

The Middle East and North Africa

Many Things in Common

The Middle East and North Africa are two regions that are often grouped together because they have many things in common. Islam is the dominant religion and almost everyone speaks Arabic. Most of the Middle East and North Africa is a desert where very little rain falls. There are, however, many exceptions:

- Most Iranians are Muslims, but they are not Arabs. Until 1935, Iran was known as Persia, a culture that has existed for thousands of years. Most Iranians speak Farsi.
- The Turks originally came from the land northwest of India. They are also Muslims but speak Turkish rather than Arabic.
- The people of Lebanon primarily speak Arabic, but more than one-third are Christian. Lebanon has traditionally been a Christian Arabic nation, but Muslims now outnumber Christians because Muslims have tended to have more children. Most Arabs living in the United States are Lebanese.
- Most people in Israel speak Hebrew and practice Judaism. After World War II ended, the United Nations created Israel as a homeland for Jews.
- About twenty-five million Kurds live in the mountains between Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. The Kurds are Muslims, but they have the own language and culture. Many Kurds want to keep their traditional lifestyle and resist assimilating into the population of their host nations.
- A minority of the people of Morocco and Algeria are Berber. The Berbers are the descendants of the people who lived in North Africa before the Arab invasion. The Berbers have their own traditions, but

most Berbers today are Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Many of the nations of the Middle East and North Africa were once controlled by colonial powers. This is why you will commonly hear many other languages, including English, French and Italian in the region.



The Arabs

People who speak Arabic as their primary language are known as Arabs. Traditionally, they lived on the Arabian Peninsula, but the language and culture of the Arabs spread throughout the Middle East with the expansion of Islam. Arabic is the language of the Quran, the holy book of Islam. Today more than 250 million Arabs live throughout the world. Arabs constitute the substantial majority of people in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

Where is the Middle East?

The lands around the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea are often called the Middle East or the Near East. The term came from the first geographers in ancient Greece, for whom the region was both near and east. China and Japan are part of the Far East.

The west referred to Western Europe, but later included the American continents once they were discovered. Australia and New Zealand are often considered western nations. This is because most people in those nations have more in common with people in Western Europe and America than they do with China or Japan.

A century after Mohammad's death, Islam spread as far as Spain in the west to northern India in the east. The Arabs were great traders whose influence reached as far as Southeast Asia. Today more Muslims live in Indonesia, far from the Arab world, than in any other nation.

The Arabs were interested in learning and in other cultures. Western Europe was in a period often called the "Dark Ages" because the civilizations of Greece and Rome had been extinguished, but the Arabs made great advances in mathematics, medicine, and physical science. They replaced clumsy Roman numbers with Arabic numerals we use today. Algebra and Chemistry are both Arabic words.

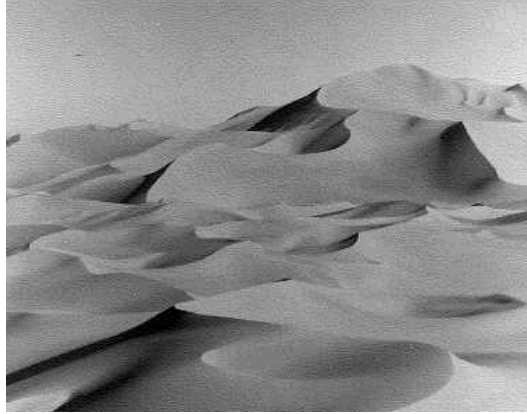
Deserts

The Middle East and North Africa are one of the driest regions on earth. Nearly two-thirds of the region is desert. A desert is land that receives an average of less than ten inches of rain per year. The Sahara Desert of northern Africa is the largest desert in the world. It stretches across 3.5 million square miles, a area larger than the United States if you excluded Alaska and Hawaii. The Rub 'al-Khali, or "Empty Quarter" is a large desert in Saudi Arabia. It is the largest area of continuous sand in the world.

Desert air contains little moisture, so few clouds form over the land. Without clouds to block the sun, temperatures may reach as high as 125°F during the day. At night, without the clouds to contain the heat, the temperature can fall to as low as 40°F.

Extreme temperatures combined with little rainfall make desert life difficult for people, plants, and animals. Yet, some

life forms have adapted to even the most severe desert environment. Camels are able to survive long periods without food or water.



Many desert plants have long, shallow root systems. This allows the plants to reach out to collect water over great distances. Other desert plants have taproots. Taproots grow very deep so they can tap sources of underground water. Plant life in the desert is usually spread out over great

distances. This is why deserts are often described as barren, or lifeless.

When many people think of a desert they often think of endless miles of hot sand, but a desert does not have to be hot or sandy. Most of the land of the Middle East and North Africa is hot, dry desert land, but some deserts look very different. Most of Antarctica is a desert but there is no sand on the continent and the climate of Antarctica is the coldest on earth.

Bedouins

Bedouins are nomads who inhabit the Middle East and North Africa. Bedouin is an Arabic word that means "desert dweller." Like the plants and animals, the Bedouins have adapted the lifestyle to the severe desert climate. They use their extensive knowledge of the location of water and seasonal weather changes to survive.

Traditionally, Bedouins avoid farming or any kind of settled life. They prefer to herd animals such as camels, sheep, and goats. Bedouins generally travel in extended family units headed by a sheik, a position handed down from father to eldest son. They generally live in tents so they can move easily. As oil wealth and strong government evolved



A Bedouin family

in the Middle East and North Africa, many Bedouins have given up their traditional lifestyle and settled on the outskirts of villages.

Almost all Bedouins are Muslims who speak Arabic. Bedouins constitute a small minority of the population of the Middle East and North Africa, but they live across a wide area of land.

Oil

Petroleum is the world's most important energy resource. Industrialized nations such as the United States depend on petroleum oil to power their factories, and developing nations such as China and India are require an increasing share of the world's oil production as their nations industrialize. Some nations have a great deal of petroleum reserves, while other nations have none.

More than forty percent of the world's oil reserves are spaced unevenly among the nations of the Middle East and North Africa. America's relationship with the Middle East and North Africa has changed since the discovery of oil in the region. In 1960, many of the oil producing nations agreed to form a cartel. A cartel is an international organization formed to regulate prices and production. The cartel, called OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), increased prices by 70% in 1973. American gasoline prices more than doubled and people waited for gasoline in lines sometimes over a mile long.



It's easy to float in the Dead Sea.

Oil has changed the Middle East and North Africa. Many leaders in the region have used the wealth from oil to modernize their nations, while others kept the wealth or used it to buy weapons and build armies. Saddam Hussein ruled Iraq from 1979 to 2003.

Saddam and other dictators in the region used their nations' oil wealth to build strong armies to control their nations.

Petroleum is a non-renewable resource, so oil-producing nations must prepare for a time when their petroleum wealth no longer exists. Experts believe that the price of oil will continue to rise as supplies are used up in

easily accessible areas. The world will likely prepare for the exhaustion of petroleum reserves by switching to other sources of energy. Bahrain is a small nation in the Persian Gulf that used its oil wealth to develop a diversified economy. Today Bahrain has little oil left, but it is a commercial and financial center and Bahrain's refineries process oil from other nations in the region.

The Dead Sea

The Dead Sea is not a sea, but a 50-mile long by 11-mile wide salt lake between Israel and Jordan. We call it a sea because it is salty like a sea or the ocean.

The Dead Sea is the lowest body of water on Earth, nearly one-quarter mile below sea level. Water from the Jordan River flows in, but because the Dead Sea is lower than the land around it, no water can drain out. The hot desert sun evaporates the water about as fast as it flows in from the river, leaving behind salt and other minerals from the Jordan.

People can easily float on the surface of Dead Sea because it about seven times saltier than the ocean. When they get out of the water, they have a salty crust left on their

NATIONS WITH THE LARGEST PROVEN PETROLEUM RESERVES

Nation	oil*
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	262
<i>Iran</i>	132
<i>Iraq</i>	115
<i>Kuwait</i>	99
<i>United Arab Emirates</i>	98
<i>Venezuela</i>	77
<i>Russia</i>	72
<i>Kazakhstan</i>	40
<i>Libya</i>	39
<i>Nigeria</i>	35
<i>United States</i>	29
<i>Canada</i>	17
<i>China</i>	17
<i>Mexico</i>	15
<i>Qatar</i>	15
<i>Algeria</i>	12
<i>Brazil</i>	11
<i>Norway</i>	10

*oil is measured in billion barrels.

Nations of the Middle East and North Africa are shown in *italics*.

Source: BP Statistical Review of World Energy June 2005.

skin. Any fish carried in from the Jordan die instantly when they reach the Dead Sea.

Other salty lakes exist in dry areas around the world. The Caspian Sea is the world's largest lake. The Romans thought they had reached the ocean upon finding the Caspian because it was salty. Utah's Great Salt Lake and the Aral Sea in Asia are also salty lakes.

The Suez Canal

The Suez Canal is one of the most important waterways in the world. The 101-mile waterway connects the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. The Suez Canal is often called the "crossroads to Europe, Africa, and Asia" because the route is used to transport goods to and from all three continents.

The idea of connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea is as old as the pharaohs. The first canal in the region seems to have been dug about 1850 BC, but many attempts to complete the task failed. Desert winds blew into the canal and clogged it. About 150 years ago, Great Britain had a thriving trade with India, but without a canal, British ships had to make a long journey around the entire continent of Africa. A canal through the Isthmus of Suez would cut the journey by 6,000 miles. An isthmus is a narrow strip of land connecting two larger pieces of land.

A French company led by Ferdinand deLesseps made a deal with Egypt to build the Suez Canal. After ten years of work, the canal opened in 1869. The Egyptian ruler, Ismail, celebrated by building a huge palace in Cairo. Ismail treated royalty from around the world to a celebration in honor of the new canal. The heavy spending for the celebration came at a time when the price of Egyptian cotton plunged. Egypt had gone into debt to pay for the Suez Canal. Ismail took out loans from European banks, but he was unable to repay them. Egypt was forced to sell the canal to



Ferdinand deLesseps

Great Britain. Soon after, the British sent soldiers into Egypt, saying they were concerned for their property. For many years, the English controlled the Suez Canal.

In 1956, Egyptian president Gamel Abdel Nasser seized the canal and declared it to be the property of the Egyptian people. Egypt fought three bitter wars with Israel during this period, and denied Israel the use of the waterway. Egypt and Israel agreed to a peace treaty in 1979, and since then the Suez Canal has been open to every nation.

The Aswan Dam

For thousands of years the Nile River overflowed its banks every spring as the snow in the mountains transformed into a torrent of water. The annual floods carried dead and decaying plants in its muddy solution. The muddy water is called silt, and silt creates excellent farmland.

Since 1970, the Aswan Dam has controlled the annual flood. By holding back water, the Aswan Dam created the world's largest man-made lake: Lake Nassar. The water from Lake Nassar provided new fishing areas and provides much needed water for agriculture. The Aswan Dam also makes it possible to grow an extra crop each year by holding back the summer flood that covers the banks of the Nile River.

Critics charge that building the Aswan Dam was unwise. The project was far more expensive than expected. Further, the annual floods carried silt, which created the topsoil needed for plants. Since the creation of the Aswan Dam, the farms on the formerly flooded banks have had to use expensive fertilizers in place of the silt. Formerly, fish have fed on the silt, and the people downstream depended on fishing from the river.

The Nations of the Middle East and North Africa

as of November 3, 2005

The density of a nation is the number of people per square mile. Crowded nations have higher densities than less crowded nations. Arable land is land that is farmable. Desert land is generally not farmable. The percentage of Muslims in each nation is an estimation.

	Population	Area	Density	arable	Muslim	Description
Afghanistan	29,928,987	251,825 sq. mi.	119 per sq. mi.	12%	99%	The Islamic fundamentalist Taliban movement controlled mountainous Afghanistan until 2002. The Taliban is believed to have harbored Osama bin Ladin, the accused mastermind of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001.
Algeria	32,531,853	919,595 sq. mi.	35 per sq. mi.	3%	99%	At one time, Algeria was part of France, but the Algerians asked the French to leave.
Bahrain	688,345	268 sq. mi.	2568 per sq. mi.	3%	100%	Bahrain was one of the first Persian Gulf nations to produce oil, but by the 1970s it had used almost all of its reserves.
Egypt	77,505,756	385,229 sq. mi.	201 per sq. mi.	3%	94%	Almost all of Egypt's population is concentrated in the Nile River Valley.
Iran	68,017,860	632,457 sq. mi.	108 per sq. mi.	9%	98%	Iran was once known as Persia. Iranians are Muslims, but they are not Arabs. Iranians speak Farsi.
Iraq	26,074,906	167,975 sq. mi.	155 per sq. mi.	13%	97%	Iraq has been controlled by a group of nations led by the United States since the overthrow of dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. Iraq includes the land once known as Mesopotamia.
Israel	6,276,883	7,876 sq. mi.	797 per sq. mi.	16%	16%	Israel is a homeland to Jewish people who had lived as minorities in other lands until 1948.
Jordan	5,759,732	34,342 sq. mi.	168 per sq. mi.	3%	92%	Jordan is an Arab and Muslim nation, but Jordan's then King signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1994.
Kuwait	2,335,648	6,880 sq. mi.	339 per sq. mi.	1%	85%	The United Nations declared war on Iraq in 1991 after Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein attempted to "annex" or take over Kuwait.
Lebanon	3,826,018	3,950 sq. mi.	969 per sq. mi.	17%	60%	Clashes among Christians, Muslims, and Israel have made Lebanon an unstable nation.
Libya	5,765,563	678,400 sq. mi.	8 per sq. mi.	1%	97%	Libya has been controlled by Muammar al-Qaddafi since 1967. It is a strict Muslim nation where gambling and eating pork are forbidden.
Morocco	32,725,847	177,117 sq. mi.	185 per sq. mi.	20%	99%	One-third of the people of Morocco are Berbers. The Berbers, who lived in North Africa before the Arab invasion, have their own language and customs.
Oman	3,001,583	118,150 sq. mi.	25 per sq. mi.	0%	92%	Oil has made this sultanate a rich nation. A sultanate is a nation ruled by a sultan.
Qatar	863,051	4,412 sq. mi.	196 per sq. mi.	2%	95%	Qatar is a tiny nation that has used its oil wealth to create a diversified economy. It is a center of banking in the Arab world.
Saudi Arabia	26,417,599	865,000 sq. mi.	31 per sq. mi.	2%	100%	Saudi Arabia includes Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities of Islam. It has the largest oil reserves in the world.
Syria	18,448,752	71,498 sq. mi.	258 per sq. mi.	25%	90%	Syria has the best farmland of the region. When irrigated, the land produces crops of cotton, wheat, and various vegetables.
Tunisia	11,074,951	63,378 sq. mi.	175 per sq. mi.	18%	98%	Tunisia was once home to the ancient civilization of Carthage, an advanced sea-faring city. The Romans defeated Carthage, burned the city and poured salt over the land so that it would no longer be arable and the people would be forced to leave.
Turkey	69,660,559	300,948 sq. mi.	231 per sq. mi.	31%	99%	Most of Turkey is in Asia, but the western tip of the nation is in Europe. The European section of Turkey includes Istanbul, Europe's second most populated city after Moscow.
United Arab Emirates	2,563,212	32,280 sq. mi.	79 per sq. mi.	1%	96%	Seven small emirates, or Arab kingdoms, combined to form this small nation in 1971.
West Bank	2,385,615	2,200 sq. mi.	1084 per sq. mi.	17%	75%	The territory along the West Bank of the Jordan River has been controlled by Israel, but the Palestinian Arabs in the region have limited self-rule.
Yemen	20,727,063	205,356 sq. mi.	101 per sq. mi.	3%	97%	Yemen is an isolated, mountainous nation. Its most famous export is rich-tasting coffee called mocha.

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