

WHAT AND WHERE IS THE MIDDLE EAST?

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The “Middle East” is a flexible geographic term that shifts depending on the user and the era. We will use it throughout this text in its most inclusive definitions and will refrain from assigning definitive boundaries. We will also use the term because it is currently in dominant usage over other descriptors of overlapping territory that have waxed and waned in prominence over time. The “Middle East” was originally coined in the late 19th century by the British, along with other



The most common but exclusive definition of the Middle East at the time of writing extends to Egypt in the West, Iran in the East, the Arabian Peninsula in the South and Turkey in the North (although occasionally Turkey and, more rarely, Egypt are omitted).

Eurocentric geographic terms such as the “Near East” (the eastern Mediterranean regions closest to Europe) and the “Far East” (China, Japan, Korea, and other East Asian entities much farther away from Europe). The Middle East at the time was defined as the region lying between these two extremes: the Arabian Peninsula, Mesopotamia, and the Persian and Central Asian lands. The “Near East” has somewhat fallen out of favor, but generally is deployed interchangeably with the term “Middle East.” The “Middle East” has in turn crept westward to envelop the Eastern Mediterranean and even North Africa, sometimes at the expense of its Eastern fringes in Central Asia.

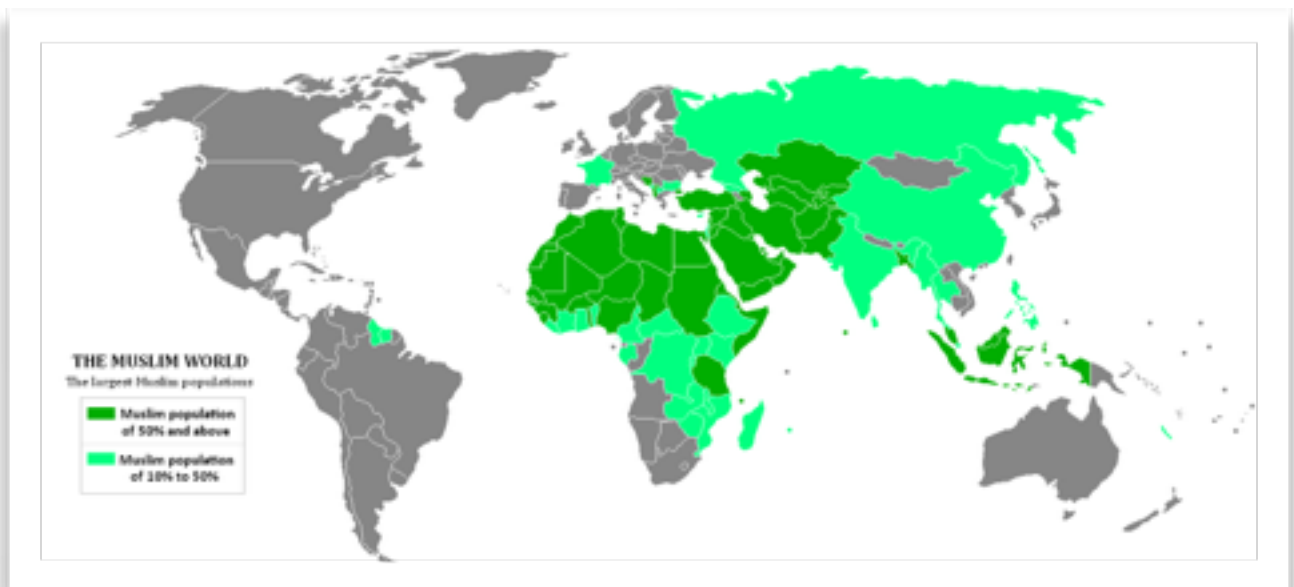
The 20th-century rise of Arab Nationalism strengthened coherence among predominantly Arab countries, sometimes referred to collectively as the Arab World. A more inclusive designation is the “Middle East and North Africa” (MENA), which adds at least Israel, Turkey, and Iran to the Arab World. A legacy of the Muslim empires, including the long-running Ottoman Empire gives rise to the terms “Islamic

World” or “Muslim World,” which refer to a geographic area that includes all of the Middle East and North Africa as well as a wider area of Asia and Africa whose populations are predominantly Muslim. All of these (“Near East,” “Middle East and North Africa” or “MENA,” “Arab World,” “Islamic World” and “Muslim World”) are frequently used in tandem with the “Middle East.” “Southwest Asia,” another term for this shifting territory has limited popularity although it does not relate to Europe (unlike “Middle East” or “Near East”). U.S. President George W. Bush’s “Greater Middle East” Initiative introduced another more inclusive definition of the region, which included North Africa, Afghanistan, and other adjacent territories.



This map of the Arab World illustrates the important regional dominance of the Arabic language as well as the resulting cultural and political connections between the Arab countries in the “Middle East” and those in North and East Africa.

In both academia and the professional world we can see all of these varying ideas of the “Middle East” (and its cousin terminologies) in play today. National Geographic’s political map of the Middle East, which seems to adhere to the original British intent of the term, does not include North Africa and shows only a sliver of Egypt, but extends to the East to include Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the



The Muslim World depicted in this map (dark green areas have more than 50% Muslim populations) shows some potentially misleading overlap with some definitions of the Middle East and North Africa.



National Geographic's current political map of the Middle East includes Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, and partially cuts off Egypt and Turkey.

Central Asian Republics. Rand McNally's maps extend further west to include Egypt and part of Libya while still stretching all the way to China's and India's Western borders. By contrast, Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group, and the Council on Foreign Relations do not include Turkey, Pakistan, or Afghanistan in their definitions of the Middle East, although they all extend their programs to include the Arab countries of North Africa as well. Other groups exclude North Africa from their definitions, although at a minimum include Egypt's capitol (Cairo) and the Sinai Peninsula. Most of the leading academic centers for the study of the Middle East in the United States include at least the Arab World (including North Africa), Turkey, Israel, and Iran (Berkeley, Harvard, Princeton, for example). In recent years some have also expanded to explicitly include studies of Central Asia as well (Chicago, NYU), and studies of Middle Eastern or Muslim Diasporas (Columbia, CUNY) or other territories adjacent to or in contact with the broad MENA region. Other research centers take a more focused approach, such as the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown, which prioritizes studies of the Arab World. Still others seem more open-ended and



This 1866 map of Southwest Asia by Leopold Kraatz and Thomas Luther prominently includes the Indian subcontinent.

these shifting connections and centers of power and influence over time. In this edited volume, we hope to spark an interest in these connections and the diversity they give rise to within the modern nation states that today call “the Middle East,” however we decide to define it, their home.

undefined beyond usage of the term “Middle East,” perhaps not wishing to unnecessarily confine their scope. What this expansive range of terms and definitions shows us is not that one version is more correct than the others, but rather that this broad region, a historic crossroads of people, cultures, ideas, and goods across three continents and numerous waterways, is *in connection* with many other places. It is not necessarily productive to figure out where the region starts and stops. Instead, it is far more interesting to look at

New Tools for American Educators

Just as the seemingly simple question of “What and Where is the Middle East?” generates a complex answer that goes beyond a map, other questions about the region are far from simple. In this volume, we have approached some of the big 20th and 21st-century questions about the so-called Middle East with an eye to the complexity and diversity of the region. While a truly comprehensive undertaking would perhaps begin with the advent of Islam (7th century CE), we have limited the temporal scope to the 20th-21st centuries, as this is where the greatest demand is for new information. It is also the most significant era for understanding the important U.S. relationships with the nations in the Middle East today (and by extension, U.S. policies and actions in the region).

We begin our journey by looking at diversity in the natural environment, the critical resources of water and oil, and the varied lived experiences of people throughout the region due to industrialization, migration, violence, and other factors. We then turn to the multilingualism that truly defines the region, paying particular attention to the languages that have dominated the identities of various modern national projects. We address religious pluralism, a critical trait of the Middle East that is so often overshadowed by an equally large knowledge gap about the dominant religion of Islam.

We imagined that teachers of social studies and world history would be the most frequent users of this volume, and have devoted significant time to understanding the legacies of the great powers in the Middle East. The authors in this section remind us that historical context matters, and that neither the distant nor the recent past can be easily forgotten by inhabitants of the Middle East nor by historians. We explore several themes. The Ottoman Empire's six-century reign leaves a lasting impact on modern configurations of nationalism in the region. The British and French colonial administrations were pivotal in quite literally drawing the boundaries that continue to spark conflict today, particularly in Palestine and Israel and their neighboring lands as well as in Iraq, Egypt, Turkey and elsewhere. The Zionist movement that culminates in Israel's birth in 1948 continues to be very influential in the Middle East despite being at odds with the aspirations of its neighboring Arab states, Turkey and Iran. Between 1950 and 1970, the Arab states in particular seek to throw off the yoke of imperialism and gain their political independence, often forging new alliances, including with the powerful Soviet Union. U.S. relationships with nations in the Middle East emerge after World War II, mature during the Cold War era and are tested and strengthened through several tumultuous political moments, including the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf war, 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and most recently the uprisings and their aftermath.



The above map shows a narrow definition of the Middle East in dark green, the “Greater Middle East” or the “Middle East and North Africa” in the middle shade of green, and areas of sociocultural and political association with the Middle East in light green (Central Asia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). The Middle East Policy Council, the supporting organization for this volume, approaches the region in the broadest of these iterations.

Finally, we turn to a few of the most critical issues facing the Middle East today: the migrant and refugee crises that continue to stretch regional and global resources; the development and persistence of Islamism in various forms; the struggle for the rights of women; and the still largely unknown and destabilizing effects of the uprisings throughout the region.

We have also developed a selection of thematic “Teaching Tools” to accompany each chapter, and hope that our readers will be less likely to draw simplifying conclusions about the Middle East after reading these materials. The Teaching Tools are based on primary sources that illustrate the complexity and pluralism of the region and cultivate critical-thinking skills. From maps and treaties to personal testimonies and photographs, these artifacts are intended to spark creativity, stimulate ideas, and appeal to different learning styles. The essays themselves can be used as background reading for both teachers and students and/or combined with other sources. Each chapter includes a list of recommended resources for further exploration and research. References to the National Standards are included to simplify the process of integrating these materials into the classroom.

Why Teach the Middle East?

In the United States, we are interested in the Middle East for all sorts of good reasons. Our government has maintained a special relationship with Israel and is interested in its security. We value the access our Middle Eastern allies give us to oil, military bases, and strategic waterways. We are concerned about increased radicalization and nuclear armament. Due to these interests, the United States has become deeply involved in the Middle East economically, diplomatically, and militarily. For these reasons alone, it is important for U.S. educators to understand and teach about the Middle East. This will help us be more informed as a society, as citizens, as voters. However, rather than approaching knowledge of the Middle East solely from a position of self-interest, we hope that our readers will be equally or even more compelled to know what Middle Easterners think is most important in their lives, from their widely varied perspectives. Rather than merely cultivating a sense of responsible American citizenry, we aim to instill a sense of global awareness and mutual respect. Moreover, we hope our readers will find the material as compelling and interesting as we know the people in the Middle East to be.

The task of bringing accurate content into U.S. curricular materials about the Middle East is a considerable responsibility. It is also an undertaking that presents daunting challenges. We all possess many harmful stereotypes about the Middle East, in spite of or perhaps because of ubiquitous news coverage and its depiction in entertainment. Teachers are hesitant to bring “sensitive” or “controversial” topics into the classroom, sometimes out of a real or imagined fear for their jobs. The additional matter of loyalty to U.S. troops, who continue to be engaged in locations throughout the region also plays a role. These challenges assure us we are not working with a blank slate, and as such, cannot merely inform, but also must dispel misinformation and encourage empathy. This collection of writings, crafted by experienced educators based on their own teaching methods, aims to inform and build confidence in teachers so that they feel ready to present complex material in a productive way. The essays also introduce teachers (and their students) to the analytical tools needed to critique the news they hear about the Middle East. The next chapter, “Notes from Educators on Teaching the Middle East” provides some practical insights into handling the challenges and sensitivities of teaching about the Middle East in the United States. The testimonies also illustrate some of the rewards that seem to compel teachers of the Middle East to carry on. We hope you’ll be inspired to join us!