HISTORY
Cradle of Civilisation
If Africa is the birthplace of humanity, the Middle East can make a strong claim to be the birthplace of civilisation. Mesopotamia's Fertile Crescent and the valley of the Nile River were the sites of some of the world's earliest known organised societies.

About 5000 BC a culture known as Al-Ubaid first appeared in Mesopotamia. Little is known about it except that its influence eventually spread down what is now the coast of the Gulf but was then a string of islands. Stone Age artefacts have also been found in Israel's Negev desert and in the West Bank town of Jericho.

Sometime around 3100 BC the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were unified under Menes, whose rule marks the beginning of Egypt's 1st dynasty. The fact that there were two kingdoms for Menes to conquer implies that a relatively organised society already existed in Egypt at that time. The earliest settlements in the Gulf also date from this period and are usually associated with the Umm-an-Nar culture (centred in today's United Arab Emirates), about which relatively little is known. The Levant too was well settled by this time, and local powers included the Amorites and the Canaanites. In Mesopotamia it was the era of Sumer, arguably the world's first great civilization.

In the late 24th and early 23rd centuries BC, Sargon of Akkad, a king from Sumer, conquered much of the Levant and Mesopotamia. At its southern edge Sargon's empire contended with a powerful kingdom called Dilmun, centred on the island of Bahrain in the Gulf. Dilmun's civilization arose around 3200 BC and was to continue in one form or another for nearly 2000 years.

The patriarch Abraham also came from Mesopotamia, having been born, according to tradition, in Ur of the Chaldees on the Euphrates River. His migration from Ur to Canaan is usually dated around 1800 BC, a century or so before another native of Mesopotamia, the Babylonian king Hammurabi, issued his famous code of laws. Other powers in the region at that time included the Hittite and Assyrian empires and, in Greece and Asia Minor, Mycenaean and Troy.

The biblical kingdom of Israel was a very minor player in this game of empires. It was established by Saul around 1023 BC, some 250 years after what is traditionally given as the date of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. The unified Israeli kingdom lasted only a century or so. It split into two parts, Israel and Judah, after the death of King Solomon (circa 928 BC). Israel and Judah later fell to the Assyrians and Babylonians respectively.

The 7th century BC saw both the conquest of Egypt by Assyria and, far to the east, the rise of the Medes, the first of many great Persian empires. In 550 BC the Medes were conquered by Cyrus the Great, usually recorded as the first Persian shah, or king.

Over the next 60 years Cyrus and his successors Cambyses (reigned 525-522 BC) and Darius I (reigned 521-486 BC) swept west and north to conquer first Babylon and then Egypt, Asia Minor and parts of Greece.

After the Greeks annexed the Persian territory at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, Darius and Xerxes (reigned 486-466 BC) turned their attention to consolidating their empire, though Xerxes launched another invasion of Greece in 480 BC.

Egypt won independence from the Persians in 401 BC only to be reconquered by them 60 years later. But the second Persian occupation of Egypt was brief. Little more than a decade after they arrived, the Persians were again driven out of Egypt, this time by the Greeks.

In 336 BC Philip of Macedon, a warlord who had conquered much of mainland Greece, was murdered. His son Alexander assumed the throne and began a series of conquests that would eventually encompass most of Asia Minor, the Middle East, Persia and north-western India. The high point of Alexander's brief reign was the final crushing of Persia and the sack of its capital, Persepolis, in the winter of 331-330 BC.

The Hellenistic World
Alexander died in Babylon in 323 BC. His empire was promptly carved up by his generals; who spent the next 40 years fighting each other. Eventually three main dynasties emerged from this carnage: the Antigonids in Greece and Asia Minor, the Ptolemies in Egypt; and the Seleucids, who controlled the swath of land running from modern Israel and Lebanon through Mesopotamia to Persia.

This is not to say that peace reigned. Having finished off a host of lesser competitors, the heirs to Alexander's empire then proceeded to fight each other. Within a century huge areas of the eastern part of the Seleucid Empire (modern Iran) had broken off to become the Parthian Kingdom. Parts of Palestine and Syria eventually fell to the Sabians -- an Arab dynasty based at Petra in modern Jordan -- while other parts changed hands frequently among the Seleucids, Ptolemies, Nabataeans and various local dynasties. Eventually all of the western Mediterranean fell before the Romans. They conquered most of Asia Minor in 188 BC, then Syria and Palestine in 63 and 62 BC, and, finally, Egypt in 30 BC.

In the east, the Seleucids saw their territory steadily whittled away by the Parthians until it disappeared entirely at the end of the 2nd century BC. The Parthians controlled most of Mesopotamia and Persia and parts of eastern Arabia for the next several centuries before giving way to another Persian dynasty, the Sasanians.

This left the area covered by this book divided largely among two empires and their client states until the coming of Islam. Asia Minor, the Levant and Egypt were dominated by what historians refer to as the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. The Sasanians ruled the east, while the area in between was occupied by several small client states. Only the nomads of the desert and the frankincense kingdoms of South Arabia remained independent of great powers of the day.

Frankincense, arguably the ancient world's most valuable commodity, was then produced only in South Arabia and control of the trade routes by which it was sent north made the rulers of what is now Yemen some of the richest people on earth. Saba, the biblical Sheba and the greatest of the South Arabian kingdoms, was founded around 1000 BC and remained the pre-eminent power in that region until about 50 AD, when it was supplanted by another local dynasty, the Himyarites. The decline of the frankincense trade after the 3rd century AD moved Arabia to the margins of the ancient world.

The New Religion
For several hundred years prior to the coming of Islam, the Byzantines and the Sassanians were almost constantly at war, a fact which probably explains the weakened state in which the Arab armies were to find the two empires.

The prophet Mohammed was born in Mecca, in western Arabia, sometime around the year 570. In the year 610 he began to receive revelations from God, conveyed to him through the archangel Gabriel. Thus began Mohammed's ministry; which was to continue until his death, at Medina, in 632.

By that time Islam had swept all other religions before it throughout most of the Arabian peninsula.

A breathtaking series of conquests followed. In the 20 years after Mohammed's death Arab armies flying the Muslim flag took Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Persia and parts of what is now Afghanistan. In 652 they crossed the Oxus River into Central Asia.

Within a century of the Prophet's death the Arabs ruled an empire stretching from Spain to India and north into Uzbekistan.

The governance of this empire initially fell to the Prophet's companions. Soon after, leaders of the Muslim community took the title of 'caliph', an Arabic word meaning 'successor', 'lieutenant' or 'vicereign'.

Arguments over the leadership quickly
arose, and in 644 a dispute over the caliphate opened a rift in Islam that grew into today's divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Those who took the side of Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, became known as the Shia (Shiite), or 'Partisans of Ali'. Ali eventually became caliph in 656, but a civil war soon broke out which ended with his assassination by followers of Mu'awiya, the military governor of Syria, who was also a distant relative of the Prophet.

The Umayyads

Mu'awiya moved the capital from Medina to Damascus and established the first great Muslim dynasty — the Umayyad (or Omayyad) dynasty. The name is derived from Mu'awiya's clan, the Bani Umayya, within the Prophet's tribe, the Quraysh.

The Umayyads were descended from a branch of the Quraysh known for its piety. Mu'awiya's father was one of the last people in Mecca to embrace Islam and had long been Muhammad's chief opponent in the city. By moving the capital to Damascus the Umayyads were symbolically declaring that they had aspirations far beyond the rather ascetic teachings of the Quran (Koran).

The Umayyads gave the Islamic world some of its greatest architectural treasures, such as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. History, however, has not been kind to them, remembering them largely for the high living, corruption, nepotism and tyranny which eventually proved to be their undoing.

In 750 the Umayyads were toppled in a revolt led by Abu Muslim, a freed slave who accused them of impiety and rallied the Shiites of Farsa behind the Abbasid (or Abbasid) branch of the Prophet's family. The release of this appeal reinforced long-simmering ethnic discontent: Umayyad rule had been particularly harsh on the non-Arab peoples of Mesopotamia, Persia and Khorasan (the historical name for what is now north-eastern Iran and western Afghanistan).

The Abbasids

From the beginning the Abbasid caliphate had a distinctly Persian flavour. This was reflected in the decision of the second Abbasid caliph, Al-Mansur, to build a completely new capital close to the Abbasids' Persian base and far from Levantine cities like Damascus, where the non-Muslim population (and, hence, Byzantine influence) remained large. Persian influence was clearly seen in the layout of the new capital, Baghdad, and in the architecture of the caliph's palace. Even the site had significance – Baghdad is only 30 km from Ctesiphon, the Sassanian and Parthian capital. Over time the Abbasids also came to adopt a number of Sassanian practices, including concealing the ruler behind a screen during audiences.

It should be emphasised, however, that the Abbasids were Arabs, not Persians. In fairness to the Umayyads, one ought to add that the Abbasids have not exactly gone down in history as overly high-minded or pious either. But the early centuries of their rule constitute what has been remembered ever since as the golden age of Islamic culture and society.

The most famous of the Abbasid caliphs was Harun ar-Rashid (reigned 786-809) of The Thousand and One Nights fame – a warrior king who led one of the most successful early Muslim invasions of Byzantium, almost reaching Constantinople. He also presided over an extraordinary burst of creativity in the arts, medicine, literature and science. Harun's son and main successor, Al-Ma'mun, founded the Beit al-Hikmah, or 'House of Wisdom', a Baghdad-based academy dedicated to translating Greek and Roman works of science and philosophy into Arabic. It was only through these translations that most of the classical literature we know today was saved for posterity.

But, as with the Umayyads before them, the Abbasids had planted the seeds of their own destruction in the first years of their rule. Though they had rallied Shiite support in their initial bid for power, the Abbasids did
not make Shi'ism the official creed of the empire or otherwise address Shiite aspirations. This, along with the difficulties inherent in governing a far-flung empire, and the power struggles which seem to beset most absolute monarchies, eventually eroded their power base.

After Harun's death the empire was effectively divided between two of his sons. Predictably, civil war ensued. In 813 one son, Al-Ma'mun, emerged triumphant and reigned as caliph for the next 20 years. But Al-Ma'mun's hold on power remained insecure, and eventually he abandoned Baghdad to found a new capital at Samarra, 100 km to the north, where he surrounded himself with Turkish mercenaries.

This was a mistake. Al-Ma'mun's successors became increasingly isolated in Samarra, which was not so much a city as a giant fortified military camp. Over time the caliph's Turkish bodyguards became the real rulers of an empire which itself was rapidly shrinking.

In the first years of Abbasid rule the empire lost Spain to the lone surviving member of the Umayyad family. The tendency that was for governors in the outer provinces to set up new dynasties whenever they felt strong enough to do so. These rulers continued to owe nominal allegiance to the caliph, but in principle the empire had no control over them. North Africa slipped away in this manner at the end of the 8th century. In the early 9th century most of Central Asia and the portions of the empire in what are now India, Pakistan and Afghanistan followed.

Egypt slipped in and out of Abbasid control for a century before falling to the Fatimids — a Shi'ite dynasty from North Africa — in 969. The Fatimids made Cairo their capital and for the next two centuries ruled most of Syria, the Levant and western Arabia. The Fatimids' most lasting legacy was Al-Azhar, a university and mosque founded in Cairo during the early years of their rule. Al-Azhar, which is now the oldest university in the world, remains one of the Islamic world's leading centres of scholarship.

By the middle of the 10th century the Abbasid caliphs were the prisoners of their Turkish guards. Two dynasties emerged from these guards to rule the empire through figurehead caliphs: the Buyids (932-1062), who eventually moved the capital to Shiraz, in modern Iran; and the Seljuks (1038-1194), who moved the capital back to Baghdad while extending their reach throughout Persia, Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The Crusades

In 1095 Pope Urban II called for a Christian military expedition to liberate the holy places of Jerusalem. There was a political subtext to Urban's spiritual concerns. Over the previous generation the Seljuk Turks had expanded westward to take control of Armenia, Azerbaijan and a large part of Anatolia. The resulting pressure was intense enough to cause the Byzantine emperor and the Greek Orthodox Church to swallow their pride and appeal to the Pope for help. For his part Urban was understandably eager to assert Rome's primacy in the east, particularly in the Holy Land.

After linking up with the Byzantine army in 1097, the Crusaders successfully besieged Antioch (modern Antakya, in Turkey) and then marched down the coast before turning inland, toward Jerusalem. A thousand Fatimid troops held Jerusalem for six weeks against some 15,000 Crusaders before the city fell on 15 July 1099. The victorious Crusaders massacred the local population — Muslims, Jews and Christians alike — plundered the non-Christian religious sites and turned the Dome of the Rock into a church.

Four Crusader states were created, in the conquered territories: the Kingdom of Jerusalem, the Principality of Antioch and the counties of Tripoli and Edessa.

These successes were short-lived. It took less than 50 years for the tide to begin to turn against the Crusaders and only 200 before they were driven out of the region once and for all.

The Muslim reconquest began in 1144 when Zengi, the founder of a short-lived Kurdish dynasty from Mosul (now in northern
The rise of the Ottomans

In 1258 – the same year that Hulagu Khan sacked Baghdad – a boy named Osman was born to the chief of a pagan Turkish tribe in western Anatolia. Osman, the first ruler of what would become the Ottoman Empire, converted to Islam in his youth. He began his military career by hiring out his tribe’s army as mercenaries in the civil wars then besetting what was left of the Byzantine Empire. Payment came in the form of land.

Rather than taking on the Byzantines directly, Osman’s successors patiently scooped up the bits and pieces of the empire that Constantinople could no longer control. By the end of the 14th century the Ottomans had conquered Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Hungary and all of the territory that now makes up Turkey. They had also moved their capital across the Dardanelles to Adrianople, today the Turkish city of Edirne. In 1453 Sultan Mehmet II took Constantinople, the hitherto unachievable objective of innumerable Muslim wars almost since the 7th century.

The empire reached its peak, both politically and culturally, under Suleyman the Magnificent (reigned 1520-1566), who led the Ottoman armies west to the gates of Vienna, east into Persia, and south through the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and into Yemen. His control also extended throughout North Africa. He cracked down on corruption, reformed the Ottoman legal system and was the patron of the great architect Sinan, who designed the Suleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul and oversaw the reconstruction of the Grand Mosque in Mecca.

After Suleyman, however, the Ottoman Empire went into a long, slow period of decline. Only five years after his death Spain and Venice destroyed virtually the entire Ottoman navy at the Battle of Lepanto (in the Aegean Sea), a loss which eventually cost the Sublime Porte (as the Ottoman government was known) control of the western Mediterranean. North Africa soon fell under the sway of local dynasties. The Ottomans were driven out of Yemen in 1636, and conflict with the Safavids – Persia’s rulers from the early 16th century to the early 18th century – was almost constant.

Enter Europe

Europe’s colonial expansion into the Middle East began in 1498, when the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama visited Oman’s northern coast, the Strait of Hormuz (then the seat of an independent kingdom, and the sheikhdom of Jaffar, near modern Ras al-Khaima in the United Arab Emirates). In 1507 Portugal annexed the Yemeni island of Socotra and occupied Oman. Its power eventually extended as far north as Bahrain. But, although Portugal retained control of Bahrain until 1602 and was not driven out of Oman until 1650, the area was important to it only as a way-station on the route to India. Little, if any, effort was made to penetrate Arabia’s interior.

Portuguese influence in the Gulf gradually gave way to that of Britain’s East India Company, which had trading links with the area as early as 1616. During the 17th and early 18th centuries the British concentrated on driving their French and Dutch competitors out of the region, a task they had largely accomplished by 1750.

At the beginning of the 18th century the political weaknesses of both Persia and Turkey left the way open to European powers seeking to dominate the region. The Ottoman sultans were, by then, virtual figureheads, and Persia seemed chronically unstable. After the fall of the Safavids, Persia was ruled by three different dynasties in the space of just 55 years.

Decline of the Porte

In the early 19th century the Europeans began nibbling away at the Ottoman Empire, the economy of which was not helped by the empire having to fight some half-dozen wars with Russia between 1768 and the end of the 19th century.

In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt in what he thought would be the first step towards building a French empire in the Middle East and India. The French occupation of Egypt lasted only three years but left a lasting mark.
20 Facts about the Region

Sultan Mohammed V declared a jihad, or holy war, calling on Muslims everywhere to rise up against Britain, France and Russia. To counter the sultan, the British negotiated an alliance with Hussein bin Ali, the Grand Sheik of Mecca. In 1916, Sheikh Hussein agreed to lead an Arab revolt against the Turks (his nominal overlords) in exchange for a British promise to make him King of the Arabs after the war.

The British never had any serious intention of keeping this promise. At the same time that they were negotiating with Sheikh Hussein, they were holding talks with the French on how to carve up the Ottoman Empire. Britain had also given the Zionists a movement a promise, known as the Balfour Declaration after the then British foreign secretary, that it would ‘view with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people’ after the war.

In the closing year of the war the British occupied Palestine and Damascus. After the war settlement modelled on the Sykes-Picot Agreement – the secret Anglo-French accord that divided the Ottoman Empire into British and French spheres of influence – was implemented and given the formal rubber-stamp approval of the League of Nations.

Ataturk's secularism, found an echo in Persia, where, in 1923, Rezā Khan, the commander of a Cossack brigade who had risen to become war minister, overthrew the Ghajar dynasty. To emphasise his nationalist credentials, he changed his name from Khan to the more Persian-sounding Pahlevi, which also happened to be his name in spoken pre-Islamic Persia. He initially moved to set up a secular republic on the Turkish model, but after protests from the country's religious establishment he had to reshuffle the country's name to Iran.

Above all Rezā Shah was a fierce nationalist. Before he came to power, Iran and Russia had had a tense relationship, a fact which led him to decide to pro-German sympathies. In May 1921, when Russia invaded Persia, Rezā Khan sided with it.

WWII & Beyond

The Middle East was then a marginal area during the Second World War. In April 1941, a pro-German coup overthrew the government of Iraq. Iraq had gained nominal independence in 1932, though British 'advisors'...
remained extremely powerful there. The coup was short-lived. British and Jordanian troops marched across the desert and reinstalled a pro-British government only a month later. That summer British, Jordanian and Free French forces invaded Syria and Lebanon to depose the pro-Vichy regime there.

As a battle theatre Egypt was briefly central to the war. It was at El Alamein, in the desert west of Alexandria, that the German advance across North Africa was finally turned back. The Germans, who were hampered by a lack of fuel, had planned to occupy Alexandria and Cairo before attacking Saudi Arabia in a bid to control the oil fields around the Gulf.

The region's problems began in earnest soon after the war was over. Since taking control of Palestine in 1918, the British had been under pressure to allow unrestricted Jewish immigration to the territory. With tension rising between Palestine's Arab and Jewish residents, Britain refused to do this and, in the late '30s, had placed strict limits on the number of new Jewish immigrants.

Several plans to partition Palestine were proposed during the '30s and '40s, but WMD briefly put an end to all discussions. When the war ended, Britain again found itself under pressure to allow a large-scale Jewish immigration, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust.

In early 1947 the British announced that they were turning the entire problem over to the newly created United Nations (UN). The UN voted to partition Palestine, but the Arab side rejected the plan and war followed.

The disastrous performance of the Arab armies in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (known in Israel as the War of Independence) had far-reaching consequences. Recriminations over the war, and the refugee problem it created, laid the groundwork for the 1951 assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan (the grandfather of Jordan's present king, Hussein), Syria, which had gained independence from France in 1946, became the field for a seemingly endless series of military coups in which disputes over how to handle the Palestine problem often played a large part.

It was in Egypt that the "Disaster of 1948," as many Arabs still call it, truly made its power felt. The Egyptian army largely blamed the loss on the country's corrupt and ineffective politicians. In May 1948 a group of young officers toppled the monarchy. Initially an army respected army general was installed as the country's president, but it soon emerged that the real power lay with one of the coup plotters: Gamal Abdel Nasser. By 1954 he was the country's acknowledged leader.

Mossadig & Iran

It was, however, in Iran, not Egypt, that the Middle East's first great nationalist crisis occurred. Iran was a patchwork of ethnic enclaves. The country was rich in oil but politically volatile. Reza Shah had held the country together with a combination of authoritarian rule and sheer force of personality. His son, Mohammad Reza, was not cut from the same cloth.

In the late '40s relations between the Iranian government and the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (the precursor of today's BP) became steadily more tense. The Iranian government, which already had the best deal of any of the producing countries vis-à-vis the oil companies, was demanding a larger share of oil revenues and threatening nationalisation if it did not receive satisfaction.

The always-turbulent world of Iranian politics reached a fever pitch in the spring of 1951 with the assassination of Prime Minister Ali Razmara, a general who opposed the nationalisation of Anglo-Iranian. In his place the Majles, or parliament, chose Mohammad Mossadig, the aged chairman of the Majles oil committee and the oil company's most ardent foe. Three days later a law nationalising Anglo-Iranian went into force. The resulting crisis dragged on throughout 1952. Strikes and, later, a British-organised boycott guaranteed that no oil flowed out of Iran. The US government tried mediation, but with no solution in sight, Mossadig, a demagogue of the first order, returned to governing by mob rule—manipulating and intimidating the Majles by summoning huge crowds to surround the parliament building.

Late in the year the USA and Britain began work on a secret plan, which they approved in mid-1953, to topple Mossadig with a coup. The plan was supposed to begin with the Shah dismissing Mossadig, but things went wrong from the start, and mobs under Mossadig's control drove the Shah out of the country, first to Baghdad and, later, to Rome. Within days, however, the tide turned and by the end of August the Shah was back in Tehran.

The extent to which the USA's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was involved in generating the wave of public support which brought the Shah back from Rome has long been the subject of fierce debate. Whatever the truth may be, most Iranians believe to this day that the USA put the Shah back on the throne. That belief played no small part in the fury directed by Iran against Washington when the Shah was overthrown again, this time for good, more than 25 years later.

The Suez Crisis

One outcome of the drawn-out Iranian crisis was that the British, who still ran parts of Yemen, most of the Gulf and the Suez Canal, came to feel that nationalist movements in the Middle East were best dealt with by stomping on them quickly. A pervasive British fear throughout the two year Iranian crisis had been that if Mossadig succeeded in nationalising Anglo-Iranian, the floodgates would open throughout the region. In particular they feared that President Nasser of Egypt might try to nationalise the Suez Canal, which was still regarded as a vital lifeline of the British Empire.

With Mossadig out of the way, the British came to see Nasser as the source of most of their problems in the region. In 1954 Britain reluctantly agreed to evacuate the Canal Zone, which it had retained control of when Egypt was granted nominal independence in 1922. Britain retained the right, however, to

reoccupy the canal in the event of an attack on Turkey or any Arab League state.

Using this loophole the British almost immediately began secret talks with the French on ways to re-establish western control over the waterway. France's interest was twofold: the Suez Canal company was based in Paris, and the French believed Nasser was supporting the Greens against them in Algeria. Israel, which wanted to curb attacks from Egyptian-sponsored guerrillas operating from the Gaza Strip, was brought into the talks, and a plan emerged.

The spark for the Suez Crisis was the US decision, announced on 19 July 1956, to withdraw backing for the loan Egypt needed to finance the huge Aswan Dam project. Washington justified its action by citing what it saw as Nasser's increasing friendliness with the Soviet Union. A week later Nasser announced that he would nationalise the canal and use its revenues to finance the dam. This prompted the British, French and Israelis to put their hitherto secret plan into action.

On 29 October 1956 Israel invaded Egypt, ostensibly to put a stop to the Gaza-based attacks. As Israeli forces entered Sinai, London and Paris, by prearrangement with Israel, issued ultimatums demanding that both Israel and Egypt 'withdraw' from an area extending for 16 km either side of the canal. This was slightly disingenuous, as the Israelis were still far from the canal, of which the Egyptians still controlled both banks. In any case, Nasser rejected the ultimatums and Britain and France responded by bombing Egypt and landing their troops in the Canal Zone.

The crisis only ended when the USA forced Britain and France to withdraw. Though it had been a military defeat, Nasser turned the Suez Crisis into a great political victory.

From Suez to Black September

The years immediately after Suez were Nasser's heyday. The Egyptian leader emerged from the Suez Crisis as the pre-eminent
figure in the Arab world and a central player in the politics of nationalism, socialism and decolonisation which gripped much of the developing world throughout the '50s and '60s.

But despite this prominence, Nasser was never able to realise his dream of a Pan-Arab state. In 1958 he merged Egypt and Syria to form the United Arab Republic. The marriage of the two countries was unhappy from the outset, and the union was dissolved three years later. A 1963 attempt to unite Egypt, Syria and Iraq never got off the ground. Soon afterwards Nasser became involved in a bloody proxy war with the Saudis in Yemen, which tied down tens of thousands of Egyptian troops for years. Other Arab countries — particularly Syria and Iraq — were chronically unstable, and Israel, Arab rhetoric notwithstanding, appeared militarily unassailable.

Nasser was realistic. Privately he acknowledged that the Arabs would probably lose a war against Israel, but for public consumption he gave rabblerousing speeches about liberating Palestine. By early 1967 the public mood engendered throughout the Arab world by these speeches was beginning to catch up with him. Nasser fell victim to accusations that he was 'hiding' behind the UN troops who had been stationed in the Sinai peninsula since the Suez Crisis.

On 16 May 1967 Nasser demanded that the UN forces be withdrawn. Somewhat to his surprise the UN Secretary-General complied immediately. The Egyptian army moved into key points in Sinai and announced a blockade of the Strait of Tiran, effectively closing the southern Israeli port of Elat.

The Egyptian army was mobilised and the country put on a war footing. Israel responded on 5 June 1967 with a pre-emptive strike that wiped out virtually the entire Egyptian air force. The war lasted only six days, and when it was over Israel controlled all of the Sinai peninsula and the Gaza Strip. The West Bank, including Jerusalem's Old City, had been seized from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. To the 'Daadier of 1948' was now added the 'Humiliation of 1967'.

As in 1948, the war's political fallout was far-reaching. In Egypt, at least, Nasser again managed to turn a military debacle into a political victory, but in the years that followed it became obvious that he had lost much of his lustre. Stresses over the loss of the Golan Heights fuelled yet another round of coup-plottings in Syria. Even in distant Kuwait, over 1,200 km from the battlefront, the government was sharply criticised for not having done enough to help the Arab cause.

It was also in the wake of the Six Day War that the Palestinians first became players in Arab politics. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) had been set up by Nasser in 1964 as little more than a front for the Egyptian leader. After 1967, however, many Palestinians concluded that it was unrealistic to count on the Arab states to regain Palestine for them.

Numerous small guerrilla groups sprang up after the war. Most prominent among these was Fatah (the name is a reverse acronym in Arabic for 'Palestine Liberation Movement'), founded in Kuwait in 1958 by three young Palestinian expatriates, including a building contractor named Yasser Arafat. It was Pan-Arab, and a host of smaller groups ranging from Marxist revolutionaries to idealist social democrats, that took over the PLO in the years after 1967. With its weak government, weighed down by hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, and its long border with Israel and the West Bank, Jordan became the main base for the Fatah and as the guerrilla groups were known in Arabic.

Relations between the PLO and Jordan were never particularly good. The first PLO fighter to be killed was, in fact, shot by the Jordanian army, not by the Israelis. Throughout the late '60s tension between King Hussein of Jordan and the Palestinians rose steadily as guerrilla raids from Jordanian territory prompted numerous Israeli retaliatory strikes and counter-attacks.

The final showdown came in September 1970 when King Hussein moved to smash Palestinian power in his country while the Palestinians attempted to overthrow the king. The PLO assumed that Jordan's large population of Palestinian refugees would guarantee them victory. In this they badly miscalculated. Despite the defection of some predominantly Palestinian units, the Jordanian army on the whole remained loyal and moved in to wipe out Palestinian resistance. Thousands of people — mostly civilians caught in the crossfire — died in the fighting.

A hastily convened Arab summit in Cairo sent a delegation to Amman to negotiate a cease-fire. The PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, was smuggled out of Jordan dressed as a Kuwaiti official and King Hussein arrived in Egypt shortly thereafter. On 27 September 1970 it was announced that the two sides had reached an agreement to end the fighting which had, by then, been going on for almost three weeks. The agreement required most of the Fatah to move to Lebanon (where their presence fuelled that country's slow slide toward civil war). Though it also allowed the Palestinians to maintain a presence in Jordan, this was greatly reduced in size and kept under stricter Jordanian control.

The Fatah leader in Jordan, Nasser, who had been the driving force behind the agreement, spent the rest of the day seeing off the delegations at Cairo airport. He then went home, where he collapsed and died of a heart attack in the early hours of 28 September. His successor in Jordan would be Yasser Arafat.

The October War & Its Aftermath

The year 1970 saw the ascension of new leaders in both Egypt and Syria: Anwar Sadat and Hafez al-Assad respectively. The decade also began with the last remnants of colonial rule departing from the Middle East when the British, in late 1971, pulled out of the Gulf.

Preparations were also well under way for the next Middle Eastern war. The Arab states were constantly under pressure from their citizens to reclaim the land lost in 1967. In Egypt, Sadat felt the political need to emerge from Nasser's shadow. In Syria, Assad needed a war to counter the charge that as defence minister in 1967 he had been responsible for the loss of the Golan Heights.

The war began on 6 October 1973, when Egyptian troops crossed the Suez Canal, taking Israel almost entirely by surprise. After advancing a short distance into Sinai, however, the Egyptian army stopped, giving Israel the opportunity to concentrate its forces against the Syrians on the Golan Heights and then to turn back towards Egypt. When the war ended in late 1973 the Israelis actually occupied more land than they had when it began. Months of shuttle diplomacy by the US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, followed. This produced a set of disengagement agreements under which Israel withdrew from some of the territory it had occupied...
their fortunes in the oil states (including Iraq where, in the late '80s, over a million Egyptians were working).

This further increased the Gulf's political clout. Poorer Arab governments, dependent on the oil dollars from those states, found themselves increasingly having to deal with the Gulf rulers in general and the Saudis in particular.

Peace & Revolution

Anwar Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem in 1977 opened the way for an Egyptian-Israeli peace process which culminated, in March 1979, with the signing of a peace treaty between the two countries. As Sadat and Israel's prime minister, Menachem Begin, signed the treaty in Washington, Arab leaders meeting in Baghdad vowed to expel Egypt from the Arab League. All but two Arab countries (Syria and Oman) broke off diplomatic relations with Egypt.

Meanwhile, one of the few friends Sadat had left in the region had troubles of his own. Discontent with the Shah of Iran's autocratic rule and his personal disregard for his country's Shiite Muslim religious traditions had been simmering for years. Political violence slowly increased throughout 1978. The turning point came in September of that year, when Iranian police fired on anti-shah demonstrators in Tehran, killing at least 300. The momentum of the protests quickly became unstoppable.

On 16 January 1979 the shah left Iran, never to return (he died in Egypt in 1980). The interim government set up after his departure was swept aside the following month when the revolution's leaders forced the hitherto obscure Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returned to Tehran from his exile in France.

After the Revolution

Iran's Islamic Revolution seemed to change everything in the Middle East. In a period of instability which lasted until nearly the end of the '80s.

In 1979 militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca – Islam's holiest site – and were only ejected several weeks later after bloody gun battles inside the mosque itself. In November of that year student militants in Tehran overran the US embassy, taking the staff there hostage. In 1980 Turkey's government was overthrown in a military coup, capping weeks of violence between left and right-wing extremists. Further east, Iraq invaded Iran, launching what would become the longest, bloodiest and, arguably, most pointless war in modern history.

Tensions escalated yet again in 1981 when President Sadat of Egypt was assassinated by Muslim militants. The following year Israel invaded Lebanon, further fueling the cycle of chaos and destruction that had gripped the country since 1975.

Lebanon's confessional system of government, under which the president was always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim and the foreign minister a Greek Orthodox Christian, was based on a census conducted by the French in the '20s and an unwritten agreement among the country's political leaders in the years immediately after WWI. It collapsed under the weight of demographic changes that made the Muslim communities more populous, and the tensions that came with playing host to a large, poor and disenfranchised community of Palestinian refugees including, after 1970, most of the Palestinian guerrilla forces. The latter established a state within a state in southern Lebanon and their raids into Israel prompted frequent Israeli reprisals across the border.

Over the 15 years of Lebanon's civil war an extraordinary cast of foreign characters intervened on one side or another (in some cases switching sides as time went on): the USA, Britain, France, Iran, Iraq, Israel and Syria all got deeply involved in the Lebanese mess at one time or another. In the early and mid-80s Lebanon became a depressing metaphor for the entire region. By the end of the decade it had become so violent and so dangerous that few foreigners dared venture there. The fighting in Lebanon only limped to a close in late 1990 when Syria moved in to put an end to it with the tacit approval of the USA.

Still, there were occasional bright spots. Turkey returned to democratic rule in 1983, albeit with a new constitution barring from public office anyone who had been involved in politics prior to the 1980 coup. In 1985 the Israelis withdrew from most of Lebanon. In 1988 Iran and Iraq grudgingly agreed to a cease-fire. The following year Egypt was readmitted to the Arab League and Jordan held its first elections in more than 20 years.

The 1990s

The Gulf War

On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait. Within days King Fahd of Saudi Arabia had asked the USA to send troops to defend his country against a possible Iraqi attack. The result was Operation Desert Shield, a US-led coalition in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf which eventually involved over 500,000 troops. On 17 January 1991 the coalition launched Operation Desert Storm to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, a goal which was accomplished after a six week bombing campaign and a four day ground offensive.

In late 1990, while attempting to solicit Arab support for the anti-Iraq coalition, US President George Bush promised to make a new effort to achieve an Arab-Israeli peace once the Iraqis were out of Kuwait. After the war Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, embarked on a tortuous series of shuttle diplomacy around the region in an attempt to convene a Middle East peace conference.

Israel-PLO Peace Agreement

The conference took place in Madrid at the end of October 1991. It was followed by nearly two years of relatively fruitless bilateral negotiations between the Israelis on the one hand and Jordan, the Palestinians, Lebanon and Syria on the other.

In the late summer of 1993, with the negotiations stalled and seemingly on the verge of breaking down, it was revealed that Israel and the PLO had been holding secret talks in Norway for 18 months and that they were now ready to sign the outline of a peace agreement and to recognise each other. When the agreements were signed a few weeks later, extremists on both sides howled in protest. Egypt, feeling vindicated 14 years after signing its own peace treaty with Israel, applauded loudly. The rest of the Arab world maintained a guarded silence. Another round of Israeli-PLO talks in late 1993 and early 1994 led to an agreement which would allow Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank town of Jericho in May 1994.

Jordan, after some initial hesitation, used the Israel-PLO agreements as an excuse to move forward in its own peace talks with the Israelis. On 26 October 1994 Jordan became the second Arab country to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel. Talks between Israel and Syria did not go as well, and continued off-and-on from 1993 through 1996.

On 4 November 1995 Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated as he left a peace rally in Tel Aviv. Israelis were stunned to learn that the lone gunman was not an Arab but a Jew – a law student who objected to the Robin government's policy of handing back territory to the Palestinians. Unrepentant, the assassin said he had hoped Rabin's murder would stop the peace process in its tracks. As it was the peace process eventually moved forward with renewed vigour under the leadership of Rabin's successor Shimon Peres, until in February 1996 a series of four suicide bombings by Palestinian militant left more than 60 Israelis dead.

The response from the international community showed just how much things had changed in the Middle East during the '90s. On 13 March 1996 a one day summit meeting took place in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh with the aim of reinvigorating the peace process. It was attended by the presidents of the USA and Russia, by most of Europe's heads of government, and by Israel's prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and the kings of Jordan and Morocco. More significantly, the meeting was also attended by representatives of all of the Gulf States, by the president of Yemen and the foreign ministers of Algeria and Tunisia. The summit represented the first public contact between
many Arab governments and Israel. However, the Israeli people remained unconfident of the future prospects of peace and two months later voted in Binyamin Netanyahu as the new prime minister, brightening candidate who advocated tougher policies towards the Palestinians. Since that time, relations between Netanyahu's Israel and the Arab world have remained at a low ebb.}

**The Arab-Israeli Conflict**

There are Arabs who claim that God gave the land to the Jews and, therefore, it would be blasphemous to surrender a millimetre of it. There are Arab who equate Israel with the Crusader States of the Middle Ages and view its destruction as a religious duty, saying it represents an infidel invasion of the sacred lands of Islam.

These are, of course, extreme examples, but they serve to illustrate the depth of the feelings and animosities born of nearly a century of conflict between Arabs and Jews over the hills of land traditionally known as Palestine.

Zionism has its roots in 19th-century Europe (thus the Arab claim that Israel is little more than a relic of the colonial era). Though the idea of a Jewish state did not originate with Zionists, Herz's 1896 book, *Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), spelled out the case for establishing a Jewish homeland, and the following year he organized the first International Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. The Congress' final resolution stated that Zionism is the establishment for the Jewish people of a home in Palestine guaranteed by public law.

In November 1917 the British Cabinet, in a statement known as the Balfour Declaration, gave the green light to the idea of a Jewish home in Palestine. When Britain took control of Palestine near the end of WWI Zionists hoped that the declaration would serve as a licence for unrestricted Jewish immigration. These hopes were dashed when, after the arrival of Jewish immigrants under Balfour, British administrators put limits on Jewish immigration, a policy which was continued throughout the British Mandatory Period.

In February 1947 the British, despairing of ever reconciling Arab and Jewish claims and far more concerned with the requirements of their own withdrawal from the region, announced that they would withdraw from Palestine the following year and turned the problem over to the United Nations. On November 29, 1947 the UN voted to partition Palestine into an Arab and Jewish state and to turn the city of Jerusalem into an international city. The Jews were pleased with the plan, the Arabs, however reluctantly, accepted it while the British rejected it out of hand. When Britain withdrew in 1948, the formal partition lines quickly came to mean nothing; Jewish forces sought to gain control of as much of Palestine as possible and combined armed forces of Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon (along with smaller contingents from Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia) to wipe out Jewish settlements in the hills and valleys of Palestine.

The 1949 armistice agreements which ended Israel's War of Independence, effectively defined the boundaries of the Jewish state's borders for the next 18 years. The only portions of historical Palestine left in the palms of the Israeli Army were the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank, which was occupied, and later annexed, by the Jordanians. By the time of the Six Day Crisis in 1967 the basic elements which defined the Arab-Israeli conflict for the next 35 years were in place; Israel, in control of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and much of the Jordan Valley, was in a position of strength and was determined to expand its territory. In 1967 the international community was forced to recognize that Israel had won a war which was only a prelude to the conflict which was to come.

In such an explosive situation no event or gesture, however seemingly innocuous, managed to remain devoid of political content. The combination of time, physical separation and an unbridled propaganda on both sides led many Arabs and Israelis to develop somewhat cartoon-like images of each other.

The 1991 Gulf War changed the strategic equilibrium in the region by leaving both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict weakened and ready to reach out for peace. But the arduous nature of the negotiations that followed meant that peace would not come easily. A statement by Israel's president Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran had begun to make tentative overtures to the outside world. After the death, in June 1989, of Rafsanjani had emerged as the Iran & the West Meanwhile, under President Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran had begun to make tentative overtures to the outside world. After the death, in June 1989, of Rafsanjani had emerged as the
country's political leader. In June 1993 he was elected to a second term as president - though with a much smaller margin of victory than had been expected - on a platform promising economic reform.

Though much of the fervour of the 1979 revolution has dissipated, Iran's relations with the west in the mid-90s continued to be awkward. Iranian leaders have refused to revive Ayatollah Khominei's 1989 call for the murder of the British writer Salman Rushdie, and they have been accused by the USA of trying to build an atomic bomb. Other western countries refused to join the Americans when they imposed an embargo on trade with Iran in 1995, but few have rushed to embrace the Iranians either.

Turkish Elections In April 1993 Turkey's president, Turgut Özal, who had shepherd the country's return to democracy as prime minister and, later, as president, died. Özal's long-time rival Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel became Turkey's new president. Demirel's successor as prime minister was Tansu Çiller, the first woman to head the government of a Muslim Middle Eastern country.

Çiller sought to deepen Turkey's ties with Europe and the west, pressing for a free trade agreement with the European Union. But many in Europe remained wary of Turkey because of its mixed human rights record. An offensive against Kurdish rebels in the country's south-east in the summer of 1993 tarnished Turkey's reputation in the west, while undermining Çiller's coalition government at home. Part of her problem was that while many in the west thought she had gone too far, some of her supporters at home, including some in the military, thought the drive against the rebels had not been carried far enough.

Çiller's government fell in late 1995 and elections in December of that year produced no clear winner. The Islamist-oriented Welfare Party emerged from the poll with the largest share of the votes (just over 20%). After several months of negotiations, Çiller's True Path Party agreed to a coalition with the Motherland Party, until then its arch-rival, designed largely to keep the Welfare Party out of government. The new alliance, led by Çiller's long-time rival Meisul Demirel, lasted only a few months. In the summer of 1996 the government fell, and President Demirel was left with little choice but to offer a Welfare Party leader Necmettin Erbakan the prime ministership. Erbakan negotiated a coalition agreement with Çiller (something he had previously said he would never do) and Atatürk's secular republic began its first experiment with a religiously oriented government.

**GEOGRAPHY**

The Middle East is a somewhat vaguely defined area where the three continents of the Old World meet. The region could essentially be defined as south-west Asia, but because present international borders and age-old cultural exchanges draw Turkey and Egypt into the picture, Europe and Africa are also included. The shores of the Mediterranean, Black, Caspian, Arabian and Red seas and the Caucasus Mountains form natural boundaries. The core of the Middle East consists of the Arabian peninsula and the Levant, with Iran and, arguably, Afghanistan forming the eastern part of the region.

Topographically the area is extremely varied. Many people immediately visualise sand dunes on hearing the name of the region, but sand deserts form only a tiny percentage of the whole area. They are mainly to be found in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and even in those countries rocky plains are much more common. Mountains and high plateaux abound in many countries: in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and Yemen much of the area lies above 1000m.

If the western Himalayas and the Hindu Kush of Afghanistan, with their 6000 to 7000m high peaks, are not counted; the highest mountains in the Middle East include the 5671m high Kûh-e Damavand in Iran, the 5165m high Ararat in Turkey and the 3700m high Jebel an-Nabi Shu'ayb in Yemen.

The biggest rivers in the area include the Nile, bringing African waters through Egypt, and the Euphrates and Tigris, flowing from the Anatolian highlands through Iraq to the Persian Gulf. Otherwise, with the exception of those in Turkey and north-western Iran, rivers flowing all year round and reaching the sea are a rarity in the region, due to the arid climate.

**CLIMATE**

Most of the Middle East is arid or semi-arid, including the greater part of the Arabian peninsula and Egypt, most of Jordan, Iraq and Iran, and Afghanistan. In many regions annual rainfall hardly reaches 100mm. Most of Egypt, south-eastern Saudi Arabia and western Oman are extremely arid, with years often passing without rain: Dakhî-ê Kûvîr or the Great Salt Desert of Iran, is the largest area in the world with absolutely no vegetation. However, mountains ridges and two separate moist climate systems guarantee that considerable variation occurs within most of the countries.

The coastal lands of Turkey, Syria and Lebanon all get an ample amount of rain from the Mediterranean system. So do north-eastern Iraq and north-western Iran, where a narrow slip of this type of climate extends from the Black Sea, along the western Agros Mountains, all the way to Khat-ezîn and beyond, bringing cyclonic rains in winter. Annual rainfall can reach 600mm in some areas, while in others it can even go up to 2000mm per year. Further south there tends to be less rain, although southernmost Arabia and, occasionally, south-eastern Iran are affected by the Indian monsoon system; in the mountains of Iran annual rainfall can exceed 2000mm.

Temperatures vary wildly depending on the time of year and location. The low-lying coastlands of the Red Sea, Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf are hot to the extreme throughout the year, with humidity continually exceeding 70%. Expect daytime temperatures between 40°C and 30°C during the summer, and way above 30°C in the winter, with nights not much cooler. Along the southern coasts of the Black and Caspian seas the mild climate resembles that of Central Europe.

On the other hand, temperatures drop consistently with the altitude. The rule of thumb is that for every 100m of ascent the temperature drops by 0.5°C to 0.7°C. Still, many high plateaus are quite hot during the summer days but freezing cold at night.

Mountains with snow caps are to be seen in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and even as far south as Lebanon and northern Israel. Winters are regularly snowy in the non-arid highlands of Turkey and Iran, and in the coldest winters it may very occasionally snow as far south as the mountains of Yemen. In the highlands of Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan you'll need extremely warm clothing in winter, which can be frosty.

**ECOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT**

The Middle East straddles the environmental dilemma. Until the 1960s many countries in the region had economies based completely on recyclable materials. No waste existed. Everything was usable and anything that was thrown away was immediately absorbed in a process of natural circulation. Since then, the region has wholly embraced the pre-packaged, throw-away ethos. But unfortunately, the modern synthetic, waste often continues to be treated as though it were organic and is disposed of indiscriminately.

One of the worst things that could have happened to the region is plastic. It's not just the cities; even tracks in the depths of the wilderness are usually marked out by a trail of snagged polythene bags. As a result, the Bedouin have left their garbage behind them to be reclaimed by the desert. But that way of life presupposes a society based on communities of people who continually moved around and were in harmony with their surroundings.

Any such harmony has long since disappeared and the catalogue of environmental discard is ever increasing. Migrating birds...
are being killed in massive numbers while en route from Europe to Africa; waterfowl are hunted in protected wetlands breeding areas; and ivory and other illegal animal products are traded in shops. The coral reefs of the Red Sea are under enormous threat from irresponsible tourism and opportunistic development. Fresh water lakes are being poisoned by industrial and agricultural toxins. Air pollution in some cities is so thick that it is eating away at the antiquities.

The traditional excuse has been that the cash-strapped countries of the region do not have the financial resources necessary to combat pollution or to police protected species; but many governments are waking up to the realization that, in the long run, it makes greater economic sense to invest in environmental protection. Egyptian TV, for example, regularly screens government information programmes aimed at educating people in environmental matters, while Yemen has undertaken the development of modern waste-disposal systems.

Oman’s government, undeniably one of region’s greenest, runs a breeding centre for endangered species, such as the Arabian oryx, Arabian leopard and houbara, at Bait al-Barakah, west of Muscat. It has also set aside an area around Ras al-Hadd as a protected breeding ground for giant sea turtles.

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Even leaving aside the matter of Israel and the widely unloved Iran, the countries of the Middle East are far from being a homogeneous bunch. Territorial disputes and rival claims on water rights, as well as ideological clashes, not always of the wedges driven in by external influences, have all combined to ensure that the post-colonial notion of a powerful Pan-Arab union has rarely ever looked like becoming reality.

The Pan-Arab dream has its origins in 1945 with the convening of the Arab League of Nations, which brought together in a proposed political and economic union the seven independent Arab states of the time (Egypt, Lebanon, Transjordan, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen). Although the League has since seen some 21 members, the unified front the organisation aimed to present has constantly been undermined by internal dissension and the extent to which the whole idea of a political merging in the Arab world has been completely discarded.

In 1979 Egypt, home of the Arab League, was itself ostracised from the organisation after signing a peace treaty with Israel at Camp David. Respectability has since, to some extent, been restored but the downgrading of Egypt now vies for the mantle of regional superpower with Jordan and Syria.

Relations between the three, especially between Jordan and Syria, have traditionally been, at best, lukewarm, although there has been some thawing recently in the face of Israel’s and/or Syria’s anti-Arabic orientation.

Facts about the Region

The Middle East oil industry got its start in Persia (modern Iran), where oil was found in commercial quantities in 1908. The next major strikes were in the Kurdist region of northern Iraq in 1927 and in Bahrain in 1932. By the time WW II broke out in Europe, the Middle East in general, and the Gulf in particular, was known to contain some of the richest oil fields on earth.

Today oil is the economic mainstay of Iraq, Iran and all of the Gulf States. It is also an important source of income for Egypt, Yemen and Syria. Many of the region’s countries which do not possess oil remain indirectly dependent upon it in the form of remittances sent home by people working in the oil states. Jordan and the West Bank are the two most obvious examples of areas dependent on such remittances, but Egypt, Lebanon and Yemen also benefit to some degree.

The oil states derive substantial income from the investment of portions of their oil and oil-related (refining and petrochemical industry) revenues in the western...
The only countries which have neither oil of their own in significant quantities nor large numbers of their citizens working in the oil states are Israel and Turkey.

**Development Aid**

Some poorer Middle Eastern countries also depend heavily on development aid to prop up their economies. Israel and Yemen are the two largest recipients of US foreign aid, between them accounting for over 40% of Washington's total foreign assistance budget. Egypt, Yemen and Jordan also receive large sums of aid from the EU. Syria's economic crisis has been exacerbated by the loss of the generous subsidies it used to receive from the Soviet Union.

The oil states – particularly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Abu Dhabi (the largest of the sheikhdoms which make up the UAE) – are also large aid donors, though the substantial sums of money they use to transfer to development projects in Jordan, Yemen and Sudan have been cut off or sharply curtailed since those countries sided with Iraq after Baghdad's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. The Gulf States tend to channel their aid toward Muslim countries.

**Trade & Services**

The region's history as a trading centre is also reflected in today's economies. Services – particularly ports and shipping – are a major factor in many Middle Eastern economic equations, though none of the region's ports are as big as those of Singapore, Antwerp or Rotterdam.

Jebel Ali at Dubai in the UAE is the largest artificial port in the world and probably the Middle East's most active duty-free zone. In the Suez Canal the Egyptians have one of the world's key shipping channels, as well as a major source of currency in the form of tolls, services and the takings from sales in the Port Said duty-free area.

**Agriculture & Industry**

Egypt and Turkey – the two largest countries in the region by population – are also among the most economically diverse. Services (including their tourism industries) account for about half of all economic activity in both countries, and agriculture, though its share has declined in recent decades, still claims around 20% of total output. Agriculture is also a significant element of the economy in Jordan, Israel and on the West Bank. Both also have active, if slightly creaky, industrial and manufacturing bases.

The region's other genuinely diverse economy belongs to Israel. Decades of political isolation led the Jewish state to develop a variety of industries – especially in defence and dual-use fields – found in few other small countries.

**Military Spending**

However, the region's overall economic health is another matter entirely. It has often been said that the Middle East is potentially one of the richest regions of the world. The problem is the way the money is used. Iraq, blessed with lots of oil, a relatively temperate climate and good agricultural land, has wasted mind-boggling sums of money on weapons and the construction of a stifling police state.

Throughout the region military spending has sucked up an enormous amount of national wealth. In some cases, such as Israel, the threat to national security are real. In others, Egypt and Syria for example, an entrenched military elite has objected to any attempt to scale back its privileges as regional tensions have eased. Some of the Gulf States, whose armed forces are dominated by members of the ruling families, have developed a fascination with high-tech weapons that has more to do with ideas of status than with ideas of defence.

**Future Challenges**

Reform and modernisation of their ageing industrial bases has been a political (and financial) problem for both Egypt and Turkey. In Egypt the situation has been complicated by the lingering on of the Soviet-style economy that Nasser bequeathed to the country.

Iran and the Gulf, with their economic fortunes so closely tied to the price of oil, have also been subject to periodic economic ups and downs. All of the oil-producing countries have reported huge profits from the UN embargo on oil sales by Iraq that was imposed in 1990. When Iraq comes back on line the price of oil is likely to drop sharply, at least for a while – a prospect that worries the other producers, particularly since the price of oil was relatively low throughout the mid-90s.

The extent to which the oil producers have prepared for the day when oil runs out varies. Oman, with limited resources, has worked hard to broaden its economic base and wean itself from the foreign labour that dominates the other Gulf States. Many other Gulf countries have talked about economic diversification and the ´localisation´ of their workforces, but to little obvious effect. When the oil comes back on line the Gulf economy will be felt region-wide as remittances from foreign workers and development aid from the oil states drop off.

That day, however, may be further away than some people think. Oil and gas resources in the Gulf remain extensive.

Rasr, and in some ways more precious, is water. Water resources throughout the region are stretched to their capacity and beyond. Examples of potential flashpoints abound: rights to the ground water underneath the West Bank have proven to be one of the most difficult issues for Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate; Syria and Iraq have protested to Turkey over that country's building of dams at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; and Egypt has threatened military action against Sudan or any other upstream country that endangers its access to the waters of the Nile. Saudi Arabia will run out of the ground water that fuels its vast agricultural programme long before it runs out of oil. In the coming years the politics and economics of water may prove to be as interesting, and as crucial to the region, as oil has been for the last two generations.

**POPULATION & PEOPLE**

The most populous countries in the Middle
36 Facts about the Region

East are Turkey, Egypt and Iran, each with approximately 60 million inhabitants. The remaining countries have a combined population of 100 million: the smallest -- Bahrain and Qatar -- have only about half a million inhabitants each.

The people of the Middle East are descendants of those who built many ancient civilisations. While the Turks, Persians and Afghans are distinctive groups, with their own countries, customs and even languages, for Arabs the picture is less clear. Most of the Arab world's links with its pre-Islamic past have been broken over the centuries, and present-day Iraqis or Egyptians, for example, identify more closely with the all-embracing, but rather abstract, Arab Nation than with Mesopotamia or Pharaonic Egypt.

Arabs

- Exactly who are the Arabs? All people speaking Arabic, or only the residents of the Arabian peninsula?
- Fourteen centuries ago, only the nomadic tribes wandering between the Tigris and Euphrates and the Central Asian exposed to Arab cultural influences. Not all the Arabs are speaking Arabic, or only the residents of the Arabian peninsula?
- The term "Arab" comes to apply two groups: in addition to the original nomadic Arabs, the settled inhabitants of these newly conquered provinces became known as Arabs when they adopted the language.
- However, as late as the 19th century it was often remarked that Egyptians were not really Arabs. It was only in the 20th century that rising Arab nationalism legitimised the current usage.

Tribes

The basic structure of Arab society has always been formed by families, extended families and tribes. Both wandering nomads and settled farmers divide into tribes and subtribes, the latter occupying a more or less strictly defined territory. In the case of an unresolvable conflict with another tribe, it is the sheikh who is responsible for recruiting an army and organising and leading the battle against the aggressor. His power is not absolute, however; a new election may be held if he doesn't live up to expectations.

The Persians, or Parsis, retained their own language even though they were among the first to adopt the new religion and welcomed the Arabic script for writing Persian. Nevertheless, almost half the Iranian population is comprised of minority ethnic groups. The Turkish-speaking Azeris form the largest minority, with significant numbers also of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens.

In the north, too, Byzantium was strong enough to resist Islam for several centuries, and the Turks kept their own language even after conversion to Islam. During the 400 year Ottoman Empire, when the Turks ruled most of the Middle East, they became known as the Shinmaliya, or Northerners, throughout the Arab world.

Kurds

The Kurds must be some of the most famous landless people of the time. Numbering an estimated 25 million people (most of them having scattered all over the world from their home mountains in eastern Turkey and Syria, northern Iraq and north-western Iran) these blue-eyed or green-eyed Sunni Muslims have a language of their own. Persecuted in turn by Turks, Iraqis, Syrians and Iranians over the centuries and betrayed by superpowers negotiating local solutions over their heads, they have adopted the motto "The Kurds have no friends". Even today it seems that they will continue to exist as the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of its own.

Data on the numbers of Kurds within Middle Eastern countries vary, but Iraq, Iran and Turkey have around three million each, while Syria has about one million. Exact numbers are difficult to get, as many members of the population seem to be constantly on the move, fleeing whichever country is currently oppressing them most.

The Bedouin

The most well-regarded group of Arabs are those who are Bedouin, or nomads. While not all the Bedouin are nomadic, the majority are, and Bedouin culture is closely tied to the nomadic way of life. The Bedouin are highly mobile, often living in tents or yurts that can be easily dismantled and transported. Their diet is primarily based on camel and goat milk, as well as dates and other desert fruits. While some Bedouin do engage in farming or herding, many prefer a nomadic lifestyle that allows them to roam freely and maintain a close connection with the natural world. The Bedouin are known for their hospitality, generosity, and strong sense of community. They are highly respected for their skills in survival and navigation, as well as their unique musical and cultural traditions. While the Bedouin have been influenced by modernity in recent years, many continue to maintain their traditional way of life, and are viewed as symbols of the resilience and endurance of the Arab people.
artists that have been able to reconcile these mediums with their heritage, and all too often the results rely heavily on ill-appropriated European models.

In the areas of calligraphy, metalwork, ceramics, glass, carpets and textiles, however, Islamic art has a cultural heritage of unsurpassable richness – one that, in turn, has had great influence on the West. Middle Eastern artisans and craftspeople (Armenians, Christians and Jews as well as Muslims) have for over 1200 years applied complex and sumptuous decorations to often very practical objects to create items of extraordinary beauty. Plenty of such items are on view in the region’s museums such as the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul or the Islamic Museum in Cairo; but to appreciate the achievements of Islamic art it is only necessary to visit one of the older mosques in which tiling, wood carving, inlaid paneling and calligraphy are often combined in exaltation of Allah. Islamic art is, for a Muslim, foremost an expression of faith.

Architecture

Ancient monuments aside, the most striking artistic heritage of the Middle East is its architecture, particularly that which developed after the coming of Islam. The earliest construction efforts inherited much from Byzantine models, but with the spread of the Muslim domain various styles soon developed, each influenced by local artists’ tastes. The vocabulary of Islamic architecture quickly became very sophisticated and expressive, reaching its apotheosis under the Maranak (1250 to 1517). A military dynasty of former slaves ruling out of Egypt, the Maranaks were great patrons of the arts and built magnificent mosques, madrasas (theological schools), khans (monasteries) and mausoleum complexes. Their buildings are characterized by the red and white bands of stone (a technique known as ablag) and by the elaborate carvings and patterning around windows and in the recessed portals. The best examples of their patronage are found in Cairo but impressive Maranak monuments also remain in Damascus and Jerusalem.

The Manlaks were eventually defeated by the Ottoman Turks who followed up their military gains with an equally expansive campaign of construction. Designed on the basic principle of a dome on a square, and instantly recognizable by their slim pencil-shaped minarets, Ottoman mosques can be found throughout Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The most impressive monuments of this era, however, were built at the heart of the empire – the Suleymaniye in Istanbul and the Selimiye Mosque at Edirne. Both are the work of the Turkish master architect Sinan. And of the non-Gulf regions of the Middle East, Persia was the one area that did not fall to the Turks. The Persian Safavid dynasty proved strong enough to hold the Ottomans at bay and thus Iran, and neighbouring Afghanistan, have a very different architectural tradition to anywhere else in the Middle East. Persian architecture has its roots not in Byzantium/Constantinople, but in the east with the Mongols who swept down from Central Asia. Their grand buildings are much simpler in form but made startling by the sumptuous use of cobalt blue and turquoise tiling which often covers every available surface.

See also the Arts section in the Yemen chapter for background information on that country’s unique vernacular architecture.

Literature

Poetry has always been the pre-eminent literary form in the Middle East and all the best known figures of classical Arabic and Persian literature are poets – men regarded as possessing knowledge forbidden to ordinary people, supposedly acquired from demons. The favourite demon seems to have been alcohol. Abu Nuwas, faithful companion to the 8th-century Baghdad caliph Harun ar-Rashid, and a rather debauched fellow, left behind countless odes to the wonders of wine, as did the Persian Omar Khayyam, famed 11th-century composer of the rubaiyat. (The current Iranian regime now prefers to celebrate Khayyam for his work as a mathematician.)

Arab literature in the form of novels and short stories has its origins only in the 20th century. An increased exposure to European influences, combined with nascent Arab nationalism in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's disintegration, led to the first stirrings. While, broadly speaking, it could be said that it has been the Egyptians, Lebanese and, to a lesser extent, the Palestinians who have dominated the scene, it's an unquestionable fact that the single most important Arabic fiction writer of this century is Naguib Mahfouz.

A life-long native of Cairo, Mahfouz began writing in the 1930s. Since then he has done much to free Arab literature from its western roots and origins and infuse the medium with a unique regional voice, inspired heavily by the traditional Middle Eastern art of storytelling. His achievements

The Thousand and One Nights

After the tale of Aladdin, The Thousand and One Nights (in Arabic, Alf Layla wa Layla); also called Arabian Nights, must be one of the most familiar, while at the same time unread, books in the English language. It owes its existence in the popular consciousness almost wholly to the 1940s Disney adaptation Arabian Nights and Sinbad and Ali Baba & the 40 Thieves that appear in children's books, cartoon films and Christmas pantomimes.

The actual text is largely interpreted as being significant in that it is most famous English-language edition (that translated by the Victorian adventurer Sir Richard Burton), it ran to 16 volumes. In fact, an old Middle Eastern superstition has it that nobody can read the whole text of The Nights without dying.

But what constitutes the whole text is a matter of academic debate. The Thousand and One Nights is a portmanteau title for a mixed bag of colourful and fantastical tales, the famed story cycle containing hundreds of thousands of stories, sharing a core of exactly 271 common tales. They all, however, employ the same framing device – that of a succession of stories related nightly by the witty Sheherazade to save her neck from the tyrannical King Shahryar.

Sheherazade and her tales have their origins in pre-Islamic Persia, but over the ages (and in endless retellings and revivals) they were adapted, expanded and updated, drawing on sources as far flung as Greece and India. As they are known to us now, the stories are mainly set in the semi-fabled Baghdad of Harun ar-Rashid (reigned 768 to 809 AD) and in Maranak and Cairo and Damascus. According to the last two classic interpretations of the Nights provides a wealth of riches for the historian, the details and prices of slaves, to vivid descriptions of the types and practices of assorted conjurors, harlots, thieves and mystics. The Thousand and One Nights is revered as much by medieval scholars as it is by Walt's animators.
40 Facts about the Region

were recognised internationally with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. Much of his work is available in English-language translations—look out particularly for his Cairo Trilogy; the haunting Minamur, set in Alexandria, and Arabian Nights & Days which takes up where The Thousand and One Nights left off.

Unfortunately, mainstream publishers in the west seem content to leave Arab literature with Mahmoud, and other excellent Egyptian writers, such as Yusuf Idris and Tawfiq Hakim, are available to an English-speaking audience only through small local publishers such as the American University Press (see the Egypt chapter or email them at micro@au.edu.eg). An exception is Nawal el-Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist well known in the west, with several books available in English-language editions (Fall of the Islam and Death of an Ex-Minister are two of the most widely available titles).

Also Cairo, Beirut is the other literary capital of the Middle East. As well as being the focus of Lebanese literary life, it has been the refuge of Syrian writers escaping their own repressive regime and of refugee Palestinians. Of the latter category Laila Elwi, who died in Beirut after the Israelis captured her home town of Tripoli, near Jerusalem, in 1967, has two books available in English (The Eye of the Mirror and the short story collection, A Balcony over the Fakhran, both of which draw heavily on her first-hand experiences of upheaval.

Of the native Lebanese writers, the best represented in translation is Hanan al-Shaykh, who writes extremely poignant but hilarious novels (Bedia Blues, The Story of Zahr and Women of Sand and Myrrh) that resonate beyond the bounds of the Middle East.

See also Books in the Regional Facts for the Visitor chapter for Amin Maalouf and Abdif Souf. For Jewish Israeli literature see the Israel & the Palestinian Territories chapter.

Music

Unlike literature which is a take it or leave it affair, in the Arab countries of the Middle East there is no getting away from music. It's impossible to walk in the street, in the evening, without hearing music. The most widespread and popular style of music focuses on a star performer backed by anything from a small quartet to a full-blown orchestra. The all-time voice of classical Arabic music is unquestionably Um Kulthum, an Egyptian-born songstress—her wholesale adoration is one of the few truly unifying factors in the Arab world. She died in 1975, but backed by the Middle Eastern Orchestra, her songs are still ubiquitous on radio and TV, and an Um Kulthum cassette remains an essential part of a taxi driver's accessory kit. Her male counterparts were Abdel Halim Hafez and Fareed al-Atrash, both of whom are also now dead, but continue to sell in vast quantities.

After Egypt, Lebanon is the other great centre of classical Arab music. The Lebanese singer Fairuz is currently the Arab world superstar. For anyone with untrained ears who hears all Arabic music as wailing, her exposure to Fairuz may be the thing that brings on a change of attitude.

The kind of orchestras that backs such a singer is a curious cross-fertilisation of east and west, with such instruments as the reed pipe, oud (lute), tambourine and tabla (small hand-held drum) contributing the oriental element. There's also classical instrumental music, involving one or more of the traditional Arab instruments, especially the oud and tabla. Among the better performers is Munir Bechir, an oud player whose recordings are occasionally available in the west.

Distinct from the classical style, the Arab world also has its own particular fashion of pop music. Groups are largely unknown and, again, the vocal is the thing, delivered by a star artist over a clattering, handclapping rhythm embroidered with synthesised twirlings. There are confusingly few musical books, the words are numbingly repetitive (the word habibi, meaning 'my love' or 'my darling', seems to form the bulk of most lyrics), and the volume is usually LOUD. Even so, you had better learn to like it because once it gets inside your head there's no getting it out again.

For further reading see the Israel & the Palestinian Territories chapter.

REXILIGION

The Middle East is the birthplace of the three big monotheistic religions of the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The followers of all of these religions worship the same God; the main difference among them being their understanding of when the revelations from God ceased to flow unto earth. While Judaism adheres to the Old Testament, Christianity in addition follows the teachings of the New Testament, and the Muslims' holiest book is the Qur'an which, according to their belief, contains the final revelation of God, covering the points not made clear by earlier prophets.

Islam

Islam was founded in the early 7th century by the Prophet Mohammed, born around 570 AD in Mecca. Mohammed got his first revelation at about the age of 40, in the form of a voice commanding him to 'Recite'. The voice, according to Mohammed, belonged to the archangel Gabriel, who revealed to him the words of God.

The revelations continued for the rest of Mohammed's life, and the oral recitations were, during and after his lifetime, written down in the Qur'an (the name meaning literally 'recitation'), the book which came to establish the form of written Arabic for centuries. To this day not one dot has been changed in the holy Qur'an— the speech of God—and foreign translations are never definitive, merely introductory.

Mohammed's teachings were not an immediate success. He started preaching in 613, three years after the first revelation, but could only attract a few dozen followers. Having attacked the ways of Meccan life—especially the worship of a wealth of idols—he also made many enemies. In 622 he and his followers retreated to Medina, an oasis town some 360 km from Mecca. It is this hijra, or migration, that marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

In Medina Mohammed quickly became a successful religious, political and military leader. After several clashes with the Meccans—he finally gathered 10,000 troops and conquered his home town, demolishing the idols worshipped by the population and establishing the one God. In Mohammed's time, Islam was a revolutionary concept that countered existing social inequalities by stating that all Muslims, both men and women, were equal in their submission to God.
Mohammed died in 632, but the new religion continued its rapid spread, reaching all of Arabia by 634, Egypt, Syria and what is now Iraq and western Iran by 642, and most of Iran and Afghanistan by 656. The Jews and Christians in those regions were often discontented with their rulers and welcomed Arab armies as liberators. From the Middle East, the Islamic Empire continued to spread in all directions during subsequent centuries.

The area of present-day Turkey, however, was a tough challenge. Even though the Arabs were at the gates of Constantinople by 674, the Christian Byzantines resisted successfully, and it was only in the 10th and 11th centuries that the Turkish Seljuk tribes converted most of Asia Minor to Islam. Constantinople was not taken until 1453.

Following this period of rapid expansion, the Islamic Empire started a long decline in the 12th century, splitting under various states and foreign overlords. Even then the religion continued to spread, being ousted only from relatively limited areas, mainly in Europe. The Christian Crusaders and the Mongols in the early centuries of this millennium hardly made a dent in Islam’s prevalence in the Middle East.

Sects All big religions have a host of different factions, and Islam is no exception. The major division within Islam stems from a dispute about who should succeed Mohammed, who died with no sons. Competing for power were Abu Bakr, the father of Mohammed’s second wife, Aisha; and Ali, Mohammed’s cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima. Initially, the power was transferred to Abu Bakr, who became the first caliph, or successor, with Ali reluctantly agreeing.

Ali’s sect, the Shiites, got its second chance in 656, when the third caliph, Uthman, from the Umayyad family, was murdered. In the ensuing power struggle Ali was victorious, moving his capital to Kufa (later Najaf, in Iraq), only to be assassinated himself in 661.

The Umayyad dynasty, after defeating Ali’s successor, Hussein, in 680 at Kerbala, rose to rule the vast majority of the Muslim world, marking the start of the Sunni sect. The division between the two sects is evident even today. Sunnis comprise some 90% of the world’s more than 800 million Muslims, but Shiites are close to being a minority of the population in Iraq and constitute a clear majority in Bahrain and Iran. There are also Shiite minorities in almost all Arab countries.

Furthermore, there are numerous subsects within both the Sunni and Shiite sects. The main Sunni schools developed within the first 200 years of Islam: the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali schools are all still active. Saudi Wahhabis are from the Hanbali school, while the rest of Arabians, Egyptians, and Iranian Sunnis follow the Shafi teachings. The Hanafi school is active in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, while the Maliki school is confined to Egypt and other North African countries.

Many Shiite subsects have, at some point in history, stocked to the teachings of a certain caliph or Imam, not recognising his follower. A well-known Shiite sect is the Seveners, or Ismailis, named in the 9th century after Ali’s seventh descendant, Ismail. The Ismailis later split into the Isma’ili and the Twelvers, the latter two of which have survived to this day, with millions of followers in the Middle East, Asia, and East Africa. The leaders of these two lines are the Aga Khan in Iran and the Twelvers in Iraq.

Among other Shiite subsects are the Zaidis of Yemen, stemming from Zayd ibn Ali, a direct descendant of Ali. They recognize only the first Imam, Zayd. The Alawites of Syria are another well-known Shiite subsect, with the Syrian president, Hafiz al-Assad, a prominent member. The mysterious Druzes of Syria, Lebanon, and Israel are sometimes regarded as a Shiite subsect, sometimes as a non-Muslim group.

The Belief Islam is based on the belief of total submission to God, and this principle is very visibly present in the daily life of every Muslim. In fact, the very word Islam literally means ‘submitting’, while ‘Muslim’ means ‘submitter’ to God. The faith is expressed by observances of the five so-called pillars of Islam: the creed, performance of prayer, giving of alms, observance of fasting and performance of pilgrimage.

There is almost a sixth pillar, jihad – or striving in the way of God – which has been much disputed and misunderstood by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. It is often translated as ‘holy war’, and indeed it may mean a holy war against the godless, the unbelievers, as well as an internal struggle against humankind’s basic unholy instincts. But while the later interpretation is much preferred at present, there are always plenty of people who use the word for propagandist purposes of war and disorder. It is for this reason that Islam has gained a reputation as a dangerous religion of fanatics in the eyes of many westerners. However, in its essence Islam is as peaceful a religion as any.

Prayer The ritual of prayer is an essential part of the daily life of a believer. Every Muslim should pray at least five times a day: at sunrise, noon, late afternoon, sunset and night. Five times a day the muezzin calls male believers to the mosque for prayer. It is perfectly permissible to pray at home or elsewhere – only the noon prayer on Friday should be conducted in the mosque. It is the custom that women pray at home, although some mosques have a separate screened-off area for female worshippers.

The act of praying consists of a series of predetermined movements of the body and recitation of prayers and passages of the Qur’an, all designed to express the believer’s absolute humility and God’s sovereignty. First the believer washes himself to show his will to purify himself – there are fountains or ablution pools in mosques for this purpose. Then he goes to the place of prayer, orients himself towards Mecca – the proper orientation is indicated by the alignment of the mosque – and performs one or more rakats, or cycles of prayer, during which he reads certain passages of the Qur’an, prays, bows, and prostrates himself in a different series for each of the day’s five prayer times.

Alms A Muslim should give one-tenth of his yearly revenue to the poor as zakat, or alms; this institution is as essential as prayer. This practice reflects as much the need to ‘purify’ earthly wealth as the individual’s willingness to demonstrate social responsibility.

Previously the giving of alms may have been an act of a more individual nature than it is today, when the institution has developed along lines significantly similar to those used by western welfare states in taking care of their poor. In many Arabic countries, a special ministry of waqfs and
Fasting The ninth month of the lunar year, Ramadan, is the month of fasting. During this month, Muslims abstain from eating, drinking, smoking, and sexual intercourse from sunrise to sunset. Extra prayer and recitation of the Qur'an are encouraged, since the purpose of fasting is to bring people closer to God.

The considerable effort needed to adhere to this rule greatly contributes to each individual's sense of belonging to the Muslim community, since everybody shares this experience at the same time. Fasting has a great influence on the daily routines of any Muslim country too, since during the fast all daily activities are of necessity kept at the lowest possible level. Ramadan is not a detested month, though. In fact, Muslims love it, since fasting during the daylight hours gives them a reason for feasting in the dark. Nights are lively and joyous occasions, many people staying awake all night and sleeping in the afternoon.

Pilgrimage Every Muslim capable of affording it should perform the hajj or pilgrimage, to the holiest of cities, Mecca, at least once in his or her lifetime. The pilgrimage takes place every year during Zul-Hijja, the last month of the Muslim calendar. The reward is considerable: the forgiving of all past sins. It is possible to make the pilgrimage at other times of the year, but the benefits of such an "umrah" or small pilgrimage, are fewer.

Nearly two million Muslims make the hajj each year. The number of pilgrims is restricted by a quota system run by the Saudis, who issue one hajj visa to every 1000 Muslims in any country.

Calendar The Muslim calendar is used side by side with the western Gregorian calendar in most Middle Eastern countries. All religious feasts are celebrated within the framework of the Muslim calendar, while secular activities are planned according to the Christian system, except in Saudi Arabia, where the Muslim calendar is the principal one used, and in Iran, where the Iranian solar calendar is used.

The Muslim year is based on the lunar cycle and is divided into 12 lunar months, each with 29 or 30 days. Consequently, the Muslim year is 11 or 12 days shorter than the Christian solar year, and the Muslim festivals gradually move away from our year, completing the cycle in roughly 33 years.

The religious festivals are attended to with different devotion in different countries: in more secular countries they don't affect you so much, while in more traditional ones you should take them into account when planning your schedule. Immediately after Ramadan, the first four days of the Shawwal month make up the Eid al-Fitr, or Festival of Breaking the Fast. Another major holiday, when the celebrations may take up to six days, is Eid al-Adha, or Feast of Sacrifice, beginning on the 10th of Zul-Hijja, the month of pilgrimage. Other important festivals include the Hijri, or New Year, and Mawlid an-Nabi, the Prophet's Birthday. For dates see the table of holidays near Public Holidays & Special Events in the Regional Facts for the Visitor chapter.

Judaism

The foundation of the Jewish religion is the Torah, or the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah contains the revelation from God via Moses more than 3000 years ago, including, most importantly, God's commands (of which there are 613 in all). The Torah is supplemented by the rest of the books of the Old Testament, of which there are also prophetic books, giving much of the substance to the religion.

These books are complemented by the Talmud, a collection of another 63 books, written in the early centuries AD and containing most of what separates Judaism from other religions. Included are plenty of Babbinical interpretations of the sacred scriptures, with a wealth of instructions and rulings for the daily life of a Jew.

The Talmud was written when the Jewish Diaspora began: after the Romans crushed the Jewish state and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD, many Jews were either exiled or sold into slavery abroad. The Jewish religion was kept intact, however, within families, who passed the teachings from generation to generation. Unlike Christians or Muslims, Jews have never actively sought converts from the followers of other religions.

Up to the first half of the 20th century there existed sizeable Jewish minorities in all countries in the Middle East. However, in the late '40s and early '50s the newly founded State of Israel began to seek the repatriation of Jews from all over the world, after 19 centuries of Diaspora, to fulfill the prophet Isaiah's prediction. Mass emigrations were facilitated from country to country, more or less with the cooperation of local authorities.

Today most Middle Eastern countries have only a few hundred Jews left, many of them still planning to emigrate to the Promised Land.

Christianity

Jesus preached in what is today Israel, but Christians form only minority groups in all Middle Eastern countries. Their numbers range from zero in Saudi Arabia (only Muslims can have Saudi nationality) to about 13% of the population of Egypt and Syria.

By far the biggest Christian sect in the region is formed by the Copts of Egypt, who make up most of that country's Christian population. Originally it was the apostle Mark who established Christianity in Egypt, and by the 4th century it had become the state religion. The Coptic Church split from the Byzantine Orthodox Church in the 5th century after a dispute about the human nature of Jesus, with Dioscorus, the patriarch of Alexandria, declaring Jesus to be totally divine. Internationally, the most famous Egyptian Copt today is the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

The Christians of Syria belong to many churches in all main branches of the religion-Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. This richness reflects the country's location on major routes along which the religion spread to Europe and Asia, and by which people and ideas have flowed into the area for centuries.

Lebanon and Jordan have sizeable Christian populations too, and the former's one million Maronites also have followers all over the world.

And of course, while Christians form only 2.4% of the population of Israel, almost all denominations of the religion are represented there, keeping watch over Christianity's holy sites.

LANGUAGE

Arabic is the official language of all Middle Eastern countries except Afghanistan, Iran, Israel and Turkey. (For information about languages spoken there, see the respective country chapters.) English is widely spoken in the area, as, to a lesser extent, is French (spoken mainly in Lebanon and Syria), but any effort to communicate with the locals in their own language will be well rewarded. No matter how far off the mark your pronunciation or grammar might be, you'll often get the response (usually with a big smile), 'Ah, you speak Arabic very well!'

Learning the basics for day-to-day travel doesn't take long at all, but to master the complexities of Arabic would take years of constant study.

It is worth noting here that transliteration from the Arabic script into English—or any other language for that matter—is at best an approximate science.

The presence of sounds unknown in European languages and the fact that the script is 'defective' (most vowels are not written) combine to make it nearly impossible to settle on one method of transliteration. A wide variety of spellings is therefore possible for words when they appear in Latin script—and that goes for place names and people's names as well.

The matter is further complicated by the wide variety of dialects and the imaginative ideas Arabs themselves often have on appropriate spelling in, say, English: words spell one way in a Gulf country may look very different in Syria, heavily influenced by French (not even the most venerable of western Arabists have been able to come up with a satisfactory solution).