

## **Student Handout # 1: Background Essay on U.S. – Middle East Relations**

**Directions:** Read the following essay. Then summarize the paragraph you were assigned and discuss in your small group your assigned question (below). Be prepared to present a summary of the paragraph and your discussion to the class.

The importance of the Middle East and North Africa to United States' interests has been increasing since the end of World War II. New independent countries were formed from the shells of European colonies. The nation of Israel was established, the exploration and refinement of oil was expanded and a new industry was established bringing the region wealth and influence. As Cold War tensions expanded between the United States and the Soviet Union, various countries in the region at one time or another became favorites or pariahs to one or the other superpower.

For much of this time, the region has been in a constant state of conflict between various countries: Israel and most of its neighbors, religious factions in Syria and Lebanon, Egypt and Great Britain, Israel and Jordan, Israel and Egypt, Israel and Iraq, Libya and Israel, Shiite Iran and Sunni Iraq, Iran and the United States, Kuwait and Iraq, the United States and Iraq, Israel and Iran, factions of Shiite and Sunni in Iraq, and most recently the people of Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya against their respective governments. Often these tensions led to various forms of conflict ranging from terrorist attacks to full scale tank wars across the deserts. But the most recent conflict has involved educated, middle class youth in public protest, using social media and non-violent tactics to defy dictators and demand their ouster.

These most recent events put United States foreign policy in a precarious situation. In the past, America most often supported a strong autocratic leader who promised stability in a region over a democratically elected radical government. During the Cold War “radical governments” were often defined as communist. In the age of global terror “radical governments” usually mean Islamic extremists. The autocratic leaders understood this paradigm and played into it, telling the United States that military and economic support was needed to keep them in power and keep the country or region stable. The United States complied with foreign aid in the billions of dollars to secure these leaders' allegiance and policing of the region. The benefits were an uninterrupted flow of oil, peace with Israel, and the isolation of rogue states like Syria and Iran when they got out of line.

To greater or lesser degrees, this policy proved beneficial and provided relative stability in the region. Even when individuals originally from this area attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, the region remained stable and many governments became allies in the war on terror. The Israel – Palestine stalemate continues, with Palestine looking to

establish a permanent state and Israel looking for acceptance by all the Arab countries. Iran is suspected of seeking nuclear weapons to tip the balance of power in their favor which would threaten the stability of the region. For the most part, these issues have been contained. But what has emerged from the street demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt is a once simmering, now overflowing discontent among the people against the brutality and corruption of their governments. They not only want freedom and better economic opportunity, they want their leaders gone and an end to the system of government that has kept them in power.

The United States now faces some tough choices. Does it continue to support the autocratic dictatorships that oppress the people in order to keep the region stable, protect the peace with Israel, and limit the extremists? Or does it support the people who are calling for regime change and the freedom to have a direct input on their governments' decisions? What are the ramifications of either decision? How can the United States be sure these new governments will honor U.S. interests? Does U.S. foreign policy have to be consistent, or can the United States take each event on a case-by-case basis, in some cases supporting the demonstrators in their cause for freedom and democracy and in other cases continuing to support an oppressive government?

### **Discussion Questions:**

- (Paragraph 1) The Middle East and North Africa region has increasingly been vital to U.S. interests since the end of World War II. What are some of these interests?
- (Paragraph 2) For most of the period, the region has been unstable with low-level conflicts between various countries. Identify some of these conflicts. Which ones are you familiar with?
- (Paragraph 3) In past, U.S. foreign policy usually supported dictators who promised stability over democratically elected governments that promised reform, but reform that was not necessarily in interest of the United States. What were the some of the costs and benefits of this policy?
- (Paragraph 4) The groups demonstrating in the streets of various countries are demanding regime change and a say in their government in hopes of bringing economic reform. Why would the United States support these demands? What questions might the United States have about the governments that form after the dictators are gone?
- (Paragraph 5) The United States faces a challenging and evolving situation that may require a change in its foreign policy approach to the region. Do you think the United States needs to change its foreign policy in the Middle East? Why or why not?

