

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

The Middle East

in a Hurry

Oil, faith, and the world's fault line

Max Brocklesby

BOOKSINAHURRY.COM

Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 5

The Core Ideas 7

How It Actually Works 20

What People Get Wrong 30

Use It 35

Terms 40

Go Deeper 44

Notes and Sources 45

Bibliography 51

The Whole Thing in One Page

The Middle East usually reaches the outside world as three explanations looking for an event: religion, oil and conflict. All three matter. None is old enough, broad enough or stable enough to explain the region by itself.

Begin with the map. There is no uncontested natural border around the Middle East. The name was popularised around 1900 by strategists looking from Europe towards the Persian Gulf and the approaches to India. Egypt moves in and out of definitions. Turkey and Iran are usually inside the Middle East but outside the Arab world. North Africa appears when the category becomes MENA. The region is therefore best treated as a set of connected zones, not a continent with an obvious edge.

Its deepest connections are physical. The Nile, Tigris and Euphrates concentrated settlement in dry country. Mountains and steppe complicated central rule. The Mediterranean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf carried armies, pilgrims and merchants. Suez, Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab later turned local coastlines into infrastructure for global trade. Water explains where large populations can live; routes explain why powers far away keep caring what happens there.

Faith laid another map across the ground. Judaism, Christianity and Islam began here and created communities, institutions, law, learning and pilgrimage networks that crossed whatever frontier happened to exist. For most of recorded history, empires governed these overlapping populations through layered authority. They expected loyalty and revenue more than cultural sameness.

The nation-state asked for a sharper answer. Ottoman collapse, European mandates, wars, local resistance and bargaining produced the modern territorial map. New governments built armies, schools, bureaucracies and passports faster than agreement formed over who fully belonged. Kurds remained divided among several states. Arab nationalism competed with state patriotism. Zionism and Palestinian nationalism claimed the same land. Citizenship, sect, class and dynasty became different ways of deciding

access to power.

Oil then changed the arithmetic. Exporters could receive huge external revenues without taxing citizens heavily. Some used the money to build welfare states, public sectors, armies and sovereign wealth funds. Gulf development also depended on migrant labour on an extraordinary scale, creating societies in which citizenship and work were distributed on different terms. Neighbours without large reserves were still drawn into the system through remittances, aid, investment and energy prices.

What makes the subtitle's fault line useful is not the idea of ancient hatred. It is transmission. A local dispute can acquire a sacred site, a displaced population, a regional patron, a television audience, an American base, an Iranian supply line or a shipping chokepoint. The conflict then travels without ceasing to be local. The same networks can carry trade, mediation and restraint.

The Middle East is therefore neither a timeless civilisation nor a permanent war zone. It is a crossroads whose layers do not line up neatly: water, faith, empire, nation, citizenship, oil and external power overlap without becoming one map. Understand where those layers match, and where they do not, and the region becomes far more legible.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

In early 2026 the Strait of Hormuz stopped being a line on a map and became a price mechanism. War involving Iran sharply restricted shipping through a channel that had carried about 20 million barrels of oil a day in 2024. Gulf producers shut in output, tanker risk rose and gas markets far beyond the region reacted. A narrow waterway connected a military decision to refineries, freight costs and household budgets thousands of miles away.

That is the obvious reason to understand the Middle East. The better reason is that it trains you to distinguish several kinds of power that are easy to confuse.

A political map shows states. A national map shows Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds, Jews and other peoples whose histories do not stop at borders. A religious map divides again, then divides inside every category. An economic map joins oil exporters to labour exporters, remittances to households and ports to inland cities. A security map runs through alliances, bases, armed movements and external patrons. The same place can occupy all of these maps at once.

The region also contains sacred centres that organise living institutions, not museum memories. Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina, Najaf and Karbala move people, money and political feeling now. Yet most life takes place elsewhere: in schools, construction sites, call centres, family businesses, hospitals, football grounds and traffic. Cairo's media, Istanbul's factories, Tehran's universities, Gulf logistics hubs and Levantine service economies belong to the story as much as battlefields do. A book that shows only war reproduces one of the region's central distortions.

Water makes the ordinary political. Across the wider MENA region, average annual water availability was about 480 cubic metres per person in 2023, less than one tenth of the global average. Wealthy coastal states can desalinate seawater on a massive scale. Poorer states cannot buy their way around failing pipes, depleted aquifers or damaged power systems so easily. A bread subsidy, a dam or an electricity tariff can therefore matter more to regime stability than a speech about ideology.

Oil creates another lesson. Resource wealth can make a state rich without making every resident equally secure. In several Gulf countries migrant workers form most of the labour force while citizenship remains tightly restricted. Elsewhere, governments without large hydrocarbon revenues built public sectors and subsidies they struggled to finance. The political question is therefore less "who has oil?" than "who receives revenue, who pays, who works and who is entitled to the state?"

The region also warns against both fatalism and conspiracy. Foreign powers have repeatedly invaded, partitioned, armed clients and protected allies. Local rulers and movements have also pursued their own projects, exploited

outside patrons and made catastrophic choices. Remove either level and the history becomes propaganda.

There is a final reason to care: the region is a laboratory of state-building under pressure. Monarchies and republics, resource-rich and resource-poor states, old capitals and new cities sit close enough to compare. Some governments deliver security and infrastructure while restricting political competition. Others hold elections while basic services decay. The contrasts expose a question that travels well beyond the region: what makes people accept a state as theirs when identity, revenue and power do not line up neatly?

Once those distinctions are visible, the headlines change shape. Instead of asking which ancient feud caused an event, you can ask which institution failed, which identity has been activated, who funds the state, where labour comes from, which patron has entered and which route can transmit the shock. The Middle East does not become simple. It becomes understandable enough to think about rather than merely react to.

The Core Ideas

1. A Crossroads Before It Was a Region

There is no continental plate called the Middle East and no ancient society that used one name for the whole area. The modern label entered strategic writing around 1900, when British officers and American naval thinkers were looking towards Persia, the Gulf and the approaches to India. General T. E. Gordon used the phrase in 1900; Alfred Thayer Mahan helped popularise it in 1902. The compass contained a viewpoint: east of Europe, but not as far east as China.

The boundaries have moved with the problem being discussed. Early uses could centre on Persia and Afghanistan. British wartime administration later widened the theatre towards Egypt and the Levant. American policy grouped Turkey, Israel, Arab states and Iran inside a shared security problem. MENA adds North Africa. West Asia avoids the European

compass but often leaves Egypt out. The Arab world stretches from Morocco to Oman and excludes Turkey, Iran and Israel. A statistic for "the region" is therefore partly a decision about what region the analyst has chosen.

This book uses a practical core from Egypt through the Levant and Iraq to Iran, and from Turkey through the Arabian Peninsula. Israel and the Palestinian territories are inside it. North Africa beyond Egypt appears when Arab politics or MENA data make it necessary. Afghanistan and Pakistan remain outside. The border is declared rather than disguised as nature.

That does not make the category meaningless. Long before anyone called the area the Middle East, it was crossed by systems larger than states. Grain moved along the Nile. Caravans joined Arabia, Syria and Mesopotamia. Pilgrims converged on Jerusalem, Mecca and later Najaf and Karbala. Merchants crossed the eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Empires joined Egypt to Syria, Anatolia to Iraq and Iran to Mesopotamia in changing combinations. Arabic scholarship, Persian court culture, Ottoman administration and later broadcasting created publics that ignored many political frontiers.

Cities often mattered more than abstract regions. Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Istanbul, Jerusalem, Beirut, Isfahan, Basra, Jeddah and later the Gulf ports each connected hinterlands to wider worlds. A merchant could belong to a neighbourhood, a religious community, an empire and a trading network without needing those identities to match. Modern nationalism hardened some boundaries, but migration, media and business kept crossing them.

The right question is therefore not "where exactly does the Middle East end?" It is "what connection is doing the explanatory work?" Sometimes the answer is language. Sometimes it is an imperial inheritance, a river basin, a labour market, an oil route, a sacred geography or a military alliance.

That distinction protects against the two easiest errors. One is to treat the Middle East as a single culture. The other is to dismiss the term as a

western fiction and miss the real systems that now connect the area. The label began from outside, but institutions inside and outside the region have spent more than a century making some of its connections politically real.

2. Follow the Water, Then the Roads

The standard image is sand. The working geography is water separated by dry land.

The Nile made Egypt a long, narrow concentration of people and cultivation. The Tigris and Euphrates made Mesopotamia productive through irrigation, while also demanding labour, maintenance and political coordination. The Jordan River and its aquifers support a much smaller basin whose water is claimed by several states and populations. Rain falls heavily on some mountains and scarcely at all a short distance away. Snow in the Taurus and Zagros ranges feeds rivers on which downstream farms and cities depend. A dam built in one country can become a foreign-policy instrument in another.

This pattern helped produce the earliest cities, but geography did not write one political script. Irrigation could strengthen a central authority, a local landlord, a village association or whoever controlled the canal gate. River valleys encouraged dense government; mountains and steppe gave mobile communities and local rulers room to bargain. The Lebanon range, the Zagros and the highlands of Yemen sheltered communities from easy conquest while keeping them close enough to trade and fight with the lowlands. Desert routes rewarded people who could move animals, goods and information between settled zones.

The seas mattered as roads. The eastern Mediterranean connected Egypt and the Levant to Anatolia, Greece and Italy. The Red Sea tied Arabian ports to east Africa and the Indian Ocean. The Persian Gulf linked Mesopotamia and Iran to India long before oil tankers appeared. Three narrow passages now carry an extraordinary share of global exchange: the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab. Their importance is physical. Ships cannot persuade a continent to move aside.

Water scarcity is the region's quiet organising pressure. In 2023, average annual water availability across the wider MENA area was about 480 cubic metres for each person, below one tenth of the global average. The number hides large differences, but the direction is plain. Aquifers are pumped faster than they recharge. Rivers arrive polluted or diminished. Networks leak. Farmers consume most withdrawals in many countries because food, livelihoods and political bargains were built around irrigated agriculture.

Wealth changes the options. Gulf states have built desalination plants on a scale unmatched elsewhere, and MENA holds more than half of global desalination capacity. That allows coastal cities to grow beyond their natural freshwater base. It does not abolish scarcity. Desalination needs energy, finance, secure coastlines and distribution networks. It creates concentrated brine and leaves inland communities harder to supply. A wealthy city can manufacture drinking water while remaining dependent on imported food grown with someone else's rain. That trade is sometimes called virtual water: grain, meat and fruit carry the water used to produce them. Food security and water security can therefore move in opposite directions, with local aquifers protected by deeper reliance on foreign farms, ports and shipping insurance.

Follow water before blaming culture. A protest over electricity may begin with a failing dam. A dispute over land may conceal a fight over wells. A state may subsidise bread because the alternative is exposing its dependence on imported grain. Climate change adds heat and variability, but bad outcomes still pass through institutions: pricing, maintenance, treaties, farming policy and the ability to protect poorer households. Geography sets the pressure. Politics decides who bears it.

3. Faith Built Networks Larger Than States

Judaism, Christianity and Islam began in this region, and each made geography portable. A covenant, a church or a community of believers could survive conquest and migration because membership travelled with people. Sacred centres remained fixed while the faithful spread. The result was a map of authority that crossed every later border.

Judaism developed through kingdom, exile, return and diaspora. Jerusalem remained central even when most Jews lived elsewhere. Christianity began as a Jewish movement in Roman Palestine, spread through cities and imperial roads, and acquired major centres in Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. Long before Europe became predominantly Christian, Arabic, Syriac, Greek, Armenian and Coptic Christians were building theology, monasteries and institutions across the Middle East.

Islam added a political and linguistic network of exceptional range. Muhammad's community in western Arabia joined belief, law and government. The conquests after his death carried Arab armies and a new ruling order from Egypt to Iran within decades. Conversion was slower than conquest. For centuries, Muslim rulers governed populations in which Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others remained numerous. Arabic spread as a language of government, scholarship and commerce, while Persian and Turkish cultures reshaped the empires that used it.

The umma, the community of Muslims, did not erase politics. Disagreement over leadership after Muhammad's death contributed to the division later known as Sunni and Shia. That division matters, but it never produced two permanent geopolitical camps. Sunni rulers have fought Sunni rivals; Shia movements have disagreed over doctrine and authority; states have allied across sectarian lines when strategy required it. Iran maintained closer relations with Christian Armenia than with mainly Shia Azerbaijan for long periods because borders, security and rival powers mattered more than a religious diagram.

Religious institutions performed practical work. Mosques, churches, synagogues, seminaries and pious endowments supported education, charity, courts and neighbourhood life. Pilgrimage moved people, money and news. Scholars formed chains of authority across cities. Family law and communal leadership gave religious identity an administrative shape. Modern states inherited these structures, regulated them and sometimes turned them into ministries, official hierarchies or electoral quotas. Control over sermons, seminaries, personal-status courts and charitable funds

became a way for governments to manage public life. Opposition movements used the same institutions when parties and unions were closed, which helps explain why religion often became politically organised where other association was restricted.

Coexistence was real and unequal. Empires often allowed communities to govern parts of their own affairs, but equal citizenship was not the premise. Non-Muslims could receive protection while paying distinct taxes and facing restrictions. Local peace could coexist with hierarchy, periodic violence and forced migration. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries then brought new nationalisms, European intervention, centralising states and population exchanges that hardened categories once managed more flexibly.

This is why religion can become politically explosive without being a hidden command inside scripture. A sectarian label can identify a neighbourhood, school network, memory of persecution, access to state jobs, militia protection and foreign patron all at once. Under calm conditions, those layers may sit quietly. Under threat, leaders can bind them together and claim that survival is at stake. Faith supplies a durable community and a moral language. Institutions, wars and political entrepreneurs decide when that community becomes a front line.

4. Empire Was the Normal Political Form

For most of recorded history, the region was ruled by empires. The nation-state is the newcomer.

The reason is visible on the map. Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran and the Levant form wealthy zones connected by corridors and separated by deserts, mountains and seas. A power strong enough to hold one corridor usually tried to take the next. Assyrians, Babylonians, Achaemenid Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Sasanians, Arab caliphates, Seljuks, Mongols, Mamluks, Ottomans and Safavids all governed mixed populations across large distances. Their frontiers shifted, but the political unit was commonly larger than a single language or nation.

Empire did not mean uniform control. A ruler needed taxes, soldiers, roads

and obedience, not identical citizens. The Achaemenids used satraps and royal routes. Roman and Byzantine authorities worked through cities, landowners and churches. Caliphates appointed governors while tolerating local legal and fiscal practice. Ottoman sultans governed provinces through officials, judges, tax farmers, tribal leaders, religious authorities and urban guilds. The centre could be formidable without being present in every village. Distance was managed through delegated power and scheduled movement: tax caravans, court circuits, military campaigns, postal routes and the annual pilgrimage. An empire's strength lay as much in keeping intermediaries useful as in replacing them.

That arrangement made diversity governable by layering authority. A person might belong to a village, tribe, guild, religious community and imperial province without being asked to choose one identity as sovereign. The system was unequal and often coercive. Rebellion could bring massacre, deportation or collective punishment. Tax burdens varied. Enslavement and forced recruitment were part of imperial life. Yet the empire's practical question was how to extract and arbitrate among differences, not how to make every subject culturally the same.

The Ottoman and Safavid empires gave the early modern region a durable political structure. Ottoman rule after 1516 joined Egypt, Syria, Iraq and much of Arabia to an imperial centre in Istanbul. Safavid Iran established Twelver Shia Islam as a state identity and created a powerful eastern rival. Their wars helped sharpen a frontier between Ottoman Iraq and Iran, but commerce, pilgrimage and tribal movement continued across it. The line divided empires more clearly than it divided societies.

Imperial government began to change under military and financial pressure. European powers gained commercial privileges, seized territory and lent money. Ottoman reformers built ministries, censuses, conscription systems, schools and telegraphs. These measures strengthened central government and made subjects more legible, but they also raised the stakes of identity. A state that counts, recruits and educates people must decide which language, law and history it will use. Equal citizenship was promised while

nationalism was teaching groups to ask who owned the state.

The end of empire therefore did not reveal a natural map waiting underneath. It removed the structure that had kept several maps in suspension. New states inherited Ottoman provinces, European agreements, military occupations, local administrations and communities whose institutions crossed the proposed borders. They also inherited the expectation that government should reach deeper into daily life than the old empire often had.

Empire is not a lost solution to praise. It managed pluralism through hierarchy and could turn brutally against groups it no longer trusted, as the Armenian genocide during the First World War showed at its extreme. Its importance is explanatory. Modern conflict did not emerge because diverse peoples suddenly discovered one another. It emerged partly because a new political form demanded a sharper answer to a question empire could leave blurred: who is the people entitled to rule this territory?

5. The State Map Hardened Faster Than Belonging

The modern map is often reduced to a scene in which two Europeans draw arbitrary borders with a ruler. The image survives because foreign partition mattered and because the simpler story is easy to remember. It also gives Sykes and Picot more power than they possessed.

Britain and France did plan to divide Ottoman Arab lands. Their secret agreement of 1916 sketched spheres of control while the First World War was still being fought. Britain encouraged an Arab revolt, issued the Balfour Declaration in support of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, and made commitments whose meanings did not fit neatly together. At San Remo in 1920, the victors allocated mandates over former Ottoman territories without obtaining democratic consent from the populations being governed.

Yet the final states were produced by far more than one agreement. Turkish national resistance overturned the partition planned for Anatolia. French armies imposed control in Syria. Britain installed Hashemite monarchies and

separated Transjordan from the Palestine administration. Lebanon was enlarged. Ibn Saud conquered much of the Arabian Peninsula. Kurdish claims lost out to the territorial settlements of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Local revolts, tribal bargains, dynastic ambitions and later treaties altered borders and the authority inside them.

The new map became durable because states create habits. Schools teach a national curriculum. Armies conscript. Bureaucracies issue identity documents. Football teams, currencies, postal systems and public-sector jobs make a frontier part of ordinary life. "Artificial" is therefore a poor synonym for "unreal". Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria acquired institutions, interests and generations of citizens whose lives were organised by the state even when its origins were colonial.

The harder question was membership. The Kurds were divided among several states and repeatedly confronted governments that treated cross-border national organisation as a security threat. Arab nationalism imagined a wider Arab nation while individual governments defended their own sovereignty. Turkey built a Turkish republic from an imperial remnant containing minorities with different claims. Iran combined an older territorial state with Persian cultural dominance, religious institutions and, after 1979, a revolutionary Islamic project.

Israel and Palestine became the sharpest collision. Zionism sought Jewish self-determination in a land of ancient Jewish attachment and growing Jewish settlement where an Arab Palestinian majority already lived. European antisemitism, the Holocaust, British rule, Arab opposition and competing national movements drove the conflict towards civil and interstate war. Israel declared independence in 1948 and survived. More than 700,000 Palestinians were displaced or expelled in what Palestinians call the Nakba. Jewish communities across Arab countries then shrank rapidly through a mixture of migration to Israel, Zionist mobilisation, state pressure, expulsion, discrimination, violence and fear. The 1967 war placed the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza under Israeli military occupation, though later administration differed between the territories. Sovereignty, settlements,

refugees, security, borders and political rights remain unresolved.

Citizenship added another boundary inside the state. Monarchies, republics and settler states defined who could vote, own property, receive welfare, serve in the military or transmit nationality. Lebanon institutionalised communal representation. Gulf monarchies maintained unusually restrictive routes to citizenship while importing labour at scale. Palestinian refugees in several host countries lived for generations with political and legal statuses different from those of citizens around them.

The central fact is not that the borders are about to disappear. Most have proved remarkably durable. It is that territorial states hardened faster than agreement over nationhood, citizenship and equal membership.

Governments have spent a century managing that mismatch through accommodation, welfare, education, patronage and coercion. Many of the region's political disputes are arguments about the state from inside its apparently settled lines.

6. Oil Rewrote the Political Bargain

Oil did not create the Middle East, and most people in the region do not live in a major oil-exporting state. It still changed the political economy of nearly every country.

Commercial production began in Iran after the 1908 discovery at Masjed Soleiman. Concessions gave foreign companies control on terms that later became symbols of humiliation. Oil followed in Iraq and the Gulf. Bahrain found it in 1932, Saudi Arabia in 1938, and postwar demand turned thinly populated monarchies into strategic suppliers. The infrastructure was compact: wells, pipelines, terminals, refineries and tanker routes. A government could receive enormous revenue from a narrow sector without transforming the productivity of the whole society.

That altered the bargain between ruler and ruled. A state usually needs to tax households and firms, which gives both sides a reason to bargain over representation, spending and competence. An oil exporter can fund government from external rent. It may provide public jobs, subsidised fuel,

housing, education, health care and grants while taxing citizens lightly. In return, citizens may receive security and material benefits rather than a strong claim to control the budget. This is the rentier-state model, and it explains an incentive, not a law. Oil exporters vary widely in institutions, population, history and political participation.

The distributional question begins with who counts as a citizen. Gulf states had small citizen populations and huge construction and service needs. They imported labour first from nearby Arab countries and increasingly from South and South-East Asia. Migrants now make up between roughly three quarters and 95 per cent of the workforce in GCC states, depending on the country. They built roads, towers, ports and homes, often under sponsorship rules that tied legal status to an employer. The wealth of the citizen welfare state and the insecurity of the migrant labour system grew together.

Oil also connected exporters to neighbours without large reserves. Workers sent remittances to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and beyond. Gulf funds financed businesses, media, charities, political movements and governments. Oil-importing states received aid or credit, but also paid more when prices rose. Regimes that lacked petroleum sometimes copied the distributive state through public employment and food subsidies without possessing the revenue to sustain it.

Producer power increased after exporting states renegotiated concessions and created OPEC in Baghdad in 1960. The 1973 embargo made clear that energy could carry political leverage, though market forces and producer interests soon complicated the weapon. The resulting revenues built modern infrastructure and sovereign wealth funds, armed states and financed ambitious foreign policies. They also exposed budgets to price cycles and encouraged rulers to delay taxation and private-sector reform. Because oil is priced in a global market and commonly in dollars, decisions in producer capitals became tied to exchange rates, Asian demand, American monetary policy and wars far from the wellhead. Sovereignty over the resource did not mean independence from the system selling it.

The picture is changing. Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar and others are

investing in logistics, tourism, finance, manufacturing and technology. Non-oil activity has grown, citizens pay more fees and taxes than the old stereotype allows, and governments compete for capital and talent. Yet the hydrocarbon base remains visible beneath the new economy. During 2024, Hormuz carried an average of about 20 million barrels of oil each day, close to one fifth of global petroleum consumption. Much of it went to Asia, which is now the main customer for Gulf energy.

Oil's deepest effect was not universal wealth. It concentrated fiscal power, reordered labour, invited external protection and gave some governments the means to shape politics far beyond their population size. It made the regional map financially unequal and tightly connected at once.

7. Fault Lines Move Through Networks

A geological fault is dangerous because pressure can travel along it. The political fault lines of the Middle East are less fixed. They become dangerous when institutions, patrons and routes connect one struggle to another.

Start with a conflict that is local enough to have local causes: a protest movement, a succession crisis, a war over territory, a militia challenging the state. The actors rarely leave it local. Governments describe opponents as terrorists, foreign agents or threats to a religious community. Opposition movements seek audiences and money abroad. A regional power supplies weapons, intelligence or finance. A rival backs the other side. Television networks, diaspora communities and social media give the dispute a public beyond the border. Refugees move. Insurance prices move. The original grievance remains, but its consequences acquire additional layers.

The twentieth century built dense machinery for this transmission. British and French rule linked borders to imperial security routes. The Cold War brought American and Soviet weapons, aid and bases. Arab nationalist governments competed to lead a public larger than their own citizenries. The Palestinian question became regional because refugees, host states, armies and mass politics made it impossible to contain within the territory of

mandate Palestine.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 created another cross-border project. The Islamic Republic challenged American power and conservative monarchies and cultivated armed and political partners outside Iran. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states developed their own financial, religious and security networks. Turkey, Israel, Qatar and the Emirates later built different networks of trade, media, military access and political sponsorship. None maps neatly onto Sunni versus Shia.

This is why the word proxy can mislead. A militia or party can be locally rooted and externally supplied at the same time. Patrons provide capabilities, money and strategic depth; clients bring constituencies, grievances and their own leadership. They can disobey sponsors or pull them towards escalation. The relationship must be measured rather than assumed.

External powers are another layer, not a master switch. Britain and France reshaped the region after the First World War. The United States later became the dominant outside military power, protecting Gulf partners and Israel while fighting wars, deterring rivals and keeping bases across the region. Russia intervened decisively in Syria. China has become a major trade partner and occasional diplomatic broker without reproducing the same military footprint. Local actors use these powers as well as being used by them.

The same connections can restrain conflict. Trade gives rulers something to lose. Mediators such as Oman and Qatar maintain channels that enemies lack. The 2023 restoration of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations showed that rivalry can be managed without friendship. Gulf diversification plans require predictable investment and transport. Even hostile states often preserve informal red lines because direct war is expensive.

Recent events exposed both sides of the network. The Gaza war after October 2023 spread confrontation into Lebanon and the Red Sea and intensified direct Israel-Iran exchanges. In 2026, war involving Iran and the

effective closure of Hormuz restricted a route central to world oil and gas flows. The significance was not that petroleum had caused every political dispute. It was that a military conflict could travel through shipping, production and prices almost immediately.

Core Idea 1 began with a region defined by connections. This final idea explains why the label now has more reality than its invented boundary suggests. Military commands, markets, pilgrimage, media, migration, finance and alliances repeatedly join events across the area. The fault line is not one eternal crack. It is a network of connections that can transmit pressure, and politics determines which connections are activated.

How It Actually Works

Rivers, cities and the first corridor

Around 4000 BCE, settlements in southern Mesopotamia began turning into cities on a scale the world had not seen. Uruk had temples, workshops, officials and a demand for grain that reached into the irrigated countryside. Writing emerged partly because institutions needed to count rations, labour and goods. In Egypt, political unification gathered the Nile valley under pharaohs whose authority travelled along the river. The Middle East's first large states were built where water made people dense enough to tax and organise.

No empire held the whole region for long. Egypt looked south and east; Mesopotamian powers pushed along the rivers; Anatolian kingdoms controlled highland routes; Levantine ports faced the Mediterranean. The land between larger powers became a corridor and a battleground. Timber, metals, horses, grain and luxury goods moved through it. So did alphabets, gods, diplomatic habits and techniques of government.

Assyria turned communication and terror into an imperial method in the first millennium BCE. Babylon inherited much of its territory. The Achaemenid Persians then assembled an empire from Egypt to Central Asia and the Indus, ruling through provincial governors, roads and a court able to absorb

local elites. Alexander's conquest broke the dynasty in the 330s BCE, but Greek-speaking kingdoms inherited the routes. Rome took the eastern Mediterranean, while Iranian empires held Mesopotamia and the plateau. For centuries, Roman and then Byzantine rulers faced Parthian and Sasanian rivals across a frontier that ran through Armenia and Iraq.

Ordinary life sat under these contests. Farmers watched canal levels. Caravan merchants calculated tolls and security. Villages paid tax to whoever could collect it. City dwellers used several languages, worshipped in different communities and depended on grain arriving from somewhere politically unstable. The recurring structure was already present: imperial centres, local brokers, mobile trade and strategic corridors linking several ecological zones.

The faiths and the imperial languages

Ancient Israelite religion developed in this imperial world. Conquest and exile helped turn a territorial kingdom's traditions into a portable religious community. Jewish life continued in Judea and across a diaspora stretching through Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Roman destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE strengthened forms of religious authority that could function without a sovereign state.

Christianity spread through the same urban networks. Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem and later Constantinople became centres of doctrine and administration. Imperial adoption in the fourth century gave the church new power and produced new battles over orthodoxy. Communities condemned by one council could survive beyond the empire's effective reach. By the time Arab Muslim armies arrived, the region contained several Christian worlds, Jewish communities, Zoroastrians and local religious traditions.

Muhammad's preaching in Mecca and the community established in Medina from 622 created a new centre in western Arabia. After his death in 632, Arab armies defeated the exhausted Byzantine and Sasanian empires across Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Iran with startling speed. The conquests did not make the region instantly Muslim or culturally uniform. Administrators

kept using Greek, Persian and Coptic for decades. Taxes differed by status. Conversion, intermarriage, urbanisation and the attractions of Arabic government changed society over centuries.

The Umayyad caliphs ruled from Damascus after 661. The Abbasids overthrew them in 750 and built Baghdad near the old Mesopotamian imperial heartland. The city became a centre of government, trade and scholarship connected to the Mediterranean, Central Asia, India and the Indian Ocean. Arabic became a language in which Christians, Jews and Muslims translated and extended Greek, Persian and Indian learning. Persian bureaucratic and literary culture shaped the caliphate in return.

Political unity fragmented, but the network did not. Dynasties ruled from Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad and elsewhere. Pilgrims still moved towards Mecca. Scholars travelled between cities. Merchants used Islamic law and trusted associates across huge distances. The Crusades created Latin Christian states on the Levantine coast from the late eleventh century, yet trade and alliance often crossed the religious front they claimed to establish. Mongol armies destroyed Baghdad in 1258, while later Mongol rulers in Iran converted to Islam and entered the regional order they had shattered.

Ottoman and Safavid order

By the early sixteenth century, two empires had imposed a new structure. The Ottoman state conquered Constantinople in 1453, defeated the Mamluks in 1516 and 1517, and took Syria, Egypt and the holy cities under its protection. The Safavid dynasty established control in Iran from 1501 and promoted Twelver Shia Islam as a state identity. Their rivalry gave political force to a religious distinction without turning every Sunni and Shia community into an agent of one empire.

The Ottomans governed Arab provinces for four centuries, but the phrase hides variation. Egypt's tax system differed from that of Syria. Baghdad changed hands. Yemen resisted. Mountain communities and desert tribes bargained over access and tribute. Local notable families could collect taxes, command armed followers and mediate between officials and

residents. Istanbul appointed governors and judges, maintained garrisons and claimed sovereignty; much daily government remained local.

Cities linked the system. Aleppo sat on routes between Anatolia, Iran and the Mediterranean. Cairo was an administrative and commercial giant. Damascus served caravans and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Basra faced the Gulf and Indian Ocean. Coffee from Yemen became a habit from Istanbul to London. Pious endowments financed fountains, schools, hospitals and markets. Guilds, courts, households and religious communities supplied much of the social order that modern ministries would later try to centralise.

Empire provided no age of uncomplicated harmony. Christians and Jews held subordinate legal status, though communities could possess autonomy and influence. Slavery was widespread. Provincial wars, famine and repression recurred. In the nineteenth century, violence in Mount Lebanon and Damascus showed how local rivalry, economic change, reform and foreign intervention could harden religious categories. Still, most people were governed through layered arrangements rather than a demand that one national identity absorb every other.

The nineteenth-century squeeze

European power entered first through trade, debt and military advantage, then through occupation. Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 was brief but exposed the strategic value of the eastern Mediterranean. Muhammad Ali, the Ottoman governor who became Egypt's hereditary ruler, built a conscript army, monopolised crops and nearly displaced the Ottoman dynasty. Britain and other powers blocked him, preserving an empire they increasingly dominated.

Ottoman reformers answered pressure with the Tanzimat from 1839. They promised more equal citizenship, reorganised taxation, built schools, codified law and expanded conscription. Telegraphs and steamships brought provinces closer to the centre. These reforms could protect subjects from local abuse, but they also made the state more intrusive. A peasant who had dealt with a tax collector might now face census officials, army

recruiters and a school teaching an official language.

The Suez Canal opened in 1869 and shortened the sea route between Europe and Asia. Egypt's ruler borrowed heavily to modernise and lost control of his finances. Britain occupied Egypt in 1882, nominally leaving it under Ottoman sovereignty while running the state. France took Algeria earlier and Tunisia in 1881; Italy later seized Libya. Iran avoided formal colonisation but became an arena of Russian and British influence. Oil concessions would deepen the pattern.

Newspapers, schools, migration and military service created wider publics. Ottomanism, Arab cultural revival, Turkish nationalism, Islamic reform and Zionism offered competing ways to organise political loyalty. Armenian movements demanded reform and protection amid discrimination and massacre. European powers spoke the language of minority rights while using protected communities to extend influence. The empire tried to produce equal citizens at the same moment nationalism was telling them to seek a state of their own.

War and the state map

The Ottoman decision to enter the First World War in 1914 turned the region into a battlefield. Ottoman forces defeated the Allies at Gallipoli and Kut before losing ground in Palestine, Syria and Iraq. Blockade, requisition and crop failure caused famine in parts of the Levant. Ottoman authorities deported and killed Armenians on a mass scale in 1915 and after, destroying ancient communities in what historians recognise as genocide.

Britain encouraged Sharif Hussein of Mecca to rebel against Ottoman rule in 1916, while negotiating the Sykes-Picot division with France and issuing the Balfour Declaration in 1917. These commitments were less a coherent blueprint than several imperial policies competing for the same land. Arab forces entered Damascus in 1918, but Faisal's short-lived Syrian kingdom was destroyed by France in 1920. Britain suppressed a major revolt in Iraq that year and then installed Faisal as king.

The mandate system called foreign rule tutelage. France divided Syria and

Lebanon, then recombined and adjusted territories under pressure. Britain created an Iraqi monarchy, separated Transjordan from the Palestine administration and retained military and financial influence after formal independence. Turkey's nationalist movement defeated attempts to partition Anatolia and established a republic in 1923. Reza Khan built a centralising Iranian monarchy. Ibn Saud conquered rival polities and declared the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Borders now required passports, customs posts and exclusive citizenship where imperial subjects had once crossed provinces. Nomadic routes were cut. Kurds were divided. Ports lost old hinterlands. The new map still drew on Ottoman administrative units and local geography, but it gave them a harder political meaning.

Cities, regimes and mass politics

Independence did not produce one political model. It produced a contest over what the new state was for.

Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal in 1956 and survived the subsequent British, French and Israeli attack, turning himself into a symbol of Arab sovereignty. Arab nationalism promised political unity, land reform, industrialisation and an end to foreign domination. Military officers and single parties took power in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, arguing that disciplined states could overcome the weakness of monarchy and colonial rule.

Monarchies survived through different bargains. Jordan's Hashemites balanced tribal constituencies, Palestinians, foreign aid and a vulnerable geography. Saudi rule joined dynasty, religious authority and later oil distribution. Gulf sheikhdoms built state institutions around ruling families, commercial elites and external protection. Survival did not prove that monarchy was more traditional. It showed that different coalitions could turn inherited institutions into durable regimes.

Beneath the regime contest, social change was faster than constitutional change. Cities expanded. School and university enrolment grew. Public

employment created a salaried middle class. Women entered education and professions in increasing numbers, though law, family expectations and labour markets constrained them unevenly. Rural migrants arrived in capitals looking for wages and housing. Cairo's cinema and music, Beirut's publishing, Kuwait's magazines and later satellite television created a shared Arabic public culture in which cultural figures could be recognised across borders more easily than many politicians.

These changes mattered politically. Education raised expectations. State jobs became a promise of mobility. Housing shortages and inflation turned budgets into legitimacy. Television allowed a war, speech or scandal in one country to become dinner-table politics in another. The public sphere was regional even when the security services were national.

Palestine followed its own violent sequence. Jewish immigration increased under the British Mandate, driven by Zionist organisation and escalating persecution in Europe. Palestinian Arabs resisted British rule, land loss and the prospect of a Jewish state, most dramatically in the revolt of 1936 to 1939. The Holocaust transformed the urgency of Jewish refuge and statehood. The United Nations proposed partition in 1947. Civil war followed, then regional war after Israel declared independence in May 1948.

Israel survived and expanded beyond the proposed partition boundaries. More than 700,000 Palestinians became refugees through flight and expulsion. Jordan annexed the West Bank and Egypt administered Gaza. No Palestinian state emerged. In 1967 Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights. Egypt later recovered Sinai through war and diplomacy, culminating in peace with Israel in 1979; Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994. Palestinian self-rule created by the Oslo process in the 1990s did not resolve sovereignty, settlements, refugees, Jerusalem, borders or security.

The conflict shaped regional politics without explaining all of it. Governments used Palestine as a source of legitimacy while also pursuing state interests that diverged from Palestinian ones. Palestinian movements built institutions across borders and sometimes clashed with host governments. The cause

remained regionally powerful because it joined nationalism, displacement, sacred geography and foreign intervention in one unresolved question.

Oil, revolution and the security order

Oil production grew rapidly after 1945. Foreign companies and western governments initially held much of the power. Iran's prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh nationalised the oil industry in 1951; a British and American-backed coup removed him in 1953 and restored the shah's authority. Across the producing states, rulers later demanded larger shares, nationalised assets and used OPEC to coordinate interests.

The 1973 Arab-Israeli war and oil embargo multiplied revenues and exposed global dependence. Gulf cities expanded, public sectors grew and migrant labour remade society. Oil money moved through aid, arms, investment and remittances. The United States tied its security role to Gulf production and Israel while the Soviet Union armed several republics. Across both monarchies and republics, public employment and subsidies became political promises that governments without enough revenue often struggled to sustain.

Iran's 1979 revolution removed the shah and established an Islamic Republic that claimed to oppose monarchy, American power and Israel. The seizure of the US embassy fixed hostility with Washington. Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, expecting a quick victory. Eight years of trench warfare, missiles and chemical weapons ended without a decisive territorial result and killed hundreds of thousands.

Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. A US-led coalition expelled Iraqi forces in 1991 and left a larger American military presence in the Gulf. After 11 September 2001, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, removed Saddam Hussein's regime and dismantled much of the state, producing insurgency, sectarian violence and a political order in which Iran gained influence.

Uprisings, war and an unfinished regional reset

The uprisings that began in Tunisia in late 2010 travelled because citizens in different Arab states recognised similar experiences: police humiliation, corruption, youth unemployment, blocked careers and rulers who appeared permanent. Presidents fell in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Bahrain's uprising was suppressed with Gulf support. Syria's government answered demonstrations with escalating force and the country descended into civil war.

The outcomes diverged because institutions differed. Egypt's army remained coherent and retook political control. Libya and Yemen had fragmented coercive systems and divisions. Syria's war drew in Iran, Russia, Turkey, Gulf states, the United States, Kurdish forces and armed movements from across the region. The Islamic State exploited collapse in Iraq and Syria, seized cities in 2014 and declared a caliphate before losing its last large territorial enclave in 2019.

The pressures that helped produce the uprisings did not disappear. In 2024 the ILO projected youth unemployment across MENA at 24.5 per cent. The figure conceals large national differences, but education has expanded faster than many economies have created secure work. Gulf governments seek to move more citizens into private employment while migrant labour remains indispensable; poorer states face inflation, debt and weak services with far less fiscal room.

Migration is part of the operating system. Workers move towards Gulf labour markets and send remittances home. Refugees from Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Yemen have altered neighbourhoods, schools and politics across host countries. Families often distribute their futures among several states, linking local economies to diasporas long after the first move.

Diplomacy also changed. Israel normalised relations with the Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco through the Abraham Accords of 2020. Iran and Saudi Arabia restored diplomatic relations in 2023 with Chinese mediation. Neither development erased rivalry. They showed that states could

compartmentalise it when trade, investment or security made restraint useful.

The Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's war in Gaza returned the Palestinian question to the centre of regional politics and caused immense civilian suffering. Confrontation spread through Lebanon, the Red Sea and direct exchanges involving Iran. A limited ceasefire endorsed in October 2025 expanded humanitarian access, but United Nations agencies still described severe hunger, damaged infrastructure and precarious recovery in 2026.

Syria changed again when Bashar al-Assad's government fell on 8 December 2024. The end of that regime did not repair the state. Millions remained displaced, institutions were damaged and armed, communal and external interests still had to be reconciled. The transition illustrated an older regional pattern: removing a ruler is faster than rebuilding authority that people accept.

Then, in 2026, direct war involving Iran produced the clearest recent example of transmission. The Strait of Hormuz became effectively closed for a period after fighting began at the end of February. Gulf producers shut in large volumes of oil and gas because loaded ships could not move safely through the channel. An agreement in June partially reopened traffic, while renewed hostilities showed how fragile the arrangement remained. Energy markets reacted because the route joined a regional battlefield to global consumption.

None of these crises defines ordinary life in the region. They sit on top of longer pressures: water scarcity, rapid urbanisation, unequal citizenship, housing, education, labour markets and the fiscal bargains created by oil or its absence. The next political settlement in any state will have to work through those systems after television crews leave.

How we know

The evidence is abundant and badly uneven. Ancient river states left inscriptions, administrative tablets and monumental archaeology, most of it produced by rulers and institutions. Religious traditions preserve texts copied across centuries, while archaeology and manuscript study continually revise how those texts are placed in history. Ottoman archives record taxation, courts, land and government in exceptional volume, but they see society through administrative categories.

Modern states generated censuses, newspapers, diplomatic files, company records, memoirs and film. Access varies sharply. Colonial archives are extensive but reflect imperial priorities. Security services rarely open their records. Population data can be politically dangerous: Lebanon has not held an official census since 1932, and war has interrupted enumeration elsewhere. Refugee totals, war deaths and economic activity are often estimates assembled from incomplete systems.

Current figures require dates and definitions. MENA, the Arab States and the Middle East cover different country sets. Oil flows, displacement and employment can change within months. The narrative above therefore uses exact current numbers sparingly, states the regional frame where it matters and treats archives as evidence of what institutions could see, not a transparent record of everything people lived.

What People Get Wrong

“The Middle East is one Arab, Muslim region”

The category merges three different maps. The Arab world is a linguistic and political space extending across North Africa and western Asia. The Middle East usually includes non-Arab Turkey, Iran and Israel. The Muslim world is larger again, with most Muslims living outside the region, especially in South and South-East Asia.

Inside the core Middle East are Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds, Jews,

Armenians and many smaller peoples. Most are Muslim, but Christian communities predate Islam, Jewish life has roots here measured in millennia, and Druze, Yazidis, Baha'is and others resist the standard boxes. Sunni and Shia are families of traditions, not two central offices issuing instructions.

The mistake persists because language, religion and geography overlap enough to look identical from a distance. It matters because policies built for an imagined uniform population misread local authority. An Arabic television audience, an Iranian security network, a Kurdish national movement and a Gulf labour market may occupy the same space while connecting different people. Even the label minority can deceive: a community small within one state may form a majority across a province or possess institutions extending far beyond it.

“It has always been at war”

The region has experienced repeated conquest and several severe modern wars. That does not make continuous violence its natural condition. Centuries of Ottoman rule contained rebellions and repression, but most years in most places were not battle years. Cities traded, courts functioned, families formed and religious communities negotiated daily life. No civilisation could have maintained irrigation, pilgrimage and long-distance commerce through permanent collapse.

The impression comes from selection. Foreign reporting expands during war and contracts during ordinary government. A bombing in Beirut becomes international news; a decade of routine port activity does not. The twentieth century also placed the region inside world wars, decolonisation, the Cold War and an expanding American security system, increasing both violence and observation.

The correction is not comforting. Conflict has become concentrated and durable in several states, and the wider region has carried immense displacement. The correction is causal. War requires institutions, weapons, decisions, grievances and patrons. Calling it timeless removes those causes

from view and turns preventable arrangements into climate. It also hides the long intervals of negotiated order from which any serious peace has to be rebuilt.

“Sykes and Picot drew every border”

The secret agreement of 1916 is the most famous map in the subject and one of the least accurate guides to the map that followed. It proposed British and French zones while the Ottoman Empire still existed. Its lines did not create modern Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria or the Israel-Palestine boundary in their final forms.

Those states emerged through the war, the mandate settlement, local revolt, French and British administration, Turkish military victory, Hashemite bargaining, Saudi conquest, Zionist settlement, Palestinian resistance and later treaties. Some boundaries followed former Ottoman divisions or physical features. Others cut through communities and routes. Nearly all were revised after Sykes-Picot.

The agreement remains important as evidence of imperial intent. Britain and France planned to dispose of territory without the consent of its inhabitants and made conflicting commitments to secure wartime support. It became a symbol because the symbol is true about power. Treating it as the lone blueprint is false about history and erases the regional actors who resisted, negotiated and imposed borders of their own. The final map was imperial in origin and regional in construction, which is a harder truth than either total imposition or pure self-determination.

“Sunni versus Shia explains the conflicts”

The split began with arguments over leadership in the early Muslim community and developed into distinct traditions of law, ritual and authority. It is real. It is also a poor master key for modern geopolitics.

States and movements activate sectarian identity under particular conditions. Saudi Arabia and Iran have used religious legitimacy and supported aligned partners, but their rivalry also concerns security, regime

survival, influence and relations with outside powers. Sunni governments disagree sharply with one another. Iran has backed non-Shia and secular actors. Shia political parties in Iraq compete among themselves, sometimes violently.

The sectarian explanation became persuasive after the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the destruction of Iraqi state power after 2003 and the Syrian civil war. Institutions allocated offices by sect, militias offered protection through sectarian networks, and patrons funded the language they could mobilise. Religion shaped the field, but politics raised the stakes. The distinction matters because an ancient-theology diagnosis suggests no remedy. A political diagnosis points towards security, institutions, representation and restraint. It also explains why sectarian tension can rise quickly after a state changes the rules governing jobs, policing or protection.

“Oil made the region rich”

Oil made some states extraordinarily wealthy, some ruling systems powerful and the whole region strategically important. It did not distribute wealth evenly.

Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait combine large hydrocarbon income with relatively small citizen populations. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the Palestinian territories do not. Iraq and Iran possess major reserves but have lost income to war, sanctions, corruption and policy failure. Even within exporters, wealth divides citizens from migrants, regions from capitals and connected firms from everyone else.

Oil can build roads, hospitals, universities and financial reserves. It can also concentrate revenue in the state, weaken the pressure to tax citizens, expose budgets to price swings and support coercive institutions.

Labour-importing Gulf economies rely on migrants whose rights and security differ from those of citizens. Labour-exporting countries depend on remittances and Gulf demand.

The strongest correction is therefore not the resource curse in reverse. Petroleum is neither automatic prosperity nor automatic failure. It changes

incentives and bargaining power. Institutions decide whether the windfall becomes broad capability, private extraction, strategic ambition or some mixture. The same barrel can finance a school, a subsidy, a foreign investment or a weapons shipment; the geology does not choose among them.

“The desert is empty and water hardly matters”

Deserts contain routes, wells, grazing systems, settlements and political knowledge. Bedouin and other mobile communities were not people waiting for the city to arrive. They connected markets, managed scarce pasture and negotiated with states that could not govern the steppe without them.

The deeper error is treating dryness as scenery. Water determines where people can live, what farmers can grow, how much food must be imported and which upstream decisions become downstream crises. Cairo depends on a river whose headwaters lie far beyond Egypt. Iraq depends on rivers rising in Turkey and passing Syria. Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories draw on shared and contested basins and aquifers.

Oil briefly hid the constraint in wealthy coastal states by financing desalination, food imports and huge distribution systems. Those systems are achievements, not escape. Desalinated water costs energy and money; agriculture still consumes scarce freshwater; poorer and inland states have fewer options. Follow the pipe, canal and electricity supply and many conflicts described as ethnic or ideological acquire a material layer. That layer matters most when shortage is filtered through unequal citizenship, neglected provinces or politically protected users.

“The Middle East is only oil, religion and war”

The subtitle names the three subjects through which outsiders most often encounter the region. Taking them as the whole region would reproduce the distortion the book is trying to correct.

Most people spend most days dealing with work, family, school, housing, transport, prices and bureaucracy. Cities such as Istanbul, Cairo, Tehran,

Riyadh, Dubai, Amman and Beirut are labour markets and cultural centres before they are geopolitical symbols. Arabic television, Turkish drama, Iranian cinema, football, universities, online commerce and migration create regional connections that are not reducible to conflict.

Even the supposedly exceptional subjects are embedded in ordinary systems. Oil matters through budgets, wages, contracts and migrant labour. Religion matters through family law, charity, education, ritual and moral authority as well as political mobilisation. War matters because it destroys housing, interrupts electricity, moves families and changes who can work or return.

The correction changes analysis. A society cannot be understood from its crises alone. To judge whether a peace, reform or regime is durable, look at jobs, schools, municipal services, citizenship and whether people can build a future without leaving. Those systems decide how much pressure a country can absorb before another fault line opens.

Use It

Ask which map is active

A report may say that an actor crossed a border, betrayed a nation, defended a sect or protected a route. Each statement belongs to a different map. The state map asks who holds legal sovereignty. The national map asks which people claim self-determination. The religious map asks which community supplies authority and solidarity. The economic map asks where labour, money and goods move. The security map asks who can coerce whom.

Before judging an event, name the map doing the work. Kurdish politics cannot be understood from the borders alone because Kurdish populations and movements span four states. Gulf politics cannot be read from nationality alone because migrant workers make up most of the labour force in several countries. Jerusalem cannot be reduced to municipal administration because national and sacred claims occupy the same

streets.

The maps can all be real and still contradict one another. The useful question is not which one is true. It is which claim has become decisive, who benefits from activating it and what other map the account has pushed out of sight.

Follow the water before the slogan

Political language is loud; infrastructure is quiet. Start with the river, aquifer, dam, power station, grain terminal and subsidy budget.

A government may present a dam as national development while a downstream state experiences it as strategic pressure. A city may appear stable because tankers and pumps compensate for a network that no longer supplies every district. A bread subsidy can be a food policy, a wage policy and a regime-survival policy at once. Desalination can support a coastal metropolis while increasing dependence on electricity and secure shipping.

This lens prevents two errors. It stops environmental pressure from being treated as fate, since institutions decide allocation and maintenance. It also stops ideology from becoming the whole cause. People can mobilise through nationalism or religion while competing over land, water and public services. The material layer rarely replaces the political one. It explains why the argument has become urgent and why some communities have more room to absorb failure than others.

Find the state's revenue bargain

Ask who pays the government and whom the government pays.

A tax-funded state depends on domestic households and firms. That dependence can create bargaining over representation, competence and public spending, though it guarantees none of them. An oil-funded state can receive revenue from foreign buyers and distribute it through jobs, subsidies, contracts and security. A state dependent on foreign aid, remittances or debt faces a different set of pressures again.

This reveals why two governments using the same constitutional language can operate differently. A parliament has less fiscal leverage when the treasury does not need to tax the voters. A public job may function as social protection in one country and as a reward for political loyalty in another. A subsidy cut may be an economic reform and a breach of an older political promise.

Do not stop at the national budget. Ask who receives citizenship, who works without it, which regions obtain infrastructure and which firms depend on state contracts. The revenue bargain runs through class, migration and geography. Oil matters because it changes this bargain, not because petroleum possesses a political ideology.

Separate the regime from the country

Foreign commentary often treats a ruler, regime, state, nation and society as one object. They are not interchangeable.

The state is the durable machinery of territory, law, taxation and administration. The regime is the coalition controlling it. The nation is the community imagined as entitled to the state. Society contains people who may comply, resist, bargain, withdraw or organise through institutions outside government. A regime can fall while the state survives. A state can collapse while national identity remains. A ruler can speak for the country abroad while fearing much of it at home.

The distinction clarifies foreign policy. Regime security may require preventing a coup, containing an opposition movement or preserving a ruling family. National security may concern borders, food, water or military threats. The two can align, but rulers can also define domestic challengers as foreign agents and use regional conflict to narrow political space.

When a policy looks irrational, ask which object it is protecting. What harms the national economy may strengthen the security services. What weakens the state may keep a ruling coalition together. The answer does not excuse the decision. It identifies the decision-maker's real unit of survival.

Trace the patron without erasing the client

A militia, party or government may receive money, weapons and training from abroad while retaining local roots. Both facts matter.

Calling every armed partner a proxy makes regional powers seem omnipotent and local actors mindless. Patrons rarely control clients perfectly. A movement has its own constituency, leaders, finances and memory. It can refuse instructions, pursue local rivals or drag its sponsor towards escalation. The sponsor still changes the balance by supplying capabilities the client could not obtain alone.

Use a two-column test. What does the local actor want? What does the patron add? Then ask where their interests diverge. This works for Iranian-linked militias, Gulf-funded political movements, western-supported armies and Russian-backed forces alike. It also reveals why cutting external support may weaken an organisation without removing the grievance or social network that sustains it.

Regional conflict spreads through these relationships because they are cheaper and less risky than direct war. They also make responsibility harder to assign. The correct response is precision: identify support, command, dependence and autonomy separately rather than compressing them into one loaded noun.

Look for the ordinary system beneath the crisis

News selects rupture. Understanding requires continuity.

When a state appears only during war, reconstruct the system that existed the week before: who imported food, paid teachers, kept mobile networks running, issued identity documents and moved cash between cities. During conflict, some of those functions continue through municipalities, businesses, charities, religious institutions, families or armed groups. Control over ordinary provision often matters as much as battlefield victory because it determines who can remain, return and claim authority.

This lens also corrects the region's public image. Most people are working,

commuting, studying, marrying, caring, trading and arguing about prices. Their choices shape migration, fertility, investment and political patience. A government that looks stable from a palace can be losing nurses, engineers and entrepreneurs. A city described as recovered may function through unpaid labour and remittances. A peace agreement that ignores housing, schools and property records may end shooting without making return possible.

Follow ordinary systems and the region stops being a sequence of emergencies. It becomes a set of societies whose resilience is measurable, distributed and costly.

The limits

The overlapping-maps model can explain transmission and misalignment. It cannot predict every event. Leaders make mistakes, movements split, technologies change and accidents matter. Similar border or revenue structures can produce different outcomes because institutions and historical sequences differ.

The regional frame also risks repeating the error it diagnoses. Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Yemen and the Emirates cannot be reduced to positions in one system. Each contains its own political economy, class structure, institutions and memories. A one-hour book must compress, and compression can privilege states and conflict over gender, art, rural life and local histories.

Current politics adds another limit. Alliances and fronts can change faster than books. Exact figures for displacement, oil flows and employment depend on dates and definitions. Use the model to ask better questions, then update the evidence.

The one thing to keep

Keep the maps separate.

A border may be recognised while a nation crosses it. A shrine may outrank the capital for millions of believers. A pipeline may bypass the population

whose territory it crosses. An army may depend on a patron outside the country. A city may run on workers who can live there for decades without becoming citizens. None of those facts cancels the others.

Confusing the maps produces bad history and worse judgement. It turns diversity into contradiction, political choices into ancient fate, and external connection into proof that local people have no agency. Seeing the overlap does not solve the Middle East. It removes the excuse of surprise. The next time a crisis spreads, ask which route carried the pressure and who kept that route open. That question is the beginning of seeing the region as it is rather than as the label first imagined it.

Terms

Middle East. A shifting strategic and cultural region usually covering Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. Its disputed boundary is part of its history.

MENA. Middle East and North Africa. A policy and statistical category that normally adds the Maghreb to the core Middle East, though institutions include different country lists.

West Asia. A geographical alternative to Middle East used by the United Nations and several states. It avoids a European compass but often excludes Egypt.

Arab world. The Arabic-speaking states from Morocco to Oman, organised politically through the Arab League. It overlaps the Middle East but includes North Africa and excludes Turkey, Iran and Israel.

Mashriq. The Arabic term for the eastern Arab lands, commonly Egypt, the Levant and Iraq. Its counterpart is the Maghreb, the western Arab lands of North Africa, a distinction rooted in direction.

Levant. The eastern Mediterranean coast and its hinterland, usually including Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories. The exact boundary changes with context, and older usage could stretch it

wider.

Fertile Crescent. An arc of relatively well-watered land running from the Levant through northern Mesopotamia to the Gulf, associated with early agriculture, cities and states, though the neat crescent simplifies the ecology.

Arabian Peninsula. The landmass containing Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman and the Gulf monarchies. Mountains and monsoon edges make it more varied than the standard desert image.

Persian Gulf. The shallow sea between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. Arab governments often use Arabian Gulf; international cartographic convention generally retains Persian Gulf.

Suez Canal. The waterway opened in 1869 linking the Mediterranean and Red Sea. It shortened Europe-Asia shipping and made Egypt central to global trade, imperial competition and naval strategy.

Strait of Hormuz. The narrow passage between Iran and Oman connecting the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. A large share of world oil and liquefied natural gas trade passes through it, giving a small channel global consequence.

Bab al-Mandab. The strait between Yemen and the Horn of Africa linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Its Arabic name means Gate of Tears, and disruption there can divert ships around southern Africa.

Water stress. A condition in which demand approaches or exceeds available freshwater, or poor quality restricts use. It reflects institutions, infrastructure, pricing and inequality as well as rainfall.

Desalination. The removal of salt from seawater or brackish water. Gulf states use it heavily for urban supply, trading freshwater scarcity for energy, cost and brine problems.

Caliphate. A political order headed by a caliph, understood as successor to Muhammad's leadership of the Muslim community. Historical caliphates

differed widely in reach and authority, and later claims to revive one carry political as well as religious meaning.

Umma. The worldwide community of Muslims. It expresses religious solidarity across borders but has never removed disagreement over government, doctrine, class or national interest.

Sunni. The largest broad tradition within Islam, historically associated with communal recognition of the early caliphs. It contains several legal schools, theological traditions and political movements.

Shia. Muslim traditions tracing legitimate leadership through Ali and the Prophet's family. Twelver Shia predominate in Iran and Iraq, while other branches follow different lines of imams.

Sectarianism. Political organisation or discrimination through religious community. It is not mere religious difference; it grows when institutions, leaders and insecurity make the category distribute power and protection.

Millet. A later name for Ottoman arrangements through which recognised religious communities held authority over parts of personal law, education and worship. Practice varied across time and place, and the tidy textbook version exaggerates uniform communal autonomy.

Mandate. League of Nations authority granted after the First World War to Britain and France over former Ottoman territories, presented as temporary tutelage but operated as imperial rule under a new international legal vocabulary.

Sykes-Picot Agreement. A secret 1916 British-French plan for zones of influence in Ottoman lands. It shaped expectations but did not directly produce every modern border or survive unchanged into the mandate map.

Balfour Declaration. Britain's 1917 statement backing the establishment in Palestine of a Jewish national home while referring to the rights of existing non-Jewish communities.

Zionism. The modern Jewish national movement seeking

self-determination in the historic Land of Israel. Its achievement of statehood collided with Palestinian Arab claims, residence and national self-determination.

Arab nationalism. The belief that Arabic-speaking peoples form a nation entitled to unity or close political solidarity. It challenged empire and colonialism but competed with separate state interests, dynastic rule and local nationalisms.

Islamism. Political projects that place Islamic principles, law or identity at the centre of government and public life. The term covers movements with sharply different methods, social bases and aims, from elections to armed revolution.

Rentier state. A state receiving substantial external income, often from hydrocarbons, rather than mainly taxing domestic production. The revenue can change bargaining, spending, taxation and accountability without determining a single regime type.

Sovereign wealth fund. A state-owned investment fund built from fiscal surpluses, often oil and gas revenue. Gulf funds invest globally and support domestic diversification, intergenerational saving and strategic influence.

Kafala. A sponsorship system linking a migrant worker's legal status to an employer or sponsor. Reforms vary, but dependence can restrict mobility, exit and bargaining power, especially for lower-paid workers.

Mukhabarat. Arabic for intelligence services, commonly used for the security agencies that monitor opposition, manage political risk and protect ruling regimes across several Arab states.

Go Deeper

James L. Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 6th edition (Oxford University Press, 2025). Start here for the modern period. Gelvin explains nationalism, imperialism, political economy and state formation rather than treating the region as a list of crises. The sixth edition reaches the current decade and is written for readers entering the field. It is a university textbook, so some chapters carry more conceptual scaffolding than a narrative history, but the organising judgement is strong and the coverage includes Turkey, Iran, the Arab states and Israel-Palestine. Read the opening chapters on modernity and the state before dipping into a current crisis; they explain why the crisis vocabulary often begins too late.

Camron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna and Elizabeth B. Frierson, eds., *The Modern Middle East: A Sourcebook for History* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Use this to hear the region arguing with itself. The collection brings together laws, memoirs, journalism, speeches, fiction, petitions and images from 1700 onwards. It breaks the habit of meeting Middle Eastern people only through foreign diplomats or later summaries. Seven hundred pages make it a reference shelf rather than a straight read. Choose one cluster at a time, especially reform, gender, nationalism or everyday life. The editorial introductions explain enough context to make documents usable without turning them into illustrations for one approved story.

Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East* (Basic Books, 2015). Read this for the hinge between empire and states. Rogan tells the First World War from the Ottoman side while following soldiers and civilians across Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, the Levant and Arabia. It shows why the postwar map cannot be understood from Sykes-Picot alone. The military narrative is substantial, but that is the strength: the settlement came out of campaigns, famine, revolt and defeat, not a conference-room line detached from events. Keep a map nearby, since the fronts move quickly and the place names reflect several languages and later borders.

Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, updated edition (Verso, 2023). Read this for the most demanding argument in the set. Mitchell connects energy systems, labour power, western democracy and Middle Eastern oil, asking how the physical organisation of coal and petroleum shaped political possibilities. Some claims remain debated and the book is not a balanced regional survey. It is valuable because it forces oil out of the category of background wealth and treats extraction, transport and expertise as political machinery. Read it as a strong interpretation to test, not a final theory that explains every exporter or every political outcome.

Notes and Sources

Scope, terminology and the opening argument

The working boundary follows common modern usage while making its choices explicit: Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, the Levant, Israel and the Palestinian territories, and the Arabian Peninsula. The United Nations M49 system classifies most of the Asian part under Western Asia, places Iran in Southern Asia for statistical purposes and Egypt in Northern Africa, illustrating why regional datasets differ. MENA and the Arab world are overlapping but distinct categories.

The history of the phrase Middle East follows Charles R. Koppes's correction to the standard account. Alfred Thayer Mahan popularised the term in 1902, but General T. E. Gordon used it in an article published in 1900. Both uses emerged from British imperial strategy towards Persia, Afghanistan, the Gulf and India. The argument that the region later acquired institutional reality through military commands, diplomacy, markets and media is interpretive and draws on Fred Halliday, James Gelvin and critical geography of the term.

The 2024 Strait of Hormuz figure comes from the US Energy Information Administration's June 2025 analysis: average petroleum flow was about 20 million barrels per day, equivalent to roughly 20 per cent of global petroleum

liquids consumption. The text retains the date because flows and the global denominator change.

Geography, water and corridors

The treatment of river valleys, mountains, steppe and maritime routes draws on standard regional histories and environmental work. Geography is used as pressure and opportunity, not as a deterministic explanation. The term virtual water refers to water embedded in traded food and other products.

The World Bank's 2025 regional water work gives average annual per-capita availability in MENA at about 480 cubic metres in 2023, below one tenth of the global average. A 2024 World Bank account states that MENA contains more than 53 per cent of global desalination capacity. The wider World Bank literature, including *Beyond Scarcity* and *The Economics of Water Scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa*, stresses that governance, pricing, agricultural allocation, leakage and institutional trust shape scarcity alongside climate and hydrology.

The canal and chokepoint descriptions use the EIA's world oil transit work and standard maritime geography. Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz figures should always be read by year because conflict can redirect shipping rapidly.

Faith, community and sectarianism

The book separates conquest from conversion in the early Islamic period. Arabic administration and Muslim majorities emerged at different speeds across provinces. The account of religious communities, pious endowments, courts and scholarship draws on broad histories and Camron Michael Amin, Benjamin C. Fortna and Elizabeth B. Frierson's sourcebook.

Karen Barkey's *Empire of Difference* informs the explanation of Ottoman rule through brokers, layered authority and managed diversity. Ussama Makdisi's *Age of Coexistence* supports the refusal of both harmony nostalgia and permanent-hatred narratives. Coexistence existed inside hierarchy and could break under economic, political and imperial pressure.

The account of Sunni and Shia politics treats doctrine as real while rejecting automatic geopolitical alignment. Modern scholarship on sectarianisation argues that institutions, insecurity, elite strategy and foreign patronage can make communal identity more politically decisive. Examples of cross-sectarian or intra-sectarian rivalry are used to test, not dismiss, religious explanation.

Empire and state formation

The imperial sequence is selective. Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Rome, the caliphates, the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran appear because they establish the recurring mechanics of corridors, provincial rule and plural populations. Individual civilisation titles in this series own fuller treatment.

M. Şükrü Hanioglu and Eugene Rogan support the account of Ottoman reform, centralisation, war and collapse. The description of the Armenian genocide follows the broad historical consensus that Ottoman deportation and mass killing from 1915 constituted genocide. No numerical estimate is needed for the mechanism explained here.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement is treated as evidence of British and French imperial intent rather than the final border plan. Its proposed zones differed from the mandate and state map. The King-Crane Commission's 1919 inquiry records extensive local opposition to imposed division. Rogan and Gelvin provide the wider sequence of war, mandates, Turkish resistance, French conquest, Hashemite bargaining and Saudi expansion.

The claim that the new states became durable does not deny coercive origins. Passports, schooling, armies, public employment and international recognition created interests and identities tied to the state, while Kurdish, Arab, Turkish, Iranian, Jewish and Palestinian national projects continued to cross or contest borders.

Israel and Palestine

The narrative gives both national movements historical agency while keeping differences of power and outcome visible. Zionism is described as a modern Jewish national movement shaped by ancient attachment, European nationalism, antisemitism and the search for security. Palestinian Arabs are treated as an existing society whose national movement developed under Ottoman and British rule and against dispossession.

The figure of more than 700,000 Palestinians displaced or expelled during the 1948 war is the standard approximate figure used by the United Nations and mainstream scholarship. Causes and local sequences remain debated. Benny Morris provides detailed military chronology; Rashid Khalidi supplies a Palestinian national and anti-colonial interpretation. The manuscript does not attempt to settle the full historiographic dispute in a regional survey.

The legal and political status of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, refugees, settlements and borders is compressed to the minimum required for the regional model. The war beginning with the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 is described without a casualty total or claim about its eventual settlement because both the humanitarian record and political status remain current. United Nations reporting records an October 2025 ceasefire that improved some access while describing Gaza's humanitarian situation as still catastrophic in mid-2026.

Oil, labour and the political bargain

The first commercial oil discovery in Iran at Masjed Soleiman dates to 1908. Bahrain's discovery dates to 1932 and Saudi Arabia's Dammam discovery to 1938. OPEC was founded in Baghdad in 1960. The discussion of concessions, nationalisation, the 1973 embargo and petrodollar-era state expansion follows Timothy Mitchell, Eugene Rogan and standard energy histories.

Rentier-state theory identifies the effects of large external revenue on taxation, distribution and accountability. The manuscript treats it as a model with limits. Oil exporters vary in population, institutions, production costs,

state capacity and economic reform. Current IMF and World Bank work was used to check against the obsolete picture of Gulf economies as unchanged oil enclaves.

The ILO reports migrant workers as 76 per cent of the workforce in Saudi Arabia and 95 per cent in Qatar, with the other GCC states within that broad range. Definitions and years vary by country, so the prose uses the range rather than a false regional average. Kafala systems have undergone reforms that differ in law and enforcement; the definition therefore states the continuing mechanism without claiming one uniform rule.

The Gulf's non-oil growth and diversification are acknowledged, while hydrocarbon revenue remains the fiscal base and strategic context in several exporters. The Hormuz figure and the direction of energy trade towards Asia are from the EIA's 2025 analysis of 2024 flows.

Regional rivalry, war and external powers

Fred Halliday and F. Gregory Gause inform the treatment of the Middle East and Persian Gulf as regional systems in which local regimes, regional powers and outside states interact. A patron-client relationship is treated as variable: support can be decisive without producing full command.

The account of the 1953 Iranian coup follows declassified British and American records and Ervand Abrahamian's history. The later sequence uses standard dates: Iranian Revolution in 1979; Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988; Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990; coalition war in 1991; US invasion of Iraq in 2003; Arab uprisings from late 2010; Islamic State territorial expansion from 2014 and loss of its last major territorial enclave in 2019.

The Abraham Accords were signed in 2020. Iran and Saudi Arabia announced restoration of diplomatic relations in 2023 with Chinese mediation. These are presented as examples of managed rivalry, not proof that earlier conflicts disappeared.

The current period

The ILO's *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024* projected MENA youth unemployment at 24.5 per cent in 2024. The figure applies to the ILO's MENA grouping and should not be assigned mechanically to every country.

UNHCR's 2026 operational updates show displacement remaining a regional system rather than a country-specific exception. Its emergency reporting during the 2026 escalation covered an affected area already hosting tens of millions of forcibly displaced people. Because the operational geography changes with the emergency, the manuscript avoids converting that figure into a population statistic for the book's working Middle East.

United Nations Security Council briefings in 2026 identify 8 December 2024 as the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government and describe the subsequent Syrian transition as fragile. The manuscript states no claim about a settled constitutional order.

US Energy Information Administration reporting dates the 2026 conflict and effective closure of Hormuz from 28 February and records an 18 June memorandum intended to reopen the strait. EIA market reporting documents major production shut-ins and disruption to oil and LNG flows. United Nations Security Council material records renewed hostilities after the June agreement. The manuscript keeps only the durable mechanism: direct war disrupted the chokepoint and transmitted a regional conflict into global energy markets.

All current figures and political-status claims were checked on 10 August 2026. Durable historical claims were preferred over volatile operational details.

Evidence and gaps

The warning about source imbalance follows the evidence itself. Ancient inscriptions and administrative records privilege states, temples and wealthy institutions. Religious texts survive through copying and selection. Ottoman archives are extensive but administrative. Colonial records document imperial observation and omission. Modern security archives remain restricted.

Lebanon's last official census was in 1932. War and political sensitivity have also weakened census and survey systems in Syria, Yemen and elsewhere. Estimates for refugees, deaths, employment and informal economic activity therefore depend on agencies using different definitions and access. The book surfaces this problem only where it changes confidence or comparison.

Bibliography

Primary documents and original evidence

Balfour, Arthur James. "Letter to Lord Rothschild," 2 November 1917.

King-Crane Commission. *Report of the American Section of the International Commission on Mandates in Turkey*. 1919.

League of Nations. *Mandate for Palestine*. 1922.

Sykes, Mark, and François Georges-Picot. *Asia Minor Agreement*. 1916.

United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 181 (II), *Future Government of Palestine*. 29 November 1947.

Modern works

Abrahamian, Ervand. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Amin, Camron Michael, Benjamin C. Fortna, and Elizabeth B. Frierson, eds. *The Modern Middle East: A Sourcebook for History*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2006.

Barkey, Karen. *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Gause, F. Gregory III. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Gelvin, James L. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 6th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025.

Halliday, Fred. *The Middle East in International Relations: Power, Politics and Ideology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Hanioğlu, M. Şükrü. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Khalidi, Rashid. *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017*. London: Profile Books, 2020.

Koppes, Charles R. "Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term 'Middle East'." *Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 1 (1976): 95-98.

Makdisi, Ussama. *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. Updated ed. London: Verso, 2023.

Morris, Benny. *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: A History*. Revised and updated ed. London: Penguin, 2018.

Rogan, Eugene. *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

Current data, institutional reports and reporting

International Labour Organization. *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024: Middle East and North Africa*. Geneva: ILO, 2024.

International Labour Organization. *Review of National Social Protection Legislation and Legal Frameworks for Migrant Workers in the Gulf Countries*. Geneva: ILO, 2023.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Global Report 2025: Regional Overview, Middle East and North Africa*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2026.

United Nations. *Economic and Social Repercussions of the Israeli Occupation on the Living Conditions of the Palestinian People in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem, and of the Arab Population in the Occupied Syrian Golan*. Report of the Secretary-General, 18 June 2026.

United Nations Security Council. "From Tragedy to Opportunity, 'New Syria' Is Writing Its Own Story, Security Council Hears, as Speakers Laud Progress." 15 May 2026.

United States Energy Information Administration. "Amid Regional Conflict, the Strait of Hormuz Remains Critical Oil Chokepoint." 16 June 2025.

United States Energy Information Administration. *Short-Term Energy Outlook*. July 2026.

United States Energy Information Administration. "International LNG Prices Rise amid Strait of Hormuz Closure." 28 April 2026.

United Nations Security Council. "Implement Peace Deal Now, Speakers Urge, as Security Council Considers Renewed Hostilities Involving Iran." 2 July 2026.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Middle East Situation: Operational Data and Population Movement Updates*. 2026.

World Bank. *Beyond Scarcity: Water Security in the Middle East and North*

Africa. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017.

World Bank. “Building a Water-Secure Future in the Middle East and North Africa.” 9 April 2025.

World Bank. *The Economics of Water Scarcity in the Middle East and North Africa: Institutional Solutions*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2023.