

9 attempts to explain the crazy complexity of the Middle East

By [Adam Taylor](#) October 1



(The Washington Post)

The Middle East is complicated.

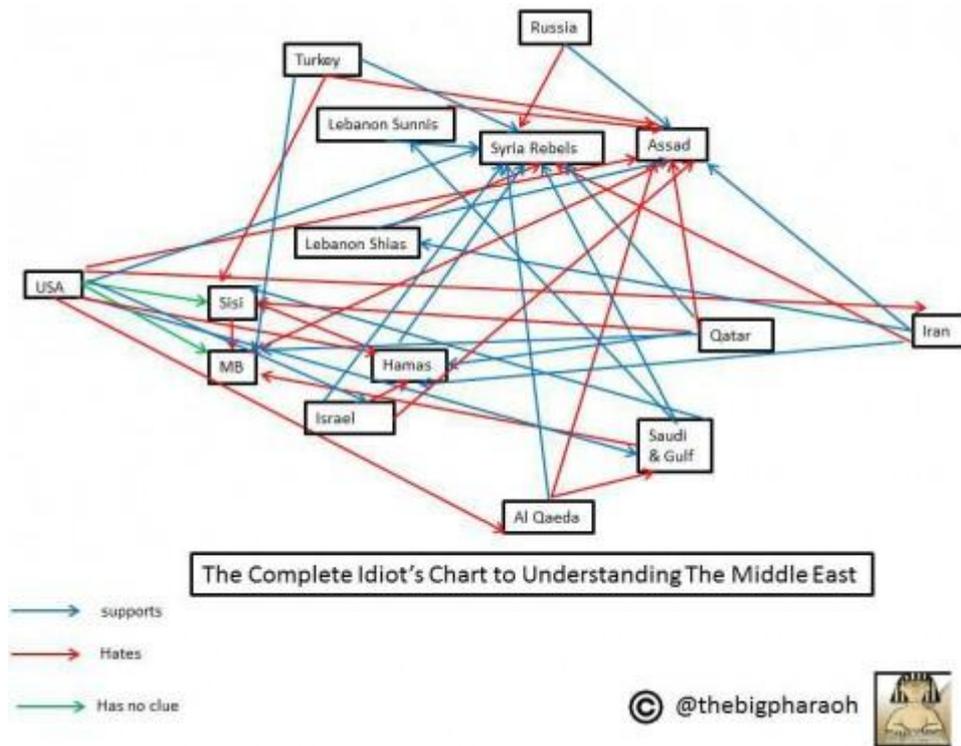
The religious, social and political cleavages of the region are myriad and hard to succinctly sum up. How do you untangle the Israeli-Palestinian situation, or explain the divide between Sunni Islam and Shia Islam, or square those who favor political Islam with those who favor secular government? Where do other religious and political minorities fit in? And where do big powers outside the region, most obviously the United States, exert influence?

Over the past year, as Syria's civil war dragged on and the Islamic State extremist group became everyone's worst nightmare, the desire to try to explain the Middle East – in a bid to help solve its daunting problems – has grown.

There have been a number of increasingly complicated attempts to illustrate the web of relationships in the Middle East. Below are nine of our favorites.

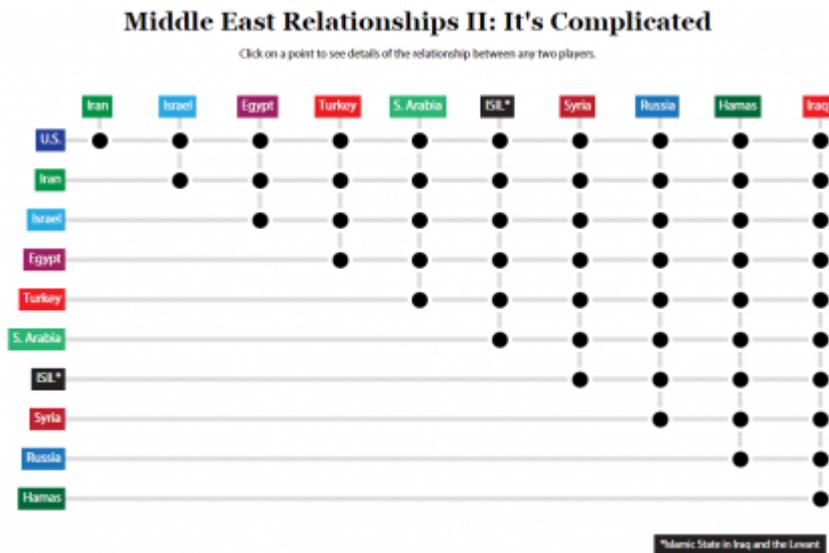
Last summer, a reader of the Financial Times tried to make sense of the Middle East with a [widely shared letter to the editor](#):

That letter seems to have sparked a trend. Within days, [Egyptian blogger The Big Pharaoh](#) made a graphical guide for "complete idiots":



(Courtesy The Big Pharaoh)

Not long after, Radio Free Europe [made its own](#) interactive attempt, which it updated this year (please [click through](#) to see the interactive options):



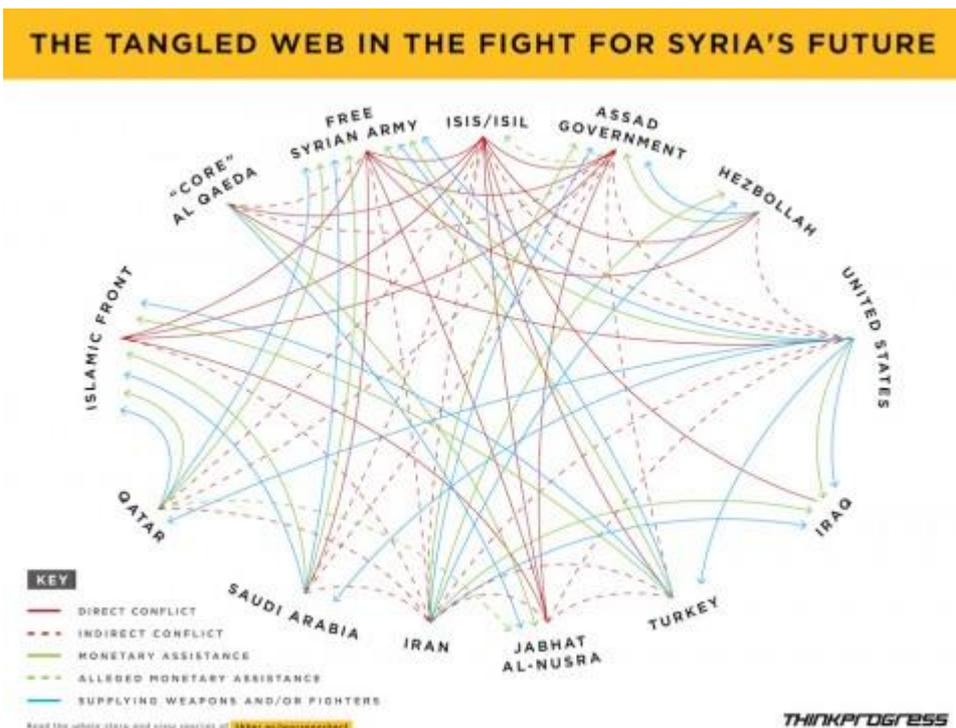
(Courtesy of Radio Free Europe)

Slate interactive editor Chris Kirk [turned the original letter to the editor](#) into a graphic last year. Then, a few months ago, Kirk teamed up with foreign affairs writer Joshua Keating to [create](#) an interactive "friendship chart." Again [click through](#) to see the interactive aspects of this graphic:



(Courtesy of Slate)

Adam Peck of Think Progress also made a chart, which he and (now former) Think Progress World editor Hayes Brown [acknowledged was "terrifying"](#):



(Courtesy of Think Progress)

One of the most all-encompassing (though perhaps overwhelming) attempts came from Blaise Misztal at the Bipartisan Policy Center. You can [take a closer look on the center's Web site](#):

	Non-State Actors											State Actors					
	YPG	PKK	YKCK	AKC	YKCK	Islamic Front	ISIS	Nusra	FSA	SNC	SUP	Assad	Iraq	Turkey	Iran	U.S.A.	S. Arabia
YPG		4	4	4	3	1	1	1	3	4	3						
PKK	4		3	3	1	1	1	1	5	1	4	1	4	1	5		1
YKCK	4	4		3	3	1	1	1	3	1		3	3	1	3	1	1
AKC	4	5	3		4	1	1	1	3	1	4	1	3	3	5	4	2
Islamic Front	3	3	3	4			1	1	3	4		1	3	4	3	4	
ISIS	1	1	1	1	1	1		2	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
YKCK	1	1	1	1	1	2		2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2
Al-Nusra	1	1	1	1	1	3	2		3	1	3	1	1	2	1	1	2
FSA	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	4	1		1	3	4	1	4	4
SNC	1	2	2	4	1	1	1	1	4			1	1	4	1	4	4
SUP	4	4	4	4	1	1	3	1				1	3	3			
Assad	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1		3	2	2	4	1	1
Iraq		4	3	3	3	2	1	3	1			3	3	2	4	4	3
Turkey		1	3	4	4	3	2	4	4	3		3	3	3	4	4	4
Iran		5	3	5	4	3	1	1	1			4	4	3	1	1	1
United States		1	4	3	3	1	1	4	4			1	4	4	1	4	4
Saudi Arabia		1	1	3	4	4	2	2	4	4		1	3	4	1	4	4

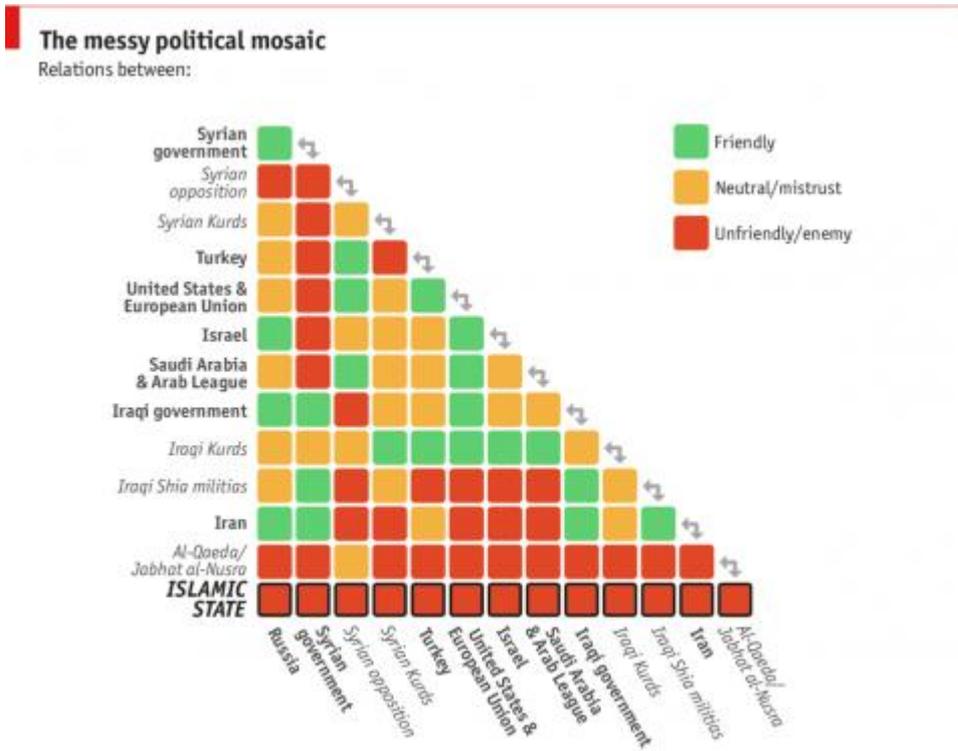
Key		
1	Stated opposition/refusal to cooperate	Jadid
2	Recent allies, current enemies	Sunni/Shia
3	Mixed ties	Al Qaeda Affiliates
4	Allied/tacitly supportive	Non-sectarian
5	Recent enemies, current allies	Syrian Christian
N/A	no information, no stance	

¹The YPG concerns itself primarily with defending Kurdish areas, be that from pro- or anti-Assad forces.
²The KRG is not a state but is functionally similar to one.
³Individuals within the Islamic Front have expressed sympathy toward Al Qaeda, but the group as a whole is not affiliated with Al Qaeda, and it limits its operations to Syrian territory. Turkey has been accused of supporting the Islamic Front.
⁴ISIS opposes Assad but is more focused on establishing its own state. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq have been accused of supporting ISIS.
⁵The United States only opened talks with the Islamic Front after the FSA suffered setbacks; the Islamic Front backed out of the talks.

YPG: People's Protection Unit, armed wing of Kurdish Supreme Committee operating within Syria
PVD: Democratic Union Party, Syrian Kurdish political party, affiliate of the PKK
PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party, Kurdish separatist organization based in Turkey that has also operated in Iraq and Syria
KNC: Kurdish National Council, political organization
KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government, ruling body of Kurdish region in Northern Iraq
ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (or ISIL, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) formed in 2004 and declared allegiance to Al Qaeda
FSA: Free Syrian Army, a secular opposition force comprised largely of Syrian Armed Forces defectors; the Syria Revolutionaries Front and the Syrian Martyrs' Brigade are included in the FSA
SNC: Syrian National Council, coalition of opposition groups, based in Turkey
SUP: Syrian Union Party, political party operating within Syria; the Qamishi branch of Sutoro, its militia, split from the group and supports Assad

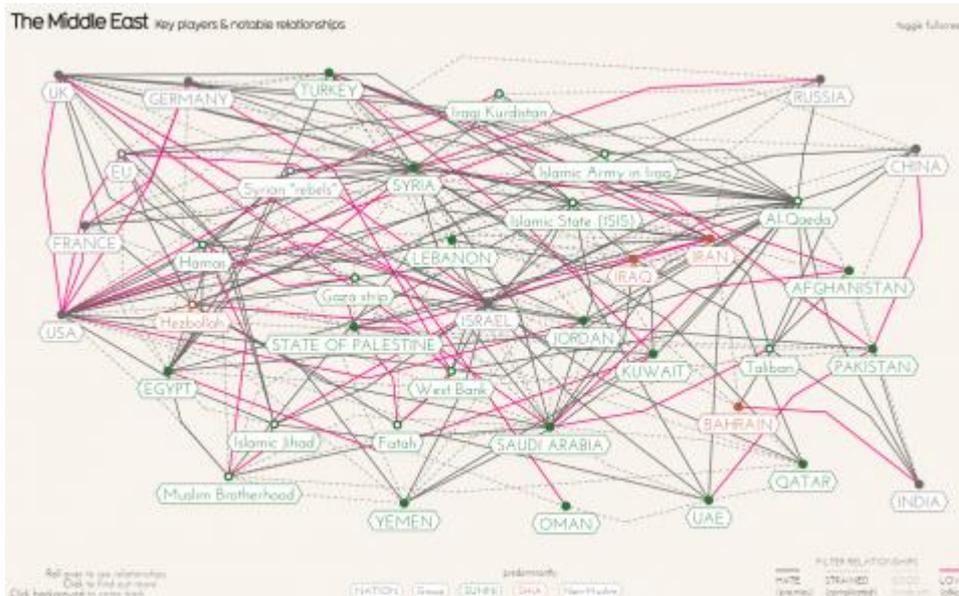
(Courtesy of the Bipartisan Policy Center)

The Economist [recently presented](#) another option: a "mosaic." This particular graphic is useful to gauge how much everyone hates the Islamic State:



Source: The Economist
Economist.com/graphicdetail
(Courtesy of The Economist)

Perhaps the [most audacious attempt yet](#) is this graphic from British designer David McCandless. The interactive nature of this one is particularly interesting: When you click on an actor, the graphic shifts to show you that actor's specific relationships:



(Via Data is Beautiful)

Sometimes things come full circle. After a year of increasingly complicated and ambitious attempts to explain the Middle East's intricate web of relationships, it perhaps seems appropriate that a letter to the editor (perhaps cribbed [from elsewhere](#)) would be used to explain the Middle East. This letter ran in the Daily Mail [this month](#):



Adam Taylor writes about foreign affairs for The Washington Post. Originally from London, he studied at the University of Manchester and Columbia University.