September 11, 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, terrorists captured four American airplanes. Suicide pilots guided two of the planes into the twin towers of New York City’s World Trade Center, while another was guided into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The Pentagon is the home of the American Department of Defense, the government agency responsible for the American military. Reports indicate that a group of passengers forced a fourth jet to crash in Pennsylvania. The brave passengers apparently gave their lives to keep the terrorists from harming any other innocent people. America had been unrivaled as a military power since the breakup of the Soviet Union more than a decade before the attacks. If America could be attacked, anyone, anywhere in the world might be at risk.

What seems clear is that the attacks are rooted in the Middle East, an area of southwest Asia that includes Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria, and Afghanistan. The Greeks called the region the Near East to differentiate it from the Far East of China and Japan. England, France, and Germany came to be known as the West. The discovery of America added to the western world.

The Middle East is often called “the crossroads of the world.” This sparsely populated region produced three religious faiths practiced by half of the world inhabitants: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The Middle East is a gateway to India, the Far East, sub-Saharan Africa, and southeast Europe.

In recent years, this region has been one of the most chaotic parts of our world. Many brilliant ideas came from the Middle East, but it is also a land of long standing hatred and revenge. This section of mrdowling.com is an attempt to explain some of the causes of the many conflicts in the Middle East.

The Ottoman Empire

In the fourteenth century, a Turkish military leader named Osman defeated other Turkish tribes to become ruler of a small kingdom. His dynasty conquered what was left of the old Roman Empire, which historians call the Byzantine Empire. The Turkish Ottoman Empire, whose name derives from Osman, eventually united most of the Middle East and North Africa. At its strongest point it also controlled Greece, the Balkan Mountains, and most of southeast Europe. The Ottoman Empire lasted until the early 20th century, a span of almost six hundred years.

The Ottoman Turks were Muslims. While the sultans who ran the empire were acknowledged as the legal successors of Mohammad, they did not impose Islamic law on non-Muslims. The Ottoman Turks allowed Christians, Jews, and people of other faiths to practice their beliefs in peace. Arabs, Persians, Kurds, Maronites, and Armenians all maintained strong cultural identities within the Ottoman Empire.

Two wars in the early twentieth century (the 1900s) resulted in Greece, Crete, Serbia, Romania, and Macedonia leaving the empire. The weakened Ottoman Empire was often compared to a “sick man.” European colonial leaders had recently seized most of Africa and were eager to exert their influence in the Middle East.

World War I broke out in 1914. Britain, France, the United States, and Russia were united as the Allied forces. They fought the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Ottoman Turks assumed the Central Powers would win the war. The Turks believed Germany would keep Russia from taking land from their declining empire, so the Ottoman sultans joined the Central Powers. Russia lacked a “warm water port,” where
they could ship goods in all seasons. All of Russia’s western seaports are in regions that are frozen for at least part of the year.

The Russian people revolted in 1917 and Russia withdrew from the war. Even without the Russians, the Allied Powers won. Britain, France, and the United States carved up most of the Ottoman Empire. The Allied Powers left only what we now know as the modern nation of Turkey.

European colonial powers were eager to assert their influence in the Middle East and North Africa at the beginning of the twentieth century.

_The Europeans hoped to create new markets for their products._

_They hoped to exploit the natural resources of the region. Oil had not yet been discovered, but the Middle East and North Africa had many exotic spices._

_The Europeans hoped to secure a safe route to colonial lands in India and East Asia._

**Ataturk and Turkey**

Ottoman sultans ruled Turkey until the end of World War I. A charismatic general named Mustafa Kemal wrestled control of the last remnant of the empire. Greece attacked Turkey in 1921 and 1922, but Kemal led the Turks to victory.

Kemal was convinced that Turkey needed to become a modern nation. He believed that if the Turkish people continued to follow their traditions, they would again be attacked by another western power. By the mid 1920s, the Turkish leader began a modernization program in Turkey:

- Kemal ordered that girls be allowed to attend school. He said that in a modern nation, men and women must be equal. Kemal also gave women the right to vote and take jobs in business and government.

- He set aside Shariah law and set up a western system of justice.

- Kemal forbade the Turkish people to wear fezzes, veils, or other traditional Turkish clothing. The fez is a hat with a flat top and no brim. Many Muslims men wore fezzes so they could touch their forehead to the ground when they prayed.

- Kemal introduced a western alphabet and ordered all newspapers, books, and street signs printed in the new script. He traveled the Turkish countryside with a blackboard and chalk to personally explain how the letters should be pronounced.

- Kemal decreed that everyone must have a surname, or family name. He was named Mustafa at birth, and nicknamed Kemal, “the perfect one” by a mathematics teacher. In 1934, the Turkish assembly gave Mustafa Kemal the name Ataturk, or “Father of the Turks.”

Ataturk was a popular leader, but many Turkish people did not like his changes because he created a more secular society. Secular means non-religious. Many people in Turkey were satisfied with their traditional lifestyle, although it didn't matter if people disagreed with Ataturk. The Turkish leader allowed only one political party and did not permit people to openly disagree with his policies. Ataturk died in 1938, but his presence is still felt in Turkey.