

THE MIDDLE EAST

CULTURE: A RICH MOSAIC

The many cultures of the Middle East

Culture, a shared set of traditions, belief systems, and behaviors, is shaped by history, religion, ethnic identity, language, and nationality, among other factors. The Middle East consists of approximately 20 countries, with many different religions and a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups. Given this diversity, we should not be surprised to find a multitude of different cultures coexisting in the region.

Stereotypes about the Middle East

During the 19th century, translations of the *Arabian Nights* and archaeological discoveries in Egypt dominated the imaginations of people in the West who had never visited the Middle East. These armchair explorers conjured up competing images of a desert region populated by nomads and camels and, of course, pyramids, but also brimming with all manner of sweet and savory treats in bustling urban bazaars. During the 20th century, stories about the Middle East have tended to focus on oil wealth, territorial wars, and religious conflicts. All of these do exist, but there is much more to life in this area

Religion in the cultures of the Middle East

The Middle East is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all monotheistic religions that grew from the same tradition. Each religion used the texts from earlier groups, and so they share many rules and beliefs. For example, Islam and Judaism observe the same dietary rules and have a similar focus on religion as a foundation for civil law. All three share a tradition of prophets, from Adam and Abraham to Solomon and Joseph. Jesus is significant for both Christianity and Islam, and Muslims in addition follow the teachings of Muhammad.

Religion plays a large part in the rhythm of daily life, not only through prayer and study, but also in determining the end of the work week. Shops in different neighborhoods close down on Fridays for the Muslim holy day, Saturdays for the Jewish Sabbath, and Sundays for the Christian day of rest. Religious festivals and remembrances, like Id al-Fitr (the Festival of Fast-Breaking, celebrated at the end of

Ramadan), or the Jewish Passover holiday, or Easter Sunday as determined by the Roman or Eastern Orthodox Christian churches, are all recognized as national holidays in different countries.

An awareness of God (Arabic: *Allah*) is exhibited in common Arabic expressions that are used throughout the region -- even in Turkey and Iran, where Arabic is not the local language. A common response to "How are you?" is "*Ilhamdillah!*" -- "Praise be to God." When expressing hope for a future event, one might say "*Inshallah*" -- "God willing." The exclamation "*Mashallah*" -- "What God wills!" -- is often heard as an expression of delight, at the sight of a new baby, for example. While there are those for whom these phrases reflect the divine, others use them the way many English speakers use "Good-bye" (literally, "God be with ye").

Religion plays a role in national and international politics as well. Turkey has a Muslim majority, but is officially a secular nation. Other countries in the region identify themselves with a specific religion, mostly Islam. Lebanon's constitution attempted to provide for power sharing among 18 officially recognized religions, including Maronite and Orthodox Christians, Sunni and Shii Muslims, and Druze. But because the populations of the various groups grew at different rates, this system eventually became less representative of the nation as a whole and civil war broke out.

The poor relations between Israel and most of its Arab neighbors are sometimes described in terms of a perpetual religious conflict between Jews and Muslims. This reading, however, is too simplistic. Although control over important historical sites of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam *is* a factor in the disagreements, many of the details that stall negotiations have to do with control of land and access to water resources. Furthermore, many Palestinians who demand restitution for their property are Christian, not Muslim, and Egypt's historic treaty with Israel provides a model for how Muslim and Jewish neighbors can live peaceably.

Ethnic diversity at the crossroads of civilizations

Situated between Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Middle East has been a crossroads for traders, travelers, and empire builders for thousands of years. Africans, Central Asians, and Celts have all added to the ethnic mix. Major ethnic groups in the Middle East today include Arabs, Iranians (also known as Persians), Turks, Jews, Kurds, Berbers, Armenians, Nubians, Azeris, and Greeks

Most of the countries in this region are multiethnic. But even as diversity enhances the cultural richness of a society, it unfortunately may also lead to political conflict. The Kurds, for example, do not have their own nation-state, but are instead spread across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Their political and military attempts to create an autonomous Kurdistan have been strongly resisted by those states.

Many languages, three families

The multiplicity of languages spoken in the Middle East reflects its ethnic diversity. Most of these languages come from three major language "families":

- Semitic (including Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic)
- Indo-European (Kurdish, Persian, Armenian)
- Turkic (Turkish, Azeri)

These language families reflect the successive migrations of different peoples into the region. A quick examination of these languages reveals the influence they have had on each other. Persian, for example, is written in Arabic script, while Turkish incorporates vocabulary words from Persian and Arabic. Arabic itself is spoken in regional dialects that are not always mutually understood. Some ethnic and religious communities have preserved "native" languages for religious use.

<p>CONNECTIONS</p> <p>What Connections can you make between Judiasm, Christianity, and Islam?</p>	
<p>CONCEPTS</p> <p>What are some of key concepts discussed in the article?</p>	
<p>CHALLENGES</p> <p>What challenges are discussed in the article?</p>	
<p>CHANGES</p> <p>How has religion changed or impacted the people of the Middle East?</p>	