

INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST – PART 2

STUDY GUIDE – 1/11/09

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INTRODUCTION

In Part 1 of this study we looked at the Middle East and its geography during Biblical times. This showed us that just like today places change depending on the ruling power. Since the beginning of civilization the Middle East has been a place of turmoil as it has been ruled by one power or the other. In reading the Bible we see that the Bible story starts in the Garden of Eden, which by the description in Genesis 2 is placed in what is now southern Iraq by the referral to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, or the area that was known as Mesopotamia. As the story unfolds we see Abraham travelling up through Iraq and then God sending Abraham to the promised land of Canaan, which is modern Israel. As the story continues we see the Israelites moving to Egypt and the exodus through the Sinai desert back to the promised land of Canaan. As the story continues we see the Israelites in battle with nations around them, including the Philistines. The Israelites do form their own kingdom which reaches its height under David. As the Israelites fall in and out of favor with Yahweh, which coincides with their maintaining and breaking their covenant with Yahweh, they are taken over by various empires that rule the region. Following David's rule and the expansion of an economically successful nation under Solomon, we see the one nation splitting into two, Judah and Israel. Continuing separation from Yahweh brings about the take-over by the Babylonian empire and the exile of the people in Babylon. After the return from exile we see in the following years they come under domination by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. The Hebrew people saw a brief period of self rule under the Maccabees but this was short lived as the area was taken over by the Roman Empire. As we move to the New Testament we see Rome's domination and spread of the gospel through the Roman Empire.

This week we will move on to post biblical times. This continues to be a time of change for the Middle East and it has constantly seen changes in political dominance and so geographical makeup. We will also look at the area as it is today and why there continues to be struggles. We will also look at the major "players" in the area and what their motivation is for the continuing strife we see today.

THE PRE-TWENTIETH CENTURY MIDDLE EAST

Following the fall of Rome the Middle East initially went through several power changes. As in previous times the struggle for control of this area was based on it being in the middle of the major east-west trade routes.

Immediately following the fall of Rome control of the Middle East was split between the Byzantine Empire, which was the remnants of the Roman Empire under Constantine with its headquarters in Constantinople, and the Persian or Sassanid Empire. This control lasted until the 8th century.

ISLAMIC EMPIRE

On the death of Mohammed in 632 CE there were power struggles within the ranks of the Muslims. Around 700 control was gained by Mohammed's cousin Ali abu Ibn Talib. He was a powerful leader and had great aspirations to spread Islam. Under his leadership Islam spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa and even as far as Spain. The center of the Levant area, the area we know as Syria, Lebanon and Israel, was important to this Islamic empire as the third holiest site in Islam was in Jerusalem. This is the Dome of the Rock, which today holds the well known Mosque with its gold dome that dominates the Jerusalem skyline. This was the beginning of Arabic/Islamic control of the Levant region and the Middle East as a whole. Due to Islamic rule many of the names used in the Hebrew Bible were changed to Arabic names.

THE CRUSADES

In the 11th century Christianity in Europe became concerned that the Levant area, which is the birth place of Jesus Christ and so the birth place of Christianity, should not be under Islamic control. They knew there was desecration of the sites that were holy to Christianity. The Crusades were mounted with the goal of reclaiming Jerusalem and the Holy Land and making it a Christian enclave and drive out the Islamic rulers. As history shows there were many bloody battles and great destruction. The first crusade was mounted in 1095. Through the years other crusaders set out for battle in the Holy Land. Over the years interest in the crusades waned and the ninth and last major crusade was sent to battle in 1271. The end result was an area left with much destruction and a great animosity held by the Islamic people towards the European Christians and so the Western world. This feeling among the Islamic people is still held today as they see the West as an aggressive people who want to enforce their ways on other people.

MONGOLIAN EMPIRE

Following the Crusades, at the end of the 13th century, there was a power void left in the Middle East. This void was quickly filled by a power that swept down from the north east through the Turkic area. The great Genghis Kahn took over the Middle East. The Mongol Empire spread from the Pacific Ocean to the Caspian Sea. It was one of the largest empires the world has known. Controlling an empire this large created many problems and by the mid 13th century it started collapsing and control over the Middle East was taken over by the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

In the mid-15th century with the fall of the Mongolian Empire the Turkish Ottomans, based in Constantinople, gained control over the region. Over the next century their influences spread and they took control of the Middle East, Greece and North Africa. It was this lock on the land trade routes to Asia that prompted the Queen of Spain to send Christopher Columbus on a search for another route to India and Asia. The Ottoman Empire developed strong naval power and controlled sea travel throughout the Mediterranean.

In the 18th century European rulers being concerned about the strangle hold the Ottomans had of the travel routes and the effect on their economy they started exerting influence into the area to challenge the Ottoman control. In 1798 Napoleon, in a search for glory and to try to be the next Alexander the Great, mounted an attack on Egypt. His successes were limited and although he did capture Cairo his supply lines were cut by the British sinking his ships at Alexandria and he withdrew leaving his forces stranded. The result, though, was that it showed the Ottoman Empire was vulnerable.

At the time this was going on there were signs of unrest within the Ottoman Empire. In the 19th century they implemented the Tanzimat reforms that returned some control of local areas back to the ethnic groups of the area. They formed *vilayets* that were based around major cities in the area and were known by the cities name, such as Damascus, Baghdad, or Mosul; they did not use the Biblical names for the areas. The Biblical names had no significance for the Muslim Turks. These vilayets had a considerable amount of autonomy in the rule of the region. This continued to lead to the decline of the Ottoman Empire as the various ethnic groups discovered a new found freedom to develop by themselves. By the beginning of the 20th century the Ottoman Empire had collapsed completely and was dissolved completely by 1922.

TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

In the period leading up to World War I, Great Britain had declared Queen Victoria to be the Empress of India. For Britain, India was the “pearl in the crown” and together with Southeast Asia was vital for the economy of Britain and its rule and influence in that part of the world. The British tried to maintain a weak stability in the Ottoman Empire in order to use Egypt and parts of the Middle East for access to the markets of India and Asia.

The great threat to British India in the nineteenth century was Russia. By the end of the nineteenth century, the French had allied themselves with the Russians. The effects of this were considerable. France had obtained significant influence in the Middle East and had a greater familiarity with its cultures, languages, and religions than did the British. The situation was complicated by the fact that France and Britain were allies against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I.

As Britain developed its strategy toward the Ottoman Empire and, hence, the Middle East, it was dependent on Lord Kitchener, who was the British minister of war and who had spent considerable time in the Middle East. With the clarity that only hindsight can give, it seems clear that Kitchener had an incredibly poor understanding of the Middle East. David Fromkin writes:

The West and the Middle East have misunderstood each other throughout most of the twentieth century; and much of that misunderstanding can be traced back to Lord Kitchener's initiatives in the early years of the First World War. The peculiarities of his character, the deficiencies of his understanding of the Moslem [sic] world, the misinformation regularly supplied to him by his lieutenants . . . , and his choice of Arab politicians with whom to deal have colored the course of political events ever since.

Britain's considerable ignorance of Arabs and Islam are almost comical by today's standards. They tended to understand Islam and its structures through Christian categories, often resulting in the most extraordinary policies. For example, it was hoped to unite Arabic speaking Muslims against the Ottoman

Turks under the leadership of Amir Hussein of Mecca, whom the British thought could function as a type of Muslim pope!

BRITISH INFLUENCES

It was the British hope to get the Arabs to revolt against the Ottoman Turks. To achieve this they backed Amir Hussein bin Aly, the sharif of Mecca who controlled the area of the Arabian Peninsula that borders the Red Sea with Jeddah, Mecca and Medina as the main centers of population, known as the hajiz region. Hussein was a member of the Quarish tribe and the clan of Banu Hashem making him a Hashemite. The British hoped that Hussein as a direct descendent of Muhammad could provide spiritual leadership that would inspire the Arab Muslims to revolt against the foreign, though Muslim, rule of the Ottomans. The British did not understand Islam and its structures, the prime one being that the Arabs were not altogether sure that Christian control would be any better than a foreign Muslim control and Hussein made it clear he did not want to be a spiritual leader. The other problem was that the lands Hussein wanted, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, were under French control and the British did not want to upset their ally. The only area the British had real control was the Arabian Peninsula. The majority of this area was under the control of Hussein's rival Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. Ibn Saud had a great following from the Bedouins who were fierce fighters. Ibn Saud would eventually overthrow Hussein and take control of the entire Arabian Peninsula which would become Saudi Arabia.

Under the British and subversive civil wars, some of which were led by the famous Lawrence of Arabia, the British were able to get Arab control of the area. The following developments occurred:

- Hussein was given control of the Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula. This lasted until 1924 when Ibn Saud would overthrow Hussein and take control of the Arabian Peninsula. Control of this area has stayed in the Saud family with the present king, Abdullah, being a direct descendent of Abdul.
- Feisal, Hussein's third son, became the King of Greater Syria, which included Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. This was achieved with British help and of a group of Arab nationalist rebels, al-Fatat. The French losing control of this area attacked it driving Feisal into exile and setting up a mandate in Syria. The British had a mandate in Iraq with the old Ottoman vilayats of Baghdad and Basra. The British feared a revolt in Iraq and named Feisal as king of Iraq. This Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq lasted three generations until 1958 when it was overthrown in a revolt led by Colonel Abdul Karim Qassim.
- When Feisal was in exile his younger brother, Abdullah amassed an army and set out to avenge his brother and attack the French in Damascus. The British feared defeat and that the French would also take over the areas of Transjordan and Palestine. To appease Abdullah and provide some sense of stability the British created the protectorate of Transjordan and appointed Abdullah as amir or prince. Abdullah negotiated independence and so in 1923 the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was formed with Abdullah as King. Abdullah had aspirations of ruling a Greater Syria made up of Jordan, Syria and Iraq but due to mounting distrust of him and relationships he was building with Christians and Jews in the area this never happened. Abdullah's ancestors continue to rule Jordan and the current King Abdullah is the original Abdullah's grandson. The royal families of Jordan have been very progressive and have always

tried to develop relationships between all people in the Middle East regardless of race or religion.

While all this was happening the French controlled the area of Lebanon and the British, Palestine.

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY

As we have just seen Great Britain and France exerted a great deal of influence in the Middle East following World War 1 and tried to redraw the maps of the area. From the foregoing we see that Syria, for a short period, Jordan and Iraq were under Hashemite rule which were Arabian or foreign dynasties imposed on them by the British. In the mid-twentieth century the following happened with these three areas:

- **Syria** became a French protectorate and gained its independence in 1944. Syria since its inception has undergone political turmoil. From 1946 to 1956 Syria had twenty different cabinets and four preliminary constitutions. In 1958 Syria formed an alliance with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic, which was dissolved in 1961. The Syrian Army officers carried out a coup in 1963 and Amin Hafiz was installed as president. He was overthrown in 1966 due to tensions with the Ba'athist Party and the conflict with Israel weakened the government. Hafiz al-Asad, the minister of defense, instigated a coup in 1970 and took control of the country. Thus Syria had a Ba'athist authoritarian regime, if not a dictatorship. Hafiz died in 2000 and his son Bashar al-Asad took control. He had been educated in Damascus and London and promised political and economic reforms which have not taken place and Syria remains under authoritarian rule.
- **Iraq** was given to Britain by the League of Nations after World War 1. In this annexation Iraq was defined as being the southern Shi'ite area around Basra and the central Sunni area around Baghdad and the northern Kurdish area around Mosul. Iraq gained its independence in 1932. The dynasty was not stable and the British supported it with military occupation from 1941 to 1947. In 1958 the monarchy was overthrown by a revolution led by the Ba'athist Party. Eventually Iraq became a dictatorship under Saddam Hussein who gained control by executing anybody who opposed him. Saddam Hussein ruled until he was removed in the invasion of 2003, tried for crimes and executed. Under Saddam Hussein there was a rule of terror. Hussein, being a Sunni persecuted and indiscriminately executed Sunnis in the south and Kurds in the north. Since the 2003 invasion there have been ongoing struggles for power and the formation of a fledgling democracy, supported by coalition forces led by the United States.
- **Jordan** was formed in 1921 when Britain gave the area east of the Jordan semi autonomy and formed the Kingdom of Jordan. Jordan has remained a Hashemite Kingdom and has been one of the most stable countries in the region.

Of the three kingdoms set up by the colonial powers only Jordan still exists.

LEBANON

The colonial powers made some use of the former Ottoman system of vilayets, although introducing some changes. Thus, when the League of Nations granted Britain the protectorate of Iraq, it included the three Ottoman vilayets of Mosul (Kurdish), Baghdad (Sunni Arab), and Basra (Shi'ite Arab). In the

nineteenth century, Christians—especially Maronites—in Ottoman Greater Syria suffered considerable persecution, and the European powers forced the Ottoman Empire in 1861 to set up the autonomous region (*mutasarrifi ya*) of Mount Lebanon for the Christians. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, France was given Greater Syria as a protectorate. Greater Syria included what is today Lebanon. In 1926 France permitted the establishment of the Lebanese Republic.

The new country of Lebanon was one in which there was considerable diversity. Christian Maronites shared the country with Sunni Muslims, Shi'ite Muslims, Isma'ili Muslims, Alawi, and Druze. At the time of the founding of Lebanon, the Maronites held a relative majority. The governmental structure was developed to represent the different groups in the country. Thus, the president of Lebanon is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of Parliament a Shi'ite. In addition to providing demographic representation in the government, the Lebanese solution also provided people with a dual identity. There were Maronite Lebanese, Shi'ite Lebanese, Sunni Lebanese, and so on. This militated against a sense of national unity. Demographic changes, the formation of private militias, economic inequities, and the incursions of both Syria and Israel into Lebanon contributed to destabilizing the status quo in Lebanon, leading to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). This devastated the country and destroyed not only infrastructures but also whatever trust had been built up among the different religious communities. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon has enjoyed some success in rebuilding its political system, economy, and social life. However, the conflict between Israel and Hizbullah in the summer of 2006 brought a tremendous setback to Lebanese recovery, especially in the south but not limited to there.

ISRAEL

One of the most significant events in the region was the rise of the State of Israel.

After World War I, the League of Nations made Palestine a mandate of Great Britain. In 1917 the British secretly made the Balfour Declaration. In it British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour declared that Britain “viewed with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” From the end of World War I until the end of World War II, Jewish immigration to Palestine increased greatly. In 1922 Jews constituted 11 percent of the population of Palestine. They formed 33 percent of the population at the end of World War II. The Arabs in the area opposed the Balfour Declaration, and there were riots and attacks against Jews in Palestine. Groups such as Haganah were formed to protect Jewish settlements. More militant groups, such as Irgun and Lehi, broke off from Haganah and began attacking not only Arabs but also the British. After several years of attacks by Irgun and Lehi, the British decided to withdraw from Palestine. The United Nations approved Resolution 181 on November 29, 1947, partitioning Palestine, giving slightly more than half the land for a Jewish state. The Jewish community accepted the partition, while the Arabs did not. On May 14, 1948, the State of Israel was declared, and the following day the British Mandate of Palestine expired. Since the foundation of the State of Israel there has been an almost constant state of conflict between the Jewish state and its neighbors. Several times the conflict took the form of out-and-out war, notably the Six Day War in June 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Sinai Peninsula, and the Golan Heights. Although peace treaties between Israel and Jordan and Israel and Egypt were later agreed upon, the situation in the region has been one of almost constant conflict. Technically Israel and Syria are still at war. Israel has made several serious incursions into Lebanon, the latest of which was in August 2006. Earlier incursions

into Lebanon contributed to the destabilization of the Lebanese government and the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). The situation between Israel and the Palestinians resulted in two intifadas. The occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza have undergone what has been described as de-development, with the economic situation deteriorating rapidly as Israel's security measures increasingly isolate the Palestinians from one another and from the outside world.

MOVEMENTS

While governments in the Middle East continue to play important roles in the region, there are several movements that also play major roles. None of these movements is a government in the strict sense. Three movements are crucial: Fatah, or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); Hizbullah; and Hamas. While Fatah has a quasi-governmental role in Palestine, and Hamas is trying to achieve a similar situation in Gaza, none of the three organizations can be considered a real, independently functioning government.

FATAH

Fatah, or the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was founded in Jerusalem in 1964 as the representative of the Palestinian people. More radical elements of the PLO came to the fore of the organization after the Six Day War in 1967. In 1969 Yasser Arafat became the chairman of the Executive Committee of the PLO. In 1968 the PLO charter had been amended to include armed struggle against Israel, with the ultimate goal of regaining all of Palestine and expelling the Israelis. In 1974 the twelfth meeting of the Palestinian National Council moderated its stance and began to speak of a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians. At the nineteenth meeting of the Palestinian National Council, in 1988, there was a declaration of Palestinian independence with a Palestinian state envisioned in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. In 1993 the PLO signed a Declaration of Principles with Israel in a ceremony at the Rose Garden at the White House. Although the PLO achieved limited power as the Palestinian National Authority, it has not been able to achieve its goals for several reasons, some external and some internal. The death of Arafat on November 11, 2004, provided the Palestinian National Authority with both a challenge and an opportunity. The elections of 2006, which brought Hamas (see the following section) to power, resulted in a cutoff of funds that were either owed or promised to the Palestinians, resulting in tremendous damage to the Palestinian social, economic, and political infrastructure. Mahmoud Abbas, elected president of the Palestinian National Authority in January 2006, must deal with opposition from Hamas, the previously mentioned damage to the Palestinian infrastructures, and a future that is far from clear.

HAMAS

Hamas⁴ was established in 1987 as a response to the first intifada. It is an offshoot of the Islamic Brotherhood. As such, it sees itself as an Islamic movement, which differentiates it from the more secular PLO. Hamas has a clear religious—Islamic—agenda and sees itself in a religious-political struggle with the West. One of the main agents of the West's alleged aggression against Islam is Israel. Thus the liberation of Palestine is seen as a religious duty, something that did not play a great role in the ideology of the PLO. For Hamas, this religious duty to liberate Palestine is a call to *jihad*. Any attempts to engage in political negotiations are not acceptable. the threat to Islam, that is, the Israelis, must be eliminated

and an Islamic state set up in Palestine. Hamas has also assumed the role of a social welfare agent. Schools, clinics, and the like have been set up by Hamas especially in Gaza, where the Palestine National Authority has enjoyed little success. In addition, for the most part Hamas has been able to avoid a reputation for corruption, a reputation that seriously eroded the authority of the Palestinian National Authority. In the January 2006 parliamentary elections, Hamas won 76 of the 130 possible seats, while the governing Fatah party won only 43. Although this was looked upon as a surprise, anyone familiar with what was going on in the occupied territories would have known of the great popular dissatisfaction with the corruption and ineffectiveness of Fatah. The results of the 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections were more a sign of dissatisfaction with Fatah than approval of Hamas. Nonetheless, Hamas is still a force to be reckoned with not only inside the occupied territories but also in the larger world of the Middle East.

HIZBULLAH

The name *Hizbullah*, the Party of God, is taken from the Qur'an (cf. 5:56). Hizbullah is a Shi'ite movement that began before the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Shi'ite scholars from southern Lebanon had contact with their coreligionists at theological centers such as Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran. There they came in contact with Shi'ite thinkers such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect not only of the Iranian revolution but also of a new notion of Islamic government. Muhammad Hussein Fadlullah had studied in Najaf and returned to Beirut where, in the 1970s, he became a leading force in establishing Hizbullah in Lebanon. With the success of the Iranian Revolution there were attempts—unsuccessful at first—for Hizbullah in Lebanon to receive aid from Iran. There was an unsuccessful attempt to bring Iranian jihadists into Lebanon to fight against Israel. Hizbullah found ready support in Shi'ite refugees who had been driven out of southern Lebanon by Israeli attacks. The Israelis occupied the part of southern Lebanon south of the Litani River in response to Hizbullah rocket attacks against northern Israel. However, ultimately Israel was forced to withdraw, leaving Hizbullah stronger than ever. In the summer of 2006, once again in response to rocket attacks, Israel attacked Hizbullah positions in southern Lebanon. Although the shelling and bombing were severe, Israel was not able to dislodge Hizbullah. As a result, Hizbullah came out of the conflict stronger and the Lebanese government weaker. At present Sayid Hussein Nasrallah is the secretary general of the governing council of Hizbullah. Not unlike Hamas, Hizbullah has been quite successful in bringing social services to the poor and refugees in Lebanon, thus strengthening its position considerably.

CONCLUSIONS

From this discussion we can see that the issues in the Middle East are very complex. In Part 1 we looked at the Middle East in Biblical times and saw there was constant conflict and the area was constantly being redefined by the politics of the region as one regime and another gained control. In post-Biblical times this has continued as the region moved from Roman to Islamic to Mongolian to Ottoman control and then to European influences to set up autonomous states. In all these changes animosities have arisen with deep seated feelings.

There appears to be no human answer to the situation and as long as men are involved the issues will continue. We must turn to the teachings of Jesus when he taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves and to love our enemies before there can be any peace. This is an area we must constantly pray for.

There is no right or wrong as through the centuries all players in region have been wronged and have been aggressors. All people are children of God and must be recognized as such.

Even as you read this we see the conflict between Hamas and Israel escalating. I hope that this discussion helps you better understand all sides of the conflict.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What questions does this history raise for you as you think about the Middle East today?
2. What new insights do you have from hearing this history from multiple perspectives?
3. In a quote from David Fromkin's book *A Peace to End all Peace*, "The West and the Middle East have misunderstood each other throughout most of the twentieth century..." To what extent do you believe this is true today?
4. What role do you believe people from outside the Middle East should have in the Middle East today?
5. Consider the following quote:

Historically it is arguable that no foreign power, regardless how powerful, has ever been able to form another power, regardless how weak, into something the greater, foreign power wishes. It is possible for occupying powers to profoundly influence an occupied culture, but rarely, if ever, has an occupying power transformed and occupied another culture into a mirror image of itself.

Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

What examples of this have you seen in this study or in recent history?

Would you like the United States to transform parts of the Middle East? If so in what ways?

6. The recent conflict it appears to have started by Hamas firing rockets into Israel. Those rockets engendered fear among Israelis but the numbers injured or killed is relatively few. Israel's military response has inflicted a large number of casualties. Is a disproportionate response ever the right thing to do?