



The Middle East and North Africa

The Middle East extends from the Atlantic Ocean east to the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, from the Sahara Desert in North Africa north to the Mediterranean Sea, and to the borders of the Trans-Caucasus and Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. North Africa is included in the Middle East because its history, language, religion, culture, and ethnic groups are more closely related to the people of Southwest Asia than to Africa south of the Sahara Desert. North Africa had close cultural and economic contact with Southwest Asia in ancient times. For a time Hittites from Turkey and Assyrians from Mesopotamia controlled Egypt, and Egypt's empire extended into Southwest Asia. The Phoenicians from Lebanon settled in western North Africa to establish the empire of Carthage that controlled the western Mediterranean region for centuries. For many other centuries North Africa and Southwest Asia were part of the Roman Empire. However, the most significant event that linked North Africa with Southwest Asia was the expansion of Islam in the 7th century. Within a few decades after Muhammad established Islam, Arab armies stormed out of the Arabian Peninsula to the north to conquer what is now Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. They also moved rapidly across Africa to the Atlantic. Wherever the Arabs conquered they implanted their religion, language, culture, and people. The religion of Islam soon spread to non-Arabic Turkey and Persia. Devout Turks and Persians learned Arabic because the sacred scriptures of Islam, the Koran, may be written only in Arabic. By the year 1000, the Arab empire had made advances in science, medicine, mathematics, and literature that spread to parts of the Middle East beyond their control. The Middle East is made up of 19 independent nations. It also includes disputed regions: the Western Sahara, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. According to 2011 estimates, the population of the Middle East is 461,500,000 (166,777,000 in North Africa and 294,723,000 in Southwest Asia). Egypt's population of 82,080,000 people is the largest in the Middle East, while Qatar population of 848,000 people is the smallest. Most of the people in the Middle East are Arabs, though the people of two of the largest nations, Turkey and Iran, are not. Over 90% of the people in the Middle East are Muslims. The only nation that does not

have a majority Muslim population is the Jewish nation of Israel. The insert in the lower right of the map shows a magnification of the nations of Israel and Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, and neighboring larger Arab nations, which has been the source of a great deal of tension.

MAP: Question 1

Which nation on the map serves as the geographic link between North Africa and Southwest Asia?

Question 2

Why is North Africa considered part of the Middle East even though it is on a separate continent?

Question 3

Why are the countries in the insert the most troubled region in the Middle East? What steps have been taken in the past 35 years to improve relations among these countries? What is yet to be done?