

Speaker 1: This is the Middle East and North Africa. Stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf, the region includes a vast expanse of arid desert and fertile river valleys. The Nile, Tigris and Euphrates once supported some of history's great civilizations, which made ground breaking advances in mathematics and medicine.

The Middle East also gave rise to three of today's major religions and tens of millions of people make pilgrimages to the region's holy sites every year. It's a crossroads for people from all over the world and home to a diverse mix of ethnic groups, but the Middle East is weighed down by multiple problems, including regional rivalries, repressive governments and its failure to develop economically.

In recent years, youth unemployment has hovered around 25%, higher than any other region in the world and women in the Middle East are more than twice as likely as men to be unemployed. Authoritarian governments are another constant in the regions. Often propped up by religious authority and oppressive security services, they attempt to control their populations and limit rights and freedoms.

For example, when protest spread through the Middle East in 2011, in what was called the Arab Spring, government security forces brutally attacked many of those movements. Even in some of the countries where leaders were overthrown, there was deadly violence. In Egypt, government crackdowns killed hundreds of peaceful protestors. And in other parts of the region, reactions to the Arab Spring have evolved into prolonged and bloody conflicts.

In Syria, the government's harsh repression spurred a revolt that turned violent and escalated into a deadly civil war. And then in Yemen, a civil war has pushed millions of people to the brink of starvation. The roots of these conflicts are complex, but both are exasperated by a fierce competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

While the two countries have not gone to war, they fight each other indirectly for regional dominance by supporting proxy groups and hot spots around the Middle East, especially in Yemen and Syria. By aiding groups with money and weapons, both Saudi Arabia and Iran fuel the already deadly conflicts there. This power struggle also involves religion. The leaders of Saudi Arabia are Sunni, the dominant sect of Islam, which roughly 85% of the world's two billion Muslims follow.

The leaders of Iran are Shia, a smaller sect of Islam, making up about 10% of the world's Muslims. For centuries, these two sects have lived together. However, recently, this history of peaceful cohabitation has fractured, particularly after the 2003 war in Iraq where civil war broke out between Sunnis and Shias.

Then and now, Saudi Arabia supports Sunni leaders and extremist groups in Iraq and around the region and Iran throws its support behind Shia leaders and extremists. The rhetoric and violence of extremist groups on either side of this divide inflames religious tensions, causing turmoil in many Middle Eastern countries. Over the past few decades, Iran in particular has emerged as the most consequential force in the Middle East, supporting proxy groups that have committed extensive violence. In many ways, the

problems that affect this region resonate far beyond its borders. In fact, five issues continue to draw the world's attention here.

One of these issues is the price of energy. The Middle East has a majority of the world's proven oil reserves and is the source of nearly half of the world's natural gas reserves. In fact, the Middle East's oil and gas supplies make up so much of the world's supply that when oil and gas prices change in the region, the world's oil and gas prices change. Conflicts in the region can interfere with oil production, raising the price of oil for the entire world. While this may benefit some oil producing countries, it can have far reaching implications for the global economy, bumping up the price of everything that is transported somewhere before being sold.

Many countries also care deeply about supporting Israel. Israel was founded in 1948 with the support of the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II. It was created as a Jewish country. However, at the time, many Arab Palestinians lived there. Immediately after its founding, neighboring Arab countries invaded Israel, but Israel beat back the invading armies and expanded the territory it controlled. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians either fled or were forced to leave their homes, moving into the remaining Palestinian territory or setting up in countries around the region as refugees.

In the years that followed, Israel fought several more wars with its Arab neighbors. After one conflict in 1967, Israel occupied Palestinian territories with its military. And since then, Israelis have been moving to and settling parts of this occupied land. Many western countries support Israel based on a belief that they have a moral obligation to do so following the horrors of the Holocaust. They also support Israel because it's the region's only country that is both democratic and economically successful, yet most western countries object to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian land that it captured in the 1967 war.

Israel is at the center of another major issue in the region, nuclear weapons. It's one of the few countries in the world that has nuclear weapons, though Israeli officials refuse to acknowledge their existence. Several of its neighbors have also attempted to build nuclear weapons. However, outside powers, along with Israel, have tried to stop those countries with both diplomacy and military force. They fear that another country in the region with nuclear weapons could increase the potential for a devastating nuclear war. More nuclear weapons also increases the possibility that one could fall into the hands of terrorists.

The region is home to multiple Islamic extremist groups, which cause an enormous amount of violence. Some have the support of regional governments. Iran, for example, sponsors Hezbollah, which often commits violence in support of Iran's regional agenda. Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda use the internet to radicalize and recruit people in foreign countries, influencing them to commit acts of terror around the world.

Terrorism, government persecution and civil wars have forced millions of refugees to flee their countries over the past decade. Many migrate to other countries within the

Middle East. In Jordan and Lebanon, for example, refugees make up large percentages of the population. However, since the start of the Syrian Civil War, many refugees have traveled further, arriving in European countries in large numbers. Massive flows of refugees create logistical problems for host countries, both inside and outside the region, disrupting, and in some cases, reshaping the domestic politics of those countries.

These five issues have driven countries from outside the Middle East to intervene in its affairs repeatedly. Sometimes these interventions achieve their goals, like the US led coalition to liberate Kuwait or Russia's support of the oppressive Syrian government in that country's recent civil war. On other occasions, interventions have largely failed to achieve their aims, as was the case in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011. In both instances, civil war broke out and violent extremist groups grew and spread out from the chaos.

The Middle East's ability to quell this destabilizing violence and solve its many serious problems has major implications for us all because what happens in the Middle East affects the livelihood and security of countries around the world.