

Geography of the Middle East

Environment and People

The Middle East is the term given to the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, where Europe, Asia and Africa meet. The Middle East includes large countries with huge populations such as Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Iraq. It includes rich oil countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and The United Arab Emirates. The Middle East also includes significant nations like Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Oman and The Republic of Yemen.

Approximately 66% or 2/3 of Middle Eastern countries receives less than 20 centimeters of rain each year. This is the least amount required for most food crops. Most of the rain comes during the winter months when the growing season is over. During the growing months the skies are clear and the temperature soars to over 100°F (38°C).

Water is essential to life. Water has determined for centuries where people settle how many live in one area, if people suffer, prosper or fight wars. Water equals life. What is life like in an area of large populations and little water?

The Region

One hundred fifty million years ago, the Middle East was covered with dense tropical forests and swamps. Today this area contains valuable oil fields, rugged mountains, rocky hills and deserts. The many mountains of the Middle East block the flow of rain clouds to the inland side of the region. Despite being surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, fresh water is scarce and unpredictable. Only Turkey, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Syria and Lebanon flourish with regular and adequate rainfall.

Deserts

Mountains and prevailing winds have created vast deserts in many parts of the Middle East. Not all deserts are the same, some have shifting sand dunes, others eroded hills, while some have blooming wild flowers and dense grasses. While the deserts of the Middle East have been inhospitable to many forms of life, the **Bedouins** have managed to make their homes on the edges and around the oases of the deserts for centuries. Because food and water for their herds are scarce, the Bedouins can not settle permanently and are considered to be nomads, people who move from place to place. The Bedouins do not wander aimlessly, they know exactly where they are going. Their lives and their travel are carefully planned to catch fleeting rainstorms and to survive in the harshest settings.

Life has changed for the Bedouins in recent years and few remain nomads. Fewer than 3 % of the population is still considered nomadic. The majority has abandoned their age-old way of life in favor of houses, motor vehicles and jobs in the oil fields. Even the small number who remain nomads have had to make some changes, they now rely on modern means of communication for news and other information. However the appearance of rain is essential to their existence and determines the pattern of their movement.

Watered Lands

All of the Middle East is not desert. This region also contains some of the most fertile soil in the world. Egypt's Nile Delta is one of the world's most densely populated areas. In the **fellaheen**, or delta, Egyptian farmers laboriously work the fields sixteen hours a day with only a short rest after the noon meal. They use elaborate drainage systems and constant re-fertilization efforts to produce bountiful harvests.

Israel has also transformed harsh deserts into fertile landscapes. **Kibbutzim** or collective farming communities produce much of the country's crops. All over the Middle East, modern technology and human determination are reclaiming land from deserts. They also use **desalination**, a process which makes seawater fresh and useable for drinking and irrigation.

Cities

Middle Eastern cities developed in areas that had plenty of water. Cairo, Egypt is located on the Nile River, Baghdad, Iraq is located on the Tigris River and Istanbul, Turkey is located on the Bosphorus Strait. All these cities flourished because of their location close to water. These early cities were laid out to fit the environment. Narrow streets were a defense against the intense rays of the sun. Large walled houses surrounded courts and gardens that provided both shade and shelter.

At the heart of every Middle Eastern city is a **suq**, or marketplace. Here, one can find vegetables, meat, spices, wood, fabric and gold. Each item is sold on a separate street that has been set up for that purpose. The suq contrasts sharply with the modern city that surrounds it. Wood and mud structures suddenly give way to tall marble, glass and concrete buildings. The procession of black veils is quickly replaced by modern dresses and business suits.

For centuries, the lifeblood of many early Middle Eastern cities was trade. The city of Istanbul, formally known as Constantinople, remains a trade center. Located at the neck of the Bosphorus - the Golden Horn - and the Sea of Marmara, Istanbul has been a trade link between the Eastern and Western world for over 2000 years. Istanbul is the only city that occupies land on two continents. A French visitor to Istanbul in the mid 1500's said, " it seems to me that while other cities are mortal, this one will remain as long as there are men on earth".

Questions on Geography

1. Name the countries of the Middle East that have some of the richest oil fields in the world.
2. Locate the fertile lands found in the Middle East.
3. Describe the conditions that affected early kibbutzim life.
4. Name the Middle Eastern city that occupies land on two continents. What are the two continents?
5. What factors do you think have led to changes in the Bedouin way of life? (5)
6. How were Middle Eastern cities built to fit their environment? (5)
7. In what ways does water continue to affect the development of the Middle East? (5)