**The Middle East and North Africa: Study Guide**

**Physical Geography**

**Map Test**

All countries will be tested. There will be a word bank. Capitals are extra credit up to 10 points.

You will need to know and be able to label the following topographical features on a map:

Atlas Mountains, Hejaz Asir Mountains, Caucasus Mountains, Nile River, Euphrates River, Tigris River, Black Sea, Caspian Sea, Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Sahara Desert, Sinai Peninsula, Arabian Peninsula, Anatolia Peninsula

**Deserts**

About 50% of the Middle East is considered desert. Desert characteristics include:

* Extreme weather patterns, including cold winters with freezing temperatures and hot, very dry summers.
* Summer temperatures rise to 120\*F during the day, but which drop dramatically at night due to lack of moisture in the air.
* Receives less than 10” of precipitation per year.
* Sand covers less than 10% of deserts. They are mostly made up of mountains, barren rock, and desert pavement. **Desert pavement** is compacted and solidified dirt, gravel, and sand.

Causes and contributors of deserts include:

* Weather (or lack thereof): Because of extreme temperatures (very hot during the day and very cold at night), moisture doesn’t stay in the air. Lack of moisture in the air means that water particles won’t condense and thus, won’t precipitate. No weather means droughts drag on for years, which only expand the deserts.
* **Rain Shadow Effect:** Much of the Middle East is mountainous. However, a few strategically located mountains prevent weather systems that form over the water from making their way onto land. This is because of the Rain Shadow Effect. When clouds run into mountains, they rise to go over the top. As the clouds rise, the moisture within them cools and condenses. As the cloud gets heavy, it precipitates. However, once the clouds get over the top of the mountains and start to drop down the other side, they have already lost their water. As the clouds get closer to the ground, the water that is left heats up, causing whatever water is left to evaporate. Thus, the windward side of the mountain range is lush and green and gets plenty of water. The leeward side of the range is dry and barren.
* **Desertification:** Desertification occurs when once productive and lush land turns into barren desert. While desertification can be caused by drought, it is mostly a result of humans misusing the land. When people over-farm the land, clear too much vegetation for farming, or allow their herds to over-graze the land, the land is unable to replenish itself, causing productive topsoil to erode away and the land to die.

**Water**

Rivers in the region are extremely important to the survival of the people. Dams and irrigation canals are common along the **Nile**, **Euphrates**, and **Tigris Rivers** as people try to control the flow of water to ensure all those in need have access. However, it is becoming more and more apparent that access to water and control of water can be a source of contention, especially when population is growing exponentially and the rivers are expected to support millions more than they used to.

**Aquifers** are underground freshwater lake. Layers of porous rock, sand, and gravel form a natural filtration system, causing water to seep through the layers of ground into the underwater lake. Because water is so scarce in the Middle East, access to aquifers is very important.

Desalination is increasingly becoming the most important water source in the Middle East. **Desalination** is the process by which salt is removed from saltwater, leaving freshwater. It is an expensive and slow process, but countries are considering it their only option. The most common desalination process is the boiling of saltwater, causing steam. The steam is collected, condensed, and cooled back into liquid form. This new liquid water is salt-free.

**Cultural Geography**

**People**

**Arabs:** Arabs are the largest ethnic group of the region, consisting of approximately 275 million people.

* Most Arabs are Muslim and follow the religion of Islam
* Most Arabs speak Arabic
* Originally, Arabs lived on the Arabian Peninsula
* Because of the spread of Islam, Arabs are now the dominant group in 16 different countries. Furthermore, many Arabic speaking people are descendants from a different ethnic group than Arabs, such as Egyptians and Phoenicians.

**Israelis:** About 6.4 million people of the region are Israeli.

* Israelis live in Israel
* About 82% of Israelis are Jewish. The remaining 18% are either Muslim or Christian.
* Most Israelis speak Hebrew.
* Many Jews living in Israel can trace their heritage back to the ancient Israelites.
* In 1948, Israel was established as a Jewish state, despite the large number of Arabs in the region that claimed Israel as their homeland as well. This caused tension between the groups that still exists today and is often violent.

**History**

**Mesopotamia and the Sumerians**

* Mesopotamia means Land Between Two Rivers. The two rivers are the Euphrates and Tigris. It was called the Fertile Crescent. Ancient Mesopotamia is present day Iraq.
* Mesopotamia is referred to as a **culture hearth**, a center where cultures developed and from which ideas and traditions spread outward.
* The people who lived in Mesopotamia are called **Sumerians**.
* The Sumerians were master farmers who grew crops year-round using irrigation canals. They established 12 cities with a code of law.
* They developed the first written language called **cuneiform**.

**Egyptians**

* They built along the Nile River in Egypt. Annual floods left rich soil for good farming. In dry seasons, they used irrigation to water crops so farmers could grow two crops per year.
* They developed a form a picture writing called **hieroglyphics**.
* They developed a 365-day calendar.
* They built impressive pyramids as tombs for their rulers.

**Phoenicians**

* They developed an alphabet in which letters stood for sounds, which is the basis for many alphabets used in the world today.

**Persians**

* Worried that water could evaporate in open canals, they constructed a series of **qanats**, or underground canals, to carry water from mountains, across deserts, to farmlands.

**Mongols**

* Mongols were nomads who traveled across the land seeking grasslands for their herds
* In the late 1100s, the infamous Mongol leader Genghis Khan united the nomadic Mongol tribes living north of China.
* In the late 1200s, the Mongols invaded Central Asia, establishing a vast empire
* The Mongols were brutal and violent, killing tens of thousands of people to gain control.
* Despite their brutality, the Mongols brought many improvements to the region, including paper money and safer trade routes.

**Religion**

**Judaism**

Judaism is the oldest **monotheistic** faith, or religion that only worships one god. Present day Jews can trace their origins back to the ancient Israelites. Historically, Jews have endured much, including political division, conquest, exile, and genocide. While many Jews have returned to their homeland in Israel, many still remain scattered.

Judaism teaches observance of God’s laws and the creation of a just society. Jews believe that all events have a divine purpose, which is why they are so meticulous in recording their history.

Judaism’s main book of scripture is the **Torah**, or Hebrew Bible, which is comprised of the Old Testament. Worship services are held in a **synagogue** and are officiated by a **rabbi**.

**Christianity**

In Israel, around A.D. 30, a Jewish teacher named **Jesus** began preaching a message of renewal and God’s mercy. Many of Jesus’s teachings were unpopular with those in power, and eventually, the Roman rulers of the area put him to death.

Jesus’s followers proclaimed that Jesus was the Savior and the Son of God and that those who followed Jesus’s teachings would receive salvation in heaven.

Christian scriptures include the Hebrew Bible as the **Old Testament** and the teachings of Jesus and the early Christians as the **New Testament** of the Christian Bible.

**Islam**

***The religion is called Islam. The followers of Islam are called Muslims. Islam is the predominant religion in the region.***

Islam originated through the line of Abraham’s son Ishmael. Supposedly, Ishmael and Abraham built the **Kaaba** together, which is located in **Mecca** and is considered Islam’s holiest site. Islamic tradition tells that in A.D. 610, revelations from God came to **Muhammad**, who was a merchant in the city of Mecca. Muhammad is considered within the Islamic faith to be the last prophet in a line of prophets that includes Abraham and Jesus. Muhammad started preaching that people should turn away from sin and worship the one, true God.

Overall, Islam has had a profound impact on the religious, political, and cultural practices of the region. Everything from government to holidays, from economics to education, from women’s rights to food has been touched by the religion and the culture of Islam.

Muslims worship in a **mosque**. Their scripture is the **Qur’an**, which is a record of Muhammad’s teachings.

**Devout Muslims adhere to the Five Pillars of Islam, which are:**

1. **Professing faith in God (Allah) and the Prophet Muhammad**
2. **Praying five times a day**
3. **Helping the poor and needy**
4. **Fasting during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (Ramadan)**
5. **Making a pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam’s holiest city**

***For all three religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, Jesus plays a role.*** For Jews, he is considered a normal preacher and teacher, and also as a false Messiah. Islam considers him to be a one of the great prophets. Christianity sees Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior and Redeemer of the world.