NOVEMBER
MILITANCY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BACKGROUND

In November WAC learned about the Middle East and its militant past. Known for this reason as the Cradle of Civilization, the Middle East\(^1\) was one of the earliest birthplaces of civilization. It saw the rise and fall of numerous kingdoms and empire: the Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians and Romans—yet not one could quite pacify the numerous religious\(^2\) and ethnic cultures of the region for too long until the arrival of Islam\(^3\).

From the seventh century to the present, Islam has been the uniting factor in the region that allowed for the region to be more or less together at times, most prominently under the Ottoman Turks\(^4\) from the 16\(^{th}\) century until 1919. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, two powers began a quick rise as new geopolitical powers—Saudi Arabia and Iran, who would come to compete through region-destabilizing proxywars\(^5\).

Foreign intervention in the region has also had its negative effect on regional stability—from the 1979 Soviet incursion into Afghanistan to the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. In more
recent times, we’ve seen fragmentation in the region along sectarian lines as we’ve never seen before, spurred on by the rivalry between the Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’ite Iran. In 2011, almost the entirety of the Middle East became engulfed in violence following the Arab Spring as millions of Arabs across the region agitated for the removal of dictatorships such as in Egypt, Libya and Syria.

While in some nations the uprising was relatively short, today we still see the continuation of civil war in three states primarily: Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In Syria particularly, the conflict is very multifaceted as numerous rebel groups, all with different backers and aims, fight Assad’s regime. The political climate of the region has allowed for otherwise small and isolated conflicts to have disastrous spillover effects. Instability in countries has led to the rise of factionalist militias like the Kurds, but also extremist military organizations. Historically we’ve seen the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIS in Syria; all of which have carried spillover effects across the region and the world. While countries in the region had been more or less stable under the dictatorships of those like Hussein, Mubarak, Gaddafi and Assad, the underlying tensions that have come out after their fall still continues years after their fall.

Despite recent setbacks, ISIS remains a player in the region, this coupled with the funding of rebels by powerful factions, we see the prevention of the Iraqi and Syrian governments from being able to reconsolidate central power. Already we are seeing again the very fragile geopolitical system in the Middle East being fueled into violence by the two factions who seek to control the region.
1 The Middle East is a region in west Asia, most commonly referring to the area from Turkey to Iran and Armenia to Yemen. Also included sometimes is northern Africa, usually Egypt and Libya.

2 The religious setting of the Middle East prior to Islam was extremely diverse, ranging from remnants of Greo-Roman paganism to Zoroastrianism to Christianity to Judaism.

3 Islam is an Abrahamic religion founded in the Arabian peninsula in the early seventh century which spread quickly throughout the Middle East in the following century.

4 The Ottoman Turks were a Turkic clan that managed to conquer the Byzantine Empire in the early 15th century and went on to dominate the Middle East and the Balkans until the 20th century.

5 A proxy war is a conflict which is fought by actors that are being supported by third parties in order to advance their interests against the other without declaring war. Many examples of proxy wars between the United States and USSR can be found in the Cold War era.

6 Islam is divided into two major branches; the Shia and the Sunni. While historically the animosity has not been as severe between the two, recently there has been a surge in sectarian violence and the region is mainly divided into camps based on the religious affiliations of each faction’s leadership (i.e. the Alawite Shi’ite Assad is in the Iranian camp; Sunni rebel groups are in the Saudi camp)

7 The Arab Spring is a term used to describe the wave of demonstrations that erupted around the Middle Eastern world in 2011. The movement was characterized by calls for democratization and expansions of civil and political rights. With the exception of Tunisia, the Arab Spring did not manage to catalyze change to democracy in the Middle East.

8 The Syrian Civil War, begun in 2011, is an ongoing armed civil conflict in Syria between a number of factions with different aims. The main participants are the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russia and Iran; other big actors being the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State and the Kurdish militia, Rojava.

9 The Kurds are a stateless people living in the central Middle East. They have historically been oppressed by the Turks, Syrians, Iraqis and Iranians; Kurdish militias fighting against the Syrian and Iraqi governments have requested that they be given more autonomy and some even demand independence, a position to which Turkey is vehemently opposed.

10 ISIS, or ISIL—acronym standing for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—is an offshoot organization of al-Qaeda. This organization rose to the international stage after managing to carve out a sizable self-proclaimed caliphate out of the war-torn countries of Iraq and Syria. ISIS has recently been losing ground, most notably in their loss of Mosul.
LET’S THINK ABOUT IT

Your SWAC leader will prompt you with questions revolving around the same idea: how important is it to the United States that stability be maintained in the Middle East and what can be done about it? Express your thoughts and contribute to discussion with your fellow peers!

MY THOUGHTS ON THE MIDDLE EAST

(room to write your thoughts)

This lesson plan is meant as an aid for the Faculty Sponsor, President or Vice-President to lead their respective SWAC chapter in the discussion of this two weeks’ focus: Militancy in the Middle East.

Kahoot! Introductory Quiz

Kahoot! is an online Quiz platform. This small ten-question quiz is to test the student’s prior knowledge of the Middle East and introduce them to the discussion to come. The quiz will require the proctor to have a Kahoot account in order to start. Students will use an electronic device in order to answer. The link is below; click START NOW and select Classic mode. After the Game PIN is generated, students will be able to join the session by accessing kahoot.it on
their computer or mobile device. Begin the quiz once all students have joined! This activity shouldn’t take more than 15 minutes. LINK: https://goo.gl/ckn5RQ

Lesson Handout

Now is when the handouts should be passed out to students. It is split into two sections, one which covers the history of the Middle East and a second which covers the current geopolitical and military situation. It is recommended that the handout be read aloud as a group instead of individually. Take some time after the document has been read to cover the material with the students and make sure that it’s generally understood. Ask questions to students; get them to summarize what they’ve read and make sure that the students are engaged and understanding. The reading shouldn’t take more than 15 minutes.

Video Resources

We have three video resources below that will go over in more detail the current event portion of the handout and expand upon it. Following each link we’ve included a description of the video and possible questions that you can ask students to see what they’ve taken away from watching the clips. Each video clip is between 6 and 10 minutes; coupled with questions, this segment shouldn’t take more than 20 minutes.

THE MIDDLE EAST’S COLD WAR, EXPLAINED
LINK: https://goo.gl/94K6q3

This links to a video by Vox which covers the tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran going back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, covering their rise, the beginnings of their rivalry, and their current state.

Because the Middle East is already a region split between two compe
ting powers, is there a place for the United States to be meddling in their affairs? Should the United States join one of the two camps? Why?

SYRIA’S WAR: WHO IS FIGHTING AND WHY

LINK: https://goo.gl/o5RcCZ

Syria’s Civil War is covered in this video, also by Vox, who go back to the Arab Spring to talk about the beginnings of the war and its progression through the years until April 2017.

›Which of the actors in the Syrian Civil War are friends of the United States? Enemies? Why?
›How does the multifacetedness of the civil war affected how effective lending aid can be?

DISCUSSION

How important the stability of the Middle East to the United States and what can be done about the current situation to alleviate it? Should the United States simply refrain from meddling in the Middle East anymore or does the vacuum left after the Iraq War necessitate the United States to intervene again? Can Saudi Arabia and Iran resolve their differences? How? How can the Syrian Civil War come to a beneficial resolution? This shouldn’t take more than 15 minutes – total estimated meeting time: no more than 1 hour

BIBLIOGRAPHY


