

Handout #1

WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THE MIDDLE EAST?

I. What is the Middle East?

The Middle East is the common term for a region consisting of countries in southwest Asia and, usually, at least part of North Africa. It is an interesting term - middle of what? east of what? While the term is now widespread both inside and outside the region, it is in fact relatively new. It was coined only at the end of the nineteenth century by the British foreign service, and used in a 1902 article by a United States naval officer.

It was originally used to distinguish the area east of the Near East - the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire - and west of India. It included Afghanistan and Persia. Of course, the Far East denoted the countries of East Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea. And of course, the term is entirely Eurocentric - the region is east from the perspective of western Europe, but not from China, or Russia, or Africa. Today, Near East and Middle East are synonyms, but Middle East is the more widely used term (except in archaeology, where Near East is still more common).

The origin of the name speaks volumes about the political realities of the nineteenth century, when the perspective of the British in particular carried enormous weight. Interestingly, today the term Middle East is commonly used within the region itself. The four most common languages of the Middle East all use the term in translation to describe the region:

Arabic: *al-sharq al-awsat*

Turkish: *orta dogu*

Hebrew: *mizrach tichon*

Persian: *khavarmiyaneh*

To decide what the Middle East is, and what area it covers, we have to understand what a region is. Regions are subjectively determined (and thus debatable) areas that we perceive to have certain characteristics in common. They may be defined by physical geography; for example, areas bordered by mountains or rivers or seas, or areas which share a similar climate. They may also be defined by characteristics of human geography, such as shared historical experience, the same language, the same religion, or similar cultural practices. In the case of the Middle East, both physical and human geographic considerations are brought to bear to define the region.

What is a Region, anyway?

The Middle East is, very generally speaking, an arid region in Southwest Asia and part of North Africa stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf, bounded by the Black and Caspian Seas in the north and the Sahara Desert and Indian Ocean in the south. It has a long shared history and a shared religious tradition, being the birthplace of the three main monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is also often defined as being a locale of trade and cultural transmission, and sometimes conflict, between Europe, Africa and Asia.

Within the larger Middle East, one can also describe sub-regions, such as North Africa or the Levant, which share certain characteristics. The Levant, for example, encompasses modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, and is often seen as an important area in part because of its close historical connection with countries in Europe and around the Mediterranean.

The Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Oman are linked not only by shared history, language and religion, but by the shared opportunities and problems caused by the presence of large oil reserves in these countries. These countries all lie at the eastern

edge of a large geological plate (the Arabian plate) that is tilted down from west to east - thus there are mountainous areas on the western end of the plate and oil deposits concentrated along the eastern edge at the shores of the Persian Gulf.

What's in and what's out?

The exact roster of countries thought to be a part of the Middle East region is often debated. If you look at different maps of the Middle East, you will see different countries included and excluded. Almost everyone would agree that the following countries are part of the Middle East:

- Bahrain
- Egypt
- Iran
- Iraq
- Israel
- Jordan
- Kuwait
- Lebanon
- Oman
- The Palestinian Territories
- Qatar
- Saudi Arabia
- Syria
- United Arab Emirates
- Yemen

Notice that all but two are Arabic-speaking majority countries, the exceptions being Iran (where the national language is Persian) and Israel (where the national languages are Hebrew and Arabic).

Egypt is normally included in maps of the Middle East, although it is in Northeast Africa. Why? Egyptians speak Arabic, and Egypt has been a major player in the politics of the Middle East for literally thousands of years, so it is difficult to conceive of the region without Egypt.

Likewise, many experts also include the other countries of North Africa - Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco - because they are also Arabic-speaking and their history and culture are tied to those of the other countries of the Middle East.

Also, most experts in the region would include Turkey - in fact, it is often referred to as a bridge between the Middle East and Europe, both because it straddles the continents of Europe and Asia, and because its historical experience is intertwined both with that of European states and with that of the Middle East.

For our purposes, the Middle East will include all of the countries in the list above as well as:

- Turkey
- Morocco
- Algeria
- Libya
- Tunisia

II. Not quite the Middle East?

Today, many maps include the countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Until the collapse of the

Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries were usually studied as part of the Soviet bloc and Pakistan and Afghanistan as part of political and cultural region of South Asia, rather than as part of the Middle East.

However, particularly after the tragic events of September 11 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan, these countries have more often been associated with the Middle East because of their political and religious connections, although there are also many dissimilarities in politics, language and culture between these countries and the Middle East.

Similarly, the countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, located between the Black and Caspian Seas, are sometimes included on maps of the Middle East. Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean, has a majority Greek-speaking population, although there is a minority Turkish population in the northern part of the island who claim independence in a republic recognized only by Turkey. These countries and their peoples have had long interrelationships with the Middle East, but again have strong local characteristics that also distinguish them from their neighbors to the south and east.

Sudan is another country that is sometimes considered to be a part of the Middle East, sometimes because of its close and often contentious relationship with Egypt. While there are significant Arabic-speaking and Muslim populations in Sudan, its other cultural and linguistic differences would usually place it in an African context rather than a Middle Eastern one.

Very often, countries on the periphery of the Middle East are incorporated into maps and into the discourse on the Middle East when there is political strife in these areas, often involving Muslims, simply because many Americans don't distinguish easily between the Middle East and Islam. For our purposes, we will not include these countries in our definition of the Middle East, but will incorporate them into our discussion where it is relevant.

III. What the Middle East is not

There are two common mistakes that are often made when referring to the Middle East. The first is to confuse the Arab world with the Middle East. The Middle East is a very diverse region, with many languages and cultures. While the majority of the inhabitants of the region speak Arabic, there are several countries in the Middle East that are not majority Arabic speaking, including Turkey, Iran, and Israel. Of course, there are also minority communities within the Middle Eastern Arab-majority states for whom Arabic is not their native language, including the Kurds, Berbers, and many other groups. At the same time, there are many Arabic speakers who live in non-Arab majority states, from Sudan to the United States. Although there is a great deal of overlap, the Middle East and the Arab world are not the same thing!

The second common mistake is to equate the Middle East and Islam. While Islam began in the area that is now the modern state of Saudi Arabia, it has spread over the centuries so that there are communities of Muslims all over the world.

Most Muslims today don't live in the Middle East or grow up speaking Arabic (although many do learn some Arabic for religious reasons, since it is the language of the Quran). In fact, less than 20% of all the Muslims in the world-and there are over 1.3 billion-are native speakers of Arabic.

Student Activity Worksheet #1:

Instruction: Read the class handout on WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THE MIDDLE EAST, answer the questions below:

I. WHAT IS THE MIDDLE EAST?

1. Among the list of the countries, all but which two are Arabic-speaking majority countries? What languages do they speak?
2. Why is Egypt normally included in the maps of the Middle East although it's located in northeast Africa?
3. Why are countries in North Africa, such as Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, included on maps of the Middle East?
4. Why is Turkey included on the maps of the Middle East?
5. Despite the location of the countries listed in questions 2-4 why are they still considered a part of the Middle East?

II. NOT QUITE THE MIDDLE EAST!

6. Why are the countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan included on maps of the Middle East?
7. Why is Sudan sometimes considered to be part of the Middle East?

III. WHAT THE MIDDLE EAST IS NOT!

8. What are the two common mistakes made when referring to the Middle East?
9. What is the reason Muslims around the world learn Arabic?