



Islamic World—Modern

This entire region is historically unstable. Traversing the region are the great trade and invasion routes used by conquerors from Alexander the Great to the British. The region has always been a geopolitical flash point, but the end of the Cold War truly ignited a powder keg. When the Soviet Union fell, its six Muslim republics suddenly became independent. Arab countries to the south either lost their patron (Iraq and Syria) or lost their enemy (the Saudis and other Gulf states). India lost its patron, and Pakistan suddenly felt liberated from the Indian threat—at least temporarily. The entire system of international relations was thrown up in the air. What little was solid dissolved.

The Soviets withdrew from the Caucasus and Central Asia in 1992. Like a tide receding, this revealed nations that hadn't been free for a century or more, that had no tradition of self-government and, in some cases, no functioning economy. At the same time, American interest in the region declined. After Operation Desert Storm in 1991, American focus on places like Afghanistan seemed useless. The Cold War was over. There was no longer a strategic threat to American interests, and the region was free to evolve on its own.

A detailed description of how the region, and Afghanistan in particular, destabilized is not critical here, any more than a blow by blow of what happened in Yugoslavia would be illuminating. It can be summarized as follows: From the late seventies until the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States helped create forces in Afghanistan that could resist the Soviet Union—and these forces turned on the United States once the Soviet Union collapsed. Trained in the covert arts, knowledgeable about the processes of U.S. intelligence, these men mounted an operation against the United States that involved many stages and culminated on September 11, 2001. The United States responded by surging into the region, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, and quickly the entire region came apart.

As had been the case with the Soviet Union after World War II, the United States used the jihadists for its own ends and then had to cope with the monster it had created. But that was the lesser problem. The more dangerous dilemma was that the collapse of the Soviet Union disrupted the system of relationships that kept the region in some sort of order. With or without al Qaeda, the Muslim entities within the former Soviet Union and to its south were going to become unstable, and as in Yugoslavia, that instability was going to draw in the only global power, the United States, one way or another. It was a perfect storm. From the Austrian border to the Hindu Kush, the region shuddered and the United States moved to bring it under control, with mixed results, to say the least.

There is another aspect of this that is noteworthy, especially in light of the demographic trends we will discuss in the next chapter. There was tremendous internal unrest in the Muslim world. The resistance of Islamic traditionalists to shifts in custom, particularly concerning the status of women and driven by demographic change, was one of the driving forces behind the region's instability. The struggle between traditionalists and secularizers upended the region's societies, and the United States was held responsible for the growing calls for secularization. This seems like an obvious and superficial reading of the situation, but as we will see, it has deeper and broader significance than might be apparent at first glance. Changes in the family structure, resistance to those changes, and September 11 were closely linked.

From the broadest geopolitical perspective, September 11 ended the interregnum between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the next