

Globalism's Impact on the Geopolitics of the Middle East

Emily Patterson

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Mary Prentice, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Gai Ferdon, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Marilyn Gadomski Peyton, Ph.D.
Honors Assistant Director

Date

Abstract

The important geography of the Middle East contributes to the unquestionable value of the region in international relations. Through examining the origin of geopolitics as well as the relevant political theories, and then applying these theories to the current state of the Middle East, it is evident that the geography of the Middle East has impacted the region's international significance and stability. Understanding the unique geography assists in explaining the region's current turmoil. The opposing interests in religion, land, and power catalyze tensions across the Middle East, producing an unstable environment around trade route chokepoints and disputed territories. War, political unrest, humanitarian crisis, and terrorism are a few of the unresolved problems within the Middle East. Consequently, these issues not only changed the Middle East's current political climate, but through globalization affect the cultures and economies of the connected regions in Europe and Africa. The geopolitics of the Middle East explains the devastation in the region, which globalization has spread to transform Europe and Africa economically, culturally, and politically.

Introduction

The Middle East remains a volatile region yet one of unquestionable value in the realm of international politics with influence that can be traced throughout the centuries. World powers as well as nations within the region continue to fight for land, natural resources, and governmental authority. To truly understand the region and its influence on international politics, one must observe the geopolitics of the Middle East. Several theories within geopolitics explain the unsettled and explosive nature of this region, while the negative aspects of globalization expanded the damage this civil unrest could produce. War, political unrest, humanitarian crisis, and terrorism are a few of the unresolved problems within the Middle East. Yet, this instability as seen through terrorism did not remain within the confines of the Middle East but rather spread to Europe and Africa. The rapid influx of refugees fleeing these unsafe zones created challenges because this unplanned vast increase in population has strained the limited resources and social structures of Europe and Africa. The interconnectedness of communication and travel thrust Middle Eastern culture into neighboring continents. The Islamic ideology against modernism and globalization conflicts with some of the European nations receiving refugees, which created tension within the region between the different cultures. The geopolitics of the Middle East explains the devastation in the region, which globalization has spread to transform Europe and Africa economically, culturally, and politically.

Origin of Geopolitics

Geopolitics has influenced international relations and intranational systems throughout the centuries, dating back to Anaximander (610 B.C.-546 B.C.) and Aristotle (384 B.C.-322 B.C.). The major contribution of Anaximander is his map, which is one of the earliest recorded

that attempted to include the entire world.¹ This sparked interest in analyzing the relationship between the realm of politics and geography to the time and writings of Aristotle. Though Aristotle's writings were produced centuries before the term geopolitics was coined, the concepts of geography, specifically geostrategy, can be seen in many of the philosophical questions imposed in his writings. His writing, *Politics*, emphasizes geography with the desired location for a state to be near sea access.² A body of water can be connected to safety and economic accessibility as it limits types of attacks upon the state.³ Aristotle mentioned that a nation surrounded by certain geographical features has built-in protection strengthening military capabilities. This thinking coincides with the logic that national security and international relations are influenced by a nation's surroundings as geographic advantages assist in political action.⁴

The ancients typically believed man was limited by his geography. In *Politics*, Aristotle attempts to explain the environment's effects on one's character, occupation, and even preference for a political regime. Aristotle infused politics into this concept as well, as different cultures with ties to dissimilar geographies can have different socio-economic priorities. Geography clearly affects the well-being of those who dwell in the region, so specific geography should be sought after.⁵ At the time, machinery and technology were not as advanced, so

¹ Andrew Gregory, *Anaximander a Re-Assessment*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 2.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Jowett (Ktocyta.pl, 2020), 160.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 167-168.

⁵ Ibid., 73.

mountains, climates, and deserts limited the feasibility of empires. The power was placed in geography rather than what man can do despite geography. To determine geopolitics, one observed the laws of nature and chose from the limited options that the elements did not eliminate. This worldview connects geography and politics throughout the ancient study of geography, leading up to the intellectual thought of the last few centuries.⁶

Relevant Theories of Geopolitics

Around the 18th century, ideology shifted to the belief that when a country could control certain regions that nation would become the prominent world power. Through his second book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, Alfred Thayer Mahan became an internationally renowned naval historian, strategist, and geopolitical theorist as many navies around the world adopted his ideology. Mahan taught that sea power is more important than land power for international dominance and that the naval approach protects global stability.⁷ This theory originated through his study of British success, specifically the role sea power played in its growth and emergence as an empire. Connecting British achievements to his time, Mahan believed the United States would emerge as the next world power because of its water capabilities. His book emphasizes the importance of waterway chokepoints on the world stage of politics. *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* also discusses six famous elements of power including geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, size of population,

⁶ Robert Clark, *Geospatial Intelligence Origins and Evolution* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 39.

⁷ Phil Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics a New Analytical Model* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 113-115.

character of the people, and character of the government.⁸ Alfred Thayer Mahan assessed geography's political significance, with sea power as the determining factor for international authority.⁹

Though naval power had been the main avenue responsible for thrusting Britain into the role of the most powerful nation globally, Sir Halford Mackinder proposed a contradicting prediction that the future world power would dominate through land-based acclamation. Mackinder, a British political geographer, proposed the Heartland Theory in 1904, to explain his hypothesis. Essentially, this theory suggests that strategic advancement and political interventions should prominently occur in Eastern Europe because the nation in control of it will govern world politics. His Heartland Theory says, "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland. Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island. Who rules the World-Island commands the World."¹⁰ In his assessment, the area around the Heartland, the Middle East and parts of Asia including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan, plays a major role in international relations as well because of the region's nearness to the Heartland. The size of the Heartland strengthens its political importance, as it contains approximately two-thirds of all global territories, population, and wealth. Mackinder assumed whoever rules this region possesses the advantages necessary to achieve world domination.¹¹

⁸ Robert Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House, 2013), 76.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 74.

¹¹ Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics*, 44.

After Mackinder, another slightly different geopolitical theory emerged by Nicholas Spykman known as the Rimland Theory. Spykman believed the Rimland determined the future of the world as opposed to the Heartland itself. The Rimland encompasses the Heartland, which includes all of the Middle East as well as parts of Asia and Europe. Spykman taught whoever controlled the Rimland ruled Eurasia, and whoever ruled Eurasia would be the next world power. Different from the consolidated Heartland, the Rimland, made of fragile and fragmented zones, covers multiple continents. The vastness makes it almost impossible for one nation to command the Rimland. Spykman concluded the solution to stabilize world politics would be power dispersed through a divided Rimland. Although Mackinder's theory still influences geopolitics, international strategy continues to apply aspects of the Rimland Theory as well.¹²

Rudolf Kjellén further pushed for the recognized importance of geography in the realm of international relations. Kjellén coined the term *geopolitics* along with *economy-politics*, *socio-politics*, and *regimental politics* as early as 1899, to define the combinations of strategies and functions of a state.¹³ *Geopolitics* by Kjellén's definition refers to geography's impact on the behavior of states.¹⁴ Kjellén believed one cannot solely look at geography but rather unite it with the ethno-politics to succeed at the national level and to compete on the international stage.¹⁵ Kjellén wrote, "One cannot divorce land from the state, without the state as a concept losing its

¹² Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 92-98.

¹³ Ola Tunander., "Swedish-Germangeopolitics for a New Century: Rudolf Kjellén's 'the State as a Living Organism'," *Review of International Studies* (07, 2001): 451, 454.
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fswedish-germangeopolitics-new-century-rudolf%2Fdocview%2F204946908%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>.

¹⁴ Daniel Duedney, "Geopolitics," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, June 12, 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/geopolitics>.

¹⁵ Ola Tunander, "Swedish-Germangeopolitics," 457.

meaning, and, the people leaving the land, kills the state.”¹⁶ The protection of land and state intertwine in international policy, while the economy-politics, socio-politics, and regimental politics refer to the government’s role in national unity.¹⁷

Kjellén eventually worked with Frederich Ratzel to start the German school of geopolitics. The most analyzed theory of Ratzel’s school of thought is the concept that a nation acts as a living organism.¹⁸ He then invented the term *lebensraum* meaning “living organism” to explain his theory. Ratzel proposed a nation is not a fixed state but rather living as it is born, grows, and eventually perishes.¹⁹ Kjellén expanded Ratzel’s theory by concluding a nation can lose certain territories or “limbs” yet continue as a nation.²⁰ However, losing specific parts of the country would result in the destruction of that nation. The two believed all nations have their “Achilles’ heel,” which if conquered would weaken the nation, yet almost all have “hearts,” with heart referring to intrastate territory that when conquered would disperse that nation.²¹ An example of an Achilles’ heel in the Middle East is Bahrain, the political impasse used to buffer the rest of the region from Iran that is a “festering wound in the Gulf.”²² Ratzel insisted as a nation may lose limbs, it also can take pride in regaining territory or “amputation of proud

¹⁶ Ibid., 454.

¹⁷ Ibid., 451.

¹⁸ Heinz Brill, “Political, Geography, Geopolitics, Geostrategy: An Attempt at Systematization,” *Strategic Studies* 8, no. 2 (1985), 86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45182322>.

¹⁹ Ola Tunander, “Swedish-Germangeopolitics,” 451.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Frederic Wehrey, “The Gulf’s Achilles’ Heel,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 27, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/03/27/gulf-s-achilles-heel-pub-55124>.

flesh.”²³ The living organism theory aligns with the concept of a buffer state as well as the importance of border security that can be seen today with the Ukrainian crisis, the Suwalki Gap of Poland, and the decades of ongoing crises across the Middle East.

Years later Kjellén’s theory was wrongly interpreted to justify German behavior in World War II. However, this interpretation actually contradicts his theory. To combat the issue of nations violating internationally recognized borders to regain territory, Kjellén proposed a concept that reflects the goals of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To prevent the violation of security and liberty, Kjellén thought the world should form a multi-national and non-hegemonic group. Border security would be ensured by this organization. Consequences from several nations instead of a singular, less-powerful entity could ensure international stability. Kjellén’s interpretation of his metaphoric comparison of a nation to a living organism was later realized, as it was not in support of world takeover but rather the protection of nation-states. The theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the motivations of nations to create effective measures of accountability that prevent expansion. Kjellén’s work inspired the concept of geostrategy and prioritized geopolitics in military planning.²⁴ NATO and other international organizations mirror this theory as their plan to achieve international stability.²⁵ The justification through Kjellén and the other geopolitical scientists’ logic explains the extensive NATO involvement in the Middle East to protect the borders of nation-states.

²³ John Deni, “NATO Must Prepare to Defend its Weakest Point-the Suwalki Corridor,” *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/nato-must-prepare-to-defend-its-weakest-point-the-suwalki-corridor/>.

²⁴ Ola Tunander., “Swedish-Germangeopolitics,” 451.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

All these theories have played a crucial role in international relations in the Middle East over the last century. The Heartland Theory was the foundation of NATO strategy for years in Eastern Europe, so the balance of power would not tilt in favor of communism.²⁶ Throughout the Cold War, the implementation of geostrategy pushed the ideology of containment to prevent the spread of anti-democratic practices through Eastern Europe.²⁷ With the post-World War II presupposition that democracy could be achieved anywhere, both democratic and communist nations invested and fought in the Middle East to gain an economic and geographic advantage.²⁸ These theories maintain prevalence in international relations today through the connection of geography to technology and the ties geostrategy has with the economic influence of the Middle East.

Relevant Theories of Geography

As one looks back, geography played a crucial role in geopolitics and its relationship to international history. As Mackinder concluded, for any area of the world to be considered a nation, it must cover land, and therefore, geography is the first aspect that defines a territory as a state.²⁹ The necessity signifies the relevance of geography in politics. Mackinder further expands upon the importance of geography with his statement, "At one glance at geography, a whole series of generalizations can be made. Geography bridges the gap between arts and sciences, connecting the study of history and culture with environmental factors, which specialists in the

²⁶ Clark, *Geospatial Intelligence*, 66.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 304.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

humanities sometimes neglect.”³⁰ In order to understand how effective international policy is created, one must examine the significant aspects of geography. Governing authorities and values may waiver, but the geography of the world remains mostly unchanging. Indeed, geography cannot be blamed as the sole factor for political implications. As political scientist Hans Morgenthau recognized, international politics are the consequences of forces sparked by human nature.³¹ However, when the choices of human nature intertwine with the impact of culture and politics, geography can be a useful tool to explain events currently occurring in the region.

Modern geopolitical writer, Robert Kaplan, realized the geographical analysis of the Middle East in a historical context helps explain current events. In his book, *Revenge of Geography*, Kaplan argues that each nation in the Middle East has clearly written its own history impacted by its unique geography. Geography can affect the preservation of stability. Examples of helpful and harmful geography can be seen across the Middle East. Regardless of what geographic feature plays the most significant role, it is evident in the Middle East that geography has been a major factor in world politics for centuries.³² Significant geography of the Middle East includes potential attack routes and trade routes. Climate and terrain affect the people and the lifestyles available and thus influence political presuppositions and priorities as well. In the Middle East, rivers, deserts, and connections to oceans historically determined accessibility for

³⁰ Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 60.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

³² *Ibid.*

opportunities to exchange both knowledge and goods with other cultures. Kaplan argued the instability of the Middle East can be traced to historical patterns for geographic advantage.

Geography of the Middle East

Due to political issues, there is no commonly accepted definition of the Middle East.³³ However, it has been internationally confirmed, the Middle East consists of the nations of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel.³⁴ This region covers over 5,000,000 square miles. It extends over 2,000 miles from the Arabian Sea in the South to the Black Sea in the North.³⁵ The physical geography of the Middle East varies with its fertile valleys, deserts, mountains, beaches, and rivers. Though some climates and terrains led to decreased quality of life within the region, the Middle East's rivers, land, and chokepoints assisted in the region's historical preservation and, over time, became important in international relations for globalization.

Waterways remain an extremely important aspect of Middle Eastern geography. The two major river systems within the region are the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates. The Nile is the world's longest river, and over the course of history it has earned its nickname, the "lifeblood of Egypt." Throughout history, the Egyptian empire was based around the Nile because the rest of the country is desert land, while most other groups of people settled around its tributaries because the terrain elsewhere was unlivable. The Nile flows from South to North through the

³³ Geoff Emberling, "The Geography of the Middle East," Oriental Institute at University of Chicago, December 29, 2010, <http://teachmiddleeast.lib.uchicago.edu/foundations/geography/essay/essay-01.html#:~:text=The%20Middle%20East%20is%20a,to%20the%20mountains%20of%20Iran>.

³⁴ Benjamin Elisha Sawe, "Why Is It Called the Middle East?" WorldAtlas, April 25, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/why-is-it-called-the-middle-east.html#:~:text=The%20origin%20of%20the%20term,area%20around%20the%20Persian%20Gulf>.

³⁵ Ibid.

Sahara Desert from Khartoum in Sudan extending all the way upward through Egypt to empty into the Mediterranean Sea. The Tigris and Euphrates flow through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. This river system provided historical significance as an irrigation system to Mesopotamia and for international travel.³⁶ Even with the technologies of today, dwelling near water or areas with access to it remains the trend for thriving cities and cultures of the Middle East as it is still the most viable option for civilizations.

Other influential waterways in the Middle East are the surrounding seas and oceans, which have acted as barriers for protection and routes for economic expansion. Other major bodies of water that have played a role as borders of the Middle East include the Black Sea, Arabian Sea, and the Caspian Sea. The Arabian Sea flows into the Indian Ocean. The Caspian Sea has assisted in the transportation of oil and other natural resources from Iran to other nations for decades. The Black Sea borders Turkey, providing a barrier against formerly Russian territories. Finally, the Mediterranean Sea is in this region between Egypt, Syria, and Turkey. This body of water stretching over 1,000 miles wide and 2,300 miles long has been called one of the most important waterways throughout human history.³⁷ This title can be credited to all the commercial and military traffic that has taken this route over the course of the centuries. The waterways in the Middle East also play a part in economic and trade routes with their chokepoints greatly impacting world politics.

³⁶ Sawe, "Why Is It Called the Middle East?"

³⁷ Emberling, "The Geography of the Middle East."

Chokepoints

Chokepoints are pivotal sea or land corridors that have an international impact beyond the current geographical location. A chokepoint can be a canal, strait, passage, channel, or river estuary.³⁸ A major chokepoint located within the Middle East is the Suez Canal.³⁹ The Red Sea with the completion of the Suez Canal creates a path for the shipping industry. An agreement Ferdinand de Lesseps, who was the former French consul to Cairo, made with the Ottoman Empire led to the production of the Suez Canal in 1854. The reason France got involved in this process was to make a shorter route for trade from Europe to Asia. Before its completion, European ships would have to travel past the Cape of Good Hope to transport and transfer goods to Asia. After its opening in 1869, the canal drastically changed the world economy with the most efficient and least expensive transportation routes to this day, making the canal one of three chokepoints within the Middle East.⁴⁰

Another major chokepoint in the Middle East is the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is located between Africa and Arabia. It connects the Red Sea, which is in the northwest to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean to the southeast. The Perim Island divides the 20-mile-wide channel in two. The western channel covers a total of 16 miles while the eastern channel extends four miles with the island two miles wide in between. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait's name refers to the Arabic meaning of the name the "gate of tears." With the construction of the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait became more secure and gained

³⁸ Kelly, *Classical Geopolitics*, 176.

³⁹ Ewan Anderson, *Global Geopolitical Flashpoints: An Atlas of Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 318-19.

⁴⁰ Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 75.

importance as it is part of the international trade route. Without the Bab el-Mandeb Strait the ships that pass through a day, carrying 6,000,000 barrels of crude oil, condensate, and refined petroleum, would have to divert down to the southern tip of Africa losing time and money. On average, 57 giant oil vessels a day pass through the strait, totaling around 21,000 per year. The economic efficiency comes from the connection the strait makes with the Mediterranean Sea and East Asia. This has made the strait a region of significant economic importance.⁴¹ Many nations depend upon the stability of the region for goods, so the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and its surrounding regions affect geopolitics today.

Another major waterway in the Middle East is the Strait of Hormuz. Also, called the Strait of Ormuz, this channel connects the Gulf of Oman to the Persian Gulf. It separates the Arabian Peninsula in the South from Iran in the North. The Strait of Ormuz is 30 miles wide at its narrowest point. Yet, the channel has depths reaching 160 feet, making it easier for larger ships to pass through the area as opposed to more shallow waters. The Strait of Hormuz also contains several islands, particularly Qeshm, Hormuz, and Hengām. The islands are claimed by the nation of Iran. Like the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the channel serves extreme economic value, especially after oil was found in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴² The three major chokepoints of the Middle East vitally affect the economy of most of the world, with the geography of the Middle East providing international importance.

The value of the Suez Canal can be seen given the crisis that occurred in 1956, when the canal shut down for a few days and the world economy took a massive hit. More recently, in

⁴¹Justine Barden, "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic rout for oil and natural gas ships," U.S. Energy Information Transformation, August 27, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>.

⁴² Anderson, *Global Geopolitical Flashpoints*, 24-26.

2021, a ship called the *Ever Given* got stuck in the southern stretch of the canal and blocked the Suez Canal for six days. This 1,310-foot vessel, one of the largest ships ever built containing 18,300 containers full of goods, prevented traffic in the single lane strip of the canal. This six-day fiasco created a global shipping disaster, costing \$10,000,000,000 in trade per day. To this day, roughly 15% of the entire world's shipping uses the Suez Canal as the route of transportation of goods because it is still one of the fastest ways to get goods from Asia to Europe. These minor examples show the waterway remains relevant in the economy and thus in geopolitics.⁴³

The Strait of Hormuz plays a major role in oil tankers as those that collect on the Persian Gulf must pass through it. In the mid-2010s, approximately a fifth of all seaborne trade passed through this strait, as well as a third of the world's liquified natural gas supply.⁴⁴ Bab el-Mandeb Strait has continued to be relevant in geopolitics, not only for the economic advantages it provides, but also for the geographic disputes and tensions that continue to make the news.⁴⁵ This particularly deals with the nation of Yemen. The channel separates Yemen from Djibouti. The region has been famous for wars, conflicts, and struggles, and this turmoil continues to affect this route of economic trade.⁴⁶

⁴³ Anderson, *Global Geopolitical Flashpoints*, 24-26

⁴⁴ Graham Evans, "Strait of Hormuz," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Persian-Gulf/Economic-aspects>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Anderson, *Global Geopolitical Flashpoints*, 141-42.

Fertile Land

The Tigris and Euphrates basins form Mesopotamia, which means the land between rivers. Again, as seen with civilizations near the Nile, the valley in between these two rivers is where most of the fertile land for the Middle East can be found. The region consists of the place credited as the dwelling place for some of the earliest recorded civilizations in history, explaining its title, the “Cradle of Civilization.”⁴⁷ Throughout history, some of the most successful and prosperous civilizations have lived in this region. Inhabitants of the area have been credited with the inventions of math, the wheel, sailboats, maps, and writing. The agricultural capabilities and the closeness in proximity to water allowed for trade and equipped the region with abundant means to acquire resources necessary for survival.

Not only can the inhabitants of the area be credited for so many inventions, but the region also experienced multiple major shifts of power struggles for the desired, rich territory. This included fights between the Hittites, Persians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Gutians, Persians, Israelites, and many more people groups. The region continues to reflect the desire for political power and global dominance; however, these historical implications are not the only reasons this region is still relevant in discussions of politics today. The area of Mesopotamia currently takes up parts of Iraq, Kuwait, Turkey, and Syria, all of which are regular components of discussion in international relations disputes and crises.

Geographic Tensions

When considering geopolitics, one must not only look at the physical geography of the region but also analyze its connection to religion, politics, and economics. The three religions of

⁴⁷ Sawe, “Why Is It Called the Middle East?”

Islam, Christianity, and Judaism credit the Middle East as their place of origin and history. The religious ties to land show the cultural and historical significance of the geography. Middle Eastern influence does not stop with religion but also plays a major factor in the world economy with one of the main routes for the oil and shipping industries. Both religion and economic leverage create political turmoil within the region. The political pressure shows Middle Eastern significance does not stop with religious symbolism, but also affects international politics with the implementation of jihadist practices in multiple political systems.

Religion

Medina, Mecca, and Jerusalem, the three holy cities of Islam, are all located in the Middle East. From Medina, Muhammed established the first Islamic community. Mecca became important because it was a cosmopolitan trade center for western and central Arabia. This is due to its location at almost the midway point for two major trade routes. With his prior merchant history, the economic value justifies the prophet Muhammed's declaration that made Mecca a holy city. The walled city of Jerusalem contains Islam's holy site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Islamic extremists remain actively involved in the region acting in opposition to the state of Israel.⁴⁸

The Israelites dwelled in the Middle East, so the region has a historical connection to Christianity as well. In ancient Jerusalem around 1000-900 B.C., the first holy temple of the Jewish faith was built.⁴⁹ Christians value the area because it is where Jesus lived, preached, and died. However, even with centuries of Jewish ties, the region only found lasting stability from

⁴⁸ Jonathan White, *Terrorism and Homeland Security* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth 2017), 173-178.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 179.

1517 to 1917, under the domain of the Ottoman Empire. Over those centuries Jews spread out across Europe and Russia, while Islam flourished in the Middle East. Even after 1917, the Islamic culture remained prevalent in the region until Great Britain took control of the area after World War I. With international assistance, the Jews attempted to reclaim Jerusalem and the surrounding area as their land according to God's promise. Britain changed the course of the Middle East through its support for the Balfour Act and the Zionist movement.

The Zionists were Jews who thought they deserved to make their own nation in the Middle East by regaining the historically Israelite territory. Over 75,000 Jews returned to the region by 1904, in support of the Zionist movement. The next several decades of racial persecution encouraged more Jews to migrate to the Middle East. In 1947, against Palestine's wishes, the United Nations created the Jewish country of Israel.⁵⁰ Both Islam and Judaism claimed the region, but internationally the recognition shifted to the Jews. This outside intervention posed challenges to other Middle Eastern nations. With differing histories, contradicting ideologies, and a desire to maintain disputed territory, geography has impacted international relations through the racial and religious divides in the Middle East.

Not only are there tensions between different religions, but a major conflict catalyst for the Middle East is the Sunni-Shiite split in Islam. This division dates back to the seventh century after their prophet Muhammed died without an heir. Sunnis, who today make up 85% of the Islamic population, believe the elite members of the Islamic community should have chosen his successor. This approximately includes 1,600,000,000 people today. However, the Shia, the other 15%, argue someone from Muhammed's family, specifically his cousin and son-in-law,

⁵⁰ White, *Terrorism*, 179.

should have been put in charge. The two originated from different opinions on who was in charge of Islam after Muhammed's death and continue to disagree on the current overarching religious authority. Shia still represents the majority of Iraq, Bahrain, and Iran, while Sunnis make up the majority for more than 40 other countries.⁵¹ For centuries the two lived alongside each other, but the last several decades have created a world crisis between the two as the Shias have taken an aggressive stance against those of other religions and even the Shiites, which has divided the Middle East.

Politics and Economy

This Islamic split correlates with the political unrest and recent revolutions that occurred in the Middle East. In 1979, the revolution in Iran created a power vacuum the radical branch of Shia Islam filled. The extremist Shiites started violently clashing with the Sunnis in Saudi Arabia. The Iranian Revolution provided the opportunity for the creation of terrorist groups, including Al Qaeda, Taliban, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), Afghan Taliban, Al-Nusra Front, and Al-Shabaab. Almost 95% of terrorist acts happened in the Middle East or Africa, killing over 20,000 people a year in those regions for the last decade.⁵² Though this dispute escalated because of religious tensions, the fight for the most strategic geography explains the geopolitical significance for both sides with religious ties and the proximity to necessities.

The Syrian Civil War also escalated because of Shia aggression, causing the destruction of most natural resources in Syria. Over 470,000 people have been killed, and over 1,000,000 injured, due to this conflict. It has thus created one of the largest refugee crises in the world, with

⁵¹ White, *Terrorism*, 178.

⁵² Ibid.

over 20,000,000 people still stuck in unstable locations within Syria and another 10,000 who fled to other parts of the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.⁵³ In his book *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington explained that a consequence of globalization is the dispersed tension throughout the world. This allows solidarity for groups that are spread out, making terrorism far more dangerous. *Clash of Civilization* emphasizes that culture is a more important variable than economics because it can form new boundaries or produce political cohesion in a manner the other variables cannot. This concept can be seen in the cultural disputes between Islam and Judeo-Christianity as well as the religious cohesion of Islamic extremists that caused the international migrant crisis and regional explosiveness.⁵⁴

Both crucial parts of the Heartland Theory and the Rimland Theory, Turkey's and Iran's geographic locations have made them prominent Middle Eastern powers. The two contain most of the Middle East's richest land with the most agriculture as well as the most advanced industrialization. Turkey's geographic placement allows it to control the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates, which gives Turkey the power to cut off and divert 90% of Iraq's water source and 40% of Syria's. Turkey has attempted to expand hydraulic power with the Southeast Anatolia Project to maneuver and control water held by the Ataturk Dam, attempting to irrigate its Harran Plateau. With this project, Turkey has had drastically increased power in Middle Eastern politics from the 20th to the 21st century.⁵⁵ After an Israeli raid in 2010, Turkey decided to use its geopolitical power to join the Palestinian fight against Israel and the Western front,

⁵³ Karen AbuZayd, Denis J. Sullivan, Susan M. Akram, and Sara Roy, "The Syrian humanitarian crisis: What is to be done?" *Middle East Policy*, 22, no. 2 (2015): 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12125>.

⁵⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 45.

⁵⁵ Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 79.

promoting the spread of Arab Islamist ideology. Since then, other states have also experienced exploitation by Turkey to make buffer states between Israel and the rest of the Arab world, particularly Jordan.⁵⁶ These revolutions indicate there are internal power struggles, fights for oil, fights for waterfront and waterways, religious tensions, and political disputes, which prove the Middle East's geopolitically importance. Looking at the geography of the Middle East one can more easily understand the present state of the area and explain how these effects have influenced both neighboring regions of Europe and North Africa politically, economically, and culturally.

Spread of Middle Eastern Instability

Globalization has furthered the importance of the region through its geostrategic and political significance in the realm of international trade, but unfortunately, this interconnectedness has also expanded the consequences of the Middle Eastern conflicts to Europe. The resources in this part of the world led to Britain, France, the United States, China and Russia's involvement for decades. However, in 2015, the international role of Europe shifted as over 1,000,000 Syrian refugees crossed into Europe during the Syrian Refugee crisis. Hoping to find a more stable and secure environment, thousands of migrants died during their voyage to Europe.⁵⁷ The migration of the refugees started with the abandonment of Syria, which had mainly become a battle ground to Turkey. Afterward migrants then spilled into Greece and Bulgaria, using the two nations as a gateway to the European Union (EU), an international league known for its open border policies for all EU member states. Not only did migrants come

⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography*, 79.

⁵⁷ Robin Vandevoordt and Gert Verschraegen, "The European refugee controversy: Civil solidarity, cultural imaginaries and political change," *Social Inclusion* 7, no. 2 (2019): 48. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i2.2260>.

from Syria, but other political instability and war throughout the Middle East forced migrants to come from Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, and Mali as well. This mass migration of people sparked political and economic crises, creating a serious point of tension between EU member states as some opened their nations to migrants while others built fences and closed borders.⁵⁸

In the European nations that accepted refugees, the religious lifestyle of the migrants has clashed with both the secularization and traditional religions of Europe. European states have become split between the secularized and the religiously diverse. Some nations like Germany and France have prioritized decreased religious emphasis. However, the mass of individuals coming into these secularized countries have a religious lifestyle encompassing all aspects of life. The EU has even had some internal issues amongst member states on religion and the unalienable rights endowed to all people regarding religion, as they discussed Pompeo's "Commission on Unalienable Rights Initiative."⁵⁹ The conservatism of Islam, specifically in the roles and rights of women, has clashed with the feminist movement trending in Europe. It became a major dispute when women from the Islamic community decided to embrace European ideology on women's societal role as opposed to their heritage. The tension has risen in second-generation migrants who are now being raised in the European culture but taught contrasting opinions at home. Migrants that desire to change the culture of Europe have sought political office. While several nations welcome the migrant political involvement, many Europeans have

⁵⁸ Vandevoordt, "The European Refugee," 49.

⁵⁹ *U.S. Department of State - United States Department of State. (n.d.).* Retrieved March 2, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Draft-Report-of-the-Commission-on-Unalienable-Rights.pdf> .

been voting to protect their lifestyle, thinking the migrants should change their lifestyle to fit the European customs.⁶⁰

An example of this cultural collision occurred in France within the school systems. Due to the history of France with the distrust and manipulation of the king through the Pope, the French Constitution has declared it unconstitutional to allow religious symbols in the public sector.⁶¹ This sector includes the workplace, government buildings, and schools. Young Syrian migrant women have refused to attend school or been expelled because wearing a hijab is a non-negotiable aspect of their culture and religion.⁶² Another example includes Samuel Paty a teacher murdered by several of his Islamic students as a consequence of the teacher's cartoon about Prophet Muhammed that was interpreted as offensive.⁶³ Mosques have been built to adhere to the spiritual desire of migrants, causing disputes of unequal treatment for those whose families have resided in the nations of Europe for centuries. It has led to protests, terrorist attacks, and turmoil over Europe for the last several years, still impacting the continent today.⁶⁴

This has also created problems economically in Europe. Though immigration remains a great blessing throughout the world, mass unplanned migration of individuals whose nation has

⁶⁰ William Edmiston and Annie Duménil, *La France Contemporaine* (Boston, MA: Cengage, 2016), 76.

⁶¹ France. (1958). *The French Constitution, Adopted by the Referendum of September 28, 1958 and Promulgated on October 4, 1958. French Text and English Translation*. French Embassy, Press and Information Division.

⁶² Edmiston, *La France*, 79.

⁶³ Bahar Makooi, "The Violence Shook Me Profoundly: Teachers, Students Remember Samuel Paty's Murder," *France 24*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20211015-the-violence-shook-me-profoundly-teachers-students-remember-samuel-paty-s-murder>

⁶⁴ Petter Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994-2007: Planned, prepared, and executed terrorist attacks," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 31, no. 10 (2008): 924. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576100802339185>

been destroyed by war leads to economic complications. The arrival of forced migrants led to a decrease in job opportunities for both refugees and citizens of the EU member states.⁶⁵ This placed enormous strain on the national and international budget of the member states as unplanned funding went towards the depletion of public services, infrastructure, and security. Europe has been impacted in economics, safety, and culture by the crisis that has spread from the Middle East.⁶⁶

The impact, however, did not merely extend north to Europe, as the Middle East and China have also played a major role in Africa. Over the last century, Africa has remained a fragile environment, responding differently to colonial development than Latin and North America. Through the interconnectedness of globalization, terrorist groups have made Africa their “backyard” of activity. Al Qaeda has dominated Africa, creating a North African branch of its terrorist group. This Al Qaeda branch has attacked parts of Algeria, Mali, Niger, Libya, Tunisia, and Mauritania through the acts of its violent extremists. In 2017, over 276 terrorist attacks occurred in Mali and West Africa alone. ISIS has also seeped into Africa, taking control over parts of Libya. This has caused Libya to be an unstable and politically corrupt nation for decades.⁶⁷ Africa, already a struggling region, has been battling expanded Middle Eastern

⁶⁵ Madsen, Per Konshøj. “Unemployment in the New Europe.” *The American Political Science Review* 96, no. 3 (2002): 651-652. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i356737>.

⁶⁶ Ibrahim Warde, “Monetary policy and central banking in the Middle East and North Africa, Routledge political economy of the Middle East and North Africa,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2012): 194-196. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811001498>.

⁶⁷ George Joffé, “Political dynamics in North Africa,” *International Affairs*, 85, no. 5 (2009): 931-949. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2009.00839.x>.

terrorist groups to keep at least some type of stability in the region. Islamic groups see Africa as the next potential area to combat against Western ideology.

The issues in North Africa have caused another mass migration with people now moving to Sub-Saharan Africa. This has caused the same struggles that have occurred in Europe for the last several decades due to strife in the Middle East. Individuals caught in the crossfire throughout Northern Africa have migrated down to the Sub-Saharan part of Africa. It has led to an economic crisis in Northern Africa because resources are going to defend victims of terrorist attacks instead of stabilizing the infrastructure of the political system. The political system's instability limits the advancement of the economy, causing an extremely high poverty rate throughout Africa. With the delicate economy in Southern Africa before this debacle, the future seems to be the repeat of past problems over the last five years in Europe.⁶⁸

Some argue that geopolitics and geostrategy are too deterministic. Though ancient philosophers and theorists went too far by blaming the consequences and decisions of man solely upon geography, it is evident through the history of the Middle East that geography still plays a vital role in the realm of international relations and should be taken seriously in this field of study. Connections to patterns of geographical regions, the analysis of limited resources, and the power that specific regions possess need to be addressed to fully understand the situation. The surroundings are not the only reason for why and how nations act, but it is indisputable that they are a valuable tool to understand all the potential options and historical patterns of routes taken. Globalization goes beyond the change in economic trade, and it includes the deepening,

⁶⁸ Elisa Pascucci, "The humanitarian infrastructure and the question of over-research: Reflections on fieldwork in the refugee crises in the Middle East and North Africa," *Area* 49, no. 2 (2019): 249-255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12312>.

widening, and speeding up of international connectedness. With the complexity of this aspect of international relations, geography should not be ignored because those in the past depended on it, deterministically.

Conclusion

The Middle East exemplifies the significance of geography in strategy and culture, which should serve as a warning to take geopolitics into consideration while crafting and analyzing future foreign policy because geography can cause tension that through negative aspects of globalization influences international stability. To understand the Middle East's current state of precariousness, apply relevant geopolitical theories to the region's geography. The Middle East's unique location clarifies the explosiveness of religious territorial disputes. Its waterways also show the influence of the Middle East in international politics, as the trade routes passing through play a major role in the world economy through the shipping industry. Both outside world powers and nations within the Middle East fight for access to chokepoints on these trade routes for geostrategic advantages. These points of tension have led to the ongoing problems of war, humanitarian crisis, terrorism, and political unrest. The contentions, specifically terrorism, have since spread to neighboring continents as globalization has thrust this instability on the global stage, spreading its implications to Europe and Africa. Geography both through strategical advancement and cultural significance can create volatility that should not be ignored in international relations as globalization, influenced by these points of tension, spreads the consequences for geopolitical instability, demonstrated by this study on the Middle East.

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