Middle East

Geographical term loosely applied to the predominantly Islamic countries of the E Mediterranean, NE Africa, and SW Asia. It usually includes: Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Indeterminate area now usually taken to include Egypt and the Arab states of the eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Peninsula, sometimes extended to the states of northwest Africa, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan.

Countries The area is normally recognized as including the Arab countries of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as Palestine, Iraq and Jordan and the states of the Arabian Peninsula. The non-Arab states of Israel and Iran are also usually included. Libya and the Arab states of northwest Africa are, however, normally excluded because of their geographical location, even though they have physical, cultural, and economic characteristics which are similar to those of their Arab neighbours. There is some social and economic justification in the inclusion of Sudan. Turkey, despite being Muslim, is frequently excluded from the region, partly because it lies in both Europe and Asia, although sometimes it is referred to as the Near East.

Economy The main producing areas are the irrigated farmlands of the Nile Valley, and the Fertile Crescent extending from the eastern Mediterranean coast to the Tigris–Euphrates Valley. Outside these areas the main traditional economic activity was animal husbandry, and nomadic Bedouin tribes kept herds of sheep, goats, and camels. In all of the countries of the area apart from Israel, the agricultural sector remains the main employer of labour, although its share of the Gross National Product is declining. The Middle East plays a significant role in the international economy because of its oil riches. The region accounts for over 60% of world oil reserves, and 40% of total oil production. Because of this oil wealth, the Middle East contains the countries with the world's highest per capita national incomes. Only Israel has an economic structure comparable to those of the developed nations of Europe and North America, with a diversified industrial economy.

Politics Most of the attempts at political and economic cooperation in the Middle East have embraced only the Arab countries, and excluded Israel and Iran. The Arab League, the main political alliance, includes all the Arab states of the area, as well as those in North Africa. Its members have little in common politically however, ranging from conservative monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to republics like Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Attempts have been made at regional economic cooperation, the most notable of which is the Arab Common Market, established in 1964, which provides for free trade and capital movements amongst member states. Bodies which provide for intra-regional recycling of oil funds to the poorer Middle East states include the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, the Saudi Arabian Development Fund, the Abu Dhabi Fund, and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development.

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Ethnography The Middle East, in its widest sense, used to embrace the area from Afghanistan in the east to Mauritania in the west, and has a variety of diverse ethnic groups. They include Arabs, Turkic peoples, Iranians, Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Jews, Assyrians, Berbers, and Tuaregs.

Languages Despite the widespread use of Arabic, there is a great diversity of languages, varying from the Turkic languages spoken by such different people as the Uzbek and Kirgiz of Afghanistan and the Qashqai nomads of western Iran, to independent languages of the Kurds, Armenians, Pathans, and Baluch.

Religion Religious groups are similarly varied, although Islam is dominant. By far the largest number of Muslims are of the Sunni sect of Islam although Iran has adopted the Shi’a faith as the state religion. Judaism predominates in Israel, and Christianity is widespread in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq. Small pockets of Zoroastrians still survive in the Yazd region of Iran. Other pre-Islamic Iranian religions survive in Kurdistan.

Empires At different times Egypt and the Tigris–Euphrates delta of Iraq have been thought to be the cradles of civilization, and certainly from 4000 BC until the 20th century AD the seats of many world empires were in the Middle East. The Assyrian, Babylonian, Sassanid, Achamenian, Parthian, Tatar, later Macedonian, Byzantine, Arab, and Ottoman empires are major examples. The last cohesive indigenous empire of the Middle East was the Ottoman Empire, but since its decline in the 20th century a new force provided the Middle East with international power – oil.

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