**What is the Middle East?**

The Middle East is a geographical region that has been of great importance in history since ancient times. Strategically located, it is a natural land bridge connecting the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. It was the site of some of the world’s earliest civilizations and the birthplace of three great religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In recent times enormous deposits of oil have made the Middle East more important in world trade than ever.

There has never been agreement on a definition of the Middle East. Historically, the regions include lands that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, plus Persia. Thus the countries that make up those areas are agreed upon as being the core of the Middle East. These include Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and United Arab Emirate. However other nations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the countries of North Africa; Sudan, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco are considered part of the Middle East based on religious and similar cultural attributes. The term Middle East or Near East, comes from a European perspective because looking east to China or India, one would have to go through this region of the world, placing it, from their point of view, in the middle between Europe and China. The term was created by British and American diplomats and military officers in the 1800s.

**Important Urban Centers**

The Middle East has a population of about 246 million people, or nearly as many as the United States. Most of the population lives in cities or in the fertile regions along rivers or other bodies of water. The farther from water the less likely you will find many people there. Turkey, Egypt, and Iran are the most populous countries with over 50 million people each. Saudi Arabia, though large in size, has a very small population of about 10 million because most of its land is desert.

Much of life throughout the Middle East centers around trade or agriculture. The nomadic way of life was never very popular due to the dangers of the deserts. Thus over 50% of the population lives in cities. The largest city in the Middle East is **Cairo**, the capital of Egypt. The port city of **Alexandria** was built by Alexander the Great, and became famed for a massive library and center of learning. Istanbul, the major city of Turkey, lies on one of the world’s most historic sites, spanning Europe and Asia. As Constantinople, it was once the capital of the Roman and Byzantine empires. **Baghdad**, capital of Iraq, lies along the Euphrates River, and was the seat of early Islamic rulers and also became a great trading and learning center. **Damascus**, Syria’s capital also served as an important trading center. Tehran, capital of Iran, is relatively new by Middle Eastern standards, not becoming a city until the 1500s. The importance of **Jerusalem**, Israel’s capital, is far greater than its size, containing places sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The cities of **Mecca** and **Medina** also hold significant religious value for Muslims.

**Ethnic Groups**

Since ancient times, the Middle East has attracted migrating peoples. Mixing with the earlier inhabitants of the region, they produced the peoples that make up the Middle East today. They can be classified into three main ethnic groups--Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. There are, in addition, smaller numbers of Kurds, who are scattered across Turkey, Iran, and Iraq; Jews (of varied ethnic origin), who live chiefly in Israel; Pakistanis; Armenians; and Greeks, who live mainly on the island nation of Cyprus.

**Language and Religion**

Language and religion are basic elements of cultural identity in the Middle East. The major languages of the region, which correspond to the three main ethnic groups, are Arabic, the most widely used language; Turkish; and Persian (or Farsi), the language of the Iranians. Kurdish is related to Persian. The Hebrew spoken in Israel is, like Arabic, a Semitic tongue. Educated people throughout the Middle East frequently speak English or French as well.

Islam, the religion of the Muslims, is the predominant faith of the Middle East. There are two main branches: Sunni Islam, the larger branch; and Shi'i Islam, found mainly in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Christianity is practiced by some Arabs, particularly in Lebanon; by the Greeks of Cyprus; and the Copts in Egypt. Judaism was the faith of ancient Israel and is the religion of the modern state of Israel.

**The Land**

The Middle East is a vast region with many different types of terrain. Mountains make up significant portions of the land in Turkey, Jordan, Syria and Iran. The Arabian Peninsula, which makes up more than 25% of the regions land area, has mountains on its western coast. Much of the regions land is flat and contains some of the world’s most forbidding deserts—among them the Sahara, Arabian, Syrian deserts, and the Rub’al Khali, or Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia.

The regions two major river systems are the Nile, and the Tigris and Euphrates. The Nile, the world’s longest river is the lifeblood of Egypt, without which would otherwise be desert. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers form what is called Mesopotamia (meaning land between rivers). These river valleys contain much of the region’s limited fertile land and are the most densely populated areas, and it was here that the first civilizations arose and subsequent civilizations fought over.

**Climate**

Hot, dry weather is common to the Middle East for much of the year except in the highest mountains, where snow is frequent. The rainy season in most places lasts from about October to April. In the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, rain comes mainly between May and September. But there is only light, brief rainfall in most of the region and in some areas it never rains at all. In the deserts, which are baked by the blazing sun, the daytime temperature often rises to more than 125°F (52°C). Yet at night the deserts are cool or even cold.

**Water**

Life itself in the Middle East has long been dependent upon the amount and location of water. Rain-bearing winds are often unable to penetrate into the interior of the region because they are blocked by the surrounding mountains. The best-watered areas are usually the strips of land lying between the mountains and the sea, but the Middle East generally suffers from a severe shortage of water due to the limited rainfall.

From earliest times the power of Middle Eastern empires depended on ready supplies of water. The location of sources of water also determined the routes of travel and trade. It is no accident that the valleys of the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates rivers were--and remain--main centers of life in the region. Some of the oldest irrigation systems in the world were developed in the Middle East. Many are still in use, along with newer systems.

Although only about 15 percent of the land is suitable for farming, agriculture remains the region's most important economic activity. Wheat, barley, and rice are chief food crops. Figs and dates are grown in desert oases and citrus fruits in the Mediterranean coastal region. The major commercial crops are cotton, coffee, and tobacco. Livestock raising is especially important to the agricultural economy.

Modern methods of providing regular supplies of water in the region include using dams to irrigate large areas of desert in Israel, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Nations like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates are converting seawater into drinking water by various distilling processes. The success of programs to raise the standard of living for people throughout the Middle East will depend to a large extent on the outcome of the various water projects.

The discovery of vast oil deposits revolutionized the Middle East's economy. More than half of the world's known oil reserves are found in the region, although they are not equally distributed. Saudi Arabia has the largest deposits and is the world's leading oil producer and exporter. Iran, Iraq, and the small Persian Gulf state of Kuwait are the other major producers. Aside from oil, chrome, coal, sulfur, and magnesium mined in Turkey, and phosphates from Jordan, the region is generally poor in mineral resources. Though they have few oil resources, Turkey, Egypt, and Israel are the most industrially developed countries of the region.

Questions

1. Where does the term “Middle East” come from? What term would you use to identify this area of the world?

2. What makes this region of the world so important to study and understand?

3. What are the dominate ethnic or cultural groups in the Middle East?

4. What is the dominate religion? Are there any other religions present in the Middle East?

5. How would you describe the climate in this part of the world? Explain.

6. What environmental/geographic problems do people face who live in this region?

7. How do people manage to overcome or deal with those geographic problems?