

# Great Decisions 2019

## Class #2: "Middle East: Regional Disorder"

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### US Foreign Policies to Ponder

1. Will Trump's alignment with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Israel succeed in frustrating Iranian expansion?
2. What will be upshot from Trump's withdrawing from Iranian nuclear accord and moving US embassy to Jerusalem?
3. Can US help resolve troubled states such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq?
4. Is US headed toward war with Iran?

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## A very short history of the Middle East



- Home to the Cradle of Civilization, Middle East history started with earliest human settlements, continued through several post-Islamic Empires to nation-states of Middle East today.
- A new power, the Ottoman Empire, in 1453 captured the Christian Byzantine capitol of Constantinople (Istanbul). Ottomans united the region and controlled it for 400 years. But by 19th century, Europe had overtaken the Muslim world and Ottoman Empire became the "sick man of Europe."
- In 1914, Ottoman Empire made the fatal step of joining Germany in World War I. When the Ottoman Empire was defeated, the British and French secret Sykes-Picot Agreement partitioned the Middle East between them.
- British, French, and Soviets departed from most of Middle East after World War II and most states kept their boundaries. But the struggle between the Arabs and the Jews in Palestine culminated in the 1947 UN plan to partition Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state which Jewish leaders accepted but Arab leaders rejected. In 1948, Arab-Israeli War, Israel won, Palestinians fled and became refugees creating the "Palestinian problem."

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## A very short history of the Middle East (continued)

- Modern Middle East was shaped by: departure of European powers, founding of Israel, and growing importance of oil industry. These led to increased US involvement in Middle East as the guarantor of stability and dominant force in oil industry. When revolutions brought radical anti-Western regimes to power in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, the Soviet Union allied with Arab socialist rulers who promised to destroy Israel, defeat western imperialists and bring prosperity to Arab masses.
- Six-Day War of 1967 with Israel ended in a decisive loss for Muslims and was symptomatic of failure of Arab socialism and a turning point when militant Islam began to fill the political vacuum. US, in the midst of Cold War and oil needs, felt obliged to defend its remaining allies - conservative monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran, and emirates. Iran became a key US ally, until 1979 revolution overthrew the Shah and established an anti-western Shia regime, prompting US into a close alliance with Saudi Arabia.
- Collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 had major consequences for the Middle East: Soviet Jews emigrated to and strengthened Israel, stopped Soviet support weakening anti-western Arab regimes, cheap oil from Russia reduced the West's dependence on Middle East oil, and discredited the Middle East model of authoritarian state socialism.

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## A very short history of the Middle East (continued)

- In response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1991, Gulf War led to a permanent US military presence in Middle East which offended many Muslims and was cited by Osama bin Laden as justification for 9/11.
- After the Cold War, Middle East economic growth was limited by political restrictions, corruption, overspending on military and over-dependence on oil. Failures of most Arab governments and Arab radicalism led to the embrace of competing Islamism in Iran and Saudi Arabia. 9/11 led to Middle East Wars and to further political destabilization and anger. In 2014, ISIS terrorist group controlled an area upwards of 8 million people, until largely lost by 2018.
- 2010 Arab Spring protests were followed by ongoing civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, and little democratic or economic progress. Perhaps the economic growth and secularization of Turkey and its joining NATO, was seen as the greatest vindication of westernization. However, in recent months Erdogan seems to have morphed into a Muslim dictator in cahoots with Putin.
- So today we are tackling a region of 18 countries, bigger than EU, more populous than the US, speaks 60 languages, holds 60% of world's oil reserves, and with a very different culture. And, does not like us to boot! That's why we have the Great Decision topic: "Middle East- regional disorder."
- Source: Adapted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Middle\\_East](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Middle_East)

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But Middle East is more than a desert traversed by camels. It has oases of hyper-modernism such as Dubai

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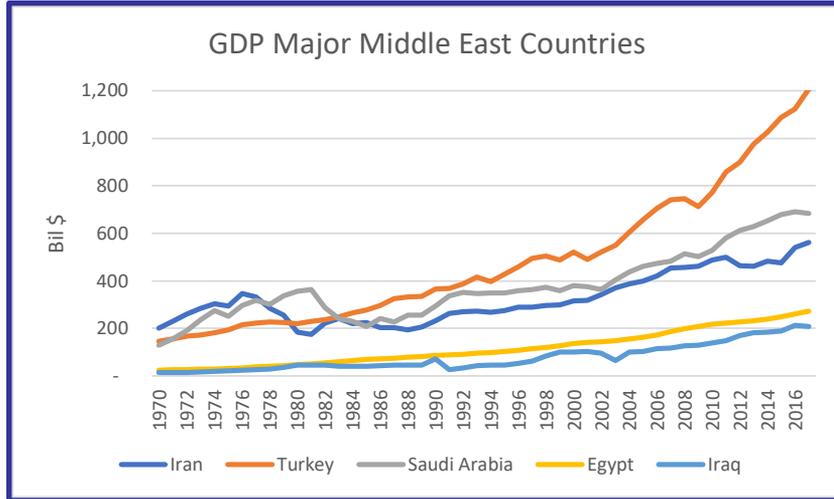
Population, Per Capita GDP, Polity of Major Middle East Countries			
Country	2019 Population (Mil)	2017 GDP/capita \$ PPP	2016 Polity2 Index
Egypt	98	13,000	-4
Iran	82	20,000	-7
Turkey	81	26,400	-4
Iraq	39	17,000	6
Saudi Arabia	33	55,300	-10
Yemen	30	2,300	0
Syria	18	5,000	-9
UAE	10	68,200	-8
Israel	9	36,300	6
Qatar	3	124,900	-10

Population and GDP from Wikipedia, Polity score 10 is full democracy, -10 complete autocracy, 0 midway

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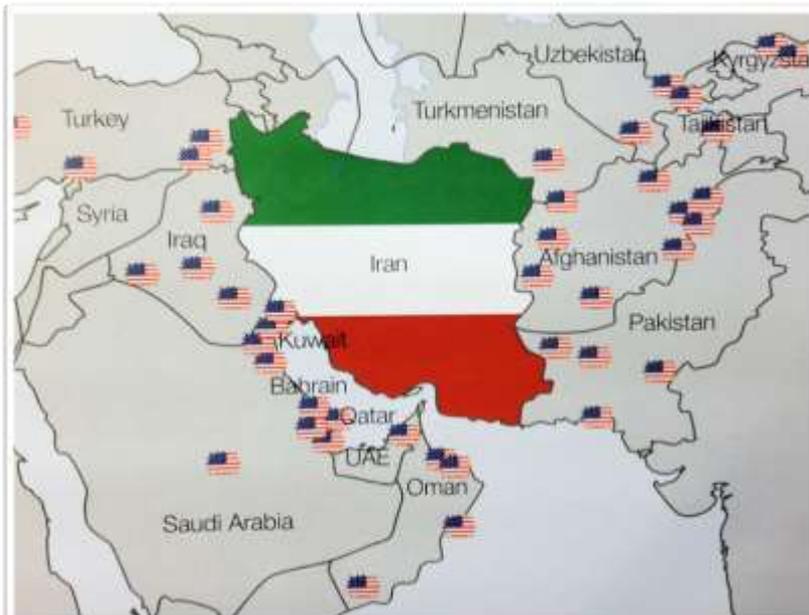
## Turkey's economy soared to double or more other 4



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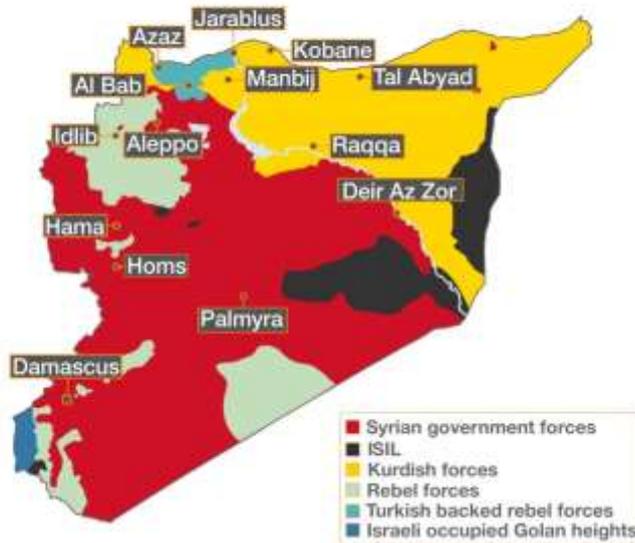
## US Military bases in Middle East – Surround Iran



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## Syria: Who controls what?



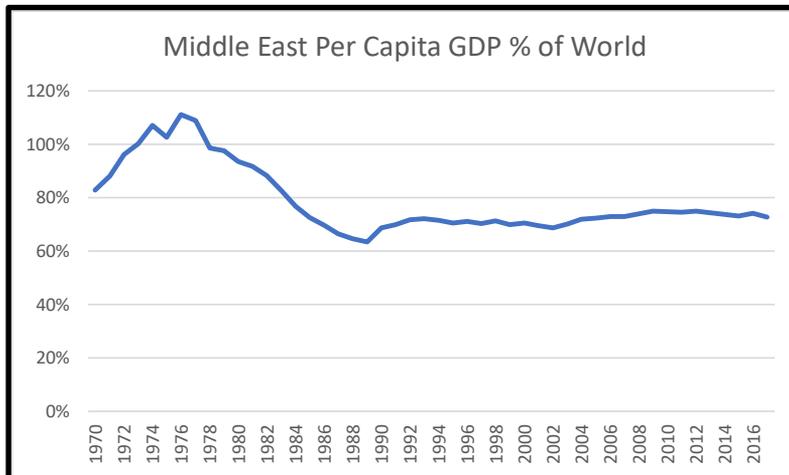
Source: LiveUAMap, Southfront  
Updated: 20 November 2015

ALJazeera

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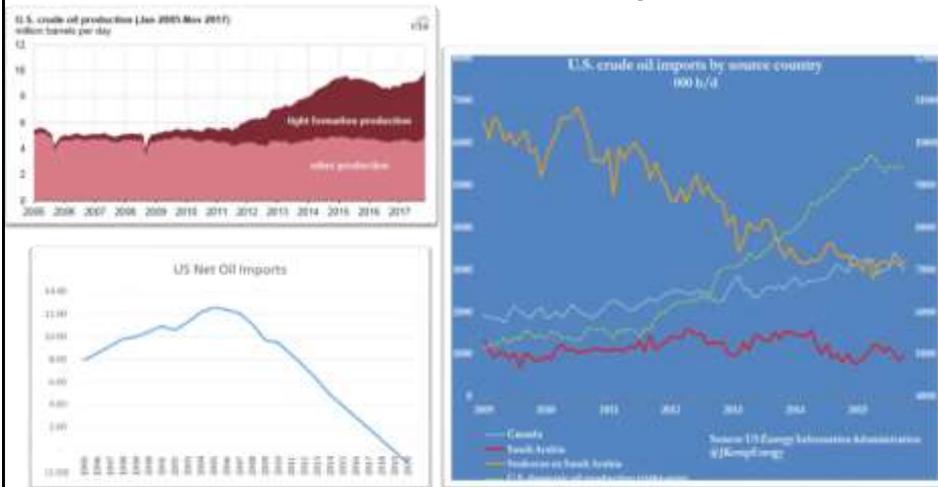
Middle East after 1970s oil boom, per capita GDP declined relative to world's



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## Thanks to shale (tight) oil boom, US need for Middle East oil imports reduced



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## Middle East oil: Curse with contracting clout

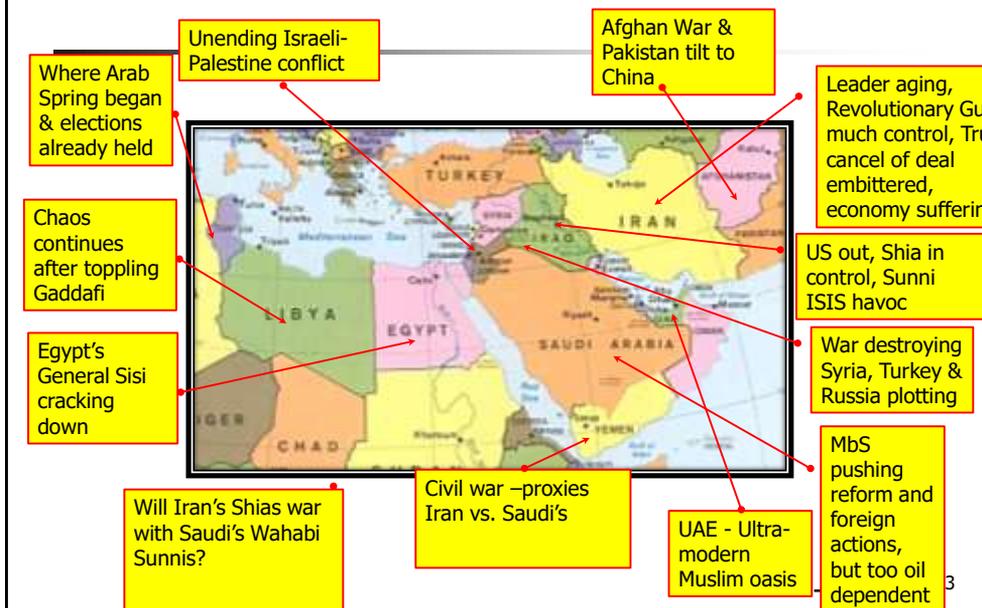
**Curse:** *"No state with serious oil wealth has ever transformed into a democracy. Oil lets dictators buy off citizens, keep their finances secret, and spend wildly on arms."* *Foreign Affairs*, Sep/Oct 2011, "Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring?" by Michael L. Ross

**Contracting clout:** Since Cold War, an oil revolution has begun to diminish the centrality of the Middle East. Vast new fields in Russia, new drilling technology and "unconventional" hydrocarbons, such as Canadian tar sands, have unlocked vast new supplies. — *WSJ*, Sep 20, 2011, Review of Daniel Yergin, *The Quest*, by Steven F. Hayward

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## Geo-Political mess of Middle East



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## Middle East – key points from Great Decisions

1. In turmoil-decades of uprisings, civil wars, failed states, political crackdowns, etc.
2. Big states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt) each facing serious internal crises
3. Much touted Arab Spring squashed but resentment remains over corrupt and brutal dictators
4. Dominated by US for 60 years
5. Now Russian influence rising while US declining
6. Decade of war has devastated Syria
7. Lower significance of Israel vs. Arabs and rising of Iran vs. Saudi Arabia



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## Middle East – key points from Great Decisions (Continued)

8. Iran's clerics embittered by US withdrawal of nuclear deal is stirring instability in Iraq, Syria & Yemen and clashing with Israel and Saudi Arabia
9. Young, ambitious Saudi Prince MbS aggressive foreign policy (Khashoggi affair) & domestic reforms (Saudi Vision 2030)
10. Great decisions remain: Iran nuclear deal, relations with Saudi Arabia, Reset relations with Palestinians, ending wars in Syria, Yemen & Libya, improving human rights, Russia seeking permanent role ....
11. US policy: fight or flight? Pivot to Asia or stay to avert Russian and Iranian dominance



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## Discussion questions from Great Decisions

1. Is Iran a greater cause of problems in Middle East than Saudi Arabia? Which country could make the better ally in the future?
2. Should US give higher priority to democracy and human rights as opposed to backing autocrats for security reasons? Was canceling the Iran deal and re-imposing sanctions appropriate?
3. Should US pivot from Middle East to Asia?
4. Why are there so many failed states in Middle East?
5. Do you expect the state system and its current borders to continue or do you think other arrangements are possible?



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## Middle East remains in turmoil

- A century after borders drawn by colonial powers, states haven't achieved coherence or legitimacy and failing
- Crisis of leadership - autocrats incompetent & corrupt
- Borders challenged by nonstate actors - ISIS and Al Qaeda
- Hope for democracy from Arab Spring of 2011 dashed
- Afghanistan and Iraq wars unending and politically unstable
- Civil war destroying Syria - half-million civilians killed and 10 million displaced
- In Yemen 56,000 deaths since Jan. 2016 and 14 mil. facing starvation

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## Big states in Middle East facing serious internal crises

- Egypt (97 mil.), Iran (82 mil.), & Turkey (81 mil.) facing serious internal challenges
- Youngsters of Arab Spring protests bitterly disappointed
- President Sisi in Egypt - imposed a new authoritarianism
- Iran's Green movement protests of 2009 crushed
- Turkey, anti-government protests violently stopped, widespread arrests and purges since the failed coup
- Persian Gulf rulers have responded to protests with repression, blaming Iran, acting defensively

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## Why is a collapse happening now?

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- Decline in sovereignty has led to many of problems
- Development that took place in the 1920s to 1970s has broken down
- Saudi Arabia and Iran are stepping up and taking charge in the region
- Proxy wars have broken out in Libya and Syria as neighboring states impose military solution
- Crisis is a result of failed statehood - a lack of citizen participation and government accountability

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## Popular frustration is contributing to the turmoil

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- Iran and Turkey are under duress due to autocratic leadership, corruption, economic collapse, media suppression, and human rights abuses
- In Iran, 40 years after the revolution, people are fed up with the state
- In Turkey, Erdogan has increased the role of religion, rolled back reforms and rights, and currency has collapsed

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## New political dynamics

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- Power operates through influence peddling and proxy warfare
- Damage by terrorists groups evidence states' inability to govern
- States confronted nonstate actors
- Problems arising from globalization, climate change, drought, deforestation and water shortages

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## The rise of media and public opinion

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- Satellite TV and social media – ended state's monopoly on information
- Governments launched networks to counter Al Jazeera
- Governments are being challenged by the "Twitter revolution"
- States turn off the Internet when faced with protests and invest in media wars and propaganda

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## US lacks solutions

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- Trump administration is disorganized and understaffed
- US hegemony in Middle East may never be restored- damage is too deep
- Middle East of lower strategic significance to US - due in part to rise of US oil production and failed American attempts in region

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## Roots of Middle East disorder trace back to the aftermath of WW I

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- England and France carved up the Ottoman Empire into six new states: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan
- Saudi Arabia and Yemen were added
- Arabs resented the arbitrary borders
- Palestinians and Kurds embittered because did not achieve statehood
- Empires fell and were replaced by nationstates
- Many found themselves minorities in newly created states

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## Middle East lacks viable nationstates

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- Only Egypt, Iran and to some extent Turkey remain well-established states similar to China, Russia, India and Japan
- Many Arab states were carved out of multinational and multiethnic identities
- Iraq from 1920-1990 tried to create a national identity that would supersede the identities of Sunni, Shia and Kurds

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## Turning point: Six-Day War of Israel versus Egypt

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- Israel humiliated Egypt, Jordan and Syrian armies and tripled its territory
- Took the West Bank from Jordan, Gaza Strip and Sinai from Egypt, and Golan Heights from Syria
- Were 200,000 refugees and great frustration among the Arabs

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## Pan Arabism failed in the 1950s and 1960s

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- Another Egypt-Israel war in 1973-turning many to Islam ideology
- Islamic religious revival led to political figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini

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## Rise of sectarianism after wars

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- Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Gulf War (1990-91) and Iraq war (2003-11) destroyed lives and raised distrust
- Iran-Iraq conflict fueled the struggle of Persians against Arabs, Sunni against Shia, and Pan Arabism against Pan Islamism
- Saddam Hussein with 18% Sunni Arabs was firmly in control and anti-Baathist and unraveled post-Saddam
- After fall of Saddam, Iraq had a Shia led government with Sunnis on the defense

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## Rise of Persian Gulf

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- Rise of Shia throughout the Arab world coincided with the rise of Sunni in Gulf – Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha
- Globalization of Gulf transformed the region - people have flocked there to work and play

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## Arab spring-"a false dawn"

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- Arab Spring of 2010-11 overthrew rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen
- Youthful uprisings failed due to brutal crackdowns and lack of leadership
- Popular anger also overflowed in Turkey in the Giza Park in Istanbul over the replacement of a park with a shopping mall
- Major protests in Iran, Arab world, and Turkey presage a new kind politics in the Middle East
- Even the regional borders were questioned and Hamas and by the Kurds

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## Saudi Arabia in transition – rise of MbS

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- In 2017 new Saudi King appointed his son Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) as crown prince
- Ambitious prince quickly amassed power and downplayed consensus
- Prince sees himself as a voice of the younger generation and reform and reining in religious traditions such as allowing women to drive –and launched vision 2030
- Prince’s reputation tarnished by murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul

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## Saudi economy and Prince MbS foreign policy

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- Saudis have been draining their financial reserves
- Reforms are needed to reduce subsidies, cut dependency on oil, and empower the private sector
- Prince sequestered 300 royals and businessmen and subjected them to a financial shakedown
- Prince takes a more aggressive foreign policy
- Saudi Arabia is obsessed with the Iranian threat and has led to proxy wars in the region

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## Shift in regional alliances

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- Qatar has supported Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Israel
- This led to expelling of diplomats and airspace closed to Qatar Airways
- Qatar like the Turks support the Muslim Brotherhood which is supported by the Saudis with their Wahhabi
- Increasing tension between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and struggle for the allegiance of all Muslims
- Upshot is been a virtual collapse of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman

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## Iran hurt by US withdrawal nuclear accord

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- US withdrawal from nuclear accord and sanctions has led to a feeling of betrayal
- Iranian currency has plunged
- European investors have backed out
- Iranian oil exports have fallen
- Tough times have led to protests
- People have lost their fear of government in the Middle East

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## Iran meddling and Revolutionary Guard rising

- Hardliners have increased pressure on moderate President Rouhani for selling out to Americans
- Iran has encouraged Shia militants in Iraq and supported Assad in Syria
- Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei is ailing
- Now the Revolutionary Guard is powerful
- Revolutionary Guard has strong economic interests and benefits and will be difficult to dislodge or moderate
- US worries that pro-Iranian militias will gain control of Iraq's government
- Future role of Iran in Iraq is problematic

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## Syria Crisis

- Syria tearing itself apart: Civil War in West and fight against Islamic State in East
- Support from Iran and Russia keeping Assad in power
- Trump like Obama does not want to commit troops
- US has supported airstrikes
- Saudi Arabia and UAE have funded insurgents
- Turkey burdened with 3.5 million Syrian refugees has troops
- Israel has launched airstrikes against military assets of Iran in Syria

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## Israel and the Palestinians

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- Trump has tilted toward Israel-designating Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, cutting aid to UN support of Palestinian refugees, and closing the PLO office in Washington
- Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, has been Trump's voice in the region
- US has lost its credibility as unbiased

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## Stalemate and tragedy in Yemen

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- A tragedy is unfolding in Yemen-between the Iranians support Houthis and Saudi support of majority Sunnis
- Saudis very concerned about Yemen - a failed state on the border
- Both sides have committed war crimes and prevented delivery of food and medicines
- Water and sewage systems have been disabled and a cholera epidemic is ongoing

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## Terrorism

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- Terrorism is still seen as a major problem-although the Islamic state controls only 1% of the territory it formally held in Iraq and Syria it remains a global threat
- Al Qaeda likewise retains jihadists
- Countering terrorism remains a primary mission of the US military in Middle East

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## US policy in age of Trump

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- Disorder in the Middle East generates confusion about what to do
- Trump has acted counter to foreign policy establishment by ending the Iraq nuclear accord and moving US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem
- Trump has reversed many of Obama's policies: increased support of autocrats and not supported democratization and human rights
- Trump's defense budget prioritizes countering China and Russia rather than fighting terrorism

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## Middle East lower priority for US

- Energy security now less important as US oil production thanks to shale oil boom
- US imports of oil from Gulf less than 20%, declining and oil prices are relatively low
- Long-term deal questioned: Saudis provide oil and US provide security
- Trump downplays multilateralism and emphasizes "American First"
- Trump sees Iran as a source of most problems in Middle East because of its nuclear program, ballistic missiles, military adventures in Iraq, Syria and human in support of Hezbollah and Hamas

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## Key issues in the Middle East

- **Iran nuclear deal:** by withdrawing US has antagonized not only Iran other signatories. Reduces likelihood of cooperation with Iran in resolving Middle East conflicts
- **Relations with Saudi Arabia:** Khashoggi affair concern about keeping Saudi Arabia stable and not destabilizing others
- **Reset relations with the Palestinians:** Given strong support of Israel and criticism of Palestinians, US not likely to accepted to play up key role in resolving this long and bitter conflict
- **Contribute to a solution in Syria:** Looks like Assad will prevail and US will not play a major role but Russia, Iran and Turkey will
- **Ending the wars and Yemen and Libya:**
- **Improving human rights in the Middle East**

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## Summary: Middle East remains a troubling and confusing mess

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- Middle East blames problems on outsiders
- US policies may be contributing to regional instability
- Time to rethink US Middle East policy
- Middle East may be at a tipping point—a major conflict along the Iranian-Saudi divide
- US needs to provide incentives for discussion and negotiations
- Need to achieve mutual agreements for benefit of all

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## Middle East-regional disorder

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- Middle East is in turmoil—decades of uprisings, civil wars, failed states, political crackdowns, etc.
- All this has destabilized the region
- Global powers are now competing for influence; alliances have shifted
- US is reconsidering its Middle East policy
- Political landscape in Middle East is changing—Russian influence rising while US declining

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## Shifting roles and alliances

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- Now much more robust Russian role – enhanced by US withdrawing
- US not what it used to be in the region
- Russia is the new big factor in the Middle East but is it sustainable?
- Iran is seeking more influence-it's revolutionary regime is mobilizing Shia to expand its influence
- Iran has given strong support to Assad and Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Palestine and Yemen
- Iran is encouraging non-state (i.e. terrorist) groups and doing rather well

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## Region has been dominated by US for 60 years

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- US attacked Iraq and now a region of failed states, poverty, unemployment and terrorism
- After the Arab Spring countries fell apart and became much more active in foreign policy
- Yemen has suffered massive air attacks from the Saudis, UAE and others
- Rebel Houthis of Yemen have turned to Iran for support
- Saudi Arabia says that Yemen is very critical - along its border

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## Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

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- GCC – Formed in 1981 by 6 Arab states of Persian Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE)
- GCC- led by Saudi Arabia and UAE confronting Iran
- GCC members cut diplomatic ties with Qatar due to Qatar's embrace of various terrorist and sectarian groups
- US in an awkward position - important base in Qatar and elsewhere in region

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## War has raged for a decade and devastated Syria

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- In 2011 Obama wanted to avoid getting directly involved with troops – and so does Trump
- Russia sees the conflict as a way to get involved by supporting Assad and keeping US off balance and gaining a permanent presence in the region
- Iran and Saudi Arabia are chief rivals for influence in the region and in a power struggle
- Iran is very anti-Western, anti-Israeli, and Shiite whereas Saudi Arabia is pro-West and Sunni

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## Shrinking significance of Israel vs. Arabs

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- No longer is role of Israel and Arab conflict the prime issue
- Now it's more Saudi vs. Iran
- Even doubtful that there will ever be a solution to this Israel-Palestinian issue
- Arab countries questioning themselves

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## The Syria war

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- Erupted after the Arab Spring
- Syria is predominantly Sunni but Assad and his minority government is Alawite - Shiite
- Conflict started peacefully but because of a severe crackdown by Assad became violent
- Syrian conflict has become a regional issue as outsiders have gotten involved
- It serves as a proxy war of the US versus Russia

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## Fall of Saddam Hussein created a vacuum – Iran and Russia have benefited

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- No new order emerged in Iraq and minority Sunnis felt disenfranchised
- Sunni extremists joined ISIS with the goal of forming a caliphate
- In vacuum of Sunni leadership, jihadist created & got involved in Syria
- Russia & Turkey have extended their influence in Syria
- Putin has taken advantage of chaos and has bolstered his image while making US, who wanted to stay out, look weak
- Flood of Syrian refugees hurting Europe

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## Middle East sets at a crossroads of the world

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- Main avenue connecting Europe, Africa and Asia – plus 60% world oil reserves
- US 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal has had major consequences-it has weakened the US position in the region, raised doubts about our reliability among our allies, and given our enemies a major talking point
- Also US moving its embassy to Jerusalem has undermined US credibility with Palestinians

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## What should be US focus?

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- Some say US focus in Middle East should be on security and continued access to energy
- But, fracking has increased US energy security and lessened the importance of Middle East oil to US
- Historically US has been a guarantor of oil flow not only to US but rest of world
- Others say US must remain active in region - continue to oppose Russia and not let a vacuum develop that Russia can exploit

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## What to do in Syria?

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- Should US let regional powers work it out?
- Does US still have prime interest in Middle East?
- Should we contain Russia in the region? Traditionally US has been containing Russia
- Russia is an outside power and not a good actor
- Should US intervene and push for regime change?
- Syria has been costly war – 500,000 dead and 12 million displaced
- Erdogan and Putin in talks what to do in Syria after US exit despite being anti- and pro-Assad (*WSJ*, 1/24/2019)

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