected by the neighboring Arab nations. Jewish nationalists proclaimed the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, accepting the boundaries delineated by the UN resolution. The armies of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon immediately invaded Israel, but were defeated in 1949.

Subsequent wars between Arab nations and Israel erupted in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982; and in 1987 and 1996, widespread civil violence broke out in Israel. Much of this conflict stems from the unresolved issue of the Palestinian Arab refugees and the status of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

When Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, spoke of “a people without a land” looking for “a land without a people,” he was not aware of the Arab population in Palestine or its future evolution. Today there are about 3,298,952 Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Herzl's vision, a utopia unlike anything else in the Middle East, led to an independent state that surpassed anything he could have dreamed of.

Jews, a people dispersed, almost lost, came together to be reborn. They returned to their historic homeland and infused it with new life.

They revived their historic tongue and transformed it into a living language; they created new forms of life (such as the kibbutz); they formed a state in which democratic freedoms

were observed, even in wartime; they put in place industry, agriculture, and services as advanced as those of the most developed nations.

Israel became the only compensation, if compensation there could be, for the Holocaust, which the Jewish people suffered under the Nazis.

But a central objective has not yet been achieved: a regional peace with the Arab countries. Still unresolved, the Palestinian question—the basis for attacks on Israel—remains the principal danger to its security.

A breakthrough toward peace was the Oslo Declaration of Principles in 1993, negotiated directly between the PLO and the Israelis without US participation. While avoiding issues such as Jerusalem and the refugees that appeared still irreconcilable, the declaration marked the first time that Israel recognized Palestinian rights, at least in principle.

The failure to build on Oslo, the unsuccessful attempts at negotiation at the Wye River Plantation under the auspices of President Clinton, led to a collapse of the peace process in 2000 and the return of violence.

Many Palestinians remain skeptical that negotiations could ever lead to a sovereign Palestinian state, given the intractability of such core issues as Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, and Palestinian refugees. While the Palestinians are confirming a prime minister and a cabinet, the Israelis are constructing a wall to separate the two peoples.

President Bush and his administration have crafted a road map for peace. Time will tell whether anyone follows any of the roads.

## **SAUDI ARABIA: BIRTHPLACE OF ISLAM, DEVELOPMENT IN THE DESERT**

The Arabian Peninsula (Arabic, *Jazirat al-Arab*) has played a significant role through 7,000 years of Middle East history and into the present.

Three roles are especially important:

- 1) It has been the source area for Semitic peoples who have migrated into the Fertile Crescent, from Akkadians and Assyrians to Canaanites, Hebrews, and Arabs in the seventh century.
- 2) It is the cradle of Islam, the religion of more than 1.25 billion people, and the destination of more than 2.5 million pilgrims to Mecca every year.
3. Under its eastern soils lie 26 percent of the world's known petroleum reserves.

Could there be an odder international couple than the US and Saudi Arabia? For six decades, the North American capitalist democracy and the Middle Eastern feudal kingdom

have embrace one another in a strange sort of common-law marriage cemented by Saudi oil and by American money and arms.

Other than shared interests centered on the Arabian oil fields—and a once mutual but now irrelevant commitment to opposing Soviet communism—it has always been hard to see what else two such dissimilar countries might have in common.

Consider Saudi Arabia:

An absolute monarchy, closed, fiercely puritanical, denier of the most basic rights to women, tolerant only of one narrow strain of Islam, Wahhabism, and an implacable enemy of Israel.

The House of Saud first rose to power in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century due to a strategic alliance with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, founder of the austere and single-minded interpretation of Islam that remains the dominant faith in Saudi Arabia to this day.

The Qur'an (sacred book of Islam) serves as the constitution of the Saudi state, and is read as banning movie houses, discos, and concerts.

Television was introduced in the 1960s only following violent protests. As much as 40% of the class hours in Saudi schools are spent studying scripture.

And look at the US:

A constitutional republic, founded on immigration and religious pluralism, the birthplace of women's liberation and disseminator via film and music of a highly sexualized and permissive global culture, and Israel's primary ally.

After 9/11, it took Saudi officials many months to formally acknowledge that 15 of the 19 hijackers who steered airliners into New York City's Trade Center and Washington's Pentagon building were Saudi citizens. But that fact never escaped American public notice.

Nor that the organizer of the deadly attacks, Al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden was born in Saudi Arabia. Nor that at least 125 of the 600-plus *jihadists*, or holy warriors, held after the US invasion of Afghanistan to topple the regime harboring bin Laden are also Saudi citizens.

Nor, finally, that a network of religious school and charities around the globe spreading an anti-American *jihadist* theology were largely funded by Saudi donations.

In the are of defense, Riyadh has been ambivalent about allowing strikes against Iraq to be mounted from the Prince Sultan Air Base, a state-of-the-art operations center built by the

US. The Saudi wavering on whether to allow the base to be used has resulted in the US building the Al-Udaid and As-Sayliyah facilities in nearby Qatar.

Ultimately, however, the US-Saudi relationship is always going to be about oil. An old oil patch saying has it that: "Blood is thicker than water, but oil is thicker than either."

The world's thirstiest consumer of petroleum products, using about a quarter of total planetary production, the US imports three fifths of its oil, a trend that has only steadily escalated as consumption grows and domestic production falls.

A quarter of America's imported petroleum flows from the Middle East, and a sixth of all imports are supplied by Saudi Arabia, specifically.

Saudi Arabia has generally used its dominance of the oil market to stabilize prices during times of crisis, providing a vital service to the US economy and that of the industrialized world as a whole.

Riyadh is responding to the erosion of its image in the US. The Saudis have cooperated in tracing financial links to terrorism and are spending millions on lobbying and television ads to assure Americans of Saudi good intentions.

Saudi Arabia has its own problems:

Saudi Arabia has demographic difficulties. One of the highest birthrates in the world has led to a tripling of the Saudi population in only three decades. Two thirds of Saudi Arabia's population of roughly 18 million is under the age of 25. The female half of that youthful bulge is allowed no role in the economy at all. The male half is educationally and temperamentally ill equipped to assume such a role.

That leaves Saudi Arabia sorely dependent on a foreign work force as well as saddled with a restless young population competing for an ever-declining share of national oil revenues, which may find little channel for its energies save religious adventurism.

King Fahd, the current ruler in name, has been basically incompetent since a 1995 stroke, and his half brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, serves as de facto ruler in his stead.

## **SYRIA: MIDDLE EAST HEARTLAND**

Like many countries in the Middle East, modern Syria is a nation of artificial boundaries. Its borders were determined by agreement between France and Britain after World War I.

About the size of North Dakota, with a population of 16, 730,000, its location is central. Damascus and Aleppo have played outstanding roles as a commercial and cultural centers

for 3,500 years; and Syria's cereal belt has served as a granary for empires during many centuries.

Ninety percent of Syrians are Arabs and most are Sunni Muslims. Nonetheless, with large Christian, Alawite, and even Kurdish populations, Syria remains a diverse society.

Today Syria is a republic controlled by the military. The new president is a 37-year old, London-trained, ophthalmologist, Bashar al-Assad. He is considered to be among the younger generation of leaders emerging on the scene in the Middle East. The president is leader of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party, a branch of the party that has also been ruling in Iraq. Although ideologically similar, the Syrian and Iraqi parties have been bitter enemies.

Bashar had little experience in national politics before being summoned back to replace his elder brother Basil, killed in an auto accident in 1994, as heir-apparent.

Former President Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000) and his son are Alawites. Despite their small numbers overall (between 11 and 15 percent of the population), the Alawites have played a disproportionately large role in Syrian politics and in the armed forces. Presently, Alawites control the armed forces, the security service, and the Ba'ath Party.

The Alawites are an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam and form a majority in the coastal Syrian province of Latakia. They have vigorously maintained their religious and cultural identity. Many Muslims believe that the Alawites have strayed so far from Sunni Islam that they are no longer truly Muslims.

When the 1973 constitution was approved, many Sunnis objected to the exclusion of the traditional article making Islam the state religion. After some agitation, the critics were satisfied by an amendment that declared that the president must be a Muslim. President Assad, an Alawite, made this claim for himself, despite the uneasiness of many Sunnis. Islamic jurisprudence was retained as the primary source of legislation; and the Arab character of the state was confirmed. Freedom of religion was guaranteed for all groups, however.

Bashar's tentative steps toward a more open Syrian society and representative government generated a negative reaction in 2001, largely on the part of old-guard conservative elements, with their vested interest in the status quo.

Following the release of prisoners, and creation of salons, private forums where issues could be freely discussed, more restrictive measures followed. Salons were closed; new ones were denied permission to organize; and arrests of leading intellectuals, opposition leaders in parliament, and human-rights activists were carried out.

Syria's often prickly relations with its neighbors and its rigid opposition to Israel have made the country the "odd man out" in the region at various times.

Syrian and Israeli representatives met in January 2000 in the resort town of Shepherdstown, West Virginia, with then president Bill Clinton serving as moderator. Their talks ended inconclusively, as the Syrian and Israeli positions remained far apart on such issues as the Golan Heights—taken from Syria by Israel in the 1967 war.

Syria has been included in the US Department of State's list as a state supporter of terrorism. However, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States has caused the US government to de-emphasize the fact. President Bush denounced the terrorist attacks and criticized Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network for giving Islam a bad name. Having defeated Islamists in his own country, he appears to be cooperating with the US on the matter.

## **JORDAN: THE LAND BEYOND**

Modern Jordan is another artificial nation, the result of historical forces and events that shaped the Middle East in the twentieth century. It had no prior history as a nation and was known simply as the land east of the Jordan River.

Jordan was one of many countries that escaped from a long period of Turkish rule when the Ottoman Empire collapsed after WWI.

The newly formed League of Nations gave Britain an Mandate over Palestine; and shortly afterwards the new state of Transjordan was made a separate entity under King Abdullah.

After the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, Transjordan took advantage of the situation and occupied the West Bank and a part of Jerusalem. This done, King Abdullah shortened his fledgling country's name to Jordan.

Abdullah was assassinated in 1951. He was succeeded the following year by his grandson Hussein, who took the throne at the immature age of 17 and managed to hold it for 48 years through insurrection attempts and major disruptions, two wars with the Israelis and a virtual civil war with the Palestinians, until his death early in 1999.

In the Six-Day War of 1967, Jordan lost the West Bank and its half of Jerusalem to occupying Israeli forces. In a single blow Jordan had lost its two most important income sources: agriculture and tourism. It also experienced another huge influx of Palestinian refugees.

The government of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy. King Abdullah II is one of the new generation of Arab leaders coming to power. The monarch appoints the prime minister, who then selects the prime minister and the senate. The house of representatives is elected by popular vote. The Kingdom is the last remaining Hashemite rule. The current king is a descendant of the Sherif of Mecca. It was the Hashemites who led the famous Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

King Abdullah II, born of a British mother and educated in England and the US, came to the throne by surprise.

It was often assumed that his father, King Hussein, would nominate his brother as his successor. Shortly before his death, King Hussein surprised everyone by picking his oldest son.

Although trained as a military man, the new king has been portrayed as one of the new generation of Arab leaders arriving on the scene. He has pledged to continue his father's policy of moderation.

Jordan is a poor, small state in a very tough region. It will take great skill for the new monarch to chart a safe course for the Kingdom.

King Hussein's diplomatic skills were stretched to the limit when, during the 1991 Gulf War, the king refused to side against Iraq, largely out of fear of unrest among Jordan's pro-Saddam Palestinian populace. Jordan, however, played a peace-broker role and complied, at least officially, with the UN embargo on trade with Iraq.

Peace with Israel became a reality in October 1994, with Jordan the second Arab nation to sign a formal treaty with the Israeli state.

## **LEBANON: MEDITERRANEAN MOUNTAIN**

Lebanon is dominated by the rugged and well-watered range of Mount Lebanon, green on its western slopes, facing the Mediterranean and brown from the steppes and deserts at its back.

It is small enough to be traversed by car in a few hours even over its entire length. Yet it displays almost as much landscape diversity as does Turkey, with an area 76 times that of Lebanon.

Lebanon is one of the most Western, modernized, literate, education-centered, entrepreneurial countries in the Middle East. Beirut, the capital, has a fantastic nightlife, good museums, and is one of the region's most cosmopolitan cities.

Lebanon is synonymous with cultural diversity, as virtually every major ethnic or religious group in the Fertile Crescent is represented. However, the diversity among Lebanon's peoples that underlies the country's factionalism is not so much ethno-linguistic as sectarian or denominational.

Moreover, emphasis on the conflict between Christians and Muslims neglects the antagonisms among more than a dozen Christian subgroups and half a dozen Muslim subgroups. Intercommunal tensions are so great that all sects have opposed a census since the 1932 enumeration, which showed a Christian majority and, under the system arranged

with French guidance, gave majority government and military power to the Christians. Today, cabinet and parliament have a 6 to 5 Muslim-Christian ratio.

Lebanon is the most multi-sectarian state in the region.

Although ethnolinguistically, about 92 percent of the Lebanese are Arabs in that their mother tongue is Arabic, religious affiliation is the single most vital identity among the Lebanese.

There are no official figures but it's estimated that about 70% of the population is Muslim and about 30% is Christian. The majority of Lebanon's Muslims are Shi'ite, although there are also significant numbers of Sunni. Druze (a religious offshoot of Islam) constitute 8% of the population.

The largest Christian group is the Maronite sect, followed by the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholic, the Armenian Orthodox, the Armenian Catholic, the Syrian Catholic, the Chaldean, the Protestant, and the Syrian Orthodox churches. There is also a handful of Roman Catholics, Baha'is, and Jews.

Set up after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, Lebanon had a fatal flaw in its national make-up. Power and control rested with the Christian part of the population while the Muslims (almost half of the population at the time) felt they were excluded from real government. Add large numbers of displaced and restive Palestinians and you had a recipe for conflict.

Under a National Covenant agreed in 1943, the president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the deputy prime minister a Greek Orthodox, the speaker of parliament a Shi'ite Muslim, and the armed forces chief of staff a Druze. Emile Lahoud, current president, Rafik Hariri, prime minister.

Due to inter-confessional tensions augmented by regional stresses, Lebanon flamed into externally fueled civil warfare in 1975. It sank into anarchy to become for sixteen years the area's most devastated and endangered country.

Once called the Switzerland of the Middle East, Lebanon's economy was virtually destroyed by the civil war and repeated Israeli and Syrian interventions.

Not until late in 1990 did the mutually destructive killings finally cease under determined pressure from other Arab League states.

Israel finally withdrew from Southern Lebanon in May 2000.

Despite periodic setbacks, Lebanon is making steady progress along the road to recovery.

Syria, with 30,000 troops stationed in Lebanon, remains the dominant factor in the Syrian workers are employed in Lebanon, most of them in low-level jobs.

## **YEMEN: HOME OF THE QUEEN OF SHEBA**

The Republic of Yemen occupies the extreme southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula.

Yemen is the most populous country in the Arabian Peninsula, with a population of about 16-18 million. Ample rainfall in the mountains allows extensive use of terracing for agriculture. The main crops are coffee, cereals, vegetables, and *qat* (a shrub whose leaves are chewed as a mildly intoxicating narcotic). In the highlands, the most commonly seen dwellings are multistory tower houses, lined up one next to the other, standing guard over the valleys and ravines below.

Yemen is also one of the poorest nations in the world. The country has a few petroleum reserves, but nothing to match those of its neighbors. Two problems combine to challenge Yemen's development efforts: an alarming population growth rate with an increasingly serious shortage of water.

Unlike other countries of the peninsula, Yemen is still very much a tribal society. Two powerful federations remain in the northern part of Yemen today: the Hashids and Bakils of the mountains. No cabinet can be formed in Yemen today without balancing tribal representation. Sheikh Abdullah Ibn Hussein Al Ahmar, Speaker of the Yemeni parliament, is a leader of the religious political party, *Islah*, and the Hashid tribal confederation.

Historically, the most important rulers of Yemen were the Zaydis of Sa'da, which were a dynasty founded in 897 by a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. The Zaydi imams ruled well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (over a 1,000 years), ending with the revolution of 1962. Most southerners are Sunnis of the Shafi'i legal school.

Yemen is the only parliamentary democracy on the Arabian Peninsula; and in recent elections almost 40 parties competed for 301 parliamentary seats. The People's General Congress is the largest party, with *Islah*, a religious party, running a distant second. The president, Ali Abdullah Saleh elected in 1999 in Yemen's first direct presidential election has ruled since 1978.

Unification of North Yemen, more a tribal confederation than a republic in the modern sense, and South Yemen, the Middle East's only communist state, took place in 1990.

Three months after unification, Yemen made the costly decision not to condemn Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Many donors canceled financial support and Saudi Arabia expelled nearly one million Yemeni guest workers. The expellees returned to Yemen only to face 40 percent unemployment in a difficult economic environment.

In the heightened friction, the south initiated hostilities to withdraw from the four-year-old union. Civil war returned to Yemen between May and July 1994. The secessionists were

defeated. The unified republic was restored; and the government has attempted to emerge from the pariah status it was in after 1990.

Yemen's association with terrorism was emphasized by the bombing of the US Navy destroyer, Cole, in October 2000, while it was in Aden harbor for refueling. Seventeen American naval personnel were killed in the attack, which was carried out by men in a small boat filled with explosives.

The attack was unexpected, given the extent of the Yemeni government's cooperation with the United States. American warships had been given permission to use Aden as a port of call, American specialists had arrived to train Yemenis in removal of land mines from the interior, and Peace Corps volunteers were providing English-language and agricultural training in villages throughout the country.

The Cole attackers were believed to be part of Osama bin Laden's terrorist network; and American FBI agents were initially invited to take part in the investigation. However, as the search proceeded, Yemeni authorities imposed severe restriction on these agents.

Their access to senior military and religious leaders was prohibited; and subsequently they withdrew from the country.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, the Yemeni government declared its willingness to join the international antiterror coalition.

We started out with a story emphasizing the tension between the old and the new. With each passing decade, the Middle East continues to fashion and refashion itself. And the fate of much of the world, including that of the developed countries, is inextricably bound up with developments in the Middle East.

Turbulent politics, alarming leaders, terrifying extremist organizations, unflattering media profiles distract us from the rich history, exciting places, and real human beings whose lives are at stake behind the headlines.

The Middle Eastern and North African states are the products of Western colonialism or neocolonialism. Their present borders are largely the product of previous colonial divisions. Because the borders often have little relation to tribal and family boundaries, there is an inherent instability build into the present system.

The geographic position of the Middle has dictated that it will always play a pivotal role in world history.

