

## **The Middle East in the Midst of the Cold War**

Since the early 1800s, Britain had been the leading power in the Middle East. Britain controlled the Suez Canal (linking the Red Sea and the Mediterranean) and most of Egypt after 1882. British naval forces patrolled the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf, guarding shipping lanes to India, the jewel of the British Empire.

World War II brought down the old order of international relations. In 1947, British officials told their U.S. allies that Britain could no longer maintain its presence in the Middle East. World War II had nearly bankrupted Britain. Britain's postwar leaders saw their enormous empire as a financial burden. They urged the administration of U.S. President Harry Truman to fill the vacuum in the Middle East ahead of the powerful Soviet Union. Both Britain and the United States saw the Soviet Union as a dangerous expansionist power. They believed protecting the Persian Gulf's oil reserves from Soviet control was critical to the West's economic survival. Indeed, in 1948, for the first time, the United States imported more oil than it exported.

In fact, the Soviets had already begun to increase their activities in the Middle East. In Iran, the Soviets delayed the withdrawal of their troops after the war. In Turkey, they raised territorial claims along the Soviet border and insisted on sharing control of the straits connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

### ***What was the Truman Doctrine?***

In 1947, President Truman announced a \$400 million foreign aid package to Turkey and Greece. In what became known as the "Truman Doctrine," Truman pledged U.S. support for governments resisting communism.

The Truman Doctrine confirmed that the United States was willing to step into the shoes of the British in the Middle East. For U.S. policy makers, this meant that the Persian Gulf would rank second in importance only to protecting Western Europe.

By 1948, the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed frozen in place. What became known as the Cold War would eventually reach every corner of the globe, raising tensions to particularly dangerous levels in the Middle East.

### ***How did the politics of the Arab world change following World War II?***

The politics of the Arab world underwent deep changes after World War II as well. Resentment and mistrust toward the West spread in the Middle East as it did in Africa, Latin America, and regions of Asia. As Britain and France retreated from the region, Arab nationalists criticized the Arab monarchies and rich landowners who had cooperated with the colonial powers of Britain and France. In the 1950s and 1960s, nationalist military officers overthrew kingdoms in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya.

### ***Why did Nasser's message appeal to other Arab countries?***

Egypt's Gamal Abd al-Nasser was the most prominent voice of Arab nationalism. A former army colonel, Nasser emerged as Egypt's leader after taking part in a coup that toppled the country's corrupt king in 1952. Nasser addressed his message not just to Egypt, but to the larger Arab world. He campaigned for "pan-Arabism"—the unification of Arabs into a single state.

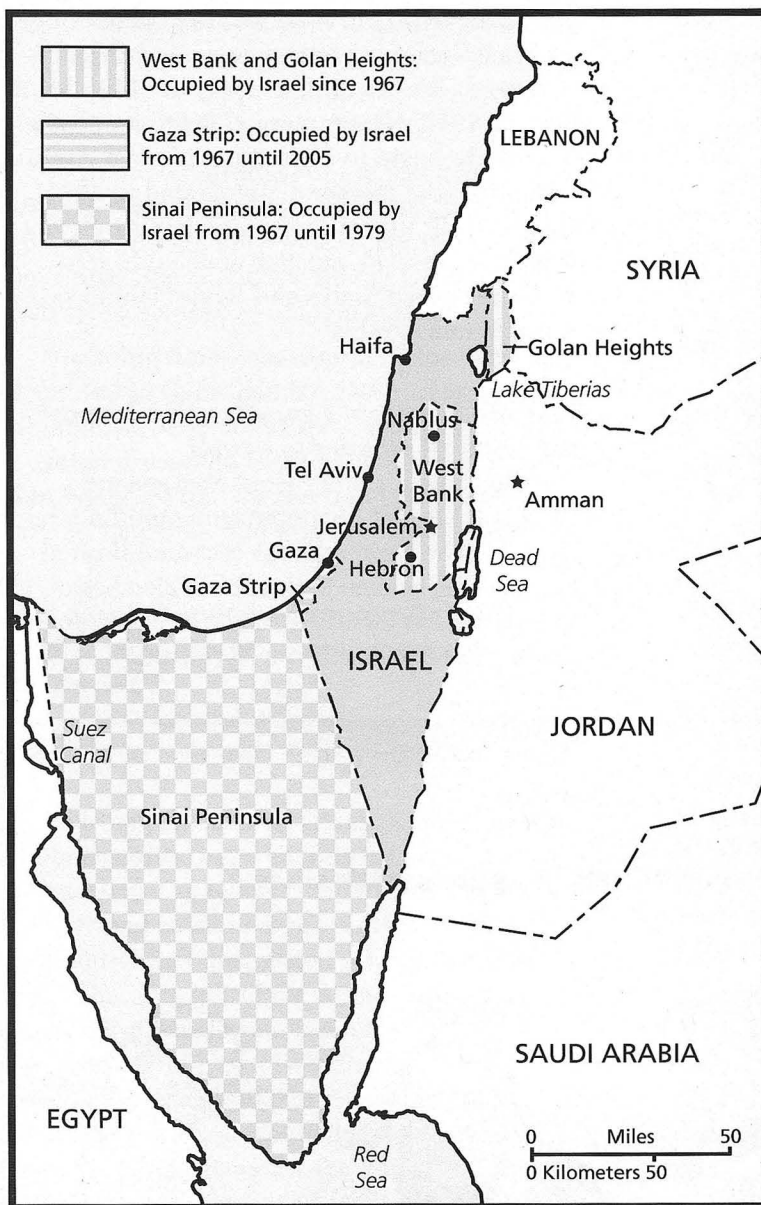
Nasser's reputation soared over the next fifteen years as he strengthened his position as the most dynamic leader of the Arab world. Part of what made Nasser

appealing to other Arabs was his condemnation of Israel, which he described as an outpost of Western influence in the Middle East. In 1958, Nasser merged Egypt and Syria in order to begin to implement his pan-Arabist campaign (the merger disintegrated in 1961). He also built up his army, mostly with Soviet weapons. Nasser's prestige enabled him to play the United States and Soviet Union skillfully off one another.

### ***Why did President Kennedy sell advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Israel?***

U.S. officials mistrusted Nasser's motives but felt that his popularity could not be ignored. The United States resumed limited financial assistance to Egypt but also began to see Israel as an ally against the expanding Soviet influence in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. In





1962, President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) approved the sale of advanced anti-aircraft missiles to Israel, along with a loan to help the Israelis pay for their purchase.

***“We are interested that Israel should keep up its sensitive, tremendous, historic task.”***

—President John F. Kennedy, 1962

Three years later, President Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969) permitted the Israelis to buy more than two hundred tanks, again

with generous financing. The arms sales marked the beginning of a steady flow of U.S. military equipment to Israel. No formal alliance was signed, but the United States and Israel were clearly developing a special relationship. At the same time, the Arab-Israeli conflict continued.

### ***What factors contributed to the Six-Day War?***

Expanding nationalism, growing superpower involvement, and an escalating arms build-up ignited another Arab-Israeli war in 1967. The immediate cause was Nasser’s decision in May 1967 to order the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers separating Egyptian and Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and to deny Israeli ships access to the Red Sea by closing the Suez Canal.

President Johnson attempted to resolve the crisis diplomatically. But Israeli leaders placed little faith in diplomatic solutions. In June 1967, they launched a surprise attack, destroying most of the Egyptian and Syrian air forces on the ground. With control of the air, Israeli tanks rolled across the Sinai to the Suez Canal. On their eastern flank, the Israelis drove the Jordanian army out of the Old City of Jerusalem and overran the West Bank.

Within two days, Egypt and Jordan claimed that they were ready to accept a UN resolution that the United States proposed for a cease-fire. But Israel continued its military operations. Israeli warplanes bombed a U.S. communications ship based off the coast of Egypt, killing thirty-four U.S. sailors. Although Israeli leaders claimed the attack was a mistake, some U.S. officials privately believed that Israel’s intent was to direct attention away from Israeli military preparations against Syria. Indeed, two days later the Israelis smashed

through Syrian defenses on the strategic Golan Heights. Syria quickly agreed to a truce. What came to be known as the Six-Day War ended in a complete military victory for Israel.

### ***What were the results of the Six-Day War?***

Although Israel would not consider withdrawing from the Golan Heights or Jerusalem, it did not refuse to withdraw from the other territories it had conquered if Arab leaders would recognize Israel's right to exist. When Arab leaders refused, the Israelis became responsible for governing more than one million Palestinians on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Six-Day War also set the stage for the next round of fighting in the Middle East. Although pan-Arabism had failed, Arab leaders were more determined than ever to match the military might of the Israelis. Increasingly, they turned to the Soviet Union. The Soviets, embarrassed by the speedy defeat of their allies and eager to extend their influence in the Middle East, were more than willing to help. They provided technical assistance and military support to Arab leaders. The United States, though still hoping for peace and stability, continued to support Israel in the hopes of countering Soviet influence.

### ***What happened during the October War of 1973?***

In 1970, Anwar al-Sadat came to power in Egypt. Sadat's top priority was to regain the Sinai Peninsula. When U.S. diplomacy failed to persuade Israel to withdraw, Sadat began making preparations for war.

In October 1973, Egypt and Syria opened a surprise two-front offensive against Israel on Yom Kippur, the most sacred day on the Jewish calendar. Along the Suez Canal, Egypt's army broke through Israeli lines and spilled into the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, Syrian troops overwhelmed Israel's defenses on the Golan Heights and were poised to attack northern Israel.

Israel's army quickly recovered from its setbacks. Within days, the Israelis drove a

wedge between Egyptian forces in the Sinai and crossed to the west bank of the Suez Canal. Against the Syrians, they soon regained the Golan Heights and swept toward Damascus, the Syrian capital. By the end of October 1973, after less than a month of fighting, the Israelis agreed to stop their advance.

### ***How did the Cold War affect the U.S. position during the October War?***

The October War brought the United States' chief concerns in the Middle East to the boiling point. In the first week of the conflict, Washington's commitment to Israel was put to the test. Israel's prime minister, Golda Meir, pleaded with President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) to ship U.S. military supplies to her country. Nixon approved a resupply effort but did not want to give Israel a lopsided advantage on the battlefield.

Cold War politics ultimately convinced Nixon to step up the flow of arms. From the outbreak of the October War, the Soviet Union had showered Egypt and Syria with military assistance. By the second week of fighting, the United States decided to do the same for Israel and began airlifting one thousand tons of military supplies a day. Superpower tensions rose further when the Soviets vowed to send troops to the region to stop Israel's advance. Nixon warned the Soviets against taking action. He put the U.S. military on worldwide alert to emphasize U.S. resolve.

### ***How did the Arab states try to use oil as a weapon against the United States?***

Most significantly, the October War prompted Arab states to lead an oil embargo against the United States.

High oil prices and increasing U.S. demand for oil made the embargo an effective tool against the United States. From 1970 to the start of the October War, world oil prices had doubled. During the same period, U.S. oil imports nearly doubled, exceeding one-third of total U.S. consumption. U.S. allies in Western Europe and Japan were almost entirely dependent on imported oil, mostly from



the Middle East. Rising demand allowed the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC, which at the time included Algeria, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Venezuela) to steadily push up prices for the first time since its formation in 1960.

In mid-October 1973, Saudi Arabian King Faisal Ibn Saud, a solid U.S. ally, initiated the oil embargo. He hoped to emphasize to the United States that it would have to do more for the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli conflict if it wanted to minimize Soviet influence in the region. The Arab oil-producing states raised prices on their exported oil by 70 percent. When President Nixon proposed giving Israel \$2.2 billion in military aid a few days later, the Arabs responded by completely cutting off oil shipments to the United States. At the same time, they reduced their overall production by 10 percent and vowed to lower oil output by 5 percent a month until Israel withdrew from the territories occupied in the 1967 War and restored the rights of the Palestinians.

### ***What was the impact of the oil embargo?***

The impact of the Arab cutbacks on the international oil market was not catastrophic, but it was dramatic. By the end of 1973, world oil production had fallen about 9 percent. Major non-Arab oil producers, such as Iran and Venezuela, increased their exports as new markets opened to them. Nonetheless, the Arab measures set off an economic panic. Oil prices rose as high as \$17 a barrel—six times the price in early October. Gasoline prices in the United States jumped 40 percent. Over the next two years, U.S. economic output dropped 6 percent, while unemployment doubled and inflation surged.

The Arab states also caused divisions in the Western alliance. Unlike the United States, most Western European countries and Japan backed away from overt support of Israel. In turn, the Arab oil producers allowed more exports to them. The situation caused the United States to reevaluate its Middle East policies.

U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger

undertook what came to be known as “shuttle diplomacy.” Jetting between countries of the region, Kissinger negotiated two agreements to end the fighting between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Syria. The State Department left the Soviet Union out of the negotiations. Kissinger’s efforts were enough to convince King Faisal Ibn Saud to call off the embargo in March of 1974.

### ***How did the October War lay the groundwork for peace?***

While the October War was the most destructive conflict yet between Arabs and Israelis, it also laid the groundwork for the first steps toward peace. The early battlefield successes of the Arab armies had soothed the humiliating sting of the 1967 War. Arab pride, especially in Egypt, was partially restored.

The initiative for peace came from Egyptian leader Sadat. In 1977, he visited Israel and spoke before Israel’s parliament. Meanwhile, U.S. officials worked behind the scenes to set the stage for serious negotiations.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) invited Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin to the presidential retreat at Camp David for peace talks. The negotiations were scheduled to last three days. Instead, they dragged on for two weeks.

### ***What were the Camp David Accords?***

Thanks largely to Carter’s persistence, the talks produced a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. In exchange for Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt became the first Arab country to recognize Israel. U.S. foreign aid sweetened the deal for both countries. Israel received \$3 billion in immediate military assistance, while Egypt was given \$1.5 billion. (Israel and Egypt remain among the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid.)

What were known as the Camp David Accords scarcely addressed other aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arab leaders condemned Sadat for neglecting the needs and hopes of Palestinians and expelled Egypt from the Arab League, an organization founded in

1945 to serve the common good of Arab countries. In 1981, Sadat himself was assassinated by political Islamist extremists. (The term political Islamist is used to describe political movements based on an interpretation of the principles of Islam.)

***How did the Camp David Accords affect the position of the Soviet Union in the Middle East?***

The Camp David Accords brought Egypt securely into the U.S. camp in the Middle East. At the same time, countries who opposed the treaty, such as Syria and Iraq, moved further into the Soviet camp. To counter the Soviets, U.S. officials placed greater weight on their relations with other long-time friends in the region.

Aside from Israel, the United States counted on close ties with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Turkey was linked to the United States through membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The United States also provided Turkey with ample foreign aid. The Saudis, while they opposed Israel and U.S. support for Israel, nevertheless relied heavily on U.S. firms to market their oil exports and invest their profits. The U.S. relationship with Iran was also complex.