

Chapter 1

The Middle East's Relevance in the 21st Century

In This Chapter

- ▶ Grasping the Middle East's relevant issues
- ▶ Tracing contemporary violence in the Middle East to two major political events: World War II and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
- ▶ Destroying stereotypes and breaking monoliths
- ▶ Understanding varying perspectives on terrorism (militancy)

Like it or not, you live in a global society where nearly everything you do affects others, and other people's actions also affect you. Every time you purchase a product made abroad (which is more often than you may imagine), you're contributing to a global network of mechanisms that influence the lives of millions of people you'll never meet. Every time OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) raises the price of oil, higher prices make their way to the gas pump, impinging on your budget and reducing your ability to buy items for your family and yourself.

While you were going about your business on September 11, 2001, 19 Arabs hijacked four civilian airliners and flew three of them into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, killing more than 3,000 innocent people. This single event has likely changed your life, your worldview, and your opinions on the Middle East. First, you may have been among the throngs of people who began a concerted effort to educate themselves on the Middle East. Bookstores rushed to keep the shelves stocked with books on the Near East, Islam, and terrorism, while regional experts tirelessly attempted to keep up with requests to speak on TV and radio, give lectures, and participate in panel discussions on Middle Eastern issues. Religious studies and Near East studies departments struggled to answer phones and meet the growing demand of students who suddenly wanted crash courses in Islam and the Near East. Suddenly, the Middle East was relevant.

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This chapter discusses the importance of the Middle East to our 21st-century world by highlighting issues relevant to you: oil, economy, terrorism, environment, art, literature, and human rights among them.

Making Sense of It All

With the recent turmoil in the Middle East, many people in the West have tried to find out more about the underlying issues, but this task can be a confusing one. The information they gleaned from the TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, and the Internet, at times seemed contradictory or filled with obscure terminology, complex concepts, and scores of foreign names of people and places.

Because I've lived, studied, and traveled in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, my friends, family, and colleagues often ask me questions about the Taliban, *madrasas* (theological schools), Pashtuns, Hamas, General Pervez Musharraf, martyrdom, *sharia* (Islamic law), and the Quran, along with a whole host of other topics. *The Middle East For Dummies* provides the essentials on religion, politics, society, and history of the Middle East so that you can process all the data that you're downloading from the Internet, TV, newspapers, and other sources.

Following the headlines

The events taking place in the far-off Middle East have a lot to do with you. In fact, the Middle East is so relevant to Westerners that they can no longer afford to ignore it. You read about the region in the headlines everyday, and the most visible reason that the Middle East's events, trends, and politics affect you is the impact that terrorism has had on the West. If you traveled abroad in the past, you probably think twice about flying overseas now, don't you? In fact, you may think twice about flying at all. The tighter restrictions, longer lines, and baggage screening at airports are a direct result of September 11. After the July 2002 murder of three people standing at the El Al airline ticket counter at the Los Angeles International Airport, many people feel even less comfortable just waiting in lines.

Understanding global Islamic militancy

A wave of anti-Western feelings is currently washing over the Muslim World. All too often this anti-Western sentiment has taken the form of deadly violence against innocent civilians. Islamic militancy has struck in many parts of the world. Consider the following in the month of October 2002.

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- ✓ **Bali:** Militants bomb two Bali nightclubs, killing 183 people. Most of the victims are Australian, British, and Indonesian.
- ✓ **French Oil Tanker Limberg:** Suicide bombers attack a French oil tanker, killing a Bulgarian crewmember in Yemen.
- ✓ **Moscow:** Approximately 50 Chechen separatists storm the Moscow Palace of Cultural Theater, taking approximately 750 hostages, only three of whom are Americans. More than 100 die when Russian security forces pump an airborne chemical agent into the theater in order to disable the militants.

Unfortunately, Islamic militancy has impacted the West and has dominated the media, much in the same way that violence and conflict fills history books. Other issues, often filled with controversy, also fill the headlines.

Art, architecture, and history

Five millennia of art and architecture telling the region's history saturate the Middle East. Egypt's pyramids, royal tombs, and ancient relics, like mummies, sarcophagi, and statues, and the Holy Land's countless sites held sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, like the Wailing Wall, Church of the Holy Sepulcher, and Dome of the Rock are just glimpses into the Middle East's treasure chest of art, architecture, and history (for more, see Chapter 23). You're probably also aware the region's art has suffered setbacks recently. In 2001, the Taliban destroyed the 50-meter tall Buddhist statues that had endured two millennia in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. During the wars in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, looters decimated holdings, most notably in Iraq's National Museum of Antiquities.

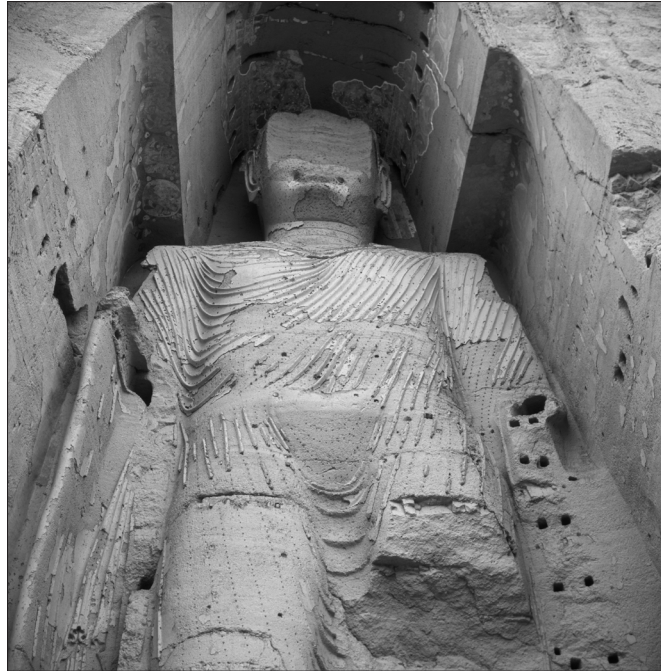
Gender and human rights

Gender in the Middle East is a complex topic. Turkey, Israel, and Pakistan can boast having elected female prime ministers. The highly publicized activities of educated, visible Jordanian queens Nur and Rania represent the more progressive elements in Middle Eastern society. An increase in women-run businesses and improved education for girls in several countries signals a shift in traditional attitudes. Yet women continue to suffer in the region.

The Taliban became the most recent regime in the Middle East to emerge as poster boys for human rights abuses. The most commonly cited infraction was their treatment of women. In many parts of Afghanistan, women were forbidden to work in most jobs and travel outside the home alone or without a *chador* (type of veil). Furthermore, in many areas, girls and women were denied access to education. Women also weren't allowed to drive cars. When found in violation of these Islamic regulations, a special religious police under the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue would beat or arrest the perpetrators.

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Figure 1-1:
One of
several
Buddhist
statues
destroyed
by the
Taliban in
Bamiyan,
Afghanistan.



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The Taliban didn't create all these practices; many they borrowed from Saudi Arabia. The issue of forbidding women to drive, for instance, came to a head in Saudi Arabia in November 1990 with the arrival of 500,000 Americans to the country for the Gulf War. Hoping to draw international sympathy for their cause (women's rights), 45 Saudi women drove automobiles to downtown Riyadh defying the ban. The Saudi Commission for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue arrested the women. The most vociferous of the religious police labeled the women "communist whores." Some of the women lost their jobs. More controversial yet was the incident in March 2002, when religious police blocked an exit of a burning school, preventing the girls from fleeing the fire because the girls weren't wearing the appropriate Islamic attire presentable for the public. Even though 15 girls lie inside dying in the fire, outside the religious police dutifully busied themselves with beating young girls for not wearing the *abaya* (black robe and headdress).

Oil and economy

Because most of the world's oil reserves lie in the Middle East, the global economy hinges on the unimpeded production and flow of that oil. Disturbances of any type — war, rumors of war, or militancy — upset the delicate balance of the global economy and can affect countries for a variety of reasons. For

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example, since the USS Cole bombing in 2000, Yemen's already ailing economy has been reeling. After a wave of tribal kidnappings, bombings, and other violence, estimates indicate a loss of \$7.6 million a month, which is substantial for a small developing nation of 18 million people. The bombing of two Bali nightclubs in October 2002 has had a devastating impact on Indonesia's economy, which relies heavily on tourism. The Jakarta Stock Exchange plunged 10 percent immediately after the bombings because investors worried that the violence may convince foreign firms to pull out.

Ecology and environment

On October 6, 2002, a suicide bomber attacked the French oil tanker Limburg off the coast of Yemen, killing one Bulgarian crewmember and spilling 90 million barrels of oil. The oil spill has caused serious ecological damage to coral reefs, fish, birds, and other marine life. This spill is dwarfed by the destruction wreaked in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War when offshore oil platforms and oil tankers served as military targets. A recent U.N. report found that 25 years of war, drought, and famine have devastated Afghanistan's environment. Deforestation, desertification, water contamination, oil dumps, and soil erosion are among the country's most prominent environmental problems. And you probably remember that Saddam Hussein's soldiers set 1,164 Kuwaiti oil wells ablaze as they were withdrawing in 1991.

Humanitarian issues

Take Lebanon, for instance, where an estimated 100,000 Lebanese were killed, 250,000 maimed or injured, and more than 1 million forced to flee their homes during the civil war. In the Iran-Iraq War, some 500,000 were killed. After 25 years of war, Afghanistan's soil is saturated with land mines, infesting an estimated 344 million square meters of territory. More than 150 people a month, frequently children, fall victim to mines. In 1992, a growing humanitarian crisis in Somalia, brought on by the century's worst drought and exacerbated by civil war, left 300,000 dead. Tribal warlords demanded loyalty from the starving population in return for access to food. Rival factions used military force to strangle U.N. supply routes, raid and hoard food supplies, and extort money from relief agencies. U.S. and U.N. peacekeepers stepped in to lend stability to the suffering Somalis.

Judeo-Christian tradition

If you live in the West, you're a product of Judeo-Christian tradition, which itself was born in the ancient Middle East. The Bible's origins, for instance, lie in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan. The notion of *hell* that has played an important role in Western religion, culture, and literature, not to mention a central theme in so many Hollywood movies, originated in the Middle East (see Chapter 4). Ever wonder why you get Sunday off? It's a religious day of rest. Christmas, Easter, and Hanukkah are all holidays embedded in our society.

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The Middle Eastern story of infant Moses floating down the River Nile or concepts like *sacrifice* and *the golden rule* are so ingrained in our culture that imagining life without them is difficult.

Apart from these few reasons why the Middle East is relevant, I could name many more. Approximately 1.2 billion Muslims populate the globe. Islam is America's fastest-growing religion; an estimated 5 million Muslims live in the United States. If you pay taxes, then you support military and economic aid to both Israel and Egypt, as well as Turkey and many other countries in the region. You probably have friends or family members who have recently served in the military in Afghanistan or Iraq or who have been stationed in the Near East. Middle Eastern work, travel, trade, food, and other elements are woven into the very fabric of our Western society. Our destiny is intertwined with that of the Middle East. The first step in beginning to understand the Middle East is meeting it halfway.

Meeting the Middle East halfway

The issues that I mention in previous sections dominate the headlines, and you've probably already run across many of them. Just as history books and headlines are generally filled with wars and invasions and other brutalities of which humanity is capable, *The Middle East For Dummies* discusses the Middle East's historical and political developments. This political history requires an accounting of revolts, revolutions, wars, torture, invasions, and yes, Islamic militancy. In order to understand the current "mess" that you read about or watch on TV, you have to face some tough issues.

The Middle East's greatest asset

The Middle East's greatest asset — its people along with their customs — is the main reason the Middle East should interest you. Daily life for most people in the Middle East is pretty routine. Parents raise their children, kids go to school and do homework (yuck), and families attend functions, such as weddings and parties. People sing, dance, write poetry, create art, joke and laugh, cook fantastic food, work long hours, pay their bills, have kids, grow old, and do most of the things you do. I have, therefore, reserved a considerable portion of the book to capture various dimensions of Middle Eastern life. The chapters on food, literature, ethnicity, customs, and art provide a window into the Middle East's rich and diverse culture.



Although Islamic militancy and religious and ethnic violence currently snatch the lion's share of headlines, most of the world's Middle Easterners have never participated in any act of violence, nor have they even picked up a firearm or even seen an explosive device in real life. Most have never conspired against any nation, burned effigies of a U.S. president, or shouted

"Death to America." By and large, Middle Easterners are among the kindest, most tolerant, and most hospitable people on earth. Although the vast majority of Middle Eastern people don't actively participate in violence, they still may harbor ill will against the West or sympathize with suicide bombers or people the West labels as "terrorists."

If you're truly going to understand why Islamic militants hate the West and how some Muslims (and Christians) could possibly sympathize with Islamic militants, you need to release the old biases and stereotypes and attempt to look at various Middle Eastern worldviews. This advice doesn't mean sympathizing with any particular group or accepting its justifications, but rather it means you must meet the Middle East halfway. The Middle East is a multifaceted world that can best be fully appreciated with an open mind.

Wiping out the monoliths



Middle Eastern people, whether Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, or whoever, are as diverse as any other religious or ethnic group. You can't lump all Jews or all Muslims into monolithic categories where all members think, walk, and act alike. Like Westerners, members of all these communities disagree, argue, challenge, reconcile, and fight.

In the January 2003 elections in Israel, for instance, the Likud party ran on a platform of stiff resistance against the Palestinians, while the Labor party campaigned to negotiate with the Palestinians and withdraw from the Occupied Territories (see Chapter 11).

You really can't view the controversial Taliban who ruled Afghanistan with a heavy hand as a monolithic entity. Taliban rulers in the capital of Kabul outlawed girls' education, forcing dedicated female teachers to set up clandestine schools in their homes. Yet, in May 2000, just 40 miles from the capital in the Taliban stronghold of Gardez, I visited a number of legal girls' schools filled with daughters of Taliban rank and file.

We're Muslims, not terrorists

If you want to conduct a simple examination of perspectives on terrorism, read a few articles from Pakistani newspapers on violence in Kashmir, and then read a handful on the same events in Indian newspapers. Pakistani articles routinely use the term *freedom fighters* or *mujahideen* (holy warriors) while Indians call the same militants *terrorists*. (I cover this multifaceted debate in more detail in Chapter 8.)

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Most of the Muslim community, whether living in the West or in the Muslim World, is a little peeved. The Muslims feel slighted, even offended, that the West now looks at them with suspicious eyes. In an effort to crack the monoliths, try to appreciate the complexities of the term so loosely referred to as *terrorism* in the West. Although all but the most extreme Muslims renounce terrorism, various nuances regarding armed resistance against the enemy deserve special consideration:

- ✓ **Condemning terrorism:** Most Muslims condemn terrorism (including the state variety), which to them means unfair or unacceptable violence against innocent civilians. Interpretation of the categories of acceptable and unacceptable targets becomes tricky.
- ✓ **Denouncing all forms of Islamic terrorism:** Many Muslims, especially those who've been acculturated to the West, condemn all forms of terrorism and militancy.
- ✓ **Interpreting terrorism:** Even among Islamic militants a debate rages on about how best to interpret acceptable acts of armed resistance. Some proponents of Palestinian militancy, for instance, attempt to rationalize harmful actions by arguing that suicide bombings and killing of Israeli civilians is okay only in the Occupied Territories, but not in Israel proper.
- ✓ **Sympathizing with terrorists:** Many Muslims (and Christians) denounce terrorism, but sympathize with the plight of those Muslims they feel are forced through desperation to commit such militant acts.
- ✓ **Understanding state terrorism:** Many Muslims charge that hostile governments have utilized unwarranted, brutal force against civilians that amounts to state terrorism.
- ✓ **Using the terms “terrorism” or “freedom fighting”:** Other Muslims condone armed opposition against those they perceive as repressive forces, such as the Indian army in Kashmir or the Israeli Defense Force in Palestine. In such cases, they argue, Muslim resistance should be labeled *freedom fighting*, not *terrorism*.

Do these points seem difficult to understand? You can try to reconcile such a line of thought by trying to imagine Christian fundamentalists who may condemn the bombing of an abortion clinic while sympathizing with the terrorists' cause. Certainly not all demonstrators against abortion are *terrorists* or *militants*. Because the definition of *terrorism* and *terrorist* becomes increasingly difficult when taking various points of view into account, throughout the remainder of the book, I generally refer to such acts of violence as *militancy*.

Navigating Through the Book

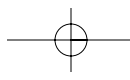
The Middle East For Dummies is organized into seven parts. The rest of Part I acquaints you with the diverse geography and climate of the Middle East as

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well as its people, their culture, and hospitality. Part II provides the essentials for Middle Eastern history. This part is broken into ancient, medieval, and modern history running to about the mid-20th century. Part III discusses political and economic issues related to current events. Within this part, Chapter 7 treats various types of leadership in the region, as well as experiments in communism, socialism, and democracy. Chapter 8 describes Islamic militancy in a nutshell, while Chapter 9 deals with the stormy romance between Islam and the West. Chapter 10 rounds out this part with a general discussion of oil and economics in the region.

Regions in turmoil is the topic for Part IV. If you really want to get to the meat of Middle Eastern affairs today, this section is for you. It begins with Chapter 11 that digs into the complicated events in Israel and Palestine. The next three chapters describe the history of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan respectively, laying out the important historical developments leading to the most recent ongoing crises. Part V looks at regions in repair — North Africa, the Fertile Crescent, the Arabian Peninsula, and the non-Arab states — that represent numerous nations attempting to recover from turmoil in their recent pasts.

Next is Part VI, which deals with religion and culture in detail, including major and minor religions in addition to family dynamics, language and literature, and arts and sciences in the Middle Eastern context. The Part of Tens closes out the book in Part VII. These three chapters should be significant to you as they deal with ten key ethnic groups, ten key militant groups, and ten key challenges facing the Middle East in the 21st century.



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