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## *The Middle East and North Africa: The Global Context*

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## 2

# The Middle East and North Africa: The Global Context

There could scarcely be a more appropriate part of the world in which to test the usefulness of politico-geographic perspectives than the Middle East and North Africa. No region of comparable size has received so much anxious attention in recent years. Why should this region seem to have been the scene of so much violence and political change? What has made it the focus of great power interest? Have geographic characteristics influenced events? Many have sought the answer to these questions but all too often in the context of distorted and inaccurate views of the region. Interestingly, there seems to be a recognition that the geographic setting is important, as shown by the frequent adoption of pseudogeographic terms, such as chokepoints, crossroads, critical interfaces, and arc of crisis, by the media.<sup>1</sup> Though such terms are probably bandied about too readily, they underline the fact that, even at the global scale, geographic realities have some bearing on the politics of the region. This chapter is an attempt to highlight some of these realities, such as distance, physical and cultural diversity, and relative location.

### The Region Defined

Although the term "Middle East" has been traced back with certainty only to 1900, it may have been in use in Britain's India Office since the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> It first came into prominence when used by the American naval historian A. T. Mahan in 1902 to describe a region around the Gulf that, as seen from Europe, was neither "Near East"

nor "Far East." Mahan was discussing the geographical implications of Russian influence in Iran and of German plans to build a railway to Baghdad. Although the commonly accepted definition of the Middle East now encompasses a far greater area than that of Mahan, the geostrategic overtones of the term linger on. The Middle East became familiar in the United States and Europe in World War II when both the British and the Allied headquarters in Cairo—known as H.Q. Middle East—covered large parts of northern and eastern Africa as well as Iran, Turkey, and all the Arab states east of the Suez Canal. If any more exposure was needed to fix the region indelibly in the popular mind, it resulted from the region's being the source of more than a quarter of the world's oil production as well as the possessor of more than 60 percent of the world's known oil reserves.

A half dozen North African states are also discussed in this book for a number of reasons.<sup>3</sup> They are historically and culturally inseparable from the Middle East. They share a common language with the Arab-speaking states, a common religion in Islam, and political aspirations within the Arab community that also broadly coincide. Both North Africa and the Middle East are key oil-producing regions; states in both regions belong to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC).<sup>4</sup> The Mediterranean Sea is also an important common factor.

The Middle East and North Africa, as we have defined them, are neither physically nor culturally bounded regions, although their physical environment and cultural patterns endow them with a distinctive regional identity. There is no standard definition of the Middle East. It is commonly taken to refer to Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Arab states east of Suez together with Egypt and Libya.<sup>5</sup> Sudan and Cyprus are sometimes included, less often Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. However the region may be defined, it is not a closed political system. Culturally, the Middle East in certain areas extends far beyond the outer limits of some of the states of the region, whereas in other areas—as in southern Sudan—different cultural regions impinge on it. The geopolitical influence of the Middle East and North Africa extends into Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean as well as into the Sahara and the Horn of Africa. No grouping of states can claim to belong to so many geopolitical realms. The coastal states of North Africa are African, Mediterranean, Islamic, and Arab—all influenced politically and economically by nearness to Europe. Most of the states of the Middle East are in Asia, but they have strong ties with the Euro-Mediterranean world or the Afro-Indian Ocean world or both. All but Cyprus, Israel, and Lebanon are Islamic; only Cyprus, Iran, Israel, and Turkey are not Arab.

### The Significance of Location

The coming together of the Eurasian and African continental land masses along an axis through the Mediterranean and Red seas has created one of the world's great human and physical junctions. Europe and Africa are separated by a few miles of water at the Strait of Gibraltar in the west. Europe and Asia are separated by the narrow Turkish Straits in the east. But for the Suez Canal, Africa and Asia would be joined at the Isthmus of Suez; they are separated by only a few miles at the southern end of the Red Sea at Bab al-Mandab. The Strait of Gibraltar, the Turkish Straits, and the Isthmus of Suez have been strategic crossing points for invading armies for centuries. In time of peace, they are vitally important for the movement of people and goods between the continents and within the region. The Turkish Straits are already bridged, and there are tunnels under the Suez Canal. Discussions are also in progress concerning a possible fixed link across the Strait of Gibraltar in the form of a bridge or tunnel. In the modern world, commercial links between Europe, Africa, and Asia are heavily dependent on sea and air communications; the closeness of Europe and North Africa encourage a high level of interaction.

Intercontinental trade between Europe and Africa and Asia has varied in style and scale over the centuries, but it has nearly always been important. In the past, it meant the painstaking transportation of silks and spices from the east overland through Asia. Similarly, slaves, ivory, and gold were brought across the Sahara by camel caravans for the markets of Europe. In modern times, trade has meant the exchange of oil and natural gas for modern technology and manufactured goods. Quite apart from such commercial interaction, the Middle East has acted as a passage between Europe and the East. To a lesser extent North Africa has been a transit link between Europe and black Africa. The transit function of the Middle East is best understood by glancing at the population distribution of the "world island" (Eurasia and Africa). Two marked concentrations of population stand out, one in western Europe, the other from the Indian subcontinent to the Far East. The Middle East stands astride the routes between the two by land, sea, and air—at the heart of the "world island."

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 linked the Atlantic and Indian oceans via the Mediterranean and Red seas (see Chapter 5). As a result, global perception of distance changed radically, and the Middle East acquired great geopolitical significance for the maritime powers. The saving in time and distance, which primarily means lower fuel costs, is up to 40 or 50 percent for certain voyages (Table 2.1). The advantages for commercial shipping are clearly attractive, particularly for smaller ships, but the canal's strategic value to naval ships is also important. Transfer of naval units from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean

*Table 2.1*  
Distances Between Selected Ports

	Via the Cape of Good Hope (nautical miles)	Via the Suez Canal (nautical miles)	Distance Saving (percentage)
London to			
Bombay	10,800	6,300	42
Kuwait	11,300	6,500	42
Melbourne	12,200	11,000	10
Calcutta	11,700	7,900	32
Singapore	11,800	8,300	30
Marseilles to			
Bombay	10,400	4,600	56
Melbourne	11,900	9,400	21
New York to			
Bombay	11,800	8,200	31
Singapore	12,500	10,200	18
Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia	11,900	8,300	30

*Source:* Adapted from W. B. Fisher, "Suez Canal," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., p. 768.

via the Suez Canal takes 17 to 18 fewer days than the voyage via the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa.

Communications are greatly assisted by the fact that the region is flanked by the Atlantic and Indian oceans and interpenetrated by five bodies of water: the Mediterranean, Red, Caspian, and Black seas and the Gulf. Far from creating barriers, the region's seas have generally been intensively used for commerce. Concomitantly, they have also been the scene of numerous naval and military struggles to control the main trade routes.<sup>6</sup> It is also worth remembering that the region's vast interior deserts were by no means impenetrable—even before the coming of modern roads and transport. The recognized camel caravan routes were traveled regularly, with towns on the desert margins functioning rather like ports.

### *Physical Background*

The Middle East and North Africa lie roughly between latitudes 20° north and 40° north in a transitional climatic zone between equatorial and midlatitude climates. Because of general atmospheric circulation patterns, a characteristic of these latitudes is the prevalence of aridity, with minimum amounts of rainfall registered at about 30° north. Scarcely any precipitation occurs during the summer months. The implications of

widespread aridity are many. The population of the region is relatively sparse and discontinuous in its distribution. Nomadism was widespread until recent decades, leaving a legacy of tribal values and attitudes in society. Where settled agriculture was practiced using irrigation, delicate infrastructures developed that became highly vulnerable in time of war. Scarce water resources often led to local quarrels, despite the existence of elaborate legal codes concerning their ownership and allocation. Such quarrels over water, as with land, could easily erupt into regional conflict. Today, there are serious international disputes over the allocation of water resources in several river basins as well as numerous local troubles over water.

The Middle East and North Africa are geologically extremely complex, chiefly because they occupy part of the earth's crust where three tectonic plates meet. As a result of the convergence of these plates, great ranges of high fold mountains have been thrown up, notably in the Maghreb and in the northern tier states of Turkey and Iran. Although these ranges present a magnificent sight, particularly when snow-clad, they are formidable barriers to travel. Peaks in the High Atlas of Morocco rise to over 13,000 feet (4000 meters). The Taurus range in southern Turkey rises to over 12,000 feet (3700 meters) in places. Mount Ararat in Turkey's eastern highlands reaches nearly 17,000 feet (5200 meters), and the region's highest peak, Mount Damavand in the Elburz Mountains along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, reaches 18,400 feet (5600 meters). The broad, long Zagros range of western Iran is also impressive in scale, reaching over 13,000 feet (4000 meters). It is not always appreciated that there are also important mountainous regions outside the northern Middle East; the Yemen Highlands, for example, have peaks of over 12,000 feet (3700 meters), and Mount Hermon in Syria is over 9800 feet (2800 meters). The region's mountain systems have often provided refuge for persecuted minorities or have been the stronghold of dissidents and brigands. In modern times, they have been the core areas from which anticolonial and antigovernment movements have sprung. Mountains have played an important role in the political geography of the Maghreb, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon and Iraq. The close proximity of highland and lowland and sea and desert have given much of the region terrains that can provide mobility for the attacker and security for the defender at the same time.

### **Population and Peoples**

Large tracts of arid and semiarid land ensure that the Middle East and North Africa are not extensively populated (Table 2.2). The total 1984 population of 278 million was about 5.6 percent of the world popula-

Table 2.2  
States of the Region: Area, Population, and GNP 1984

	Area (sq mi/sq km)	Area Rank	Population (millions)	Population Rank	Percent Urban	GNP (per capita) 1982 (US\$)
North Africa	3,271,306 (8,472,682)	—	123.8	—	42	
Algeria	919,600 (2,381,764)	2	21.4	5	52	2,350
Egypt	386,663 (1,001,457)	6	47.0	2	44	690
Libya	679,364 (1,759,553)	4	3.7	15	52	8,510
Morocco	254,817 (659,976)	8	23.6	4	41	870
Sudan	967,500 (2,505,825)	1	21.1	6	21	440
Tunisia	63,362 (164,107)	14	7.0	10	52	1,390
Southwest Asia	2,432,905 (6,301,224)	—	154.2	—	53	
Bahrain	231 (598)	22	0.4	21	81	9,280
Cyprus	3,572 (9,251)	20	0.7	20	53	3,840
Iran	634,000 (1,642,060)	5	43.8	3	55	—
Iraq	167,957 (435,009)	10	15.0	7	68	—
Israel	7,992 <sup>a</sup> (20,699)	18	4.2	12	87	5,810
Jordan	37,000 <sup>a</sup> (95,830)	15	3.5	14	60	1,690
Kuwait	9,375 (24,281)	17	1.6	17	90	19,870
Lebanon	3,400 (8,806)	21	2.6	13	78	—
Oman	105,000 (271,950)	11	1.0	19	8	6,090
P.D.R. Yemen <sup>b</sup>	111,075 (287,684)	9	2.1	16	38	470
Qatar	4,000 (10,360)	19	0.3	22	87	21,880
Saudi Arabia	864,800 (2,239,832)	3	10.8	8	70	16,000
Syria	71,498 <sup>a</sup> (185,180)	13	10.1	9	48	1,680
Turkey	301,383 (780,582)	7	50.2	1	45	1,370
United Arab Emirates	36,193 (93,740)	16	1.5	18	81	23,770

Table 2.2 (continued)  
States of the Region: Area, Population, and GNP 1984

	Area (sq mi/sq km)	Area Rank	Population (millions)	Population Rank	Percent Urban	GNP (per capita) 1982 (US\$)
Yemen A.R. <sup>c</sup>	75,290 (195,001)	12	5.9	11	38	500
(Gaza)	139 (360)	—	0.5	—	90	—
Total	5,704,211 (14,773,906)		278.0			

<sup>a</sup>Pre-1967 areas.

<sup>b</sup>People's Democratic Republic of Yemen

<sup>c</sup>Yemen Arab Republic.

Source: Adapted from 1984 *World Population Data Sheet*. Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, 1984.

tion in a region occupying just over 10 percent of the earth's surface. Although the region covers a far greater area than the United States, (see Figure 2.1) it has only 40 million more people. The average population size in the region's 22 states is under 12 million. The largest populations are in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran, which globally rank 18th, 19th, and 24th, respectively. These three states possess 52 percent of the region's population. Individually they each have sufficient manpower to be eligible for consideration among Cohen's emergent second-order powers, although other factors are likely to prevent them from achieving this status in the near future.<sup>7</sup> The region also includes some of the smallest states in the world both by area and population (Qatar, Bahrain, Cyprus, Oman, the United Arab Emirates [U.A.E.], and Kuwait). On the other hand, the population of the region as a whole is growing rapidly because death rates have fallen, whereas birth rates remain high. The average growth rate is 2.8 percent per annum. This means a doubling of population in about 25 years. Roughly 40 to 45 percent of the population is under 15 years old, and yet to have their children. The expected increase in population far exceeds that projected in the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union (see Table 2.3). Some 64 percent of the region's population lived in Arab states in 1984, which could rise to over 66 percent by the end of the century.

Rapid population increase coupled with urban growth provides an essential backdrop to the political geography of the region. Oil-producing states with large populations wish to press ahead with major and costly development projects that call for maximization of oil prices for short-term goals. The less populous producers prefer to keep prices down in the interests of long-term global economic stability. Large population increases have also led to a high degree of dependence on imported food in many states. At the same time, urbanization has significantly redistributed the population geographically and sharply decreased the

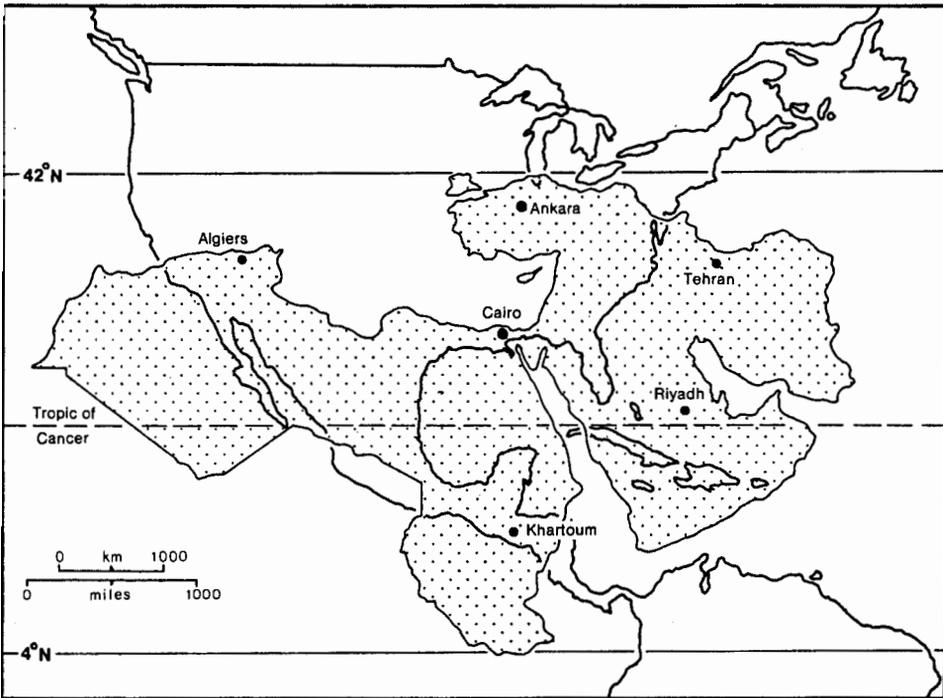


Figure 2.1 The Middle East and North Africa compared with North America by area and latitude. (After Robert A. Harper and Theodore H. Schumde, *Between Two Worlds: An Introduction to Geography*, third edition. Copyright © 1984 by Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., Dubuque, Iowa. Reprinted with permission of the authors.

percentage of people engaged in agriculture. Political awareness tends to be greatest among urban populations, who comprise 42 percent of North Africa's population and 53 percent of the Middle East's population.

Although 18 states of the Middle East and North Africa are officially Arab, cultural distribution patterns within the region are complex. Not all Arab states are exclusively inhabited by Arabs, and Arab minorities live outside the recognized Arab states. The peoples of the region have become so mixed racially that it is no longer useful to identify racial groups. The Arabs are probably as mixed racially as the inhabitants of Western Europe. Language is a more useful guide to the variety of peoples and can provide some indication of political aspirations. The dominant regional languages are Arabic, Turkish, and Persian (Figure 2.2). Arabic is a Semitic language that spread out from the Arabian peninsula with successive waves of conquerors and replaced existing languages in all but a few areas south of the Taurus and Zagros mountains. Berber is still widely spoken in parts of Morocco and Algeria; Kurdish in sections of Iraq and Syria; and a variety of African tribal lan-

Table 2.3  
Population Increases 1984–2000

	Population in 1984 (millions)	Population in 2000 (millions)	Increment
Middle East and North Africa	278	423	+145
Arab states	179	280	+101
Non-Arab states	99	143	+ 44
United States	236	268	+ 32
Soviet Union	274	316	+ 42
Western Europe	155	156	+ 1

Source: 1984 World Population Data Sheet. Washington, D.C.: Population Reference Bureau, 1984.

guages in southern Sudan. Altogether, about 57 percent of the region's inhabitants speak Arabic, although as Chapter 8 explains, the colloquial form varies spatially.

Invaders from the central Asian steppes introduced varieties of Altaic and Indo-European languages to the northern Middle East, largely replacing indigenous languages. In Asia Minor, ancient Asiatic tongues were replaced by Hittite and Turkish languages. Turkish, being part of the Altaic family, bears no resemblance to Arabic, although the two share some words as a result of an intertwined history and common Islamic faith. Since the 1920s, Turkish has been written in the Roman script. It is the dominant language of only one country in the region, Turkey. However, Turkish languages are widely spoken in neighboring Central Asia. Over the Iranian Plateau intrusive languages, like Persian, Kurdish, Afghan, and Pushtu, replaced indigenous languages. Persian, which belongs to the Indo-European family, bears little similarity to Arabic. However, it is written by using essentially the same script, and many Iranians learn basic Arabic in school because of its significance within Islam. The movements of peoples who spread these languages throughout the region were completed centuries ago. The introduction of Hebrew as the language of Israel is a small exception. This ancient Semitic language, which has a unique script (although it is part of the same family as Arabic), has been successfully revived in modern times as an element in the nation-forming process of the Jewish state.

## The Region in the Global System

### *The World of Islam*

Although estimates vary considerably, there are probably about 750 million Muslims in the world today or about 1 in 6 of the world's pop-

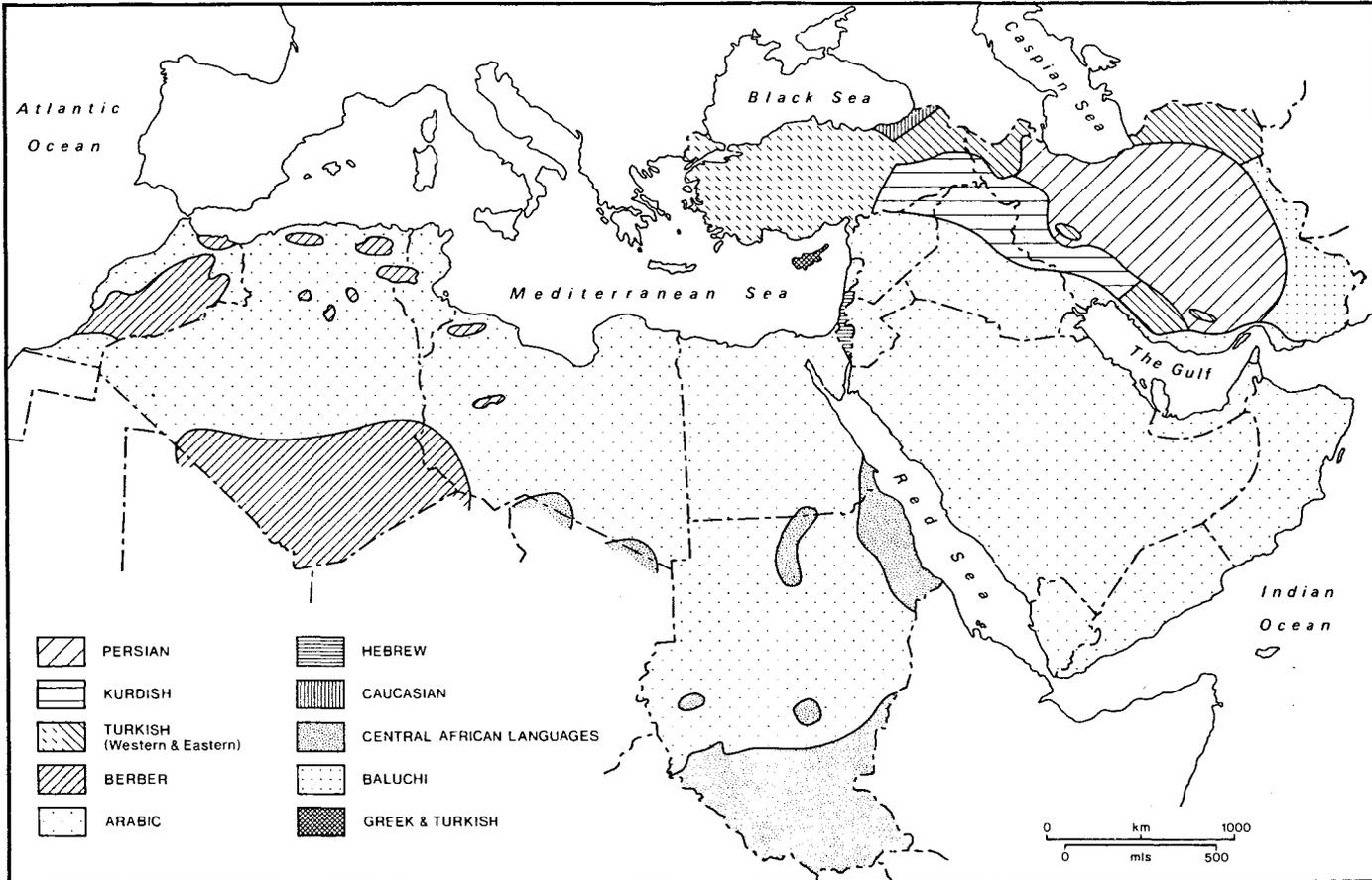


Figure 2.2 Languages of the Middle East and North Africa. (After Peter Beaumont, Gerald Blake, and J. Malcolm Wagstaff, *The Middle East: A Geographical Study*. New York: Wiley, 1976, p. 5. Copyright © 1976 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.)

ulation.<sup>8</sup> There are 50 states that have large Muslim populations; 40 of these describe themselves officially as Islamic states. About half of these, accommodating about one quarter of the world's Muslims, are located in the Middle East and North Africa. By far the largest Muslim populations are outside the region in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India (Figure 2.3). On the other hand, about 93 percent of the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa are Muslim. Less than 3 percent are Christians, about 3 percent adhere to tribal religions—chiefly in southern Sudan—and less than 2 percent are Jews. Because of its predominant position within the region, the Islamic religion is an integrating force of particular significance (see Chapter 8). The culture of the region is fundamentally Muslim. The Middle East is the birthplace and core region of Islam; its focal point is the pilgrim city of Mecca, which the faithful are supposed to visit once during their lifetime. Before modern transport, the lands closest to Mecca yielded the greatest number of pilgrims, and unity was most keenly felt at the center.

Although Islam unites the Middle East and North Africa, it also divides it between the Sunni and Shi'i branches. About 90 percent of Muslims are Sunnis. The schism in Islam dates almost from its beginning in the seventh century, originating in a dispute over who would succeed the Prophet Muhammad as Caliph (Successor) of Islam. Sunnis believed the Caliph should be selected on the basis of community consensus; Shi'is believed that the succession should be hereditary, beginning with Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law and the first Imam. Sunnis regard Ali as their fourth Caliph. The Sunni-Shi'i difference should not be overstated. All Muslims, regardless of sect, believe in the "Five Pillars" of Islam. Nevertheless, the schism has created fierce local rivalries from time to time and explains some of the political complexity of the Middle East, especially where geographical proximity of the two groups is most marked (Figure 2.3).

Iran is overwhelmingly Shi'i and has a large majority of all Shi'is in the region. Shi'is also form the majority in Iraq and Yemen A.R. and are important minorities in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and eastern Arabia. To complicate matters, the Shi'i are also split into a large number of sects, mostly on the basis of the line of succession after Ali. The most important are the Imamis or "Twelvers," who await the return of a "hidden" Imam to restore justice and righteousness in the world.<sup>9</sup> Another branch are the Zaydis, though their influence today is confined to the two Yemens. Finally, the Alawis, Druzes, and Isma'ilis, whose beliefs are somewhat obscure, consider themselves (but are not always considered by others) to be Shi'i. They are concentrated in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel.

The divisions within Islam are most significant in relationships between communities at village and town level. Internationally, they can occasionally be important, as in the current war between Iraq and Iran. Today, there is an increasing tendency for Islamic states to cooperate

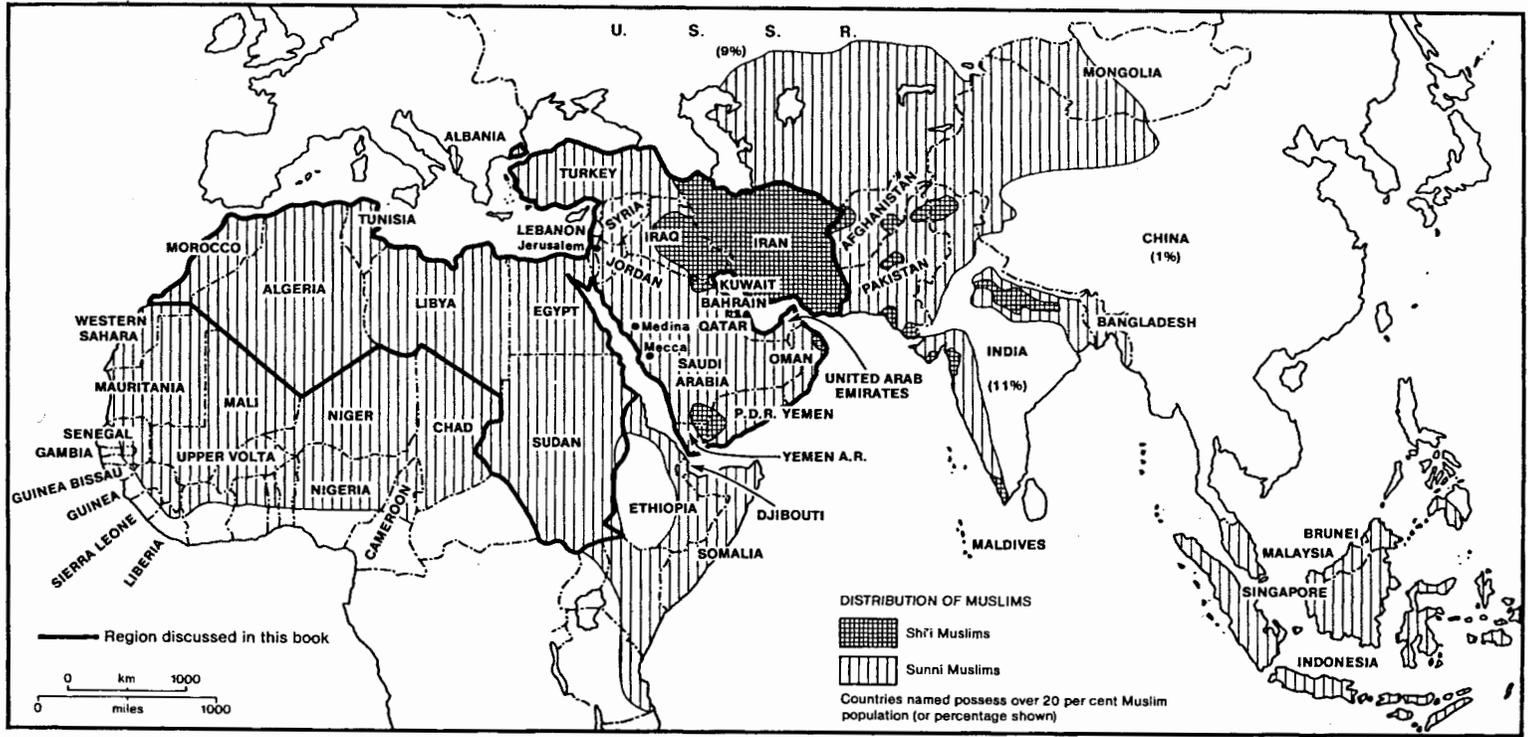


Figure 2.3 The world of Islam. (After John Paxton, ed., *The Statesman's Yearbook 1981-82*. London: Macmillan, 1981, endcover.)

in cultural and economic spheres. Islamic summit meetings are convened regularly, there is an Islamic Development Bank, and Islamic states have shown themselves willing to support Islamic political movements, as in Afghanistan and Eritrea. There is enormous potential for the worldwide mobilization of Islamic political feeling, which the geographical contiguity of so many Muslims could facilitate (Figure 2.3).

### *The Third World*

As a whole, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa belong to the Third World.<sup>10</sup> They are still generally at an early stage of industrialization and heavily dependent on the export of primary products and the import of food, consumer goods, equipment, and technology. Literacy rates, particularly among women, tend to be well below those of the industrialized countries. Almost all exhibit acute internal geographic and social inequalities. Yet there are some notable anomalies, as Table 2.2 shows. The high-income oil exporters are among the richest countries in the world, measured by gross national product (GNP) per capita, with U.A.E., Qatar, and Kuwait ranking first, second, and third, respectively, in the world. At the other end of the scale, Sudan, the two Yemens, and Egypt have among the world's lowest GNP per capita. A preoccupation with GNP per capita can, however, be misleading. Many states in the region register high per capita GNP's only because of their small populations. This is strikingly illustrated in Figure 2.4, which shows the world political map in relation to absolute size of national GNP. By this reckoning, the countries of the Middle East and North Africa do not appear out of place among the world's poorer states.

Four countries—Egypt, Israel, Syria, and Turkey—do not conform with the typical Third World economy, in that one fifth or more of their gross domestic product are derived from manufacturing industry. By contrast, the manufacturing sector in Sudan and the two Yemens is extremely poorly developed. In fact, these 3 states are among the 31 states classified by the U.N. as the world's least developed countries (or LLDC's). Despite these anomalies and contrasts, the region is included in the South (see Figure 2.4) in what has become known as the North-South dialogue. More important perhaps is the central location of the region within the South, and its favorable location on the fringe of the privileged North. There has been much discussion in recent years about the urgent need to transform economic relationships between the rich North and the poor South to give the latter a better deal. Future world stability may depend on the ability and willingness of the advanced countries to evolve a new world economic order. The geographic location of the North African and Middle Eastern states should give them a better chance of going into partnership with their neighbors of the North than have most states of the South. Some have already made

special agreements with the European Economic Community (EEC), and such arrangements could multiply. In time, the region could develop into a zone of rising prosperity between the poorer states of Africa and Asia, a role already symbolized by the fact that it is both a giver and receiver of aid.

The oil price increases of the 1970s gravely affected many Third World countries who had to pay more for goods from the industrial countries as well as for energy imports. The oil exporters of the Middle East and North Africa along with other exporters have been blamed by certain developing states for damaging their development prospects. Although financial aid from the oil producers may have compensated somewhat for these price increases,<sup>11</sup> much goodwill between the oil producers and the poorer consumers has been lost, and there is little sense of Third World solidarity between them.

### *Geopolitical Views of the World*

Political geographers have made several attempts to devise global geopolitical models of the relationships between states. What do they reveal, if anything, of the place of the Middle East and North Africa in the state system of the world? In some ways, it is tempting to dismiss these models as inaccurate, subjective, or antiquated, but they continue to be featured as an explanatory framework in books on political-geographic issues in the region. Are they valid?

Almost all discussions of global geopolitical perspectives begin with Halford J. Mackinder, largely because of his influence on subsequent ideas. Early this century, while the American historian A. T. Mahan was developing his ideas about seapower in international strategy, the British geographer Mackinder was restating the importance of land-power. Indeed, his views were partly a response to Mahan's views. Mackinder's basic thesis was that the inner area of Eurasia is the pivot region of world politics. With its abundant resources, it is also beyond the reach of the maritime powers. Mackinder noted that this pivotal area was surrounded by a marginal crescent, which embraced the Middle East (Figure 2.5a). If the pivot state should ever gain control of the marginal lands, thus gaining access to the sea, "the empire of the world would then be in sight."<sup>12</sup>

Although Mackinder modified his views in later years his basic model remained unchanged, with the land-based power competing for influence in a marginal crescent to which the maritime powers have access. The Mediterranean and Middle East would be key regions in the struggle. Mackinder's concepts have been overtaken by advances in arms technology, but Western strategists are apparently still behaving as though his model is valid.<sup>13</sup> The U.S. policy of post-World War II containment, according to which alliances and bases have been established throughout the Eurasian marginal crescent, is designed to prevent the

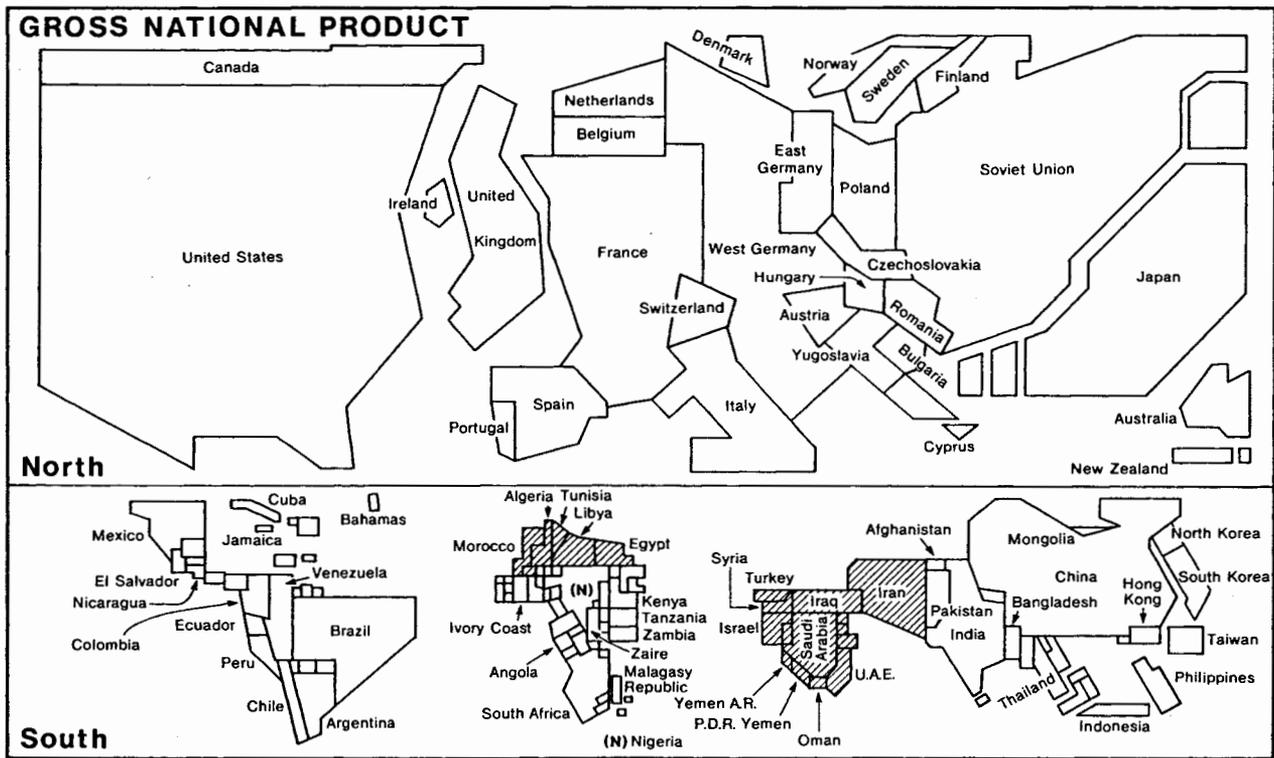


Figure 2.4a

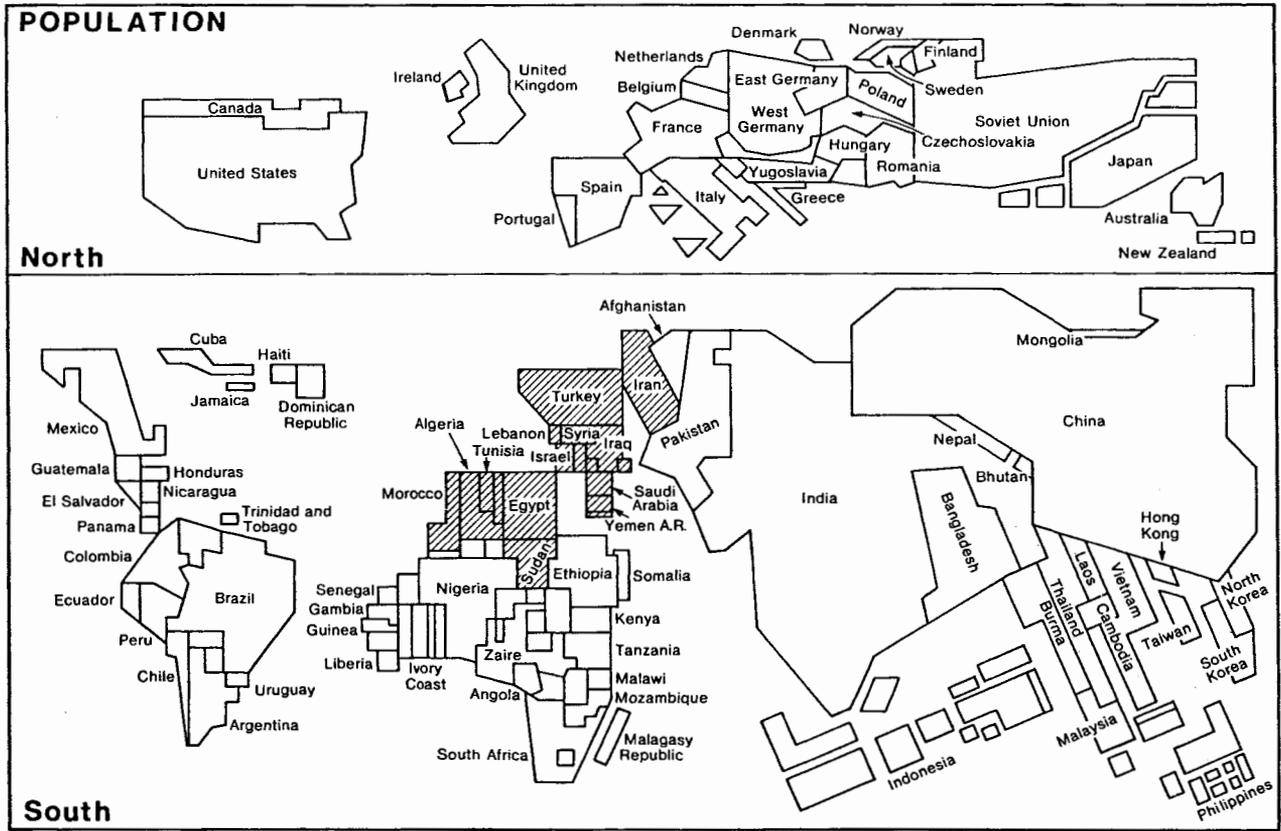


Figure 2.4b World gross national product (GNP) and world population. (After *Newsweek*, October 26, 1981.)

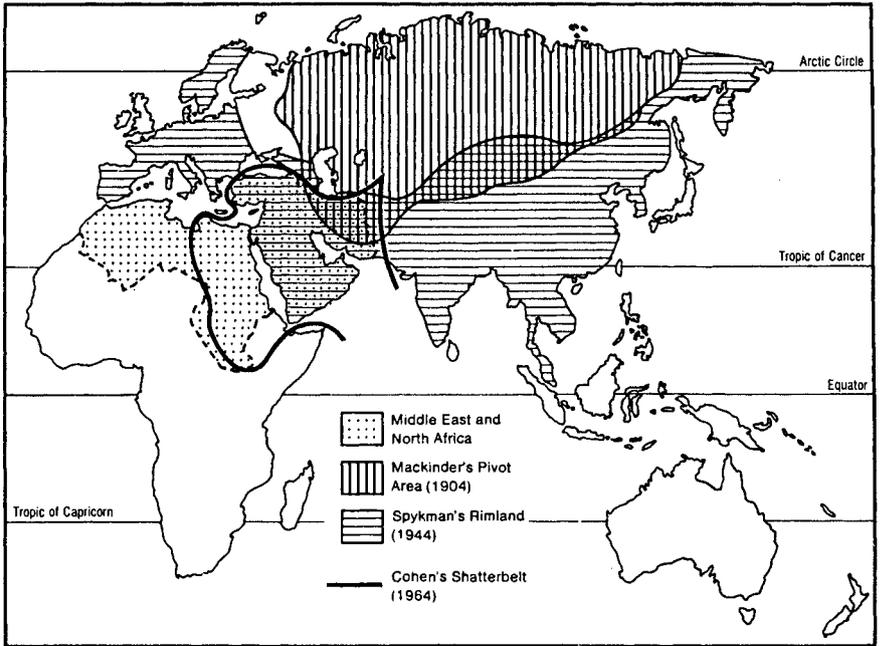
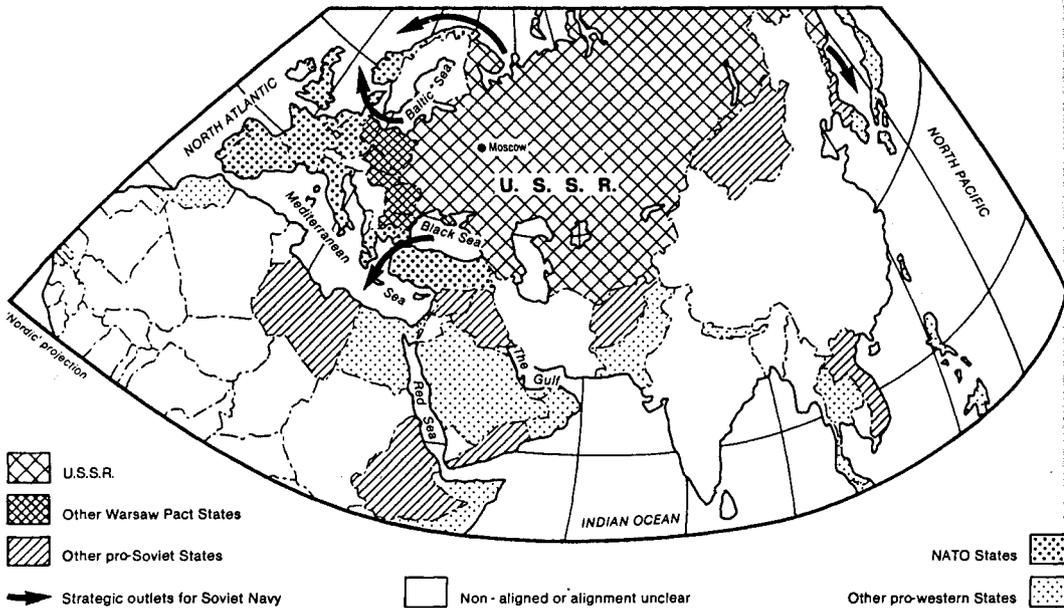


Figure 2.5a Geopolitical views of the world: Mackinder, Spykman, and Cohen.

Figure 2.5b View from the U.S.S.R.



outward expansion of this heartland power, the U.S.S.R. (Figure 2.5b). Several political geographers have suggested refinements of Mackinder's ideas, all of which emphasize the significance of the marginal crescent in global geopolitics. During World War II, N. J. Spykman advocated that the United States adopt policies that would promote American influence in the marginal crescent, which he called "the rimland"<sup>14</sup> (Figure 2.5a). Another American geographer, D. W. Meinig, suggested that some rimland states were inward-looking toward the heartland, and others outward-looking toward the oceans. Thus, the choice of allies in the rimland could be a complicated matter, and the orientation of individual states might change through time.<sup>15</sup>

Ideas of heartland and rimland and the struggle between landpower and seapower to secure control of the marginal states have little validity in the modern world for a number of reasons. First, the landpower (the U.S.S.R.) has built an ocean-going fleet, and the struggle with the maritime powers is now being conducted far beyond the margins of Eurasia. Second, the advent of intercontinental ballistic missiles has meant that the heartland power is no longer immune to attack from land or sea. Third, Mackinder's alarming and deterministic assumption that the heartland power is endemically expansionist—to the point of world domination—cannot be justified. Nevertheless, the Middle East, but not North Africa, clearly falls within a critical belt of states that are *perceived* by the superpowers to be particularly sensitive. Here, the United States anticipates and fears territorial expansion by the heartland power, whereas the U.S.S.R. deeply resents and fears U.S. influence in borderland states regarded as vital to Soviet security. How far Mackinder and his disciples stoked these fears is impossible to say. The truth remains, however, that the Middle East rimland is still seen as a key strategic region in the global power struggle, quite apart from concerns over access to oilfields.<sup>16</sup>

S. B. Cohen suggested a rather less controversial scheme of world geostrategic regions in which the Middle East along with Egypt, Sudan, and part of Libya, are characterized as "the Middle East shatterbelt." (Figure 2.5a) A shatterbelt is defined as "a large strategically located region . . . occupied by a number of conflicting states . . . caught between the conflicting interests of the Great Powers."<sup>17</sup> Part of western Libya and the Maghreb are grouped with Western Europe in a region known as "maritime Europe and the Maghreb". To date, Cohen's inclusion of the Maghreb with Europe has not been justified, except in the sense that it is farther from the U.S.S.R. than is the Middle East, and the rivalry is, therefore, less intense and the stakes are lower. Thus, although the Maghreb can be seen as part of the worldwide pattern of superpower competition, the Middle East is a crucial contact zone between Eurasia and the maritime world. As with other world views mentioned earlier, Cohen's has two weaknesses in relation to its application to the Middle East and North Africa. First, the global perspective

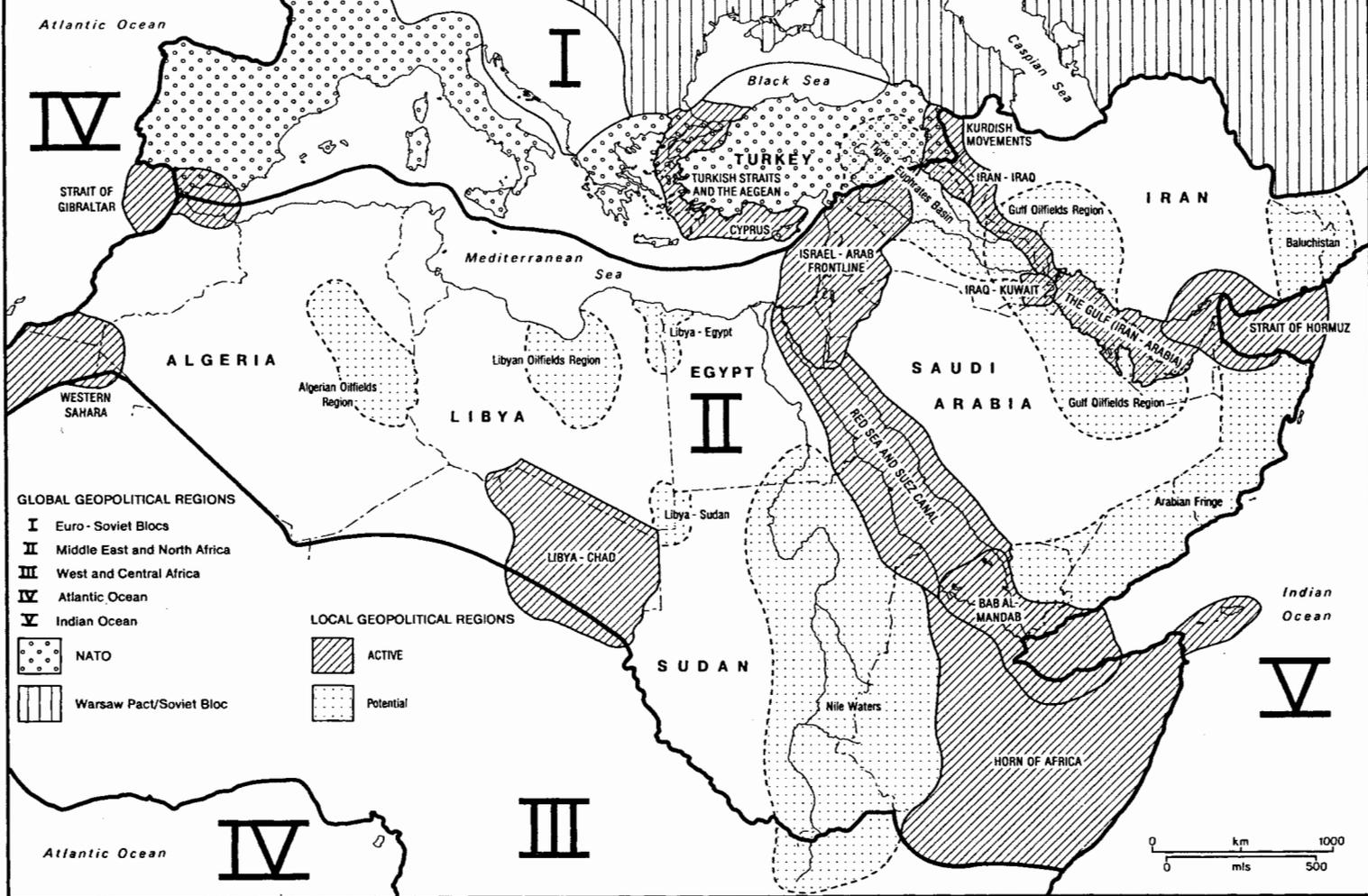
tends to obscure the infinitely complex and pertinent geopolitical relationships within the region itself. In reality a mosaic of related and overlapping geopolitical spheres exists. Second, global geostrategic models are so preoccupied with superpower rivalry that the geopolitical perspectives of the people of the region are distorted or ignored altogether. A better grasp of these perspectives might cause external powers, particularly the United States, to rethink their policies in the region. The following sections consider this theme.

### *Geopolitical Views Within the Region*

The states of the Middle East and North Africa have no single geopolitical perspective, but a variety of views conditioned by history, political ideology, and geographic location. Yet most states share certain attitudes that virtually amount to a composite outlook on the world. They have always resented interference from outside powers in the region's economic and political life. The intrusion of Cold War politics, which bring no obvious benefits (except to certain elites) and a great many risks, is generally deplored. As part of the Islamic world these states do have a sense of solidarity with communities in Africa and Asia. Equally important, there is a golden age to look back upon, a time when Arab and Persian civilizations exported art, medicine, and science to a backward Europe. This sense of having once been at the center of the world is reinforced by the fact that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—whose adherents number more than half the world's population—emanated from the Middle East. Although academics and strategists from developed capitalist and Communist societies have found it useful to fit the Middle East and North Africa into their global geopolitical schemes, such attempts are rare within the region. The real geopolitical preoccupations of the people are regional, not global. Long-standing political cleavages and traditional rivalries dominate relationships between states. Some of these divisions are illustrated in Figure 2.6. For example, Arab states adjacent to Israel have been incensed by the growth of a Jewish state at the heart of the Arab world, but they are also concerned with practical questions of territorial security and the political influence of Palestinians living on their soil. Behind these frontline states, a second ring of states, equally anti-Zionist, is rather less fearful of Israeli territorial expansion but alert to the possibilities of commando raids or air strikes. Another example is in the Gulf region where the Arab states do not fear the U.S.S.R. or the United States half so much as they fear Iranian military and ideological expansionism. The Iran-Iraq War has served to concentrate minds on regional dangers, and the Gulf

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Figure 2.6 Geopolitical regions and subregions of the Middle East and North Africa.



Cooperation Council was formed as a regional response. Similar instances confirm the importance of local geopolitics in North Africa, such as Morocco's struggle with the Polisario guerilla movement in Western Sahara and Libya's military involvement in neighboring Chad.

### Superpower Involvement in the Region

#### *The U.S.S.R.*

Just as the United States takes a keen interest in what happens close to home in Central America and the Caribbean, the Soviet Union is concerned with the affairs of the Middle East. With over 1400 miles (2200 kilometers) of common border with Turkey and Iran, the everyday business of border security with states to the south is a major preoccupation. In addition, there are 750 miles (1200 kilometers) of Caspian Sea coastline in Iranian hands and 550 miles (880 kilometers) of land boundary in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan to be watched. The importance of these borderlands to Soviet national security is not always appreciated by outsiders. Prior to the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in 1979, the United States had intelligence-collecting facilities strung along Iran's border with the U.S.S.R. Several U.S. electronic monitoring stations still operate in Turkey, which as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is perceived to be hostile to the U.S.S.R. Indeed until the 1960s American missiles were located on Turkish soil. On several occasions in the past, Russian (or Soviet) troops have occupied parts of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan in the interests of national security.<sup>18</sup> Although there is no immediate threat to the U.S.S.R. from conventional ground forces in the Middle East, fears about the massive arms sales by the U.S. to client states are genuine. Such weapons could be requisitioned for use by the United States in wartime. Soviet strategic thinking also has to take account of the fact that short-range missiles or medium-range bombers and fighter bombers could strike at Soviet cities from inside the Middle East. The nearest Soviet territory is less than 200 miles (320 kilometers) from Tehran, 300 miles (480 kilometers) from northern Syria, 500 miles (800 kilometers) from the Mediterranean, and 600 miles (960 kilometers) from the Gulf—as the crow flies. The creation of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) has generated even more fear of U.S. intentions in the region.

As long as what the Soviets call the "imperialist powers," led by the United States, retain significant influence in the region through their client states, the Middle East will remain a high priority in Soviet foreign policy. Of all Third World regions, the Middle East is regarded as the most important by the U.S.S.R. both in terms of aid and in other efforts to extend Soviet influence. Arms sales, and to a lesser degree technical assistance, have been the chief means by which the Soviets

forged friendships. The building of the Euphrates Dam in Syria and the Aswan High Dam in Egypt are monuments to Soviet engineering skills and political ambitions. But the U.S.S.R. has had a number of disappointments since it first became involved in the Arab world in 1955 after the United States refused to supply weapons to Egypt and finance the High Dam at Aswan. Egypt turned to the U.S.S.R. for help; many years of cooperation ensued until President Sadat asked the Soviet advisers to leave in 1972 and ended the Treaty of Friendship in 1976. Syria and Iraq each have a Treaty of Friendship with the U.S.S.R., signed in 1980 and 1972, respectively. But both states have presented the Soviet Union with problems, not least by being at loggerheads with one another. The Iran-Iraq War has also posed a dilemma because the U.S.S.R. would prefer to be on good terms with both countries. Even so, about 70 percent of Iraq's arms are still of Soviet origin. Syria, at the heart of the Arab world, is a potentially useful ally, but it has always followed an independent course and frequently goes against Soviet wishes (e.g., in Lebanon).

The U.S.S.R. also has good relationships with Algeria, Libya, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (P.D.R. Yemen). The first two, Algeria and Libya, are hostile to communism. The P.D.R. Yemen is the only avowedly Marxist country in the region. In some ways, it is the most useful of all Middle Eastern states for Soviet purposes, giving it a foothold in the pro-Western Arabian peninsula and affording the Soviet navy excellent facilities in Aden and on Socotra Island.

The prime Soviet strategic interest in the Middle East has little to do with oil, at least at present. Rather, it is to prevent the region from becoming a base from which to launch attacks against the Soviet heartland. A secondary role of the region for the U.S.S.R. is for the transiting and deployment of ships of the Soviet Black Sea fleet. The Black Sea fleet provides units for the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Otherwise, the nearest Soviet naval bases are in the Baltic or in the Far East. Although the number of Soviet ships in these seas is never great, they play a key role in the Soviet Union's global political and military thinking. Both are of crucial importance in relation to tanker and other shipping routes; in both regions, the Soviet Union must show the flag to offset the more obvious presence of the Western navies. The political role of the Soviet navy is perhaps particularly important in the Indian Ocean, where the superpowers compete to expand their influence.

The Soviet Union has learned a lot about the dangers and pitfalls of Middle Eastern politics and is very reluctant to become physically involved beyond the level of advisers. But it could do so. Soviet forces theoretically possess the capability to seize the Turkish Straits or occupy the major oilfields or do both. The necessary infrastructure exists for such a massive invasion of the region, and Soviet airlifting capacity is prodigious. Short of World War III, such events are extremely unlikely so long as U.S. military behavior in the region does not become

too provocative. Meanwhile, the U.S.S.R. recognizes that the region possesses some of the most glittering geostrategic prizes in the world.

Soviet influence in the region as a whole is relatively small, and is likely to remain so, in part because of the role of Islam. Most Muslims emphatically reject Communist ideology because of its atheism, and Communist parties in the region are generally small, ineffective, and invariably illegal. Fears in the West, especially in the United States, that communism is likely to spread through the region if unchecked are therefore misplaced. Another factor is that Soviet products and technical assistance are usually considered inferior to those from the West. Consequently, the value of Soviet trade, even with friendly states, is far below trade with Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. To the extent that the U.S.S.R. has allies in the region, this is largely because of the limited alternatives available, notably for the supply of weapons, and because of the consistent Soviet support for the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Finally, it is worth remembering that there are some 23 million Sunni Muslims in the Soviet Union, largely located in Central Asia, across the border from Iran and Afghanistan. They are regarded as a potential source of resistance to the goals of communism and are discouraged from practicing their religion. Almost all mosques have been closed, and pilgrimage to Mecca is forbidden. Although isolated from their fellow believers in the Middle East, the Soviet government fears that an Islamic religious revival of some sort might lead to political unrest in Soviet Central Asia.<sup>19</sup>

### *The United States*

The starting point for consideration of the United States and the Middle East and North Africa must be distance. From the eastern seaboard of the United States across the Atlantic to North Africa and the Mediterranean is over 3000 miles (4800 kilometers). Yet the western Mediterranean is only halfway from the United States to the Gulf. Steaming at about 15 knots, a ship can reach Tangier, Morocco, from New York in eight or nine days. It may take another six days to traverse the Mediterranean to the Suez Canal, and at least four days to pass through the canal and the Red Sea to Aden. From Aden to the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Gulf may take four more days. Thus, without allowing for port calls or any other delays, the voyage from New York to the Gulf takes about three weeks. Civil aircraft flying time from New York to destinations in North Africa is between 8 and 10 hours. From Cairo to Riyadh, for example, would add another 2 or 3 hours, or at least 4 hours to destinations in the Gulf from Cairo. All these times assume the availability of direct flights. Military transport aircraft would be slower and would require stopover facilities en route, for example, in the Azores or Morocco.

In spite of distance, there is a high level of intercommunication between the United States and certain states of North Africa and the Middle East. The United States is one of the chief exporters of manufactured goods to the region, rivaling France, Japan, the United Kingdom, and West Germany. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are the chief trading partners. Trade with Iran also used to be important. U.S. supplies to the region include large quantities of military equipment. Approximately 20 percent of all America's imported oil is obtained from the Middle East. A fair number of Americans also visit the region as tourists, business executives, technical experts, and in various military roles. The Middle East, rather more than North Africa, has been given intensive media coverage in the United States on particular occasions, for example, during the October 1973 War, during the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–1981), and during the deployment of U.S. Marines in Lebanon (1982–1984).

The United States has a number of interrelated motives for its heavy involvement with the region. Containment of the Soviet Union and combating the spread of Soviet influence are top priorities, regardless of the reality of the threat. U.S. policy is predicated on rarely questioned assumptions about Soviet expansion and the vulnerability of the Middle East. American involvement only gained momentum with the gradual decline since the 1950s of British influence. In 1955, the United States masterminded the Baghdad Pact, a defense alliance among Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan that effectively completed the encirclement of the Soviet Union with U.S. allies from the Philippines to Europe. The pact lasted only until 1958, when Iraq withdrew, and the remaining members formed a new alliance, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). When British forces withdrew from the Gulf region in 1971, the United States became extremely active in cultivating Iran and Saudi Arabia as local allies in the region. Both states, but especially Iran, received massive supplies of weapons and military assistance. This concentration of armaments in the Soviet Union's backyard was regarded as highly provocative. At about the same time, the United States negotiated with Britain to build military facilities on the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. The U.S. "twin pillar" policy received a sharp setback with the fall of the Shah in 1979, and there is currently great determination not to allow Saudi Arabia to go the same way.

Support for Israel is a second major plank in U.S. Middle East policy. There are 6 million Jews in the United States who play a vital role in shaping national policies toward Israel and the Middle East generally. U.S. aid to Israel, particularly the supply of arms, has been colossal (see Chapter 9), but it does not mean that the United States has unlimited power to influence Israeli policy. Regionally, Israel represents a considerable liability for the United States. The special relationship between the two states has greatly damaged American relationships with the Arab world. The need to rush supplies to Israel in the event of another war

with the Arabs would pose the U.S. Government with some difficult decisions. It is not surprising that successive American administrations have sought a negotiated peace between Israel and her enemies.

Since 1979, several events have focused American attention sharply, almost obsessively, on the Gulf region: the fall of the Shah in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980.<sup>20</sup> There were fears of further Soviet gains in the region, of the spread of the Islamic revolution from Iran to neighboring states, and of general political instability. The result of these events could be to deprive the United States or its allies in Western Europe or Japan of much needed supplies of oil. In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter declared that his administration was willing to use any means necessary to defend the vital interests of the United States in the Gulf region.<sup>21</sup> This policy has been continued under President Ronald Reagan, and the mobile RDF has been greatly expanded and upgraded several times. To move the 400,000 men of the RDF and their equipment implies access points en route, possibly in Morocco, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Oman, and continuing use of Diego Garcia, where supplies and equipment are prepositioned.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the RDF, the United States maintains a powerful naval force in the Mediterranean in the shape of the Sixth Fleet, which operates from bases chiefly in Spain and Italy. Its function is to support NATO's southern flank in the Mediterranean and to protect U.S. interests in general. The U.S. Navy has facilities at a number of strategic locations in the region. Those in Egypt are of particular interest, having been made available to the United States only after 1976, when Egypt expelled the Soviet Union. This swift turnabout in superpower fortunes admirably illustrates the unpredictability of Middle East politics and the changing strategic value of places.

It may seem excessive to have concentrated so much on the United States and the U.S.S.R., but their influence overshadows the politics of the Middle East, and is likely to continue to do so in the future. Ironically, it was the superpowers of an earlier era, Britain and France, who were largely instrumental in creating the system of states that have given today's nuclear superpowers a choice of client states in the shatterbelt. In many cases, superpower patronage has exacerbated local and regional rivalries and sometimes even cynically exploited them. Moreover, as Chapters 6 and 8 will show, Great Power interference over the years has done little to solve problems of national or regional integration and has sometimes created new problems. It is, therefore, basic to an understanding of the region's political geography to know how the contemporary pattern of states emerged.

### Notes

1. "Crescent of crisis" is a distasteful term to the people of the region because of the symbolism of the Crescent in Islam and the implied association of the faith of Islam with crises (e.g., see the cover of *Time*, 15 January 1979).

2. See C. R. Koppes, "Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the origins of the term 'Middle East,'" *Middle Eastern Studies* 12(1976): 95-98.

3. Altogether, twenty-two states have been chosen for study in this book; these states are collectively called "the region."

4. Members of OPEC in the region are: Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). Members of OAPEC are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt (suspended since 1979), Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and the U.A.E.

5. Peter Beaumont, Gerald H. Blake, and J. Malcolm Wagstaff in *The Middle East: A Geographical Study* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976) include these states. William B. Fisher in *The Middle East: a Physical, Social and Regional Geography*, 7th ed. (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd. 1978) includes Sudan and Cyprus.

6. A classic work on seapower in the Mediterranean is Ferdinand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols. (London: Fontana-Collins, 1972).

7. Saul B. Cohen, "A New Map of Global Geopolitical Equilibrium: A Developmental Approach," *Political Geography Quarterly* 1(1982): 223-241.

8. R. V. Weeks (ed.), *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey* (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1978). Cited by John I. Clarke, "Islamic Populations." Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Institute of British Geographers, Durham, Eng., January 1984: 1-14.

9. Throughout the centuries the hidden Imam or Mahdi is thought to have appeared in Muslim countries from time to time.

10. For an excellent survey of definitions of the Third World see J. P. Dickenson, C. G. Clarke et al., *A Geography of the Third World* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd. 1983).

11. See Ibrahim F. I. Shihata, *The Other Face of O.P.E.C.: Financial Assistance to the Third World* (London: Longman, 1982).

12. Halford J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *Geographical Journal* 23(1904): 431-444; and Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (New York: Henry Holt, 1919; republished 1942).

13. See Robert E. Walters, *The Nuclear Trap* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1974).

14. Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1944).

15. Donald W. Meinig, "Heartland and Rimland in Eurasian History," *Western Political Quarterly* 9 (1956): 553-569.

16. William Kirk has observed that the subtropical zone extending through the Mediterranean basin and corresponding fairly precisely with the rimland has been the zone of civilizations and innovation. Remarkably, it appears to have its counterpart in Central America. See William Kirk, *Geographical Pivots of History* (Leicester, Eng.: Leicester University Press, 1965). The idea is also discussed in Norman J. G. Pounds, *Political Geography*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972): 433-434.

17. Saul B. Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a World Divided*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973): 253. For a critique of Cohen's idea of geostrategic regions see J. R. V. Prescott, *The Geography of State Policies* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).

18. See Chapter 3. Russian attempts to reach the Turkish Straits in 1877-78, incursions into Persia in 1920-21, occupation of parts of Iran in World War II are examples.

19. With large numbers of Muslims (23 million), Armenian Christians (4 million) and Jews (2 million), the Soviet Union should have a good understanding of some of the peoples of the Middle East.

20. Publishing books and papers on Gulf security became a minor industry. See David Newman, Ewan Anderson, and Gerald Blake, *The Security of Gulf Oil: An Introductory Bib-*

liography. Occasional Paper 13. (Durham, Eng.: University of Durham Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1982): 1-55.

21. In January 1957, a similar commitment was made by President Eisenhower ("The Eisenhower Doctrine"), though it referred to the "Mid East," not exclusively to the Gulf, and it pledged economic and military assistance to fight communism in the region.

22. The logistics of a RDF operation would be formidable. Diego Garcia is 2500 miles (4000 kilometers) from the Gulf. Two months' supplies for 12,000 men are held there. An airborne battalion could reach the Gulf from the United States in 48 hours. Within 45 days, five to seven divisions could be in place, though there are plans to reduce this to 30 days by 1987. See "Buildup on the Arc of Crisis," *South* (March 1983): 9-17.

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