# United States History

**Unit 13 Reading: The Rise of Radical Islam**

Much of the discontent that Arabian nations have felt against the United States can be traced to the political involvement of America in Middle Eastern affairs. Under the **Eisenhower Doctrine** (1957), Americans committed themselves to protecting access to oil in the Middle East by preventing communism from taking over. Most dramatically, the United States sent the CIA to Iran in 1953 to ensure that Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi would become the absolute ruler of Iran. American support kept the Shah in control until he was overthrown in 1979. **Islamic fundamentalists** were responsible for overthrowing the Shah and highlight another very important source of anti-American attitudes in the Arab world: a very strict interpretation of the Islamic faith.

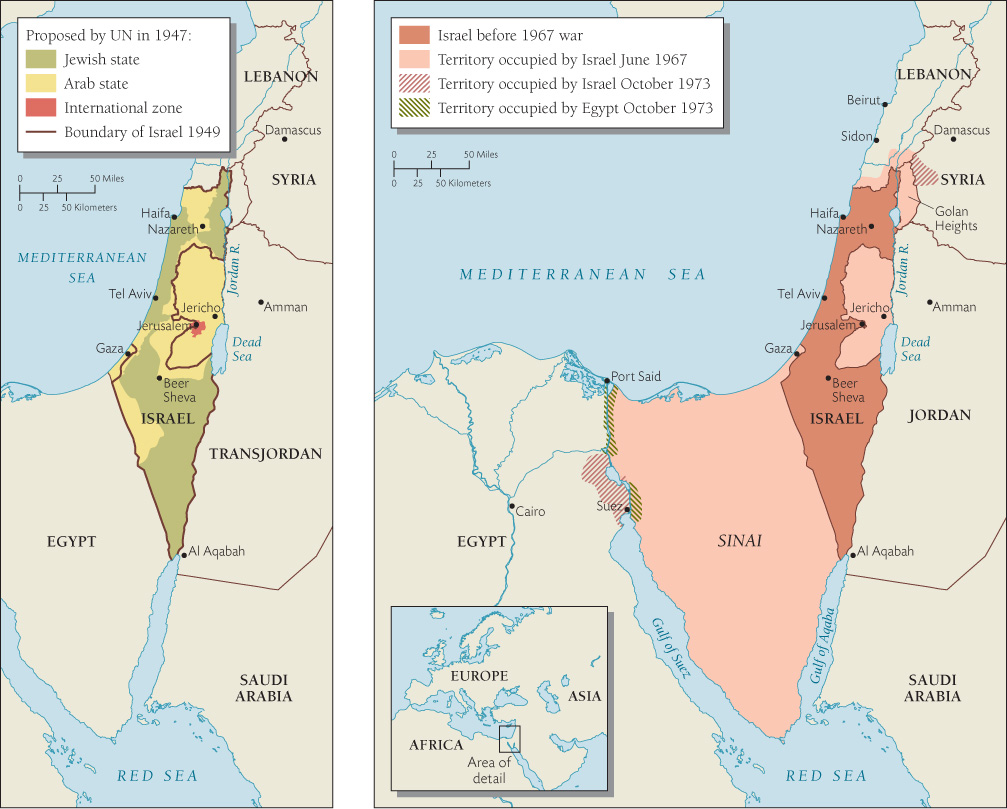
Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran

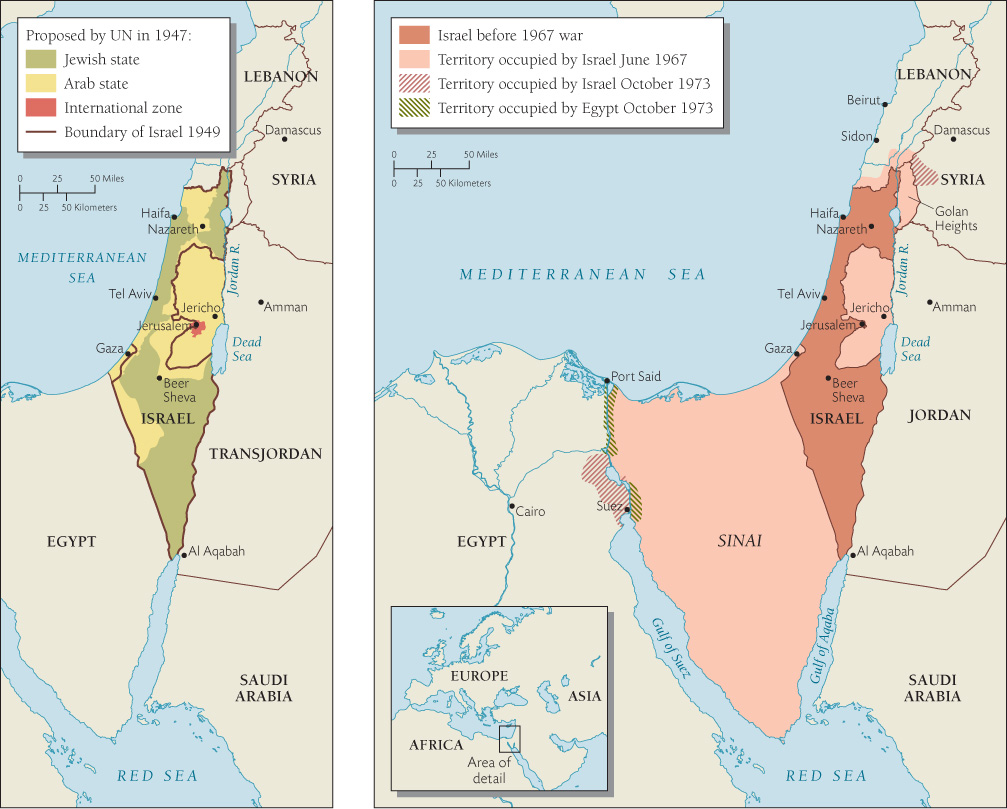
Until the 20th century, Islam was a religion very open to modern ideas and progress. Like American fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists came of age in the late 19th century. They worried about the decay of morality and called for strict interpretation of the chief religious work of Islam, the ***Qur’an***. They insisted that modern Muslims should support strict gender roles, devotion to the religion’s core teachings, and respect for traditional family and social structures. Like American fundamentalists who preached a strict reading of the *Bible*, Islamic fundamentalists wanted Muslims to focus on what they saw as the simple, pure core teachings of the prophet Mohammad.

 Islamic fundamentalism began as a religious revival but quickly associated with political movements as well. In the fundamentalist Islamic world, the idea of separation of church and state is considered unacceptable. An ideal state is one that governs rightly according to the principles of the *Qur’an*. For most Islamic fundamentalists, there can be no good government without religion. The founder of the modern ruling family of Saudi Arabia**, Ibn Saud** (Abdul Aziz), took the writings of a traditionalist teacher and made them the central ideology of the new Saudi Arabian state. Today, Saudi Arabia is a theocratic state in which there is no freedom of religion—Islam is the official religion and there are punishments for those who openly practice other religions.

Symbol of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Qur’an and the themes of violence are linked.

Some scholars argue that **Radical Islam** is the best term for modern fundamentalist Islamic movements that started in the early 20th century. In Egypt in 1928, a radical group, the **Muslim Brotherhood**, was founded to restore the teachings of the Qur’an and the prophet Mohammad. Officially, the Muslim Brotherhood has rejected violence and murder as tools of advancing their agenda, but unofficially, they have engaged in assassinations and violence to achieve their goals. They even assassinated their own founder when they thought he was departing from the group’s core teachings. Another group is **Hamas**, founded in 1987 to advance Islamic fundamentalist power in the **Gaza strip**, a piece of territory that borders southern Israel. Hamas has used violence, particularly against Israel, and is considered a terrorist organization by several countries. Often this violence is encouraged by applying the concept of ***jihad*,** a word in the Qur’an that means “struggle.” *Jihad* really refers to a person’s inner struggle to be a better believer, but many Radi cal Islamic groups have used it to mean an external struggle (violence) against non-believers. Many scholars argue that these violent groups are simply using religion as a cover for political motives—gaining more power.

 The controversy over Radical Islam and Israel centers on the **Palestinian Liberation Organization**, which was founded in 1964 to represent the Palestinian people. Originally, the group strongly opposed the creation of Israel and called for violence to establish a Palestinian state to give a home to Palestinian Arabs. Historically, the Palestinians did not have sovereignty over the lands where they lived because the British had ruled them since the end of World War I. When Israel was created in 1948, it was established partially on lands that the Palestinians considered to be their home. A war in 1948 with Israel led to about 700,000 Palestinian Arabs becoming refugees when they were expelled from their homes or fled from violence. The P.L.O. made it a central goal of establishing a homeland for the displaced Palestinian people and used violence to draw attention to its political goals. Not until 1993 did the P.L.O. recognize Israel’s right to existence and reject violence and terrorism.

Today, many acts of violence still continue as religion helps to fuel political goals for independence. Many young men, motivated by promises of eternal rewards, are willing to strap explosives to themselves for suicide bombings. A particular interpretation of Islam—a fundamentalist reading of selective parts of the Qur’an—has provided the ideology needed to motivate such violence. Islamic fundamentalists share much the same mentality as Christian fundamentalists who bomb abortion clinics: the belief in violence as completely justified to reach a “higher” purpose. For religious extremists, the ends do justify the means. The result has been that American involvement in the Middle East has directly drawn the United States into this world of religiously-inspired violence aimed at independence and political power for the minority Muslim groups who espouse it.