AG

ARABIAN PENINSULA AND GULF

Officer Block 2 and Enlisted Block 3

An Introduction to the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf Region

Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) Program

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Introduction

One must distinguish between the study of regions, countries, and cultures. Chapters 1 through 6 in this document introduce a region and provide some information about its countries and their relationships. They do not introduce a culture or cultures. Those chapters simply provide knowledge about the region and the environment in which people with different cultures live.

Regions and states do not have a single culture; instead they have multiple, diverse cultures. Cultures are not necessarily bound by national boundaries. There may be multiple cultures in a single state, while people sharing a single culture may live in more than one state.

The case study in Chapter 7 is about one specific culture in the region. Building upon the information provided in chapters 1 through 6, Chapter 7 introduces one of the many cultures in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region, using concepts discussed in the Operational Culture General document.

Why This Region is Relevant to You as a Marine

In his U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) posture statement, General Lloyd J. Austin III, CENTOM Commander (assumed command from 2013 to 2016) said "The region is an area rich in history, culture, and tradition. It is one of the most strategically important regions, holding well over half of the world's proven oil reserves and plentiful natural gas deposits, which are crucial to the global energy market."[1]

The region of Arabian Peninsula and Gulf falls under USCENTCOM, which is one of the nine unified commands in the United States military. USCENTCOM's mission, along with national and international partners, "promotes cooperation among nations, responds to crises, and deters or defeats state and non-state aggression, and supports development and, when necessary, reconstruction in order to establish the conditions for regional security, stability, and prosperity."[2]

The region is of high strategic importance to the United States. Some of the main USCENTCOM priorities include the following:[3]

- Dismantle and eventually defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in order to prevent further trans-regional spread of sectarian-fueled radical extremism, and to mitigate the continuing Iraq-Syria crisis.

- Defeat al-Qaeda, deny violent extremists safe havens and freedom of movement, and limit the reach of terrorists.
- Counter the Iranian threat network's malign activities in the region, to include the impacts of surrogates and proxies.
- Maintain a credible deterrent posture against Iran's evolving conventional and strategic military capabilities.
- Prevent, and if required, the counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; disrupt their development, and prevent their use.
- Support a whole-of-government approach to development in Yemen, preventing Yemen from growing as an ungoverned space for al-Qaeda/and Violent Extremist Organizations; and supporting regional stability efforts that retain U.S. counterterrorism capacity in the region.
- Protect lines of communication, ensure free use of shared spaces (including the cyber commons), and secure unimpeded global access for legal commerce.
- Shape, support, and maintain ready, flexible regional coalitions and partners, as well as cross-command and interagency U.S. whole-of-government teams, to support crisis response; and optimize military resources.
- Develop and execute security cooperation programs, improving bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships, building partnered "capacities," and improving information sharing, security, and stability.[4]

Iraq remains one of the U.S top priorities and a key partner in the region as well as "a voice of moderation and democracy in the Middle East."[5] The U.S. is committed in supporting Iraq in its ongoing fight against ISIL, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The U.S. military campaign "Operation Inherent Resolve" entails building a strategic partnership with Iraq and the Iraqi people. The U.S. provides precision air support to the Iraqi forces. Efforts of U.S. and Coalition advisors are focused on "advising and assisting the Iraqi leadership and training and equipping their ground forces."[6] With United States forces

U.S. Marines assigned to 4th Civil Affairs Group (CAG) hands out toys and candy to Iraqi children at a hospital in the city of Akashat, Iraq (Source: Wikimedia)

remained in Iraq from 2003-2011 the U.S. has invested precious lives and resources to maintain its achievements in the country. In 2011, the U.S. and Iraq signed the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), which seals the mutual commitment of the two countries for a bilateral relationship. The SFA "covers the range of bilateral issues including political relations and diplomacy, defense and security, trade and finance, energy, judicial and law enforcement issues, services, science, culture, education and environment."[7]

The United States' military-to-military relationship in the region is the keystone of the U.S. partnership with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region. The Gulf States "remain steadfast partners and continue to support the Counter ISIL Coalition's operations in Iraq and Syria, primarily

through the provision of robust access, basing and overflight permission critical to the conduct of regional operations."[8] Several countries from the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region are partners in the U.S.-led Counter-ISIL Coalition, formed in September 2014. Among the coalition's 66 partners are Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.[9]

Possessing the world's second-largest oil reserves and Islam's most sacred sites and cities, Saudi Arabia plays a major and strategic role in the Arab and Islamic world. With diplomatic relations since 1940, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia has a strategic partnership with shared global and regional security objectives. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, Saudi Arabia became a strategic partner of the United States in "regional security and counterterrorism efforts, as well as in providing military, diplomatic, and financial cooperation."[10]

Providing one of the "most supportive environments for access, basing, overflight, and burden-sharing,"[11] Kuwait is an exceptionally valuable strategic partner to the U.S. and is regarded as a model for stability in the Gulf region.[12] It offers the main platform for a swift regional response to crisis such as in Iraq and Yemen as well as assistance in military, diplomacy, and intelligence. Kuwait is home to the forward operating headquarters of USCENTCOM's U.S. Army component, U.S. Army Central (USARCENT).[13] Designated as a "major non-NATO ally" in 2004,[14] Kuwait continues to play an integral role in the region in bridging the gaps between and among partner nations.[15] The United States' significant effort to liberate Kuwait from Iraq in 1991 remains a remarkable bonding highlight in the two countries' historic relationship.[16]

Designated as a "major non-NATO ally" in 2002, Bahrain is a key strategic partner and ally to the U.S. in promoting regional security and stability. Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces in Manama (Naval Support Activity Bahrain and Isa Air Base).[17] In addition to being an active member of the Counter-ISIL Coalition, Bahrain was the first Arab and Gulf state to lead a Coalition Task Force patrolling the Gulf. It also supported the coalition counter-piracy mission with a deployment of its flagships.[18]

The United States and Iran – which was known as Persia until 1935 – have had diplomatic relations since 1883. However, those relations with Iran were severed in 1979 when Iranian protestors seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostages.[19] Following this incident, the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Iran, at which time it became known as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since the Iranian Revolution, U.S. policy towards Iran has been to reduce its perceived threat in the region and to U.S. interests, which include the security of the Persian Gulf.[20] Iran's nuclear program, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its poor human rights records prompted the U.S. and the international community (European Union, and United Nations) to impose comprehensive sanctions against Iran in 2005. These sanctions had a crippling effect on Iran's economy, which forced Iran to the negotiation table with the U.S. and international community.

Many of the existing issues in the region are broad in scope. The region is challenged by a number of serious threats including terrorism, sectarian violence, narcotic trafficking and human trafficking, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Geographic Overview

Why a Geographic Overview Matters to You as a Marine

Geographic features include physical and biological factors tied to location, topography, climate, soil, environmental hazards, flora, and fauna. These features influence human and social characteristics such as beliefs, behaviors, social organization, economy, and politics, to name a few. This is not to say that geography determines how people and societies behave, but rather that it has varying effects on what they believe and do.

The locations of rivers, mountains, deserts, and coasts have great influence on where people live, what crops can be raised, and what modes of transportation are suitable. Climate and weather influence how people dress, work, and earn a living. Natural disasters like hurricanes, flooding, and earthquakes can devastate a region, and dislocate a great number of people.

Countries

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region includes Bahrain, which is 3.5 times the size of Washington D.C. (capital city is Manama); Iran, which is slightly smaller than Alaska (capital city is Tehran); Iraq, which is slightly three times more than the size of New York state (capital city is Baghdad); Kuwait, slightly smaller than New Jersey (capital city is Kuwait City); Oman, twice the size of Georgia (capital city is Muscat); Qatar, slightly smaller than Connecticut (capital city is Doha); Saudi Arabia, which is slightly more than one-fifth the size of the United States[21] (capital city is Riyadh); United Arab Emirates, slightly larger than South Carolina (capital city is Abu Dhabi); and Yemen, which is four times the size of Alabama, (capital city is Sana'a). The size of the entire region is about 2 million sq mi (5.2 million sq km) -- more than half the size of the United States, which is 3.8 million sq mi (9.1 million sq km).

Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region (Source: CAOCL)

Global Location

Geopolitically a transitional zone between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the RCLF-designated Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region is bordered by Pakistan and Afghanistan to the east, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to the north; and Turkey, Syria, and Jordan to the northwest.

The Caspian Sea to the north, the Red Sea to the southwest, and the Arabian Sea to the southeast form the region's sea borders. The Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman partially split the region along a northwest-to-southeast axis.

**Map of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region (Source: CIA)**

The Persian Gulf is the ancient name of the gulf that divides the Iranian Plateau from the south. It lies between Iran and the Arab states (Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabian, UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar). There has been historic tension when it come to the name of the gulf. A topic that remains one of the triggering flashpoints between Iran and its Arab neighbors, illustrating the Arab-Persian ancient animosity. While Iran calls the gulf by its ancient name the "Persian Gulf," the Arab countries call it the "Arabian Gulf." This name dispute emerged in the 1960s, around the pan-Arabism (will be discussed further in Government and Politics), and Arab nationalism wave. The term "Persian Gulf" has been the official name used by the U.S. (since 1917) and United Nations as well. However, on certain occasions, the U.S. military has referred to the body of water as the "Arabian Gulf."[22] For example, in the first Gulf War (Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm), within the Kuwait Theater of Operations (KTO), the Persian Gulf was included as a discrete geographical feature. However, U.S. naval operations occurring within the Persian Gulf were designated as having been executed in the "Arabian Gulf." Naval surface patrols were labeled SAG and NAG to differentiate where they were executed (Southern Arabian Gulf/Northern Arabian Gulf). Air operations also used that nomenclature but reacted to any Iranian flights in accordance with the PG ADIZ (Persian Gulf Air Defense Intercept Zone).

Topography

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region includes extremely diverse terrain, ranging from rugged mountain ranges in the Iranian Plateau, to coastal lines, to lowland marshes and lush forests, to expansive arid deserts in the south, to river plains and plateaus.

Topographically, the region broadly consists of two distinct subregions: the Iranian Plateau in the northeast, and the Arabian Peninsula in the southwest. These two subregions are separated by the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, and the Mesopotamian lowlands. The Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian Plateau have very different topography, climate, and weather patterns.

The Arabian Peninsula, comprising about 1.2 million sq mi (3.1 million sq km),[23] is a plateau edged with deep escarpments on three sides, sloping gradually northwestward from its highest points along the Red Sea to the eastern lowlands adjoining the Persian Gulf coasts. The Arabian Desert occupies almost the entire Peninsula -- approximately 900,000 sq mi (2,330,990 sq km).[24] One third of the Peninsula is covered in sand.
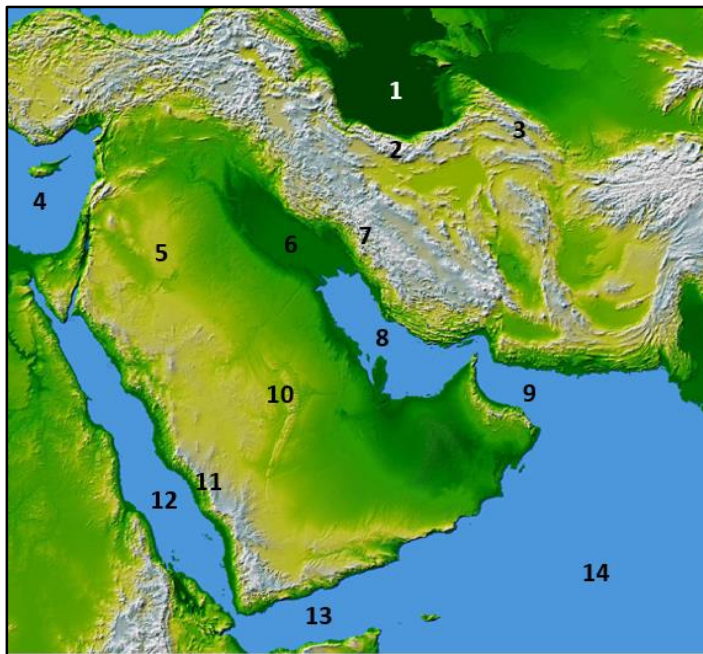
1) Caspian Sea; 2) Alborz Mountains; 3) Turkmen-Khorasan Mountains; 4) Mediterranean Sea; 5) Syrian Desert; 6) Mesopotamian Plain; 7) Zagros Mountain Range; 8) Persian Gulf; 9) Gulf of Oman; 10) Arabian Desert; 11) Sarawat Mountain Range; 12) Red Sea; 13) Gulf of Aden; 14) Arabian Sea. (Source: CAOCL)

Bounded by seas on three sides, the Arabian Peninsula transitions into Jordan, the Syrian Desert, and the fertile Mesopotamian Plain in the north. The Peninsula consists of a large central plateau, a variety of deserts, and stretches of mountains. The most prominent mountains are in the corners of the Peninsula: the southwestern edge in Yemen, the northwestern edge in Saudi Arabia, and the southeastern edge in Oman. The Sarawat Mountains, the largest mountain range on the Peninsula,[25] stretch from Yemen's Gulf of Aden in the south. The range then runs northward into Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and all the way to Jordan, along the edge of the western coast of the Peninsula,[26] which is approximately 1,200 mi (1,931 km).[27] The Sarawat Mountains are further sub-divided into three larger sub-ranges, moving from north to southeast: the Hejaz Mountain, the Asir Mountain, and the Hazar Mountain.

The Iranian Plateau dominates Iran and parts of Iraq. Mountain ranges created distinct topographic regions in the Plateau. The Alborz Mountains and the Turkmen-Khorasan Mountains dominate the northern edge of the Plateau, while the Zagros Mountain ranges dominate its southern edge along the Persian Gulf. The mountain ranges create formidable barriers to rain clouds; as a result of these barriers, deserts occupy large tracts of the Plateau's interior. Located in the north central part of country, the Kavir Desert is Iran's largest desert. The Lut Desert and the Kharan Desert are located

in Iran's east. Similar major deserts exist in the Arabian Peninsula, such as: al-Rub' al-Khali (which means "the empty quarter" in Arabic); An Nafud Desert; and Ad-Dahna Desert.

Rivers

Due to the mountainous terrain of the Iranian Plateau and the dry climate in the Arabian Peninsula, rivers in the region tend to be short. The only exceptions are the Tigris and Euphrates River system, which separates the Iranian Plateau from the Arabian Peninsula. The two rivers originate in Turkey and travel southeast through Syria and Iraq to the head of the Persian Gulf. The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers converge at the southern Iraqi town of al-Qurnah in Basra; thereafter, their combined waters form the Shatt al-Arab River for the remaining 120 mi (193 km) journey to the Persian Gulf. The last half of Shatt al-Arab defines the border between Iraq and Iran.[28]

Known as the great Tigris-Euphrates River system, the sources of the Tigris (1,180 mi; 1,899 km) and the Euphrates (1,740 mi; 2,800 km) Rivers lie within 50 mi (80km)[29] of each other in eastern Turkey. The two rivers run virtually in parallel through Syria and Iraq, then join together just before emptying into the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates is known as the longest river in Southwest Asia.[30] Both rivers are key sources of water for the majority of communities living by their banks. The Tigris River is also known as Nahr Dijlah in Arabic, while the Euphrates is known as Firat Nehri in Turkish, and Nahr Al-Furat in Arabic.

The lower portion of the Tigris-Euphrates River system, also known as the Mesopotamian Plain, has transformed an otherwise very harsh desert environment into a region that is habitable and productive: daytime temperatures in the summer rise as high as 140°F (60°C), while daytime humidity in the warm season can drop to as low as 15 percent.[31] The annual rainfall in this region is rarely above 7.87 in (200 mm). Dust storms occur throughout the year, and are especially harsh in the summer. There are also occasional sandstorms bearing windblown material from the desert. The Tigris-Euphrates River system, however, has turned this arid environment into fertile ground capable of supporting agriculture and known as one of the most ancient cradles of human civilization. There are no other notable river systems north and northwest from the Mesopotamian Plain. The few rivers in the Arabian Peninsula, also known as *wadis*, are only full during the wet season.
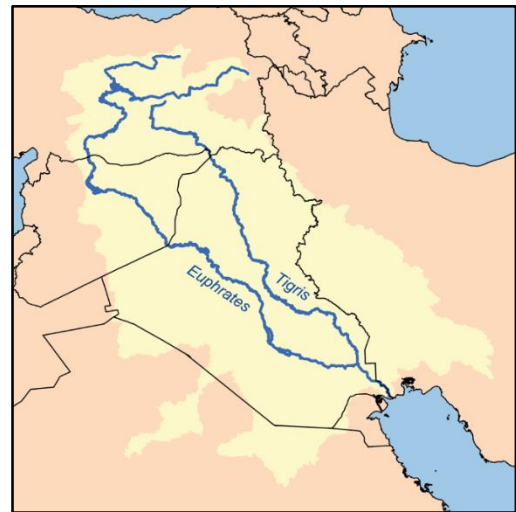
The Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Source: Wikimedia)

Wadi is a dry riverbed which fills with water only after a rainfall.

The Iranian Plateau has more water than the Arabian Peninsula. The few short rivers in the Iranian interior empty into saline marshes. The Plateau has only three larger rivers: the Karun, the Safid, and the Zayandeh. Only one of these rivers – the Karun – is navigable. The Safid River originates in the Alborz Mountains along the Caspian Sea; while the Karun and Zayandeh Rivers originate in the Zagros Mountains in the northern Iranian Plateau.[32] The Karun River flows south into Shatt al-Arab, which empties into the Persian Gulf. The Zayabdeh River – known to be the "lifeline" of Esfahan

province in western Iran[33] -- flows southeastward into the Gav Khuni Marsh, a swamp located northwest of the city of Yazd in central Iran.[34]

Climate and Weather

The Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian Plateau have distinct climates and weather patterns. The climate of the Arabian Peninsula is extremely arid. Temperatures can reach as high as 129-135° F (54° C) in some places. Much of the Peninsula's interior is dry, but along the coastline and some highlands, summer humidity can be high. The Peninsula receives very little annual rainfall; in some years, places in the interior see no rain at all. What little moisture could be carried into the interior regions of the Arabian Peninsula by the dry winds is captured by the coastal mountains along the Red Sea. Torrential rains occasionally flood the main drainage basins. Winters are relatively cool, with the coldest temperatures occurring at high altitudes in the far north. The Arabian Peninsula experiences two semiannual windy seasons: from December to January, and from May to July. Sand-laden winds originating from Syria and Jordan, called *shamal*,[35] blow into the Arabian Peninsula. A *shamal* can last from 30 to 50 days, have average velocities of 30 mi per hour (48.2 km per hour), and often generates massive sandstorms.

Located in the lower part of the Mesopotamian plain near the Persian Gulf, in late July 2015, the Iranian city of Bandar Mahshahr experienced a high temperature of 115° F (46.1° C), with a heat index of 165° F (73.8° C). On the same day, the temperature of Iraq's capital, Baghdad, reached 122° F (50° C), while the heat index was "only" 115° F (46.1° C) due to lower humidity.[36]

Compared to the Arabian Peninsula, the Iranian Plateau's climate and weather are more varied. The climate ranges from subtropical to subpolar. Elevation, latitude, maritime influences, and seasonal winds play a significant role in seasonal temperatures and precipitation. The average daytime winter highs in the northernmost part of the Plateau barely reach freezing, while the average daytime summer temperatures in some parts of the interior top 110° F (43.3° C). Precipitation also varies widely. It ranges from 1.96 in (50 mm) in the southeast of the Plateau, to almost 78.7 in (2,000 mm) on the northern slopes of the Alborz Mountains along the Caspian Sea coast. Half of the precipitation in the Iranian Plateau takes place during the winter season, while the summers are largely dry. Temperatures in the Dasht-e Lut have been measured as high as 159° F (70.5° C).[37]

Key Terrain

About 63 percent of the world's oil production is transported via maritime routes.[38] Therefore, international energy markets depend on reliable and secure transport routes. Many of the widely used global sea routes have chokepoints – narrow channels that restrict the number and size of vessels that can navigate through them. Chokepoints for maritime transit of oil are a critical part of energy security. This is mainly because of the high volume of petroleum transported through these critical thoroughfares.[39] Two of the world's four most

Location	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Strait of Hormuz	15.7	15.9	17.0	16.9	17.0
Strait of Malacca	13.5	14.5	14.6	15.1	15.2
Suez Canal and SUMED Pipeline	3.0	3.1	3.8	4.5	4.6
Bab el-Mandab	2.9	2.7	3.4	3.7	3.8
Danish Straits	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.3
Turkish Straits	2.8	2.8	3.0	2.9	2.9
Panama Canal	0.8	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.8
World maritime oil trade	53.9	55.5	55.6	56.7	56.5
World total oil supply	84.9	87.5	87.8	89.7	90.1

Volume of crude oil and oil products transported through world chokepoints, 2009-13 (Source: U.S. EIA)

important chokepoints for transit of oil are located in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region: the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

The Strait of Hormuz

Located between Iran in the north and the Arabian Peninsula -- particularly Oman in the south -- the Strait of Hormuz connects the eastern edge of the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, to the southeast. In 2013, 17 million barrels of oil per day were transported through the Strait, or about 30 percent of all seaborne oil. In addition, Qatar used the Strait the same year to transport 3.7 trillion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas, or 30 percent of the global trade in liquefied gas.[40] Merely 21 nautical mi (38.8 km) across at its narrowest point, the Strait of

Strait of Hormuz (Source: Wikipedia)

Hormuz is the world's most important oil transportation chokepoint. The Strait has two shipping channels: one for northbound traffic, the other for southbound traffic. Each channel measures just 2-mi (3.2 km) wide, and is separated by a 2-mi buffer zone.[41]

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait

The Bab el-Mandeb Strait connects the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It is a strategic link between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Located between Yemen and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, the Strait is another potential chokepoint for shipping. Eighteen miles wide at its narrowest point,[42] inbound and outbound ships traversing the Bab el-Mandeb are confined to two channels divided by Perim Island.[43] The western channel is 16 mi (26 km) wide, and the eastern is 2 mi (3 km) wide.[44] Closure of the Bab el-Mandeb would prevent tankers leaving the Persian Gulf from reaching the Suez Canal; this could effectively disrupt much of the commercial shipping between Europe and Asia. Trade in crude oil and

Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Source: U.S. EIA)

petroleum products passing through the strait increased from 2.7 million barrels per day in 2010 to almost 4.7 million barrels per day in 2014.[45]

Environmental Hazards

Ranked globally, Iran is among the top states at risk for natural disasters, including floods, droughts, earthquakes, landslides, and snowstorms.[46] Often, these disasters overwhelm Iran's disaster-response capacity. Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are among the countries in the world least at

risk from extreme natural disasters. The rest of the countries in this region face moderate and varied risks, including droughts and extreme heat waves.

In 1990, a 7.4-magnitude earthquake in Iran killed about 50,000 people, making it the worst recorded disaster in the country. In 2003, a 6.6-magnitude earthquake killed 31,000 people.

Four major tectonic plates – the Arabian, Eurasian, African, and Eurasian Plates – are responsible for seismic activity in the region. Among the countries in the region, Iran is especially vulnerable to earthquakes (the collision of the Arabian and Eurasian Plates created the approximately 1,000-mile-long [1,609 km] Zagros Mountains).[47] As a result eastern Iran experiences regular destructive earthquakes. Elsewhere in this region, expansion of the Arabian and African Plates produces relatively small earthquakes.

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region's tectonic plates (Source: Wikipedia)

On rare occasions, the lower part of the Arabian Peninsula is hit by major tropical cyclones (weather systems similar to hurricanes) that deliver heavy winds and several years' worth of rainfall (often in a matter of days) that cause flooding, mudslides, destruction, and loss of life.

In 2015 tropical storm Chapala, in some areas of Yemen, produced an amount of rainfall that was seven years' worth in just 48 hours.[48]

In addition to natural disaster threats of varying degrees, all countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf face a growing shortage of water. Increased water consumption by people, farms, and industries is straining the region's scarce water supplies.

Historical Overview

Why History Matters to You as a Marine

History provides a knowledge of how people, institutions, and states in a region evolved into what they are today. It also provides insights into people's collective memory about their group and others. In other words, history not only shapes a region's current affairs, but also tells us something about the historical roots of the individual and group identities of its inhabitants.

History does not predict how groups, institutions, and states in a region may behave in the future. Instead, it provides insights into what is possible and probable.

Prehistory

Throughout this region, there is archeological evidence of simple settlements and early signs of warfare as early as 10000 BCE, a period also known as Stone Age or the Pre-Pottery Neolithic Age (c.10000-7000 BCE).[49] These settlements were not permanent as people moved frequently.

It is believed that the first people to establish permanent settlements in the region settled Mesopotamia. By 8000 BCE, agricultural communities were already established in northern Mesopotamia, relying on fertile soil, regular rainfall, and seasonal

Map shows the extent of Mesopotamia (Source: Wikimedia)

flooding from the two dominant rivers – Tigris and Euphrates. This was known as the Pottery Neolithic age (c.7000-c. 5500 BCE).[50]

By 6000 BCE these communities relied on irrigation rather than rainfall, allowing them to move further southeast toward the Persian Gulf, where soil was extremely fertile but rainfall was scarce.

Between 4500-3100 BCE, people settled the edges of the marshes where the Tigris and Euphrates merge before reaching the Gulf. Because these early agricultural communities of the crescent-shaped Mesopotamian and Mediterranean basin relied on the fertile soil for sustenance, the region was eventually referred to as the "Fertile Crescent."

> Prehistory is defined as the period before the presence of written records. Knowledge about the prehistory period is acquired through archeological study.

> **BC/BCE:** the designations **CE** (Common Era) and **BCE** (Before the Common Era) are alternative terms for the traditional Western designations, **AD** (*Anno Domini*, or in the Year of our Lord), and **BC** (Before Christ). Also **C.** or **CA.** refers to *circa*, which is Latin for around, about, or approximately.

> **Fertile Crescent** is a crescent-shaped -- open sided towards the south -- region in the Middle East that starts from the Persian Gulf (in the east), and it covers the fertile regions in southern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and northern Egypt (the Nile valley) in the west where it ends.[51] The term was coined by the Egyptologist James Henry Breasted in 1916. The Fertile Crescent encompasses Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean basin regions.[52]

The Rise of Mesopotamia

> **Mesopotamia:** The term is Greek, meaning "the land between two rivers." Particularly, it refers to the ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in present-day Iraq and parts of modern-day Syria, Turkey, and western parts of Iran. Many of mankind's earliest cities, technologies, cultures, civilizations, and empires arose in Mesopotamia.[53] The region, therefore, is broadly considered to be, and is often referred to as, the "cradle of civilizations."[54]

> **Cradle of civilizations:** The term was coined mainly because of two major developments or inventions: the rise of the oldest city in the world, and the invention of writing.[55]

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region is where one of the first two civilizations appeared (the other one being in Egypt). Unlike the more unified civilization of Egypt, the civilization of Mesopotamia was a collection of connected cultures.

> **Civilization** is a highly developed culture, including its social organization, government, laws, and arts.

From 5900-3200 BCE, Mesopotamia witnessed the transition from stone tools and weapons to ones made of copper, hence the Copper Age or the Chalcolithic Period (5900-3200 BCE), as well as the emergence of cities built along the Tigris and Euphrates, particularly in the region of Sumer -- which is the southern region of ancient Mesopotamia.

Some of the earliest Mesopotamian cities are Uruk, Ur, Kish, Eridu, Nuzi, Lagash, Nippur, Ngirsu, and Elam. The city of Uruk (founded 4500 BCE)[56] in southern Mesopotamia (south of modern-day Iraq), is credited as one of the oldest cities in the world.[57] Uruk is also credited as the "city which first recognized the importance of the individual in the collective community."[58] However, ancient

Mesopotamians believed that Eridu was where civilization began and -- therefore -- was their oldest city.[59]

Mesopotamian cities did not have a single culture or ruler, but they nevertheless interacted intensively, economically, and culturally. However, these cities were frequently at war with each other. The Sumerians, a people living here during this period, are credited with the invention of the wheel (around 3500 BCE) and writing (around 3000 BCE).[60] The Sumerians are also credited with replacing priestly rule with kingships, as well as for waging the world's first recorded war: a conflict between the kingdoms of Sumer and Elam in 3200 BCE (the Sumerians were victorious).[61]

The early people of Mesopotamia are credited with many inventions, including agriculture, domestication of animals, irrigation, wine, beer, and the demarcation of time into hours, minutes, and seconds.

The Bronze Age was an era when bronze supplanted copper in the making of tools and weapons.

The growing prosperity of the cities in Mesopotamia increased their power, which in turn led to the rise of empires and dynasties. Some of the most prominent empires include the Sumerians, the Akkadians (who rose in 2350 BCE during the Early Bronze age [3000-2119 BCE],[62] the Assyrians, and the Babylonians. At different times, these empires extended into lands well beyond Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamian cities and empires fought not only each other but also foreign invaders lured by the wealth of the region and the lack of natural defenses. Constant warfare forced many Mesopotamian cities and empires to develop elaborate defenses and to master the art of warfare. Continual warfare destroyed many Mesopotamian states or weakened them into irrelevance. Nevertheless, outsiders were drawn to the region -- assimilating the local culture while simultaneously enriching it. Meanwhile, the region witnessed – during the Middle Bronze Age (2119-1700 BCE) and the Late Bronze Age (1700-1100 BCE) -- the rivalry, rise, and collapse of the Assyrian and the Babylonian Empires, which also spilled over into the Levant. Under the reign of Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE), the Babylonian King, the region became a center for art, letters, and intellectual pursuits.

King Hammurabi's most famous accomplishment was his code of laws, the Code of Hammurabi, which is considered to be the most ancient and complete set of legal codes in history. The code consisted of 282 laws and standards, as well as specific rules for commerce; the Code included specific fines and punishments that guaranteed the fair and equal implementation of justice.[63] The Code of Hammurabi was inscribed on a large finger-shaped black stone *stela* (a slab pillar). Invaders of Babylon looted the Code of Hammurabi stone; during the centuries that followed, the stone was presumed lost. In 1901, the stone was rediscovered by a French archaeological team working in Iran.[64]

The Iron Age (1000-500 BCE) was marked by the discovery of iron mining, smelting, and forging – particularly into weapons of war. This age witnessed the resurgence of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, followed by the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

The Assyrians (934-610 BCE or 912-612 BCE)[65] came to dominate much of the Mesopotamian region. Among their conquests: part of Anatolia, Egypt, the Levant, and the northern kingdom of Israel -- which they took in 722 BCE. The Assyrians deported the ten tribes of Israel deep into Mesopotamia and other Assyrian-controlled areas in the Middle East. The ten tribes subsequently were lost to history, hence they are known as "the ten lost tribes of Israel."[66]

By the end of the seventh century BCE,[67] Babylonians overran and defeated the Assyrian Empire, and -- therefore -- controlled much of Mesopotamia. The Babylonians also captured the city of Jerusalem under the 605-561 BCE reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II;[68] in response, the people of Jerusalem revolted.[69] The Babylonians recaptured and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE; the destruction wrought by the invaders included the First Temple, built four centuries earlier by King Solomon.[70] The Jews of Jerusalem were taken into Babylonian captivity and scattered throughout the empire. The Jewish exile lasted for almost 50 years, until the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians.[71]

The Code of Hammurabi stela (Source: Wikimedia)

King Nebuchadnezzar II is credited with the massive and sophisticated construction of the city Babylon, including the famous "Ishtar Gate," and the Great Ziggurat known as the "Tower of Babel." These two historic monuments -- evidence of this amazing period in history -- still stand in the city of Babel, the most famous city of ancient Mesopotamia Babel, 59 mi (95 km) southwest of Baghdad, in modern-day Iraq.[72] It is worth noting that former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein obsessively admired King Nebuchadnezzar, and perceived himself as Nebuchadnezzar's successor. Saddam named one of his most effective Republican Guard Mechanized Infantry divisions after Nebuchadnezzar. It provided some of the toughest resistance to the U.S. forces in February 1991 in the vicinity of the Tallil Air Base in southern Iraq. In March 2003, this unit successfully repelled an assault by the U.S. 11th Helicopter Attack Regiment in the vicinity of Karbala. The unit was officially disbanded in May 2003 by order of the Coalition Provisional Authority; many of its members joined various Sunni insurgent groups, such as al-Awda party, al-Qaeda in Iraq, or ISIS later. This is an example of the importance of history of the region and its linkage to contemporary events.

In 539 BCE, Babylon was conquered by the neighboring Achaemenid Persian Empire (550-330 BCE); the invading forces were led by Cyrus the Great.[73] With the establishment of Persian rule, whose center was in the Iranian Plateau, Mesopotamia experienced a rapid decline -- politically and culturally.

Considered the largest empire in ancient history,[74] the Persian Empire stretched eastward into the upper reaches of the Indus River (an area that is now part of northern India) and Central Asia, westward into Anatolia and Egypt, and encompassed all of the Levant.[75] The Persians allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and establish, in 516 BC, the Second Temple on the site of the First Temple.[76]

The Arabian Peninsula

While Mesopotamia was the setting for early human settlements and witnessed the emergence of great civilizations, similar activity was occurring on the Arabian Peninsula. It is believed that the earliest people to occupy the Arabian Peninsula migrated there from the Levant, settling in western areas, around 8000-6000 BCE. People also settled on the northeast coast as early as 5000 BCE; evidence of these settlements – including flint tools similar to those used in the Levant, and pottery typical of the southern Mesopotamians – have been found in what is now Qatar.[77] Ancient hunting flint tools, dating from 8000-6000 BCE, have also been discovered in central Arabia.[78] Remains of fishermen and shellfish-eaters' settlements, dating to 3000 BCE, have been found on the northeast coasts of the Persian Gulf and on the islands of Faylakah and Bahrain.[79] Parts of the Peninsula's south -- in present-day Oman and Yemen -- also offered favorable conditions for agriculture, and saw the establishment of permanent human settlements as early as 2000 BCE. By this time, the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region was a strategic connector between civilizations of Mesopotamia and those of the Indus Valley.[80] The origin of these early people cannot be fully ascertained: cultural similarities that they share with the people of Mesopotamia can largely be attributed to the great influence Mesopotamia exerted in the region, rather than to migrations.
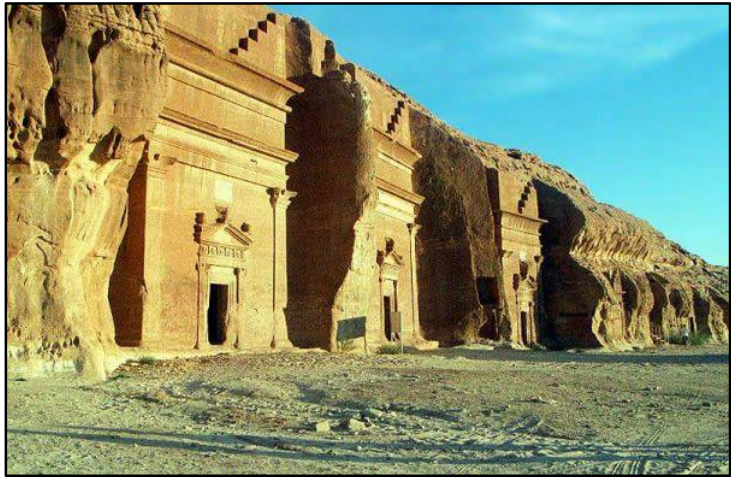
Pre-Islamic Nabataeam tombs (also known as Thamud dwellings) carved into the cliffs at Mada'in Saleh, Saudi Arabia (Source: Wikimedia)

Exploiting the more moderate climate and proximity to the Indian Ocean, the people who settled in present-day Yemen developed great cities and kingdoms,[81] which, although not rivaling the powerful empires of Mesopotamia to the north, emerged as significant political, cultural, and economic centers in the ancient world.

The most famous and largest of Yemen's ancient kingdoms were: the Sabaean or Kingdom of Saba' (a kingdom that derives its name from the biblical Sheba in the story of King Solomon and Queen Sheba), known to be the most ancient and powerful empires in southern Arabia that began as early as 1200-1000 BCE;[82] the Minaean or Ma'in Kingdom, which emerged between the fourth and second centuries BCE in northern Yemen;[83] the Himyarite Kingdom, also known as the Homeritaes (115 BCE-525 CE);[84] and the Hadramawt Kingdom, which occupied southeastern Yemen and present-day Oman until the third century CE.[85] These Kingdoms exploited their geographic location on the Arabian Peninsula as regional trade emerged as an important human activity; situated between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the southern tip of the Peninsula was an ideal transit point. The region also became a source of valuable trade commodities; – there was a particularly large demand for frankincense and myrrh in Europe and Asia. These two commodities were grown locally only in Yemen and Oman, as well as in a region of eastern Africa that is now Somalia.[86]

In addition to the civilizations that thrived in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, other ancient civilizations also emerged in the interior of the Arabian Peninsula. However, due to the harsher climate

of this area, these desert civilizations never achieved the prominence of kingdoms and cities to the north and south.

The Rise of Persia

The first people to populate the Iranian Plateau and to be identified in written records were Indo-European tribes, mostly nomadic herdsmen. Around the twentieth century BCE, these Indo-European tribes gradually migrated southeastward from the lands north of the Caspian and Black Seas (a region that is now part of modern-day Russia) into the lands that today comprise much of Iran. They emerged as the dominant group, either displacing or intermarrying with the people who preceded them. Over the centuries, the tribes became well-established; they formed powerful confederations and empires, with a majority of them having a regional "center of gravity."

The Tomb of Cyrus the Great (Source: Wikimedia)

The Medes, one of the first Indo-European tribes to settle the Iranian Plateau, became a powerful empire and dominated the region, beginning in the seventh century BCE. In the sixth century BCE, a related Indo-European tribe, the Persians, replaced the Medes, as the dominant people in the region. Over the succeeding centuries, the Persians created the Achaemenid Persian Empire, one of the world's greatest empires.[87]

The balance of power between the Medes and the Persians rapidly changed after Cyrus II became king of Persia in 559 BCE. After defeating the Medes, the Persians under Cyrus II enlarged their new empire, expanding west to the Aegean Sea, south to Babylon and Mesopotamia (in modern-day Iraq), east to what is modern-day India, and north into Central Asia.

Cyrus II, King of Persia: founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, known as Cyrus the Great. The Persian emperor was born around 590 BCE, and is believed to have died in c. 530 BCE.[88] He reigned 559-530 BCE.[89] Cyrus is known for his tolerance and bravery, therefore he is called "the Father" by Persians. Cyrus is credited for liberating the Jews from their exile in Babylonia. He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and establish the Second Temple on the site of the First Temple. The Second Temple was built in 516 BCE.[90] Some Jews held Cyrus the Great to be the "Messiah."

During the rule of another Persian emperor, Darius the Great, the empire ruled over vast expanses of land, extending even further into the Balkans and Egypt. Darius, who reigned 522-486 BCE, managed to consolidate the empire (considered to be the largest in ancient history) by adopting a cohesive governing structure, a single written language, taxation, communication networks, and a firm control over the armed forces.

As with all great empires, however, the Persian Empire soon began to suffer the stresses of overextension: it struggled to maintain control over a vast territory populated with diverse and rebellious people, while simultaneously fending off constant external challenges. The Greeks to the west of the empire proved more than a match: beginning in the fifth century, the Greeks increasingly challenged the Persians for regional supremacy. In the fourth century BCE, Greek forces led by Alexander the Great defeated the Persians and destroyed their empire.

Alexander the Great (Source: Wikimedia)

Alexander the Great: after the assassination of his father in 336 BCE,[91] 20-year-old Alexander became the king of Macedonia and set out to destroy the Persian Empire.[92] In 331 BCE, he defeated the Persians on battlefields in what is now modern-day Iraq. In just 13 years, Alexander the Great conquered the Levant and continued his campaign through what is now Afghanistan and into the Indian subcontinent. His empire stretched westward into Macedonia and eastward into India.[93] In 323 BCE, Alexander died in the Babylonian city of Hilla (in present-day Iraq).[94] His death is believed to have been caused by malaria or typhoid fever, possibly aggravated by alcoholism.

After Alexander's death, his empire was divided among his generals. Greek presence and influence in the region lasted centuries. Alexander's conquest also marked the penetration of Greek culture (Pan-Hellenic) in the region, including areas in the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia.

Between third century BCE and third century CE, leaders from the Parthian dynasty, successors to the Persian Empire, ruled vast tracts of land in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region. Throughout their reign, the Parthians battled the Roman Empire to the west and nomadic tribes to the east. While the Parthians managed to defend the Iranian Plateau, the Romans succeeded in conquering most of Mesopotamia in the second century CE. Although the Romans improved Mesopotamia's governance and infrastructure, the region never regained its past political and cultural prominence. The Romans remained in control of the region until the seventh century when a newly ascending group, the Arabs, moved in and conquered the region.

In the Iranian Plateau, the Parthian Empire was succeeded by the Sassanian Empire,[95] which remained in power between the third and seventh centuries CE. The Sassanians restored Persian dynasties to power in the region. In order to maintain supremacy, the Persians battled the Roman Empire and, later, the Byzantine Empire (also known as the Eastern Roman Empire).

Islamic Period and the Ascent of the Arabs

The centuries-long wars between the Persian Empire and the Byzantine Empire weakened both sides and made them vulnerable to other invaders. In the seventh century there emerged a new powerful

group of people, the Arabs, who quickly created what is believed to be one of the world's greatest and largest empires: the Islamic Caliphate.

The first references to the Arabs as a distinct people date back to the ninth century BCE, when Assyria battled camel-riding Arab warriors[96] for dominance in northern Mesopotamia.[97] Arabs were constantly attacking caravans traveling through North Arabia and the Sinai. Later, an alliance was formed between Arabs and king of Babylonia Nabonidus.[98]
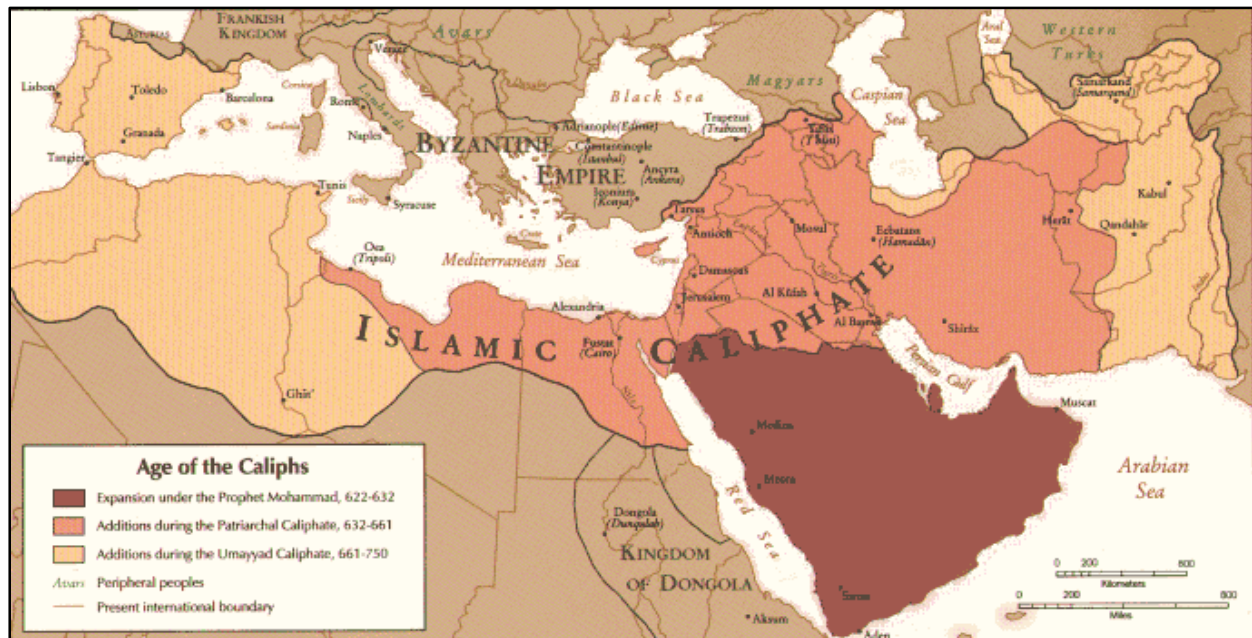
Age of the Islamic Caliphate (Source: Wikimedia)

Very little is known about the true origins of nomadic Arabs because – lacking a written language – their culture and traditions were inscribed in the minds of the community and passed down to generations through storytelling and poetry. However, it is believed that they have been roaming deserts on the Arabian Peninsula since at least 3000 BCE.

The ascent of the Arabs is intrinsically tied to the rise of Islam (for more detail about Islam see the People and Society chapter). In the seventh century CE, allied tribes and clans in Arabia, led by Islam's Prophet **Mohammad ibn Abdullah**, established control over the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. After Mohammed's death in 632, his successors launched campaigns of conquest that helped to spread Islam. In a few years, the entire Arabian Peninsula and Levant was brought to the new faith. In the late 630s and early 640s,[99]Arab armies defeated the Persians and established control over Persia for the next century.

Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim (AD 570-632)[100]

The Arab conquest extended well beyond the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region. In the seventh and early eighth centuries,[101] Arab armies reached as far north as Central Asia, marched eastward, conquered India, and defeated the Chinese.

During this same period of time, Arab forces:
- conquered North Africa
- crossed the Mediterranean Sea to the Iberian Peninsula
- conquered Spain and Portugal (which they ruled until the eleventh century[102])
- laid siege to -- but failed to sack -- Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire

Arab conquerors also expanded eastward into Persia, into large portions of Central Asia, and into the eastern half of present-day Turkey. The Arabs gradually converted the conquered to Islam. As a consequence, the military included not only Arabs, but also many non-Arab Muslims.

The inhabitants of the region at the time of the Arab-Muslim conquest were largely Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians -- most of whom either converted to Islam or coexisted with the Muslims. However, many non-Muslims living under Islamic rule -- particularly Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and other monotheistic faiths regarded by Muslims as *ahl al-kitab,* "people of the book,"-- were required to pay special taxes known as *"jizya."* People who paid *jizya* were given the status of *dhimmi* or the "protected people."

Jizya is an Islamic system, a "protection racket," where non-Muslims, specifically "people of the book" (Christian, Jews, and Zoroastrians, and other monotheistic faiths), were tolerated, protected, and allowed to practice their faith under Islamic rule upon paying special taxes.[103] They were not allowed to serve in the military. However, this non-Muslim toleration was frequently breached and non-Muslims or *dhummis*, under the Arab-Islamic rule, periodically were persecuted. They did not have equal rights under the law, as they were excluded from some civic privileges.[104]

Under the Islamic rule of the Rashidun "Rightly Guided" Caliphate (634-661 CE), the Umayyad (661-750 AD), the Abbasid (750-868 AD),[105] and all the successive Islamic caliphates that followed; Islam became the region's dominant religion, and Arabic replaced Greek and Aramaic in Mesopotamia as the most common language.

The Arab conquest of Persia marked the first time that the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf region come under a single rule. The new empire, called the Islamic Caliphate, had its capital in Damascus (present-day Syria) and later in Baghdad. The Caliphate frequently witnessed internal turmoil and internal strife, including dissent over who was the legitimate caliph to lead the Caliphate. As a result, for about four centuries civil wars divided the new Islamic Caliphate. The conflicts stemmed from religious differences over who were Mohammed's rightful and legitimate temporal successors. The Shi'a/Sunni schism resulted from these struggles (for more detail on the Shi'a/Sunni divide, see the People and Society chapter). Many Sunni and Shi'a dynasties also competed for control of the Caliphate, until the Sunni gained the upper hand.

Although the caliph was the nominal ruler of the Caliphate, local (regional) rulers in various regions, including in present-day Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, were very powerful and virtually independent from the capital. Thus various parts of the Arabian Peninsula were ruled by various dynasties which encountered their own internal struggles and civil wars.

Caliph means "successor," and refers to the temporal leader who succeeded Mohammed.

> **Caliphate:** is an Islamic government or a state governed by a caliph who is a political and religious leader with absolute power and authority.[106]

While the early Caliphate consisted of Arabs exclusively, the later era of the Caliphate consisted of many Muslims who were not Arabs, mostly Persians. Rather than assimilate the Persians, the Arab rulers in the region adopted many aspects of the Persian culture and the administrative system of the long-established Persian Empire. In essence, the Persian culture of Southwestern Asia transformed the Muslim culture from its simple Arab origin. Simultaneously, the Arabs also exerted their own cultural influence; this is evidenced by the spread of the Arab language throughout the Middle East, and the adoption of Arabic vocabulary in West and South Asia. At the height of its power, the Caliphate was not only a powerful empire, but was also a center of science, philosophy, arts, and architecture; it readily embraced the best of the diverse people within its vast empire, and was equally eager to build upon existing cultures.

The Turkic and Mongol Invasions

Persians managed to gain independence from the Baghdad-centered Islamic caliphate in the late ninth century, after two centuries of Arab rule.

Persia was once again ruled by Persian dynasties that deliberately attempted to revive Persian culture at the expense of Arab traditions. Persian rule did not last long, as Turkic people to the north gradually penetrated the region and imposed their control over a vast territory stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Afghanistan in the east, all of Persia, and much of Mesopotamia, including Baghdad.

The region suffered another invasion in the thirteenth century, this time from the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan (1162-1227), who reigned from 1206-1227.[107] The Mongols swept through Persia and sacked Baghdad. The Mongols ruled Persia until the late fourteenth century, when it was invaded by Tamerlane (also known as Timur), a "Turkified" Mongol (Turco-Mongol) and a descendent from the nomadic Mongol confederation, the Barlas.[108] Although Tamerlane's descendants fought each other over their shared inheritance, they managed to maintain control over most of the region until the early sixteenth century. While both the Turkic and Mongol invasions subdued Persia and Mesopotamia, the rest of the Arabian Peninsula managed to keep the invaders at bay, and instead continued to be ruled by local dynasties.

Persian Empire Restored

After four centuries of foreign rule (first by Turkic people and then the Mongols), Persians regained control over Persia in the early sixteenth century.[109] During the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1736),[110] adherents of the Shi'a sect of Islam emerged from their stronghold in northwestern Iran, moved west to conquer Iraq and annex Baghdad and Mosul,[111] and continued their advance into parts of Syria and Turkey to the northwest, Kuwait and Bahrain to the southwest (hence the presence of Shi'a communities in Bahrain and -- in lessor numbers -- in Kuwait), and into Afghanistan in the east. Shi'ism also gradually became the dominant form of Islam in the region. As soon as the Persian Empire was reestablished, it faced another great power to the west: the Ottoman Empire (1516-1918). Both empires became locked in a contest that lasted for centuries.

The Ottomans Turks and the British

After establishing a great empire in the "footprint" of what was once the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Turks turned their attention during the sixteenth century to the east and south: Persia and the Arabian Peninsula. The Persian Empire survived numerous wars with the Ottomans and the border between the two empires changed relatively little in the next centuries. Moving south, the Ottomans were relatively more successful conquering Mesopotamia; they established outposts throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and controlled trade routes on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. While the Ottomans imposed a

Ottoman Empire at its greatest extent, 16th-17th century (Source: Wikipedia)

direct rule in Mesopotamia, they maintained a minimal presence in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula – much of the region retained a high degree of autonomy, while parts quickly regained outright independence. The Ottoman Empire also provided protection to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, whose rulers accepted Ottoman guardianship and assurances that Muslims could make their annual pilgrimage safely. The Ottoman Empire retained its possessions in the region (mostly in Mesopotamia), and exerted nominal control over large parts of the Arabian Peninsula until the early twentieth century.

In the mid-eighteenth century, a puritanical Sunni Muslim preacher, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) formed an alliance with a local ruler named Muhammad ibn Saud[112], thereby creating a new and long-lasting political entity. (Today's Saudi Arabian monarchy traces its lineage to Muhammad ibn Saud.) The alliance embarked on a territorial conquest and the spread of the *Wahhabi'* doctrine of Islamic teachings. (Wahhabi doctrine is discussed in the People and Society section of this module.) By the late eighteenth century, most of the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina, fell under Saudi rule.

Expansion by the Saudis inevitably encountered the Ottomans; soon, the two sides were engaged in a protracted struggle. Throughout the nineteenth century, the fortunes of the Saudis rose and fell several times as they battled with the Ottomans, the Egyptians, and other Arabian tribes. For extended periods of time, the Ottomans had the upper hand and the Saudis had to recognize the nominal rule of the Ottoman Empire. With the exception of Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula remained an isolated and peripheral region of the Ottoman Empire.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf also witnessed an increased presence of the British, who had arrived to protect their commercial interests and the trade lines with Asia. In the nineteenth century, Great Britain became deeply involved in the political, military, and commercial affairs of the Arabian Peninsula. The British protected sea lines of communication and provided military protection and financial assistance to numerous Arab rulers in the Peninsula, giving

the British Empire control over their foreign relations. The British also frequently intervened in disputes between Arab rulers, choosing sides and determining the outcome of conflicts. Treaties with Arab rulers formalized British domination in the region.

Great Britain reached similar influence further north, in Persia. The Persian Empire experienced a general decline in the eighteenth century, when both the Russian and British Empires joined the regional contest. Seeking influence in the same area, Russia and Great Britain reached an agreement that accorded the Russians commercial and political controls in northern Persia, and granted the British similar controls in southern Persia. Thus, while Persia officially remained an independent state (unlike many Arab states around the Persian Gulf), both Russia and Great Britain exerted great influence over the country.

To this day, there is a perception among Iranians that the influence exerted by Russia and Great Britain over Persia from the eighteenth century into the twentieth century is just another example of the constant meddling by the West in Iran's internal affairs.

In the early twentieth century, the successor to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, retreated from Iran, leaving Great Britain in semi-control of the country. Fighting against the Ottoman Empire in World War I, Great Britain also encouraged the Arabs to revolt against the Ottomans to create a unified Arab state. Although the revolt failed, the end of the war saw the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the end of its rule in the Arabian Peninsula. As a result, Great Britain took control of the former Ottoman possessions in Mesopotamia and in southern Yemen, and the Saudis were finally free to enlarge their territorial possessions and increase their regional power. The end of Ottoman occupation

King Ibn Saud converses with President Franklin D. Roosevelt on board the USS Quincy, after the Yalta Conference in 1945 (Source: Wikimedia)

of the Arabian Peninsula led to the creation, in 1918, of the first independent state in the region: Yemen. This new country included the northern part of the current state of Yemen, while the southern part remained under British control. In 1932, the territories controlled by the Saudis were united in an independent state: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. That same year, Great Britain withdrew from the former Ottoman possessions in Mesopotamia and a new independent state was born: the Kingdom of Iraq.[113]

In 1935, Persia's ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled Iran from 1925-1941, announced that Persia should be known as "Iran," which is the country's name in Persian.

During World War II, while the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979) reigned, Great Britain and the Soviet Union once more interfered in Iranian affairs. A shared interest in excluding Nazi Germany from Iran

prompted the two countries to deploy troops to the region and set up supply routes – largely to support the Soviet war effort. After the end of World War II, the Soviet Union initially refused to withdraw its troops from northern Iran; it finally stood down after intense international pressure.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, Iran became a close ally of Great Britain and another superpower operating in the region: the United States. In 1955, the U.S. convinced Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Great Britain (plus, until 1959, Iraq) to form a defense treaty organization aimed at resisting Soviet encroachment in the region.

Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi with President Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara at the White House (Source: Wikimedia)

The Rest of the Arab States Become Independent

Exhausted by the wartime effort it was forced to exert during World War II, Great Britain lacked resources and the political will necessary to maintain its presence and commitments in the region. Additionally, revenue generated from the sale of crude oil enabled many countries in the region to seek independence. One factor that restrained these countries from seeking independence too quickly was their concern that many of the recently independent states in the region – notably Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia -- had laid claim to some of their territory. Nevertheless, starting in the early 1960s, the remaining Arab countries began to terminate their agreements with Great Britain and to declare independence. The process was far from smooth. In 1961, Kuwait declared independence but ran into immediate trouble when Iraq claimed the territory as its own. As a result, the British sent troops to Kuwait in order to deter an Iraqi invasion. In 1967, the British formally departed southern Yemen; a new state, the People's Republic of South Yemen, emerged. After several failed attempts, the two separate Yemeni states – north and south -- finally united in 1990.

In 1971, Bahrain declared independence -- although Iran claimed the island as its own. The same year, Qatar also declared independence. However, unlike other newly independent states in the Gulf, Qatar's move to independence was supported and backed by Saudi Arabia. The same year, six small territories created a confederation – the United Arab Emirates; a year later, another territory joined the newly independent states.

The status of Oman was more ambiguous. The current dynasty ruling the country – the Al Said family – came to power in the mid-seventeenth century after driving the Persians out. Oman never entered into the agreements with Great Britain that governed other states in the Arabian Peninsula. Although Britain was heavily involved in Omani affairs well into 1960s, the British were under no official obligation to defend it. Thus, Oman did not need a formal declaration of independence in the twentieth century. In fact, Oman sees itself as the first independent Arab state, tracing the linage of its ruling dynasty back to the eighteenth century.

Modern History

Since becoming fully independent by the early 1970s, all countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf have witnessed a growing turbulence. In 1978-79, Iran's religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini, led a revolution to topple the monarch. A diverse coalition of clerics, conservative rights advocates, secular leftists, nationalists, unemployed, small business owners, and other groups – all dissatisfied with many issues – overthrew the monarchy. The Iranians were protesting against issues ranging from uneven economic development, the monarch's modernization and secular policies, and Western influence in the country. In 1980, Iran was declared an Islamic republic. The post-revolutionary Iranian government was based on *Velayat-e faqih,* Khomeini's idea of society and state governed by the clergy according to the Shi'a interpretation of Islamic law and traditions.

In November, 1979, a group of young Iranian revolutionaries invaded the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 66 Americans hostage, thereby precipitating a crisis in U.S.-Iran relations. Iran soon after released 14 of the hostages. After an unsuccessful attempt by the U.S. military to rescue the hostages, the remaining 52 Americans were finally released after 444 days of captivity.

Iran's standing within the international community was damaged by its establishment of clerical rule, the 1979-80 hostage crisis, and the new regime's professed policy of exporting Iranian-style Islamic revolution abroad. Many Western countries, as well as many countries in the region, feared that Iran's religious-fueled influence would spread throughout the region; many of these Iran-watchers actively sought ways to counter the new regime.

Velayat-e faqih or **Wilayat al-Faqih**: it is the Islamic Republic of Iran's concept of governing. It means "the guardianship of the Islamic jurist," or "the rule by Islamic jurist," where an Islamic jurist is given power and guardianship over people -- supposedly in accordance with Islamic laws and traditions. The Guardian Jurist is known as the *el-Vali-e-faqih,* who serves as the Supreme Leader of the government. Following the Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, became *Vali-e-faqih* of Iran. After Khomeini's death, in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became Iran's *Vali-e-faqih*.

A year after the 1979 Revolution, a long-standing border dispute was a pretext for Iraq to invade southwestern Iran. As a result, the two countries fought a war of attrition for eight years, which ended in a stalemate and no territorial gains for either side.

Although the war with Iraq inflicted a high cost on Iran in terms of blood and treasure, the Islamic regime continued to seek influence in the region. Iran extended support to Shi'a groups in the Middle East, including terrorist groups. It also sought to increase its military power by developing missile forces and investing in nuclear technology for military applications. These moves further isolated Iran internationally as many states imposed sanctions on the regime.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in 1990, claiming the state as its own province. In response the United States assembled an international coalition and -- after a short campaign in 1991 -- pushed Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Additionally, the United Nations imposed sanctions on Iraq, and the United States established a military presence in the region aimed at deterring future Iraqi aggression. Iraq remained contained and internationally isolated until 2003, when -- following terrorist attacks against the United States in September, 2001 -- a coalition of American forces and allies invaded the country and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. The United States maintained a robust military presence in Iraq until 2011.

Ziggurat of Ur (Wikimedia)

Cyrus (Wikimedia)

Persian helmet (Wikimedia)

Iranian Revolution (Wikimedia)

Earliest known settlements in Mesopotamia, known as the Stone Age. Hunting and fishing tools were found in the Arabian Peninsula.

The rivalry, rise and collapse of the Babylonian and the Assyrian Empires. Babylonian King Hammurabi establishes the Code of Hammurabi, the most ancient and complete set of legal codes in history. Indo-European tribes settled in the Iranian Plateau.

Cyrus the Great founded the Achaemenid Persian Empire. He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and establish the Second Temple of the site of the First Temple. The Persians conquered Mesopotamia and Babylon.

Greek forces led by Alexander the Great defeated the Persians in modern-day-Iraq and destroyed their empire.

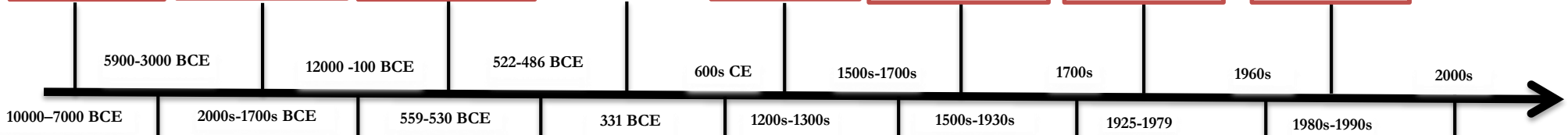Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, invaded the region. They swept through Persian and sacked Baghdad.

The emergence of the Ottoman Empire. After numerous wars with the Persian Empire, the Ottomans conquered Mesopotamia, and established outposts throughout Arabian Peninsula. They controlled trade routes on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea. Arabs revolt against the Ottomans in the early 20th century. Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen gain independence.

The Pahlavi Dynasty reigned in Iran. It ended when Khomeini led a revolution, toppled the monarch, and established the Islamic Republic of Iran. A theological government ruled by clergy. Iran's relations with the U.S was severed after a group of protesters invaded the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 66 Americans hostages.

Eight-year war between Iraq and Iran in the eighties. Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait, claiming the state as its own province. The U.S. assembled an international coalition, expelling Iraqi forces and liberating Kuwait in 1991.

5900-3000 BCE

12000 -100 BCE

522-486 BCE

600s CE

1500s-1700s

1700s

1960s

2000s

10000–7000 BCE

2000s-1700s BCE

559-530 BCE

331 BCE

1200s-1300s

1500s-1930s

1925-1979

1980s-1990s

The rise of Mesopotamia and the transition from Stone Age to Copper Age. The Sumerians invented the wheel and writing.

Several kingdoms emerged in the southern Arabian Peninsula: the Sabaean Kingdom, the Minaean Kingdom, the Homeritaes Kingdom, and the Hadramawt Kingdom.

Darius ruled the Persian Empire which became the world's largest in ancient history

The emergence of the Arabs and the Islamic Caliphate. The Arab-Islamic forces defeated the Persians and established control over Mesopotamia, Levant and Persian. Islam became the dominant faith.

The Persians regained control over Persia. The Persian Safavid Dynasty, adherent of Shi'a Islam, conquered Iraq and Shi'ism became the dominant form of Islam in most of the region. The Safavids became locked in a contest with the Ottoman Empire that lasted for centuries.

The puritanical Sunni Muslim preacher Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab (founder of the Wahhabi doctrine) formed an alliance with local ruler Mohammed ibn Saud, creating a new and long-lasting political entity. Most of the Arabian Peninsula, including Mecca and Medina, fell under Saudi rule to this day.

The rest of the countries in the region terminated their agreement with Great Britain and declared independence.

Following 9/11 terrorist attacks, a U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. The U.S. maintained a robust military presence in Iraqi until 2011. Following the emergence of ISIS in Iraq, the U.S. committed to assist and advise the Iraqi forces.

Early writing tablet from Mesopotamian (Wikimedia)

Umayyad Dinar (Wikimedia)


U.S. tanks in Baghdad (Wikimedia)

People and Society

Why People and Society Matter to You as a Marine

Missions across the range of military operations require Marines to understand, and work with, foreign populations. Knowing the people in the region, including their ethnicities, languages, and religions, as well as the way they live in social entities, enables Marines to create a mental picture of the human dimension of the region.

Population

Some of mankind's oldest continuously occupied cities are located in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region, such as Kirkuk (150 mi [241km] north of Baghdad, Iraq) – a strategic Assyrian city that dates back to 2200 BCE.[114] Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan in Iraq that dates back to 2300 BCE, was ruled by the Assyrians, Persians, Sasanians, Arabs, and Ottomans.[115] Ancient human settlements in this region were clustered in the Mesopotamian zone and well-watered areas on the banks of the two major rivers (Tigris and Euphrates), as well as the coastal areas of the Persian Gulf.
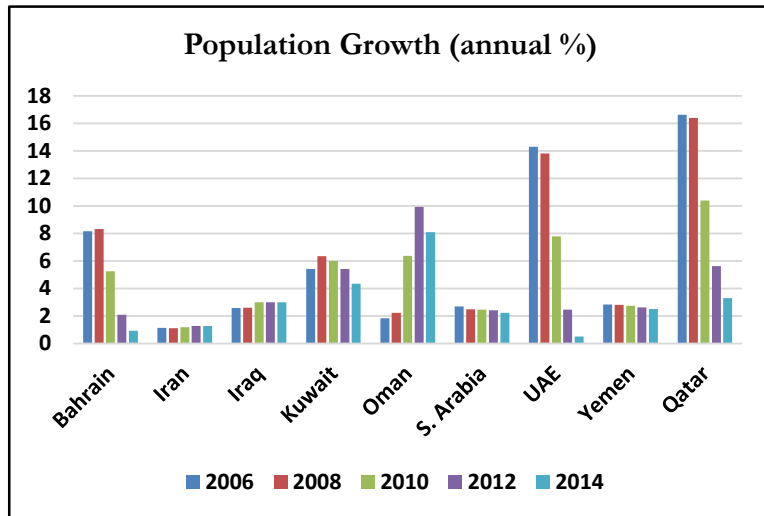
Arabian Peninsual and Gulf population total
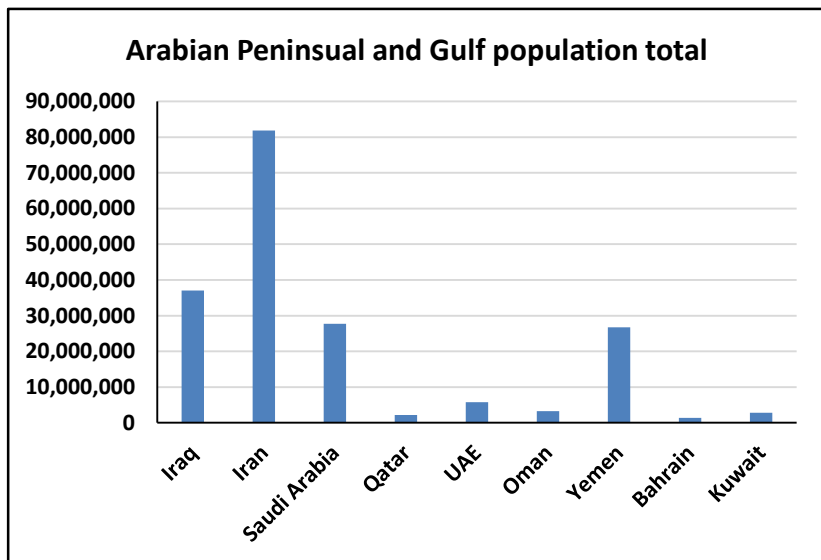
Source: Data from CIA World Factbook 2015

Before World War II, most people in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region were rural villagers or nomadic pastoralists; but in recent decades an increase in migration, economic development, and rural-to-urban population shifts, have caused change in the population density in some of the region's cities.

With over 81 million people, Iran has by far the largest population in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region. According to the CIA World Factbook, Iraq has a population of over 37 million; Saudi Arabia's population is over 27.7 million (migrants make up about 30 percent of the country's total population

according to UN data[116]); Yemen's population is about 26.7 million; United Arab Emirates is about 5.7 million (UN data estimates UAE's population at 9.1 million and that migrants make up 90 percent of the country's total population[117]); Oman's population is 3.2 million (UN data indicates that migrants make up 40 percent of the country's total population); Kuwait's population is about 2.7 million (the Kuwaiti government estimates its population at 4.1 million with migrants making up 69 percent); Qatar's population is around 2.1 million; and Bahrain's

Source: World Bank Data

population is around 1.3 million (UN data estimates that migrants make up 50 percent of the total population[118]).

The total population of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region is 188,766,732 million, about two thirds of the size of the American population, which is 321 million people. The high number of migrants in the region is mainly due to the discovery of oil in the Persian Gulf throughout the 1900s and the economic development phase that followed.[119] People from neighboring regions migrated to the Gulf States (and continue to do so) for economic reasons.
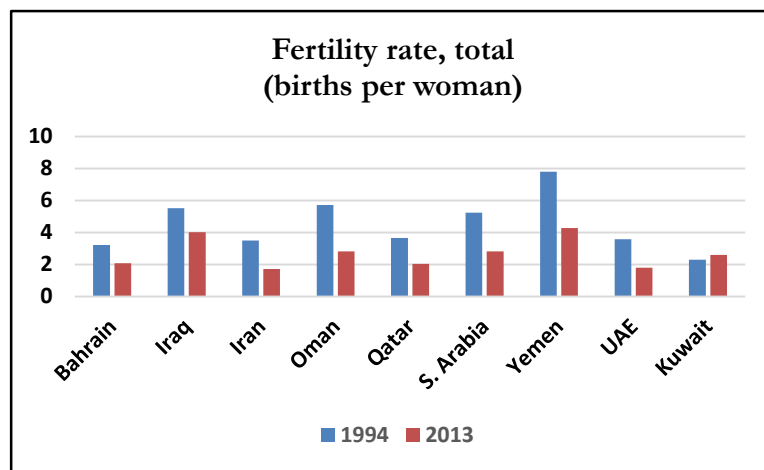
Source: World Bank Data

In the last two decades, the region has witnessed a dramatic slowing of population growth -- mainly due to declining fertility rates (average births per woman). Population growth in most of the countries in the region has been steady except in Bahrain, UAE, and Qatar; where population growth dropped over the last eight years. However, population growth has increased in Oman.

At 1,769 people per sq km of land area, Bahrain has the highest population density in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region, while Saudi Arabia has 14 people per sq km. By comparison, The United States' population density is merely 34 people per sq km.

The majority of people in the region live in urban areas, with Qatar having the most urban population at 99.2 percent. Yemen is the only country in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region where it is mostly rural, with 34 percent of the population living in the countryside. The rest of the countries range between 70 – 90 percent of urban population. By comparison, 81 percent of the population in the U.S. is urban. The availability of water and resources in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf has always

been the main factor on determining where people reside. Coastal zones, oases, valleys, and river deltas in the region have supported human settlement since the Neolithic times and the beginning of agriculture in the region.

Estimates for 2015 showed that young people represented a very large share of the population in the region. About 41 percent of both Iraq and Yemen's populations were below the age of 14. At 12 percent, the fraction of 14-year-olds and below was the lowest in Qatar, while the rest of the countries in the region ranged between 20-30 percent. By comparison, in the same year only 19 percent of the population in the United States was under the age of 14. Overall, Iran has a large young population. Over 60 percent of Iran's 81 million people is under the age of 30,[120] while more than 59 percent of Iraq's population is below the age of 24, and 62 percent of Yemen's total population is under the age of 24.

Ethnic Groups

Except for Iran, the vast majority of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region are Arabs, however, in some parts of the region – such as in Iraq -- ethnicity and kinship influence politics, personal loyalties, population distribution of the region, and also instigate conflicts. Throughout the region, people have strong loyalties to their extended family. Concentrations of members of an ethnic group often create a climate of ethnic favoritism. People in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region often view ethnic favoritism and nepotism differently than Americans do. Government officials are often expected to take care of their kinsmen with jobs or special favors --

Women wearing Islamic dress code Abaya (Source: Wikimedia)

often to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. This frequently causes animosity and has often precipitated violence by groups excluded from receiving basic government services.

In the 630s, the conquering armies of the Rashidun Caliphate first brought Islam and the Arabic culture of the Arabian Peninsula to the northern parts of the region in Iraq and Iran; consequently, most of the region converted to Islam except in Iran, where the majority of the population is non-Arab. As a result, many people in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf have identified themselves as Arabs for over 1000 years. However, Kurds, Persians, Armenians, Aziris, Baloch, Turkoman, Yezidis, Circassians, Assyrians, Jews, and other ethnic minority groups have also historically been part of the region's ethnic mosaic.

While the Gulf States are ethnically homogenous, both Iraq and Iran have a mosaic of different ethnic groups. Arabs are the majority populations in their respective countries, however, and as mentioned earlier, foreign "economic" migrants -- particularly from South Asia in the Gulf States -- are represented in significant numbers.

The dominance of a certain ethnic group often gives that group great power in politics, economics, and culture. Today, Arabs are distinguished as a group that shares one language and close cultures where the majority is Muslim -- although there are many non-Muslims who speak Arabic and also share a similar culture.[121] Moreover, white Arabs (Caucasians) are found in the Levant and Arabian Peninsula and Gulf regions; and Black Arabs, such as Sudanese, are found throughout Africa. The definition adopted by the Arab League for an Arab "is a person whose language is Arabic, who lives in an Arabic speaking country, who is in sympathy with the aspirations of the Arabic speaking peoples."[122]

According to the Oxford dictionary, "an Arab is a member of the Semitic people, originally from the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring territories," who migrated and spread in what is known today as the Middle East and North Africa.[123]

Despite being known as an Arab country, Iraq has a diverse and unique ethnic fabric. While many of these ethnic groups generally interact peacefully and often intermarry, this diversity and ethnic mosaic can also be a source of conflict. Arabs make up about 75-80 percent of Iraq's total population, and they represent the country's largest ethnic group. The second largest and powerful ethnic group in Iraq is the Kurds: they comprise 15-20 percent of the total population. Other ethnic minorities, which collectively consist of five percent of the total population, are: Assyrians, Turkomans, Africans, Armenians, Ajam (Persians), Circassians, Yezidis, Shabaks, and Roma (Gypsy).
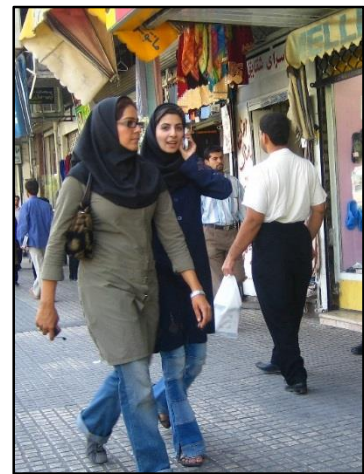
Iranian women (Source: Wikimedia)

Persians comprise 61 percent of Iran's total population and are the country's largest ethnic group. The second-largest ethnic group in Iran is the Azeris (between 16-20 percent). The Kurdish people make up 10 percent of the Iranian population, the Lurs are 6 percent, and the Baloch, Arab, and Turkmen ethnic groups each respectively comprise 2 percent of the Iranian population. The remaining is made up of other small minorities.[124]

Iranians often identify themselves with a specific ethnic, religious, linguistic, or regional background, much as Americans might identify themselves as Texans or New Yorkers. Despite the country's ethnic diversity, most Iranians -- no matter their ethnic heritage -- think of themselves, first and foremost, as Iranian citizens. However, many of the minorities face discrimination and have overtly protested the government's unfair treatment, calling for more rights and representation rather than autonomy.[125]

The Azeris are a transnational ethnic group, clustered mostly in Azerbaijan and northwest Iran. While most Azeris living in Iran are religiously observant Muslims, Azeris in Azerbaijan (having experienced decades of atheistic Soviet rule) are largely secular. What unifies Azeris in these two countries are their shared history and Turkic language.

Languages in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf

Except for Iran, where the official language is Farsi, the official language in the rest of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf countries is Arabic.

Regional Arabic dialects vary significantly from country to country and even from region to region within the same county. The Arabic language in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf is known as *Khaliji* Arabic (from the word *Khalij*, which means Gulf) and is mainly spoken in the Gulf States. Iraq has its own distinct dialect, as does Yemen. Yemeni Arabic dialect is very similar to the *khaliji,* as is the dialect spoken in Basra, the southern province of Iraq. Modern Standard Arabic is used for official and business communications, radio news and broadcast, political speeches, and to a large extent television and theater. Written Arabic is standardized and does not vary.

English is widely used and understood in the region, especially in the Gulf States where foreign migrants and workers comprise more than half the population.

The official language of Iran is Persian, also known as Farsi. Farsi is also spoken in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and parts of Uzbekistan.[126] While the entire population of Iran speaks Farsi, about 40 percent are multi-lingual in Farsi and one or more ethnic tongues such as Kurdish (nearly 10 percent of the population), Azeri Turkic (nearly 20 percent of the population), Gilaki, Mazandarani, Luri, Balochi, and Arabic. The commonality of the language and popularity of Persian culture tie people together in Iran.

Kurdish women from Kurdistan dance the traditional Kurdish *debka* dance (Source: Wikimedia).

Minorities in each country are allowed different degrees of freedom and provisions to use, study, and communicate official business in their own languages. For example, Kurdish is the second official language in Iraq, and it is the main official language in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Most minorities in the region tend to speak their mother tongue and also the country's majority language. Other minority languages include Aramaic (spoken in villages inhabited by Christians – "Chaldo-Assyrians" – mainly in Iraq), and Armenian.

Religion in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf

Religion plays a major role in all aspects of life in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region; it shapes cultural values and identity. Understanding the impact and role of religion in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf will help you understand the complex dynamics of the region. Religion plays a major role in politics, and is also one of the main instigators of conflicts. For thousands of years, waves of civilizations, armies, settlers, and religious pilgrims have swept through the northern parts of the region (Iraq and Iran), making that part of the region religiously diverse. At a certain point, the histories of some of the world's major monotheistic religions -- Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam -- were intertwined in the northern parts of the region.

The seeds of Judaism were planted in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur by the patriarch Abraham,[127] who then migrated to the Levant; the religion bloomed in what is today Israel.[128] Christianity emerged as a branch from Judaism in Judea in the Levant during the first century. Eventually, its followers spread the word of Jesus in the Middle East and beyond. Meanwhile, the birthplace of Islam is the Arabian Peninsula; Muslims also consider the same biblical Abraham of Mesopotamia as an important prophet of their faith.[129]

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf is an important part of the Middle East with significance to the Islamic world, as it is home to Islam's holiest cities Mecca and Medina, both of which are in Saudi Arabia. Also, the region, and particularly the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq and Mashhad in Iran, all have a significant religious sacredness for Shi'a worldwide, as these cities are homes of the shrines of the grandest Shi'a imams. Iraq in particular is known as home to the shrines of seven of the Twelve Shi'a imams. The City of Najaf in Iraq is also known for its Wadi al-Salam Shi'a Cemetery, known to be one of the largest and

Masjid al-Haram and Kaaba during Hajj, in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Source: Wikimedia)

oldest cemeteries in the world according to the UNESCO. The cemetery is known to have some of the oldest graves in the world, some believed to be graves of prophets, saints, and kings which predate Islam. Despite being the oldest in the world, Wadi al-Salam is the only cemetery where the burial process is still ongoing to this day.[130]

Although statistically the vast majority of the region's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, there are significant religious groups such as Shi'a Muslims, Zoroastrian, Baha'i, Jewish, and Christian populations. In almost every country of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, there is one dominant religion with various minorities.

The Faravahar or Frawahr is one of the symbols of Zoroastrianism (Source: Wikimedia)

Except for Iraq, Iran, and Bahrain (where the majority are Shi'a Muslims), and Oman's majority Ibadhi Muslims, the major dominant religious group in the rest of the countries in the region is Sunni Muslim. Two countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region – Iraq and Iran -- are Shi'a-led countries.

Bahrain: the population is about 70 percent Muslim (majority Shi'a 65-75 percent and the rest are Sunnis[131]), 14 percent Christian, 9.8 percent Hindu, 2.5 Buddhist, 0.6 percent Jewish, and less than 2 percent folk religions and unaffiliated spiritual faiths.

Iran: the country's population is 99.4 percent Muslim (90-95 percent Shi'a and 5-10 percent Sunni), 0.3 percent are members of other faiths (Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian), and 0.4 percent remain unspecific.

Iraq: 99 percent of Iraq's population is majority Muslims (60-65 percent Shi'a and 32-37 percent Sunni), 0.8 percent Christian, and less than 1 percent Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and folk religions.

Following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, Iraqi Christians were the target of many terrorist attacks and displacements. Recent reporting indicates that the overall Iraqi Christian population may have dropped by as much as 50 percent since 2003,[132] with many fleeing to neighboring countries and then resettling either in Europe or the United States.

Kuwait: its population is 76 percent Muslim (majority 60-70 percent Sunni and 30-40 percent Shi'a[133]), 17.3 percent Christian, 5.9 percent Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Baha'i (while 96 percent of the total population consist of migrants, all non-Muslims are mainly are part of the foreign labor force).

Oman: around 86 percent of the population are Muslim (about 1.8 million of the country's three million are Ibadhis,[134] which is about 75 percent of Omani citizens who compose almost 70 percent of the country's total population), lesser numbers of Shi'a and Sunni, 6.5 percent Christian, 5.5 percent Hindu, and around 2 percent Jewish, Buddhist, or other.

Qatar: 77 percent of the country's population are Muslim, 8.5 percent are Christian, and 14 percent other which includes Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh.

Saudi Arabia: the country's vast majority is Muslim (85-90 percent Sunni and 10-15 percent Shi'a), and others are Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or Sikh.

"Despite having a large expatriate community of various faiths (more than 30 percent of the population) most forms of public religious expression inconsistent with the government-sanctioned interpretation of the Sunni Islam are restricted: non-Muslims are not allowed to have Saudi citizenship and non-Muslims places of worship are not permitted." CIA Factbook.

United Arab Emirates: Muslims consist of 76 percent of the population, 9 percent are Christian, and 15 percent are Hindu, Buddhist, Baha'i, Druze, Sikh, Ismaili, Ahmedi, or Jewish.

Yemen: 99 percent are Muslim (65 percent are Sunni, and 35 percent are Shi'a) and less than one percent are Jewish, Baha'i, Hindu, or Christian.

The following is a brief description of the main religions in the region:

Islam

Islam is the world's second largest religion, after Christianity, with approximately 1.6 billion followers -- 23 percent of the global population.[135]Understanding the main concepts and practices of Islam will assist in understanding the culture and practices of people in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf.

Founded in the early seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula by **Muhammad ibn Abdullah**, Islam is believed to be the third of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths.[136] Islam teaches that there is one God "Allah," and Mohammedis his messenger − the final, the 'seal', of all religious prophets starting with Abraham.[137] The name "Islam" is derived from the word "submission," and obedience to God is a primary theme in this religion.[138]

Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim, (AD 570-632)[139]

The **Qur'an** is the central book (scripture) of Islam. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the word of God and the final divine revelation of God as revealed to Prophet Mohammed, in Arabic, by the angel Gabriel over a period of 23 years.[140]Along with the Sunna, the Qur'an provides spiritual and practical guidelines (*sharia*or Islamic law) for leading a Muslim way of life.[141]

Qur'an (English pronunciation): *al-qur'ān*, literally meaning "the recitation." The Qur'an contains 114 chapters, which are known as *surah* in Arabic. Also, the Qur'an is sectioned into 30 equal parts known as *juzu'*, which makes it easier for Muslims to read the Qur'an daily over the course of a month.

There are two major sects in Islam: Sunni Islam, which accounts for over 75 percent of all Muslims; and Shi'a Islam, which comprises 10-20 percent of all Muslims. Additionally, there are several minor Islamic sects, including the Druze, the Ismailis, and Alawites.[142]

The Sunni-Shi'a Split

Both **Sunni and Shi'a** sects agree on the fundamentals of their common faith but each fervently believes that its own path is the truest approach to the divine.[143] Islam split into these

The Muslim Holy Book Quran (Source: Wikimedia)

two branches over a religious-political leadership dispute, particularly over the rightful successor of Mohammed, following his death.[144]

Following Mohammed's death, Abu Bakr, Mohammed's father-in-law and close friend, emerged as the *Amir al-Mu'minin,* (Commander of the Faithful), initiating the Caliphate of *Khulafa'a Al-Rashidun* Rightly Guided Caliphate. The next caliph was Omar Ibn Al-Khattab; the third was Uthman Ibn Affan; and Ali Ibn Abitalib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, was the fourth caliph.

Caliph means "successor," and refers to the temporal leader who succeeded Mohammed.

Caliphate is an Islamic government or a state governed by a caliph who is a political and religious leader with absolute power and authority.[145]

It was controversy over Ali Ibn Abitalib that incited the Sunni-Shi'a split. While Shi'a Muslims believe that Ali Ibn Abitalib was the only divinely designated *imam 'caliph'* to lead following Mohammed's death, Sunnis maintain that the first three caliphs after Mohammed were also legitimate religious leaders and that Ali Ibn Abitalib was the last of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs.

Sunni: the name comes from *Ahl Al-Sunna wal Jamma'a,* which means "people of the Sunna and the community." The word **Sunna** means path or habitual practice in Arabic, the conduct and the way of life for Muslims based on the sayings, teachings, and practices of the prophet of Islam, Mohammed.[146]

Shi'a: the name is shortened from the historical name *Shi'a-t-Ali*, which means the followers of Ali Ibn Abitalib or the party of Ali Ibn Abitalib.[147]

Ali's supporters, the Shi'a, believe that he should have been named the first caliph; they also believe that he was Mohammed's infallible, divinely appointed, and true successor. They held that the caliphate should pass down only to direct male descendants of Ali Ibn Abitalib and his wife Fatima, Mohammed's daughter. Conversely, Sunni Muslims regard Ali Ibn Abitalib as merely the last of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs; they believe that Mohammed intended for Muslims to choose a successor by consensus.

Shi'a shrine in Karbala, Iraq (Source: Wikimedia)

Over the years, the political divide between the two sects broadened and deepened, from simply political-leadership disagreement, to include theological discrepancies, opposing interpretations of the Qur'an, and conflicting religious practices.

Sunni Islam has four schools of Islamic doctrine and law (jurisprudence): *Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i*, and *Hanbali* (where Salafi and Wahhabi Islam is derived from). While Sunnis can elect to follow any one of these schools, Shi'a follow one Islamic doctrine which is the Twelver, (derived from what Shi'a believe in the twelve divinely chosen imams who are the direct male descendants of Ali Ibn Abitalib and Fatima), also known as *Ja'afari* (derived from the name of imam *Ja'afar al-Sadiq*, whom Shi'a consider the sixth imam and core interpreter of the Shi'a Twelver's jurisprudence).

The Twelver Islamic doctrine is also known as *Imamiya*, which is derived from the word *imam*. Within the Twelver Islamic doctrine, there are Shi'a religious scholars, known as *marja'a*, whom through their experience and theology studies offer their followers guidance and religious interpretations. These scholars study and receive their degrees at Shi'a Islamic schools known as *hawza* located in Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran. The more distinguished and experienced scholars earn the title ayatollah, such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf.

Shi'a Twelvers can elect to follow any *marja'a* from the many *maraj'i* (plural) in Iraq and Iran. It is believed that many Christians, Jewish, and Zoroastrians, particularly in the Mesopotamia region (mainly Iraq, Iran and parts of Levant), when converted to Islam in the early centuries of the spread of the religion, elected to become Shi'a instead of Sunni. This was mainly a protest against the predominantly Arab-Islamic empires (Caliphate) and their treatment of non-Arab Muslims as a second class citizens. Hence, Shi'a Islam's evolution and rituals – which often differs from mainstream Sunni -- were

Shi'a rituals of Ashura in Iran (Source: Wikimedia)

highly influenced by the original religions (Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism) of these newly converts.[148] This led to the creation of the Shi'a cult-like rituals, which for instance place a great emphasis on visiting of Shrines and tombs of Shi'a imams to receive blessings. Imam Ali shrine in Najaf, and Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala in Iraq, and Imam Ridha shrine in Mashhad in Iran, are among the most famous and prestigious Shi'a pilgrimage destinations.[149]

Except in countries where Shi'a are the majority -- such as Iran -- Shi'a have been historically marginalized by the ruling Sunni majority. Victimhood has been deeply rooted in the Shi'a identity since the battle of Karbala in the seventh century, when Hussein, son of Ali ibn Abitalib, was massacred along with his family and companions. Historically, Shi'a have faced persistent persecution, therefore they followed the Shi'a custom of *taqqiya*.[150]

> ***Taqqiya*** is the practice of hiding one's belief and religious practices to avoid possible persecution.[151]

Sunnis strictly follow the Qur'an and the unique interpretation of the **hadith** (recorded oral traditions of Mohammed) through their respective schools of jurisprudence; whereas Shi'a follow the Qur'an and the teaching and recorded traditions of their twelve imams, also known as *Ahl Al-Bayt* (Arabic for "family of Mohammed"). Shi'a scholars use *ijtihad* (reasoning), while Sunni rely on the sourced *hadith* and Sunna. Because of these differences, Shi'a are considered by some hard-line Sunni Islamists as apostates and heretics – and often called *rafidha*, which means rejectionists -- therefore, they have been a target of Sunni extremist groups.[152] Conversely, some Shi'a extremists often call Sunnis *takfiris* -- a reference to the extreme doctrine adopted by the puritanical Saudi Wahhabis and extremist groups like al-Qaeda, which frequently declare non-Sunni Muslims as apostates.[153]

> ***Hadith***: record of the collection of traditions containing (reported words and deeds) of Mohammed, the prophet of Islam.

Both sects have different views of acceptable schools of Islamic jurisprudence and legitimate Islamic authority. Today the Shi'a-Sunni split continues to cast its shadow on most of the region's affairs, transforming from a matter of theological interpretation to serious issues with political and military ramifications. Islam also has an active mystical branch, Sufism and several Sunni and Shi'a sub-branches.[154]

Oman's majority population follow the Ibadhi sect. With a few million followers, the Ibadhi sect is known to be the smallest sect within Islam; they are located mainly in Oman. Ibadhi rituals and beliefs are closely aligned with mainstream Sunni Islam. The sect emerged from the Kharijites or Khawarij, which is a seventh century Muslim rebellion that rejected the fourth caliph. Kharijites launched jihad and violence and were eventually defeated. However, the moderate Ibadhi wing survived and is largely represented today by Ibadhis in Oman.[155] Despite of several unsuccessful attempts by successive Muslim dynasties (Umayyad and Abbasids) to defeat and persecute the Ibadhia, the faith set Omanis apart from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, which to this day largely adheres to Sunni Islam.

Sufism and **Salafism** are two significant Muslim movements that emphasize different aspects of Islam's doctrines and practices.[156] Both movements exist in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf; however, Salafism and particularly Wahhabism is more prominent in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, as Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Wahhabi movement. With resources coming from the Gulf States, the Salafi movement gained a foothold and popularity beyond the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region,

spreading to neighboring Levant,[157] Southwestern Asia (the Wahhabi movement has especially gained popularity in that region, primarily during the Soviet war in Afghanistan), North Africa, and elsewhere.[158]

Islamic Religious Movements: *Sufism*

The word Sufism, or *Tasawwuf,* derives from the Arabic word "*suf*," a reference to the woolen clothes that the *Sufis* wear to demonstrate their devotion to a mystic life.[159] Sufism is not a branch or sect of Islam; rather, it's the inward-looking and mystical aspect or dimension[160]of Islam that exists in both Sunni and Shi'a sects.[161] A member of these groups is called *darwish* or *darvish*, which means someone who gives up earthly issues to seek a personal relationship with *Allah* (God).[162]

The Sufism movement developed in the late eighth century,[163]and it focuses on the esoteric and hidden meanings of the Qur'anic revelations, as opposed to the literal interpretation.[164] Sufism is centered on the personal and emotional religious experiences of the individual.[165]

Historically, Sufism is organized into a number of brotherhoods or mystical orders,[166] known as *ṭuruq /ṭarīqah,* which literally means path.[167] Each order or *ṭarīqah* has its own religious rituals, and saintly and hereditary leadership structure.[168] The leader of each order is known as the sheikh or *pir*, supposedly a descendent of the Prophet Mohammed. Sufi sheikhs and saints are believed to possess *barakah* ("blessing" or "charisma").[169] The Sufi sheikhs' positions are usually hereditary and passed from father to son.[170]

Sufism mixes mainstream rituals of Islam, such as prayers with other spiritual practices. It aims at a mystical union of the individual Muslim believer with God through lengthy prayer, while performing physical and spiritual movements. One of the most popular Sufi rituals is called *zikr* or *dhikr* ("remembrance" of the divine); this involves chanting and praising God's attributes while dancing. Sufi dancing is usually performed by whirling dervishes. This particular dance ritual is significant because according to Sufis, *dhikr* is often deemed more important than the sharia.[171] For this reason (and because of many others), Sufis have historically quarreled with other Muslims, particularly *Salafists*, who place greater emphasis on sharia.[172] Therefore, Sufis are often considered heretics by extreme groups such as al-Qaeda.

Some of the well-known orders in the region are in Iraq such as the *Qadiria* order, located where the tomb of Shiekh Abdul Qadir al-Gailani (founder of the order) is buried in Baghdad. Followers of the *Qadiria* order stretch from West Africa to India, making it the most widely spread group among the Sufi orders.[173] The shrine of Shiekh Abdul Qadir al-Gailani in Baghdad is a pilgrimage destination for adherents of this order.[174] Other orders are: *Naqshbandia* and *Rifa'ia*.

Most Sufis are known to be pacifist, focusing on the mystical side of Islam – which focuses on chanting and dancing. However, the group known as the Naqshabandi army in Iraq, which follows the ancient *Naqshabandi* order and is comprised mainly of former Ba'athist in Iraq, has been in alliance with al-Qaeda and ISIS. As opposed to the known Sufi's pacifist approach, this groups launched terrorist attacks and fought alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS against the Iraqi forces and U.S. military before its withdrawal from Iraq.[175]

Islamic Religious Movements: *Salafism and Wahhabism*

> **Salafism** and the term **Salafi** or **Salafist** is derived from the Arabic word *Salaf* or *al-Salaf as-salih,* which refers to the Islamic "pious predecessors" or "forefathers," "ancestors, specifically of Mohammed's time"— who are considered by the movement examples to be followed by Muslims. Salafism, therefore, seeks to restore Islamic practices in the way they existed at the time of Mohammed and the early three generations of his followers.[176]

In contrast with Sufism's mystical, cryptic approach (which exists in both of Islam's biggest sects, Sunni and Shi'a), the Salafi movement is an ultra-conservative movement only within Sunni Islam that embraces puritanical religious interpretations and views.

Adherents of Salafism believe that Muslims drifted away from the core principles of Islam set by the Prophet Mohammed and Islam's early followers; therefore the movement seeks to purify society by encouraging believers to return to these principles. Salafism stresses the importance of the principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of God)[177] and follows an apparent meaning and strict interpretation of the Qur'an and the Sunna and Hadith.

Salafists views the Qur'an and Hadith as the essential sources of Muslim beliefs and practices, and regards *al-Salaf as-salih* as the guiding instrument to understand Islam and purify society.[178] Salafists also believe every decision made in daily life should be supported by religious precepts.[179]

Salafism rejects *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning), *ijma'a* (consensus), and *taqlid* of *madhib* (school of jurisprudence)[180] in Islam and any form of traditional or moderate teaching and man-made laws: instead, it embraces a literal interpretation and application of sharia.[181] This directly contradicts the Sufism perspective of a mystical union between the believer and Allah.

Roots of Salafism emerged at first as an intellectual movement led by Mohammed Abduh, an educator; Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a political activists; and Rashid Rida, an Islamic scholar at Al-Azhar University in Egypt in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Leaders of the Salafist movement intended to create social and political reform through preaching *da'awa* and education where it acknowledged and admired Western technologies and advancements.

However, Salafism evolved over the years and drifted away from its original reformist seeds planted by Al-Afghani, Abduh, and Rida. At some point, segments of the movement merged with the *"Wahhabi"* Islamic doctrine practiced on the Arabian Peninsula under the reign of King Faisal during the 1960s. *Wahhabism* was founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in the eighteenth century, and was adopted by the early leaders of Saudi Arabia.[182] Like Salafism, Wahhabism emphasizes the principle of *tawhid* (monotheism) and seeks to purify Muslim society of any Western influence and *bid'a* (innovations). It is worth noting that Wahhabis identify themselves as *muwahidun* (monotheist or Unitarians); they consider the term Wahhabi to be derogatory and a form of *shirk* (idolatry, polytheism).[183]

> **Wahhabism** is distinguished from Salafism by its insistence on obedience to authority and reliance on *ulama* (religious scholars) from religious/legal rulings.

Experts in the field divide Salafism into three groups: 1) "Quietist Salafists," who dismiss politics, do not oppose rulers, and focus on non-violence preaching or *da'awa*, (a primary activity of the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia). 2) "Activists Salafists," who are involved in politics and participate in modern political processes and elections. The Muslim Brotherhood and its branches are within this second group. 3) "Jihadi Salafists,"[184] represented by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL).

Overall, Salafism rejects Western (European-American) modes of thought, values, and social organization, with particular disdain for the concepts of a secular state, elections, and democracy. Many Salafists, however, embrace science and technology, but stress that they must be used in conjunction with Islamic values. They insist that sharia (Islamic law) is the solution to social problems.[185] Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban, Boko Haram, exemplify the jihadi Salafism doctrine.[186]

Differences in theological and political views were the catalyst behind countless attacks in different parts of the region by Salafist Jihadist groups. They have destroyed the tombs of Sufi saints and Shi'a shrines, such as the 2006 al-Askari shrine bombing in Samarra north of Baghdad. (There is additional discussion about Islamic jihadist groups in the Regional Security section.)

Informal Social Networks

Reliance on informal kinship networks, friends and acquaintances, and long-term relationships in everyday life are characteristic of societies in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region. These networks provide key sources of information, knowledge, and resources in every aspect of life and are often known as *wasta*. The networks have strong bonds based on trust. Members of the network go out of their way to reinforce these bonds, spending substantial time and resources in the process. Nepotism or cronyism is not viewed negatively like it is in the United States.[187] On the contrary, it is considered functional and a privilege to hire relatives, take care of them, recommend them to colleagues, and promote them politically. In this part of the world only members of the family or same ethnic and religious background are fully trusted.

> ***Wasta*** is an Arabic term best translated as 'clout, connections, influence, mediation, or pull.' It is a form of corruption especially if there is any form of payment involved. *Wasta* involves using one's connections and influence in places of power to get things done outside of the normal bureaucratic procedures.[188]

The root of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf society, especially in the Arab countries, is tribal. This attribute has helped to create of informal networks or the informal support system where people rely on either immediate family or extended family for help and support. Moreover, people rely on informal networks when the government is weak or fails to provide needed support and services. In this case political or religious based networks come into play. This is evident in some of the Shi'a militias and Shi'a and Sunni political groups operating in Iraq: they frequently provide essential social support and services to both middle-class and underprivileged communities of their respective sects. This occurs because the Iraqi government is not capable of providing social provisions or often justice. This also stems from the acute politicization and the sectarian nature and fabric of the Iraqi society, particularly following the 2003 war. These services are usually paid back in the form of political support during elections; however, more importantly, this informal system also strengthens the political-religious-sectarian entities' "street power" and militia politics in these communities.[189] This

clan, tribal, and notable families' social structure[190] collectively create an informal safety network for families and individuals.[191] People often rely on these informal networks for survival, especially with the lack of reliable authorities or those that fail to deliver. As people in the informal networks develop trust and bonds within the network, they likewise have limited trust in formal institutions and in people outside the networks.

Family Structure

Societies in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf are communitarian and group-oriented. The nuclear and extended family, is the most important social structure in the region. However, there is variation in family structure and values across the region states and from urban to rural within each state.

The extended family includes much more than the American version of brother, sister, mother, father, and grandparents. It includes, uncles, aunts, and extended cousins as well.

Family is structured around one line of the family, usually descending through a male relative. Traditional Arab households are headed by the father or oldest male in the family, an authority figure who commands respect and obedience.

It is common for three generations (parents, grandparents, and children) to live under one roof. Unmarried children tend to live with their parents and a set of grandparents. Grandparents typically live with their married son rather than daughter. With dramatic change and urbanization, the nuclear family remains the most important institution in the region; however, extended families remain tightly knit and are important even when family members no longer live in the same neighborhood or town.

Urbanization, smaller families, financial and economic issues, and a growing social trend of marrying later in life, have all contributed to drastic changes in the traditional home life in the region. Nuclear families now outnumber extended families living in the same household. Despite these changes, kinship ties remain strong. The honor, name, and image of the family are extremely important and many people in the region attach greater value to the honor of the family than their own lives, or the lives of their relatives.

Iraqi family out on a picnic (Source: Wikimedia)

People not only rely on the immediate and extended family for emotional and financial support, but also for child- and elder-care assistance. In general, the extended family provides a safety net during hardship. The importance of maintaining these bonds and obligations is taught and encouraged from youth. Even migrants who left the region generations ago continue to send money to relatives and fund charitable organizations based in their respective homelands.

Family ties also serve as a foundation of social and professional interaction. People expect their kin to show favoritism, to help them out, or to provide assistance. This system pervades at all levels of public and business life, from national institutions and business corporations, to low-level bureaucrats.

Members are obliged to promptly help any member of family at time of need. This obligation often includes non-relative neighbors. Therefore, the idea of "acquaintance" is much more significant in the region than in American society.

People of the region tend to be very proud of who they are and easily take offense at perceived slights directed at them or their group. People also demonstrate deep respect for elders. In some rural areas people can go to extremes to defend their personal and family honor. Having a child out of wedlock, extramarital affairs, or dating without parental supervision can lead to honor killing, usually committed by a male family member.[192]

Many marriages in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf are arranged by the bride and groom's parents. Families and matchmakers continue to bring together most couples in the region. However, more urbanized, middle-class, young people are now meeting their own partners at work, or at school, and simply asking their parents to bless the union.

In more traditional and rural areas, the bride and the groom often tended to be what Americans would consider underage, especially in Yemen and some parts of Saudi Arabia. All couples must go through a civil ceremony in order to be officially married. Couples usually have a civil ceremony and religious ceremony. In some areas, wedding celebrations can last more than a day, depending on the family's financial and social status. Weddings in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, in general, are a serious family affair. It could be an extravagant show and an opportunity to display one's social class and financial status. The families of the newlyweds of all social classes spare no expense to offer the wedding guests a memorable feast and often a wedding souvenir.

Religion, Law, and Gender Equality

There are clear male and female roles common in all countries in the region. The societies are deeply patriarchic, especially in rural areas, and these attitudes permeate all spheres of life. Custom has long cast males as breadwinners, heads of households, and the defenders of familial honor. Females, on the other hand, are expected to manage households and tend to children. Women are respected but not considered equals and they are absent from key leadership positions.[193] The concept of gender equality in the region is not as important as in the United States.

**Female labor force, 2014 (% of total labor force)**
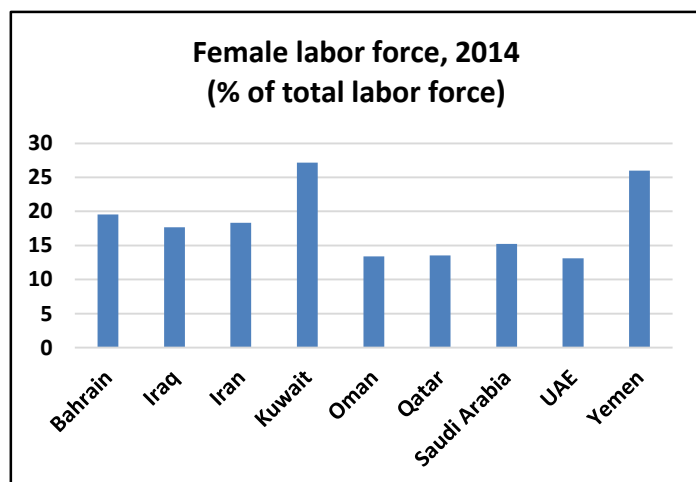
Source: World Bank

Most interpretations of the Qur'an do not preclude Muslim women from working outside the home, albeit with their husband's permission. Furthermore, in most instances, women also have the right to own and dispose of property as they wish, and to obtain an education. In many rural areas of the

region, however, local cultural attitudes prevail. Men are expected to be breadwinners and a wife's employment in public is seen as a sign of his failure to support his family. As a result, many women tend to leave the workforce soon after marriage, particularly after the birth of their first child.

Children of both sexes are given clear guidance on gender norms and are actively corrected for departing from them. Correct displays of appropriate gender roles are regularly encouraged until adulthood.

Female and male unemployment (% of female and male labor force)
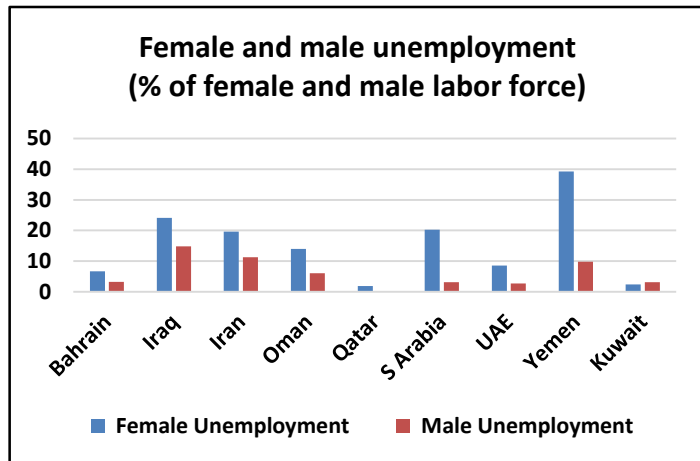
Source: World Bank

Patriarchal traditions have an influence across the region, particularly in rural areas and more so in certain countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In some areas of rural Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen these can affect a family's decision whether or not to send a daughter to school, whether a woman should be allowed to work outside the home, as well as when and whom she should marry.

In big cities, however, there are variations from these norms and traditional gender roles are frequently challenged. Nevertheless, the societies remain rather traditional in observance of gender roles compared to western values. Very few women hold prominent positions in politics and business, and they are not allowed to participate in certain sports or even attend national sports. In countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, women do not have the same legal rights as men and often end up in prison when voicing their opinion about their rights and equality.

Saudi Arabia enforces very strict gender segregation; there are separate areas for men and women in mosques, restaurants, and other public places. Women also have either limited or no access to certain places, such as cafes, parks, libraries, and government ministries,[194] and are treated in accordance with Sharia law where there are many restrictions on their social, professional, and personal lives. They are mandated to wear the *hijab* (head scarf) and the *abaya* (the full-body cloak), and in certain parts of the Kingdom the regulated dress code is the full *niqab* where the entire face is covered. There are no female fitting rooms in shopping malls. Women are not allowed to travel, drive, or initiate any legal process unless they have a direct male relative (father, brother, son, or husband) as their guardian (*mahram*).[195] However, the late King Abdulla initiated some reform where women were allowed to vote and stand as candidates in 2015 municipal council elections. He also expanded the size of the national Shura Council to include 30 women.[196] Beyond this point, women in Saudi Arabia hold no senior government positions.[197] If behavior or dress code is deemed inappropriate or un-Islamic, women (and, less often, men) in Saudi Arabia regularly face verbal and physical violence in public punishment (and possible imprisonment) by the government's Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, known as the "religious or morality police" (*mutawa'a*).[198]

Following Iran's Islamic revolution, women lost most of their rights under the previous regime. Sharia law with Shi'a interpretation was implemented and much of the power was in the hands of Ayatollah Khamenei. Women were forced to cover their hair and wear the *hijab*. Like Saudi Arabia, Iran's morality police are deployed to roam the country's streets and public places, harassing women by imposing Iran's Islamic behavioral and dress code. The government enforces gender segregation in

public places. Women remain under the guardianship of their male relatives (father, brother, son, or husband) and are not allowed to travel without the permission of their male guardians.[199] Although women are permitted to play sports such as soccer and volleyball, they are not allowed to attend and watch men play these games.[200] Few women in Iran hold senior ministerial and parliament positions.

Child marriage is prevalent in the region, however it varies from country to country, with Yemen being the country with the highest rate of child marriage.[201] There, girls often as young as eight are being forced into marriage. The country is ranked 142 at the bottom of the *Overall Gender Gap Index for 2014,* published by the World Economic Forum.[202] Yemen also has one of the lowest rates of women's participation in the workforce, political representation, education and health attainment[203]-- not just among countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, but also in the world.

Overall, there are obvious gaps and inconsistencies between constitutional rights and social norms and traditions in most of the countries in the region. This is mainly true in rural areas and communities that have retained Bedouin traditions. These traditions and norms have a significant impact on the choices and ambitions of young people. Also, violence against women is widespread and often goes unreported because of social norms and pressure such as shame and face-saving.

Countries in the region have either a mixed legal system which is often either derived from sharia or doesn't contradict sharia law. Other countries are ruled completely in accordance with sharia law, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. In countries with religious minorities such as Iraq and Iran, family and inheritance law often follow Judaic, Christian, or Islamic law. The Iraq civil code uses religious law as one of its main sources of legislation, other legal codes (such as international trade and criminal law) may be based on European models. However, sharia sometimes extends to matters beyond family and inheritance. An example of this is in Saudi Arabia, where some disputes are often resolved through Islamic courts.
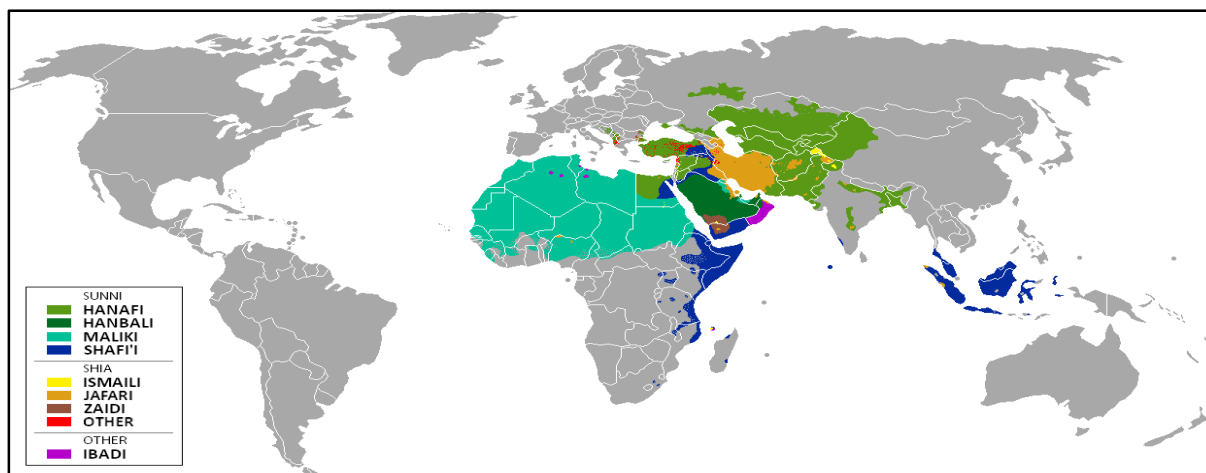
The distribution of the predominant Islamic school of law (madhhab) followed in majority-Muslim countries and regions (Source: Wikimedia)

Islamic law on the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and UAE) has historically been based on a specific school of Sunni jurisprudence known as the *Hanbali fiqh* (school of jurisprudence).[204] Shi'a, on the other hand, follows the *Ja'afari* (school of jurisprudence), particularly in countries such as in Iraq and Iran.

Here are some of the general Islamic codes relating to women in the region according to the particular school of *fiqh*:
- Men may marry up to four women.
- In sharia courts, the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man.
- As with most Islamic legal systems, women inherit half as much as their male relatives.
- In the Sunni sect, men have the right to divorce their wives for any reason or for no reason simply by uttering the divorce word *Talaq* three times. On the contrary, the wife has the right to request divorce only through court where she has to provide a proof of particular claims.
- Shi'a men seeking a divorce must pursue the process through a religious or civil court.

Class

In this region, a number of factors determine the social class of a person. The most important factors include the tribe or family name, type of post held in government, income, education degree, and title. Furthermore, wealth, family prestige, the value of one's home, and social reputation are all also important.

Urban dwellers, especially those in the largest cities, tend to look down on those who either live in rural areas or have recently migrated from the countryside. This plays a major role in the region's social stratification. The rural populations are generally less exposed to Western cultures and tend to favor traditional notions about lifestyle, behavior, and dress.

Ethnicity and religion also affect one's social status. Ethnic and religious majorities in the region tend to see themselves as their respective country's "hosts," while the ethnic and religious minorities are seen as "guests." In the eyes of majorities, hosts and guests are supposed to act accordingly. This attitude inevitably relegates minorities to an inferior status in society. Ethnic and religious minorities see themselves as being discriminated against by the majority in employment, services, and access to political power.

An example of this is the treatment of minorities in Iran. Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran became the Islamic Republic of Iran -- a theocracy, clerically-ruled government, where religion and politics are intertwined under the Shi'a interpretation of the sharia law.[205] The Shi'a-majority Iranian political leadership barred the public observation of other forms of Islam such as Sunni, and other faiths, such as Baha'i, Judaism, and Christianity. Members of Iran's Sunni minority -- including Kurds, Arabs, and Balochis -- also face discrimination, oppression, and lack representation in the government.[206]

While Iran's constitution officially guarantees the rights and freedom of faith to Islamic minorities (as well as to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians -- the "People of the Book" cited in the Qur'an), religious minorities are normally regarded with suspicion. Non-Shi'a Iranians are barred from serving in senior administrative positions in the government. The country's Baha'is are considered apostates and, therefore, are constantly persecuted.

Conversely, it is the Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia that is treated suspiciously. Historic tensions and mistrust between the Shi'a minority in Saudi Arabia and the government were intensely aggravated following the wave of 2011 uprisings known as the "Arab Spring" that swept the entire Middle East.[207] Conversely, while Kuwait is a majority Sunni country, the Shi'a have been actively involved in the

country's government, economics, and politics since the country's inception.[208] Shi'a minorities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have been the target of terrorist bombings perpetrated by Sunni radical groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Values, Norms, and Beliefs

As mentioned earlier, cultures in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf are generally group-oriented. Norms of behavior are deeply rooted in folk traditions and form the core of societies. Having a sense of belonging to a group, conforming to its norms, and maintaining harmony among its members are more important than asserting individual preferences.

Development, urbanization, and education are increasingly weakening traditional values, norms, and beliefs in the region -- and, in the process, creating new ones. Rapid modernization in UAE, Kuwait, and, to a certain extent, Iraq, has increased the rate of change. Accordingly, there are increasing variations in cultures and even gender roles in society across the region and within each country from rural to urban. In big cities, kinship, regional, religious, and ethnic ties do not necessarily form the basis of personal and professional trust and commitment.

Furthermore, instability, conflicts, and deteriorating economies have forced hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to migrate for various reasons. Whether in search of temporary refuge in neighboring countries or permanent resettlement and employment in the Gulf States, Europe, or the U.S., this migration trend has strained traditional family ties. Many women have had to take on the responsibility of running households in these patriarchic societies, especially during Iraq's successive wars.

The Use of Symbols

The people and states in the region extensively use symbols to communicate what they value. One example of the importance of symbols is the way Shi'a use memories, story-telling, and commemorations of events that took place thousands of years ago to communicate beliefs about Shi'a identity and the history behind it and to keep them alive. For example, the Battle of Karbala is always present in Shi'a events and rituals. The Shi''a rituals of Ashura (the 10th day of the Islamic month of *Muharam*), involve wailing, performing self-flagellation, beating one's head and chest, and reenacting the entire battle in a story-telling ceremonies: all serve as a reminder of the sad incident of the killing of Hussein in Karbala. The word Karbala by itself symbolizes sadness and sorrow for Shi'a.

The Hamsa (Source: Wikimedia)

Many Shi'a rituals can be compared to Jewish traditions, which use memories and the commemoration of events that took place thousands of years ago to reinforce beliefs about Jewish identity and the history of Israel; the destruction of the Temple is always present in Jewish events and rituals; the smashing of a glass during Jewish wedding ceremonies serves as a reminder of the sad incident of the destruction of the Temple.[209]

Also, Shi'a adherents in this region use a symbol of their faith and following of Imam Ali Ibn Abitalib (Mohammed's Cousin and son-in-law), which is a double-bladed sword called *Zulfiqar* or *Tho-Alfiqar*.

The sword can be worn as a pendant, displayed as a wall decoration, or depicted -- especially now among young people -- as a tattoo.

Another example of the use of symbol is the "evil eye" (also known as *a'ayn* means eye in Arabic, *Khamsa* means five in Arabic, Hand of Maryam, Hand of Fatima, *Nazr*), which is used for protection from evil and envy. This symbol is found throughout the entire Middle East, but particularly in northern parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf in Mesopotamia.[210] A *Khamsa* could be worn as pendant, displayed as a wall decoration, or carried as a keychain.

Education

All of the countries in the region have a universal, state-supported, and centralized education system. Literacy rates among people older than 15 are high. Literacy rates higher than 90 percent are found in some Gulf States like Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain. Yemen has the lowest literacy rate in the region, at around 70 percent, while Iran and Iraq and are in 80 percent range. Literacy discrepancy between males and females is particularly evident in Yemen, where the literacy rate is 85 percent for males, and 55 percent for females. In most countries, education is usually free and compulsory from elementary (age 6) up to middle or high school (ages 11-14).[211] In addition to state-run schools, there are private schools which operate under either local or international systems.

Adult literacy rate, population 15+ years (%)
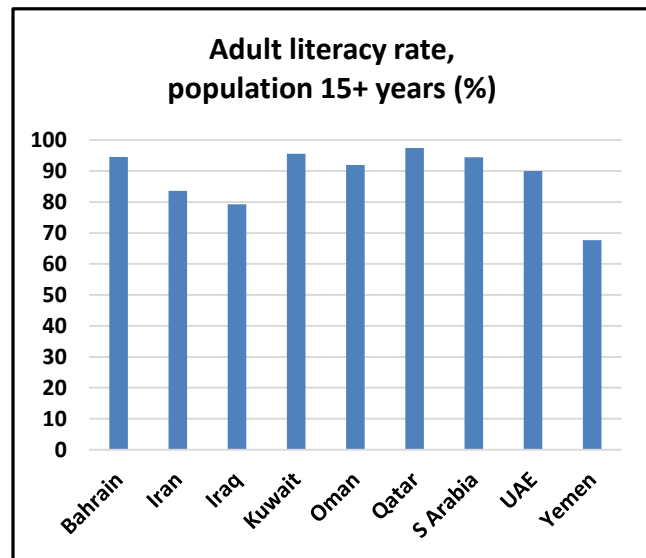
Adult literacy rate for each country: Oman – 2014; Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen – 2013, Bahrain – 2010; UAE – 2005.

There is an evident urban-rural disparity in education quality and infrastructure, especially in countries engaged in conflict and which have high poverty rates, such as Iraq and Yemen. In rural areas, if children are lucky enough to be enrolled in school, they usually have a spotty attendance record; this is because many children have to work to support their families. In countries afflicted by instability, rural families are usually hesitant to send their daughters to school, either for safety reasons (especially if school attendance requires traveling) or for reasons associated with tradition and religion. Children displaced by conflict face particularly severe barriers to education. Even in countries with greater resources and which are free of conflict, many children leave school early, especially out of primary and lower secondary education. Those children are predominantly from the poorest households in rural areas.

With the discovery of oil and an increased demand of world consumption, the Gulf States in the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a sweeping and rapid development plan that included enhancement of education systems. The Gulf States became a destination for education-related employment, and even today continues to attract high-quality teachers and professors from neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria. Europeans and Americans are also represented, teaching different subjects, from English language to math and science. Most government-backed public schools are limited to citizens of these countries. However, many wealthy families send their children to private

schools. Some of these private school are based on either British or American curriculum, combined with Arabic studies and Islamic teachings.

Foreigners and migrant children attend less expensive private, community, and/or international schools. Some of these international schools are owned by communities of foreign nationals living in Saudi Arabia and are supervised by the respective diplomatic missions. Enrollment in institutions of higher education and state universities is limited to local citizens. However, in recent years more students from the Gulf States have sought university-level education at prestigious schools in the U.S. or Europe. Many students studying abroad have their tuition and living expenses paid by their governments.

Education in Saudi Arabia is divided into segregated general education for boys and girls, with an additional tradition-based Islamic education for boys aspiring to become *Ulema* (religious clergy).[212]

Education in Saudi Arabia has a greater focus on the Wahhabi Sunni version of Islamic teaching, which includes the memorization and the interpretation of the Qur'an, and the application of the Islamic tradition into the students' daily lives.[213] Islamic education is also compulsory at the university level. Saudi Arabia also boasts the best universities not only in the region, but also in the entire Arab world. One of the reasons for Saudi Arabia's success in higher education may be the high level of state funding. On average, the best universities in the country receive $733,069 of institutional income per member of the staff.[214] Qatar, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, and Oman also each have at least one university deemed excellent by international standards.

Prior to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, the country had Western-style curriculum for students at the elementary and secondary level. Following the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government aggressively promoted literacy, with an emphasis on educating students about Islam. Education is public and funded by the Iranian government. However, compared to urban areas, rural areas have fewer schools. For that reason -- and because of child labor practices and traditional/religious attitudes towards women's education -- rural families are less likely to send children to school, especially females. Iranian university students study abroad, especially those who can afford it. Obtaining a higher education overseas is favored by promising Iranian students due to high competition and limited university seats inside Iran. Students who graduate from prestigious foreign universities are highly regarded inside Iran.[215]

Health

All countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf have healthcare systems that are either public (usually free and financed by the government and run by the ministry of health) or private (financed by public and private insurance policies and out-of-pocket payments).

Healthcare is available to most people in the region and to varying degrees. Factors such as affordability, the nature of the illness, the availability of facilities, and

Physicians, 2010 (per 1,000 people)
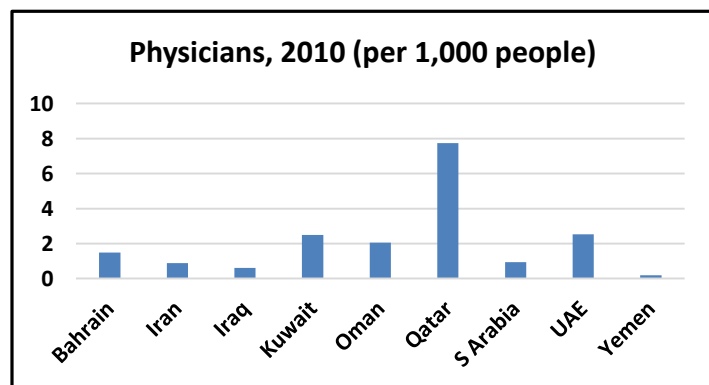
Source: World Bank Data

confidence in the type of doctor usually determine whether a family chooses primary public healthcare or opts for out-of-pocket or private healthcare. However, there is a noticeable discrepancy in healthcare coverage among the countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. Many Gulf States have very modern healthcare infrastructures and facilities, for example, but medical patients in Iraq and Yemen are poorly served.

Like the education sector in the Gulf States, the healthcare sector witnessed rapid and significant development following the discovery of oil.[216] The Gulf States became a desirable destination for medical professionals, physicians, and nurses from other Middle Eastern countries, Europe, and the U.S., mainly due to the lavish treatment and generous salaries and benefits offered in the Gulf States. These countries continue to rely heavily on expatriates to deliver its sizable and modern healthcare services. Today, citizens of the Gulf States not only enjoy free healthcare, but are privileged to receive high-quality services delivered by skilled healthcare professionals.[217] The exception is that citizens from Gulf States with critical or rare diseases often travel to either Europe or the U.S. for government-funded medical treatment. Despite the availability of government-funded healthcare, many Gulf States have a growing private healthcare sector which often provides state-of-the-art services to address more specialized requirements.[218] Obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure – all due to lifestyle and physical inactivity -- are the leading causes of mortality in the Gulf States.

Yemen has government-funded public healthcare based on a primary healthcare approach.[219] Healthcare coverage in the country reaches less than 50 percent of the total population and only around 30 percent of the rural population. Yemen has a very high degree of out-of-pocket spending on health, around 57.6 percent. Yemen also has high rates of maternal and child mortality. This is mainly due to high fertility, illiteracy, the young age of mothers at first birth (due to child marriage), closely spaced pregnancies and limited breastfeeding; accompanied with poverty, low healthcare coverage, and a lack of safe water and sanitation.[220] Also, 60 percent of the population of Yemen is at risk of contracting malaria and measles; these diseases are the fourth-largest cause of death (12 percent) among children under five.

The consumption among Yemenis of *qat*, a natural stimulant similar to amphetamines, is prevalent and increasing. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that 70-90 percent of adult males, 30-50 of adult females, and 15-20 percent of children under the age of 12 consume *qat* on a daily basis.[221]

There are several health sector programs in Yemen funded by multi-/bilateral donors and development agencies such as UN and its agencies: World Bank, WHO, the European Commission, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Oman, Saudi Arabia (the Gulf Cooperation Council), and the United States (USAID).[222] In the 1970s-1980s, Iraq had one of the most advanced healthcare systems in the region and boasted many highly skilled medical professionals. However, Iraq's healthcare sector, like other sectors in the country, suffered significantly due to successive wars.[223] In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, Iraq witnessed a "brain drain" when most of its intelligent and well-educated citizens, including physicians, fled the country (either to the Gulf States, Europe or the U.S.). This exodus, in addition to political and economic sanctions in the 1990s, led to the deterioration of the country's health sector.[224]

Iraq currently has government-funded public healthcare; however, because of years of conflicts and budget deficits, Iraqi citizens lack access to quality healthcare, particularly in rural areas. Since the lifting of sanctions in 2003, there has been a steady improvement in healthcare financing through

government sources.[225] However, Iraq's continued instability and almost daily terrorist attacks have resulted in serious injuries which burden the already crippled healthcare sector in the country. More than 50 percent of hospital intake is due to non-communicable diseases and injuries.[226] Meanwhile, diseases like tuberculosis, measles, and hepatitis remain a major challenge in the country. According to WHO, one case of polio has been confirmed in Iraq and three more cases were being investigated.[227] There are several international, bilateral, and multilateral organizations and development agencies that are providing support and services to the Iraqi health sector through cost-sharing arrangements. Some of these organizations are: UN and its agencies, the World Bank, WHO, the European Commission, and the United States through USAID.[228]

Iran has a vigorous and well-established primary healthcare network. According to WHO, Iran's "health system is one of the most robust worldwide."[229] It emphasizes equity, community, intersectoral participation, and government subsidizing of essential services. However, out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures, which stand at 58 percent, remain a challenge.[230]

Iranian life expectancy at birth is about 71.15 years. In rural areas, each village or several clustered villages are covered by what is known as a Health House staffed by trained community health workers. One step up is the Rural Health Center, which includes a physician and a health technician. On average, more than 85 percent of the population in rural and deprived regions has access to adequate healthcare.[231] Likewise, in urban areas, there are sufficient healthcare personnel and facilities to serve the population. The Iranian government is attempting to implement reform strategies to enhance the quality of the health service in these urban settings. Wealthy urban communities often receive better-quality medical services at private clinics.

Though underreported, Iran is facing a growing and serious problem in the abuse of illegal drugs. The majority of Afghanistan's opium trade passes through Iran before it arrives in Europe and beyond.[232] According to the *2015 World Drug Report*, released by the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC), three countries (Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan) accounted for 90 percent of the global quantity of opium and morphine seized each year." The report stated that "the Islamic Republic of Iran remained the country with the largest quantity of opium seized."

Life expectancy at birth, 2013 (years)
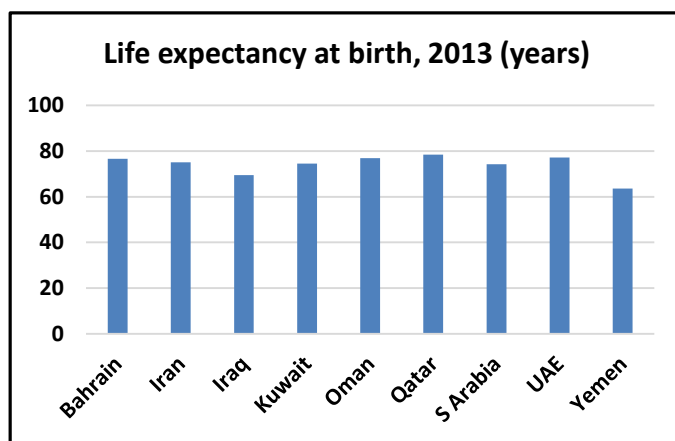
Source: World Bank Data

The sharing of contaminated needles between Iranian intravenous drug abusers has led to the transmission of HIV[233] and rising HIV/AIDS rates.[234] According to data released by the Iranian government, there are 71,000 Iranians living with HIV, 68 percent of whom have contracted the virus through unsafe drug injections. Also, about 15 percent of injectable drug users and 3-5 percent of non-injectable drug users have tested HIV positive.[235] In recent years, Iranian authorities have allocated additional resources for HIV and drug addiction treatment and prevention.

Government and Politics

**Why Government and Politics Matter to You as a Marine**

Most people live in states governed by formal and informal institutions. Marines need to know how power and authority are distributed in the state by studying the formal and informal structures of governments in the region. In addition, Marines need to understand how people, groups, and institutions exercise power and authority, in other words, what comprises politics in the states.

Political Order

The countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region are diverse in their political orders. Six of these states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates) are monarchies; the other three countries (Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) are republics. Although republics, but none of these countries can be described as a democracy as we understand the term and concept.

In all these states, there are three branches of government, including legislative, executive, and judicial. However, unlike in democracies, there is no real separation of power between the branches in these governments. Political power tends to be concentrated in one branch, and in the hands of a single or very few leaders. Accordingly, none of the countries in the region is a democracy. For example, ultimate political power is concentrated in the hands of the monarch although all monarchies have also adopted institutions empowered to provide advice, policies, and legislation to the head of state, and to generally assist in the running of government. Even the republics in the region have political systems that facilitate a concentration of power in the hands of either the executive branch (Iraq and Yemen) or in the unelected office of a country's religious leader (Iran).

Most people in this region and the larger Middle East view the police and the legal system as no more than a tool of authoritarian regimes.[236] Government institutions, including parliament, judicial systems, bureaucracy, political parties, and other institutions, suffer from various shortcomings. This includes a lack of transparency and accountability, patronage systems, *wasta*, arbitrary decision-making, and weak rule of law. Furthermore, there is a tendency within

Rule of Law in comparision to the U.S., 2014
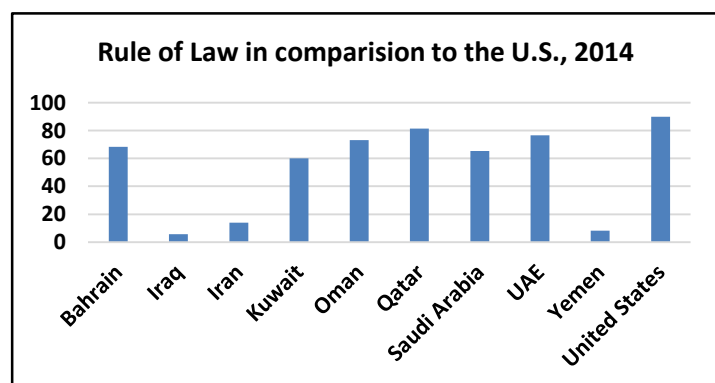
Zero corresponds to the lowest rank and 100 corresponds to the highest rank (Source: World Bank data)

these countries to serve the interest of those in power, a lack of checks and balances, widespread incompetence, and corruption. As a result, the institutions of governance are frequently unable to function properly, do not meet public expectations, and lack public trust.

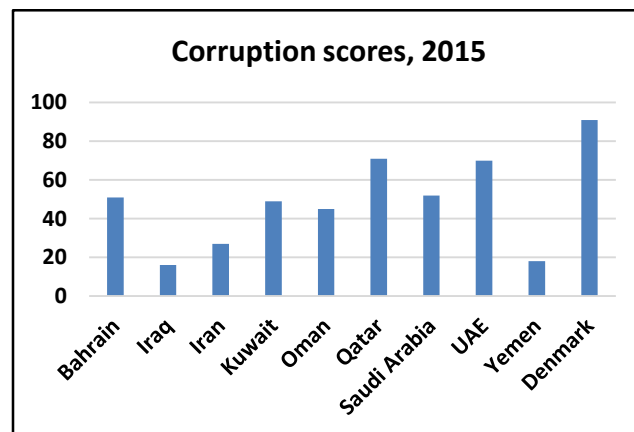Among the region's countries, Iraq is the only country that has had competitive elections for all branches of government. Following decades of dictatorial rule ending in 2003, Iraq has managed to hold eight competitive elections monitored by international organizations such as the United Nations and other independent observers.[237] However, the institutions of the Iraqi government remain weak, are faced with numerous challenges, and are plagued by widespread systematic political and financial corruption.[238] Iraq's justice system is still fragile and tainted with corruption. As a result, people often resolve their issues through tribal codes and laws.
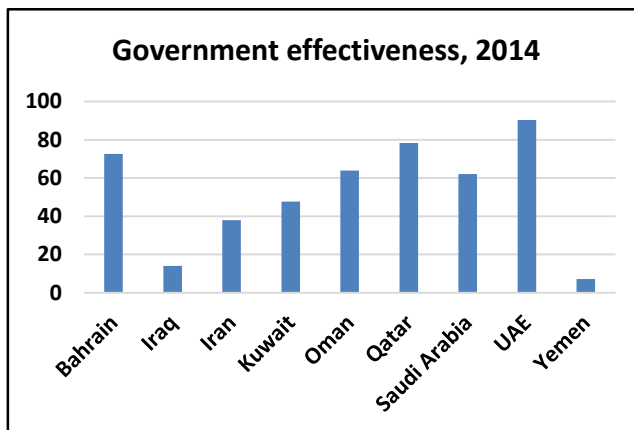
Government effectiveness, 2014

Zero corresponds to the lowest rank and 100 correspond to the highest rank (Source: World Bank data)

As these charts demonstrate, Iraq and Yemen scored the lowest in all elements of governing from rule of law, to effective governance, and control of corruption. Iraq remains unstable as ongoing wrangling between its political factions cast a shadow on the overall country's security at a time when terrorism and violence continue to challenge the Iraqi government and security forces.

Corruption scores, 2015

Although most countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf (except Iraq and Yemen) have attained a degree of stability, their incomplete political and economic transitions still pose many risks to both domestic and regional stability. The states are prone to experience political and economic instability

Arabian Peninsula and Gulf countries' scores in comparison with Denmark which was assessed as the least corrupt country in 2015. Zero corresponds to the highly corrupt and 100 correspond to the very clean (Source: Transparency International)

during changes in the domestic, regional, and international environments.

In 2015, Freedom House, an independent public policy research organization, produced its annual survey on the state of freedom around the world as defined by the state of civil liberties, political rights, freedom of expression, democratic governance, and rule of law. In the Arab Peninsula and Gulf region the report classified only Kuwait as "partly free," while all other countries were "not free." The great majority of ruling regimes in the region exercise tight control over political systems and severely restrict the political activities of their citizens. Some countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) either don't permit or outright ban political parties while imposing various

other restrictions on political participation. Accordingly, none of the countries in the region, except Kuwait, are democracies.

Although Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy in which the ruler yields considerable power, the state affords its citizens some freedoms that those in the other states in the region do not. All Kuwaiti citizens have the right to vote. The parliament consists of 50 members elected in regular, relatively competitive, national elections. By contrast, the executive branch of government is not elected by parliament, but is instead appointed by the emir (Kuwait's monarch). The executive branch is also more powerful than the legislative branch. In addition, the lack of political parties hampers the ability of independents

State of Freedom (0=worst, 100=best)
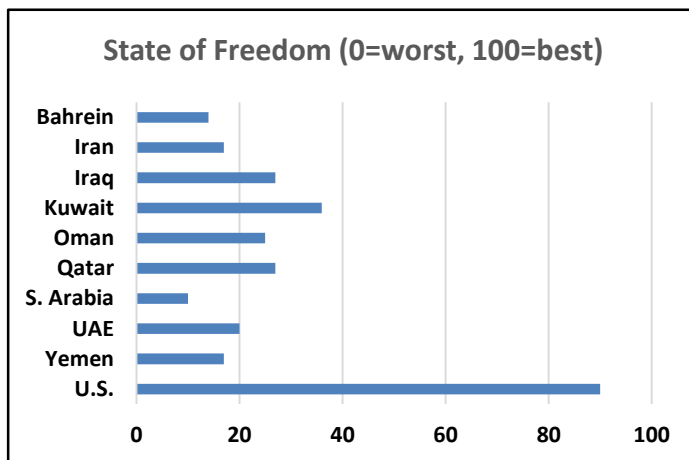
Source: Freedom House

and opposition leaders to get elected to parliament, meaning election winners are (usually or always) supporters of the ruling elite. Political freedom in the country is also highly dependent on the good will of its monarch rather on constitutional checks and balances. Thus, when the ideas of the 2011 "Arab spring" spread to the region and various groups in Kuwait demanded political, economic, and social reforms (including street protests), the government responded with a crackdown and measures that limited the political and civil rights of its citizens.[239]

Saudi Arabia has one of the most oppressive political systems in the world. The government bases its legitimacy on its interpretation of sharia law. The Saudi king and his family have a firm hold on power over the political, economic, and social systems; they also dominate the executive branch of government. The country does not hold regular elections and -- until the 2015 elections -- women were not allowed to vote or run for municipal elections.

By 2015, Saudi Arabia had only held three local municipal elections throughout its history[240] (2005, 2011, and 2015). Elections of 2015 also marked the first time women were allowed to vote and run for office in a local election. The legislative branch of government in Saudi Arabia is extremely weak, consisting of 150 members appointed by the monarch to serve four-year terms. It was only in 2013 that the king granted 30 seats to women.[241] In addition to limiting political rights, the state also imposes severe civil and human rights restrictions, including a ban on public assembly, arbitrary arrests and detentions, denial of fair trails, restrictions on freedom of speech and religious freedom, gender discrimination, and many other social and legal constraints.

Iran has a unique political system. Although in all other countries the Islamic clergy has an important role and the laws are influenced by the Shi'a interpretation of sharia, no other country rivals Iran in terms of the position the clergy holds in the formal political structure. The 1979 Iranian revolution overthrew the monarchy and set the foundation of Iran's current constitutional and political order. Some experts believe that Iranian government system is not solely based on sharia but rather one based on expediency where the ruling elite frame it within a Shi'a religious perspective to remain in power.

Iran is a theocratic Islamic republic with a mixed system of government in which the executive, parliament, and judiciary are overseen by several institutions dominated by the clergy. This system of government is justified by the concept of *Velayat-e faqih*, explained earlier, which gives political power to a jurist in Islamic law, known as the Supreme Leader, whose characteristics are deemed to best qualify him to lead the people. Sitting at the top of Iran's political power structure, the Supreme Leader is elected by the Assembly of Experts, an institution comprised of clergy *ulama*.[242] The Supreme Leader is chosen based on the candidate's personal devotion, expertise in Islamic law and jurisprudence, and political expertise. The Assembly of Experts can remove the Supreme Leader from office if they deem he is unable to perform his duties.

The Assembly of Experts: officially based in the holy city of Qom,[243] is an 86-member, all-male assembly of "clerics," each elected for an eight-year term. The Assembly of Experts is responsible for choosing and appointing the Supreme Leader of Iran. They also monitor the performance of the Supreme Leader, and have the authority to remove him if he fails to fulfill his duties. All candidates for the Assembly of Experts are vetted ahead of the elections by the Council of Guardians.[244]

The Supreme Leader has no limit to his term in office and has extensive powers including the role of commander-in-chief of the Iranian armed forces. The Supreme Leader appoints senior officers of the military and the Revolutionary Guards. He also appoints members of the judiciary,[245] half of the members of the powerful Council of Guardians,[246] and the head of radio and TV networks.[247] The Supreme Leader sets the general direction of the country's policies.

The most powerful body in Iran, the Council of Guardians, is a 12-member panel of jurists empowered to review legislation passed by parliament. Half of the Council of Guardians are theologians appointed by the country's Supreme Leader; the other six members are jurists nominated by the judiciary branch and approved by the parliament. Members of the Council of Guardians are elected for a six-year terms; elections are held every three years in phases, which means six of the 12 members change every three years.[248]

The Council of Guardians has the power to veto any law it deems inconsistent with the Iranian constitution and Islamic law. In addition, the Council approves all candidates standing for elections, and oversees the electoral process. The Council frequently prevents large numbers of candidates from running for office, including for the presidency. Additionally, the Council of Guardians vets all candidate "clerics" seeking a seat in the Assembly of Experts.

The Revolutionary Guards: following the Army, it is Iran's best-trained and most effective military force. Established after the 1979 Revolution, the Revolutionary Guards are comprised of personnel considered the most politically dependable and religiously devout.

The president is the head of the executive branch of government. Directly elected every four years in a national election, the president is allowed to serve a maximum of two consecutive terms. The president manages the day-to-day business of government and is assisted by a cabinet of ministers. Ministers in the cabinet are selected by the president and approved by the parliament. The president's powers are limited by Iran's power structure – it is the Supreme Leader, not the president, who controls the armed forces and makes decisions on major foreign and domestic policies.

The country's parliament, also known as *Majles*, is unicameral; it includes 290 members elected directly in national elections for four-year terms.

Unicameral: it is a system of government where the legislature, or legislative body, encompasses one single chamber.

Local governments in Iran have limited powers. Mayors and the governors of provinces and counties are appointed by the central government, although city councilmen are elected locally.

Iran's judicial system is another branch of government shaped by Islamic practices. The country's chief justice and the prosecutor general must be specialists in Shi'a Islamic law. According to the constitution, all judges must base their rulings on sharia law. After the 1979 Revolution, all laws that were deemed un-Islamic were revoked.

The leader of the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini, became Iran's first Supreme Leader. After his death in 1989, the Assembly of Experts elected Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the new Supreme Leader.

The political systems of the rest of the states in the region fall somewhere in between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. For most of their existence as independent states, these countries have been authoritarian states with no division of power between branches of government. Power is concentrated in the hands of few, executive power dominates the legislative and judiciary branches of government, elections are rare, and the civil, political, and social rights of citizens are severely restricted. In addition, some of the states in this region have faced internal and external conflicts, including protests, civil wars, and wars with other states, all of which have additionally hampered attempts to

Political Stability and Absence of Violence and Terrorism, 2014

Bahrain · Iraq · Iran · Kuwait · Oman · Qatar · Saudi Arabia · UAE · Yemen

Zero corresponds to the lowest rank and 100 correspond to the highest rank (Source: World Bank data)

establish pluralistic and democratic political structures in the region. For example, when demonstrators from the Shi'a majority in Bahrain took to the streets in 2011 demanding political reforms, the ruling family responded with a violent crackdown and invited Saudi troops into the country to guarantee the survival of the ruling Sunni regime. Thus, Shi'a demands for reforms, inspired by the Arab spring in the Middle East, have led to further restrictions on the rights and freedoms of Bahrain's Shi'a citizens. To include the importation of former Sunni Pakistani soldiers as Bahraini security personnel, with the incentive of guaranteed Bahraini citizenship as well as being able to bring their immediate family as new citizens.
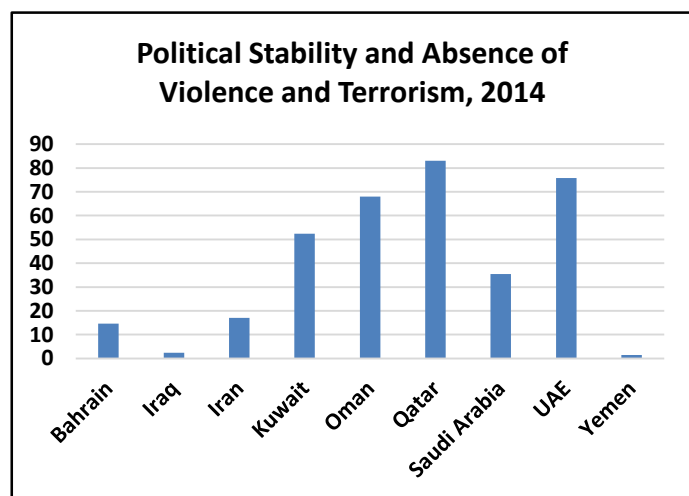
Nationalism

The concept of nationalism refers to the feeling of kinship and belonging based on shared values, culture, and beliefs. Usually, nationalism provides a basis for identity such as pan-Arabism.[249]Although

there have been several social and political events in region that led to the development of a number of nationalistic movements, Arab nationalism remains the most prominent. The main factor that bonds Arab countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf and the Arab world in general is their perceived Arab identity, which is mainly built upon their shared Arabic language, and shared Arab culture.

Despite many issues that divide Shi'a from Sunni, Islam is another bonding characteristic of the region's countries. The fact that the language of the Qur'an is Arabic and the Prophet Mohammed was an Arab intertwines the two identities (being an Arab and Muslim). While there have always been non-Muslim minorities in the Arab world in general, their culture and identity, to some extent, has been determined by the tribal and Islamic way of life. However, Christians in Iraq maintained a distinct identity and culture, despite the surrounding 'Islamic and Arab' environment.

One of the earliest accepted rallying points of pan-Arabism was the Arab revolt encouraged by Britain and France against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Later, a general and stronger sense of identity and nationalism emerged under colonial rule following World War II. This eventually led to independence for most of the Arab countries in the 1930s-1940s, and extended beyond that period (Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser's pan-Arabism popular wave movement is a good example).[250] A result of this pan-Arabism wave was the unity between Syria and Egypt in 1958 and the creation of the Arab League in 1945. Another example is the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'ath Party's focus and favoring of the pan-Arab agenda. However it must be understood that prior to, and concurrent with the rise of Arab nationalism, the sub-state, ethnic, sect, and tribal loyalties also competed with the wave of Arab nationalism and, later, with the "Islamic identity movement."[251]

Pan-Arabism is an ideology that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and peaked during the presidency of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nasser's implementation of domestic and foreign policies in favor of pan-Arabism offered Egypt a prominent role as the pan-Arabism leader in the Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s.[252] The ideology promotes cultural, political, and economic unity of Arabic-Speaking countries of the Middle East. This includes countries of North Africa and West Asia, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Sea. This area is commonly known as the "Arab World."[253] Pan-Arabism opposes Western influence in the region, and advocates for the empowerment of Arab countries either through economic or political alliances. Throughout its evolution, pan-Arabism was either secular or socialist-leaning, depending on the leader of the time.

Overall, the region's Arab nationalism, or national identity, has been historically contested by other non-Arab ethnicities and cultures which pre-date the Arab conquest, such as the Persian identity, the Kurdish national identity, and the Assyrian identity claimed by Christians in Iraq.

There are other supporting factors that nourish the Arab national identity, such as soccer. A good example is when Iraq and Saudi Arabia's soccer teams played in the Asia Cup final in 2007: Iraq won the Asia Championship for the first time. This victory generated a sense of pride and Arab patriotism throughout the Middle East. Also, arguably the Kuwaitis have created a nationalist population, as all tribes have essentially been subsumed into a new Kuwait tribe.

Economic Overview

Why Economy and Infrastructure Matter to You as a Marine

The goods and services that people exchange, the infrastructure that people use to move them, and the formal and informal structures that make exchange possible, all play critical roles in survival. A thorough understanding of a region is impossible without knowledge of its economy because the region's political, social, and cultural trends both reflect and shape economic developments and trends.

Economic Transition

The Arabian Peninsula and Gulf has the largest proven reserves of oil and natural gas in the world.[254] These resources have defined economic development in the region. Starting with Iran in the early twentieth century, followed by the discovery of huge oil fields in all the other countries in this region from the1950s to the 1970s, the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf quickly became dependent on energy exports for its wealth and development.

The discovery of oil in the region coincided with rising international energy demands in the twentieth century, most notably after World War II in Western Europe and the United States. At the time when these reserves were discovered, many of the economies in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region were little more than subsistence economies; livelihoods were drawn from activities such as animal husbandry, farming, and small-scale trade. However, all countries were able to quickly exploit their energy resources. With the support of Western oil contractors (many of them American), they discovered the oil, and built the infrastructure necessary to efficiently extract and deliver oil and gas to the global marketplace.

The oil boom in the twentieth century enabled the countries in this region to amass considerable financial resources in a very short span of time, creating enormous opportunities for economic and social development. The states invested in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and construction. The states also created large welfare systems subsidized by growing export profits. To finance the expansive budgets, the states relied on oil revenues rather than on taxing their citizens' incomes. However, the oil boom also had negative economic consequences: economic development and growth was dependent on the price of oil on the international market; additionally, the oil industry -- as the sole contributor to GDP -- precluded the need for these states to develop alternative industries.

The oil boom (and the major infrastructure development projects that it funded) required a workforce that many countries in the region did not have. As a result, millions of "guest workers" -- mostly from Asia and Africa, but also many highly qualified employees from the West -- were brought in to work.

By 2008, up to 94 percent of the workforce in Qatar was foreign. Foreign employees also made up a majority of the workforce in the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.[255] Over time, these foreign workers became the primary, dominant labor force in most sectors of the economy and government bureaucracy in the Arabian Peninsula.

The proportion of foreign populations in the rest of the countries (Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region is much lower. Iraq and Yemen -- two countries beset by lingering conflicts -- have been key providers of migrant workers to the rest of the region, rather than a recipient of foreign labor.

Saudi Arabia has by far the largest economy in the region, while Iran and the United Arabs Emirates have the second and third largest, respectively. However, in terms of national wealth per capita, it is Qatar that is the wealthiest country in the region. In fact, Qatar is the wealthiest country in the world, boasting average per capita earnings of $96,732 in 2014. By comparison, average per capita earnings in the U.S. for the same year was $54,629.
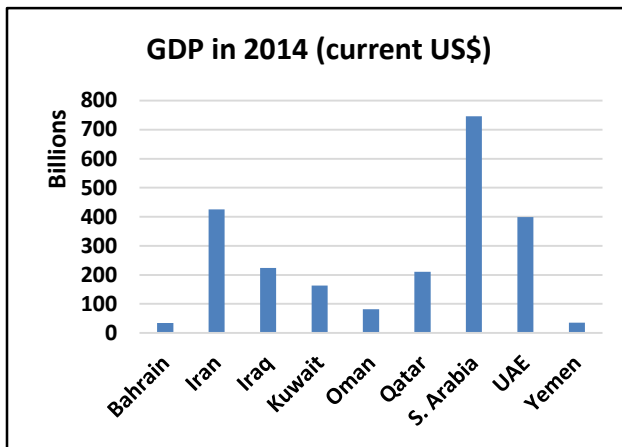
Source: World Bank
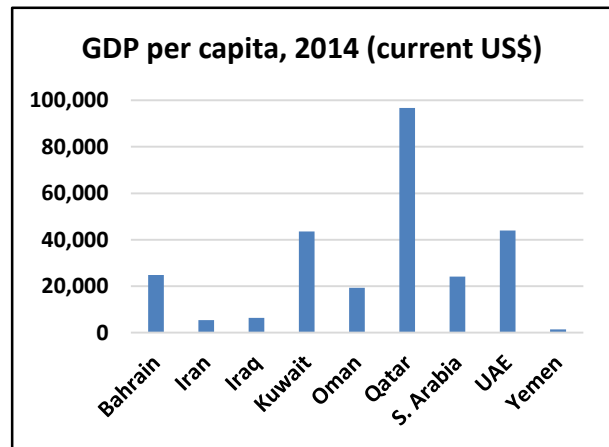
Source: World Bank

Despite the abundance of energy resources in this region, not all countries on the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf have managed to accumulate wealth, reach a sustainable economic development, or improve the lives of their citizens. Politics and conflict have frequently had a negative impact on economic development. For example, although Iraq managed by the early 1980s to accumulate substantial wealth due to oil exports and to provide high-level education and healthcare services to its population, Iraq's economy was severely damaged by its war with Iran in the 1980s, the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the Baghdad regime's defiance of the international community in the 1990s (a political stalemate that ultimately precipitated the U.S. invasion in 2003).

Similarly, violence and instability in Yemen have prevented the country from exploiting its geographic position and natural resources. A country with some of the world's greatest oil and gas reserves, Iran has also experienced severe economic stagnation due to politics and conflict, especially after the revolution in 1979. As a consequence, some of the countries in the region have dismal economic performance in contrast to the very high economic growth elsewhere in the region.

Iran

As a major exporter of oil and natural gas, Iran gained huge economic benefits from increased international demand for energy. Using the income generated from energy exports after WWII, the ruling elite of Iran's Pahlavi dynasty transformed the country's poor, agriculture-based economy into a diversified economy with booming manufacturing and trade sectors, and a large gas and oil industry. The increase in government revenues from energy exports allowed the government to invest in infrastructure development and the country's industrial base. The Iranian government also launched far-reaching land reforms, spurring further growth in the agricultural sector.

The 1979 revolution led to significant changes to the structure of the economy and put an end to Iran's rapid growth. Seeking to eliminate the great wealth disparity created by the previous regime's economic policies, the new regime nationalized major sectors of the economy and the assets of the former elite. Consequently, most sectors of the economy experienced a marked decline. Although the regime did not abolish private property, state intervention and the imposition of U.S. sanctions following the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran, brought the country's economy to near collapse. Iran's war with Iraq in 1980-88 and the collapse of oil prices added further troubles to the already distressed economy. To address shortages of goods and services, the government imposed price controls and increased subsides to consumers and industries, further increasing its intervention in the economy.

In the 2000s the Iranian economy took more hits as the U.S. and the international community imposed further economic sanctions, including freezing Iranian assets abroad, aimed at curtailing Iran's nuclear and missile programs. As a result, Iran's production and export of energy resources declined and the economy shrunk.[256] Instead of reforms, the state's interference in the economy increased. As much as 35 percent of the Iran's GDP is produced by a number of large religious and charitable foundations called *bonyads*. The foundations run large-scale enterprises and employ millions of Iranians. The heads of the foundations are selected by the Supreme Leader and are not accountable to the president, government, and parliament.[257]

Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates

Unlike Iran, some governments in the region have a more restrained role in the economy while facing relatively few domestic and external political conflicts. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, for example, have enjoyed political stability while choosing to maintain relatively open, free-market economic systems, in which the government plays a limited role. These governments have used energy revenues to invest in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, while imposing few barriers to international trade and to foreign companies doing business in their countries.

Commercial district in Doha, Qatar (Source: Wikimedia; photo by Rusavia)

The five states have also poured resources into diversifying their economies so that they are not dependent on a single industry – oil and gas. The purpose of these diversification measures are to

reduce the vulnerability of their economies to shifts in international demand for energy, to create jobs for the population in more knowledge-based industries, and to prepare the countries for the post-oil era. The states have invested in developing their financial and service industries, while spending considerably to build and upgrade the infrastructure for a rapidly growing population. The states (along with Saudi Arabia) have also invested in exploiting non-oil minerals, including gold, silver, iron ore, copper, and bauxite. Despite these diversification efforts, however, oil and gas remain the main industry of the five states.

Although all five countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf faced internal dissent inspired by the Arab spring of 2011, they have largely resisted the impulse (commonplace among autocratic regimes) to violently crackdown on the opposition (Bahrain is the exception). Instead, states in this region are trying to address some of the political, economic, and social concerns voiced by protesters. Because countries in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf are politically stable and have economies that are more diversified, they have been better positioned to survive global economic crises and price fluctuations in the energy market.

Saudi Arabia

In terms of its economic system and environment, Saudi Arabia is distinct. It has not experienced severe internal and international conflicts; this has provided the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with favorable conditions for economic growth. However, the country is highly dependent on money generated by the sale of oil (which accounts for 90 percent of total export revenues) to pay for government services (oil revenue pays for 80 percent of Saudi Arabia's national budget). At the same time, the state budget constitutes a large portion of the GDP. Therefore, when the oil exports fail to generate revenue, the state has little choice but to run large deficits (In 2015, Saudi Arabia's budget deficit reached 13.5 percent of GDP.[258]) The marketplace in Saudi Arabia is highly regulated: foreign investment in many economic sectors is prohibited or capped, and there are numerous barriers to international trade and doing business in the country.

Saudi Arabia also has the unique ability to influence oil prices on the international market. The country has the second largest reserve in the world and accounts for a large share of global oil production and trade. It is also the only country in the world that has an official policy of maintaining large spare capacity. In other words, Saudi Arabia can easily increase oil production and thus bring the price of oil down by increasing supply to the international market.[259]

Iraq and Yemen

Iraq and Yemen are also distinct from the other states in the region because they have experienced (and continue to experience) violent conflicts and volatile internal politics. Although both states, especially Iraq, have considerable natural resources, the lack of stability and long years of war and violence have precluded them from reaching sustainable economic development.

Yemen is a case in point: by 2015, due to an ongoing civil war, the Yemeni economy collapsed and nearly 80 percent of the population was surviving on humanitarian assistance. Previous attempts by the government to diversify the economy and to end the country's dependence on oil exports (which once provided 25 percent of GDP and 65 percent of government revenues) were only partially successful and were halted completely after the start of the armed conflict in 2015. Similarly, the deteriorating security situation in Iraq, starting in 2014, combined with declining oil prices, diminished

the prospect for stable economic development in the country. Iraq's largely state-run economy continues to be dominated by the oil industry, which in 2015 provided more than 90 percent of government revenues.

Industries

Rank ordering of industries, starting with the largest by value of annual output, 2015:[260]

Bahrain: petroleum processing and refining, aluminum smelting, iron pelletization, fertilizers, Islamic and offshore banking, insurance, ship repairing, tourism

Iran: petroleum, petrochemicals, gas, fertilizers, caustic soda, textiles, cement and other construction materials, food processing (particularly sugar refining and vegetable oil production), ferrous and nonferrous metal fabrication, armaments

Iraq: petroleum, chemicals, textiles, leather, construction materials, food processing, fertilizer, metal fabrication/processing

Kuwait: textiles and apparel, food processing, pharmaceuticals, construction materials, paper products, fertilizer, shrimp

Oman: crude oil production and refining, natural and liquefied natural gas (LNG) production; construction, cement, copper, steel, chemicals, optic fiber

Qatar: liquefied natural gas, crude oil production and refining, ammonia, fertilizers, petrochemicals, steel reinforcing bars, cement, commercial ship repair

Saudi Arabia: crude oil production, petroleum refining, basic petrochemicals, ammonia, industrial gases, sodium hydroxide, (caustic soda), cement, fertilizer, plastics, metals, commercial ship repair, commercial aircraft repair, construction

United Arabs Emirates: petroleum and petrochemicals, fishing, aluminum, cement, fertilizers, commercial ship repair, construction materials, handicrafts, textiles

Yemen: crude oil production and petroleum refining; small-scale production of cotton textiles, leather goods; food processing; handicrafts; aluminum products; cement; commercial ship repair; natural gas production

Informal Economy

The informal economy includes those economic interactions and exchanges that are not recognized, regulated, controlled, or taxed by a state government.[261]
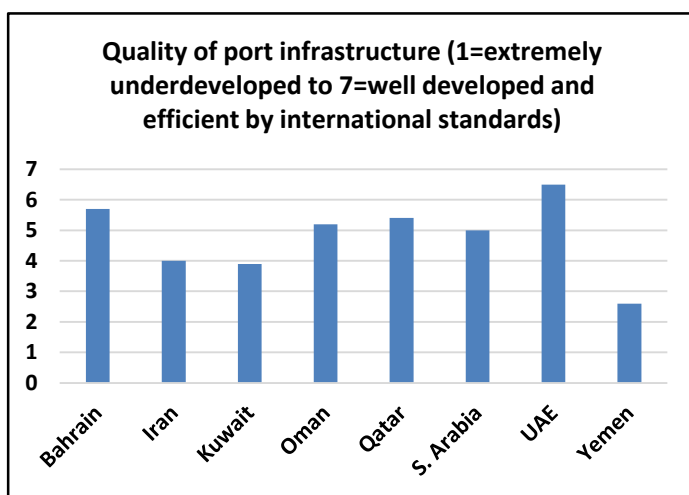
All countries in the region have significant informal economies. The informal economy allows employers, employees, and self-employed to increase their take-home earnings. However, an informal economy cannot be taxed; this results in a loss of revenue for governments. People involved in the

informal economy also lack employment stability and social security. One estimate found that, in 2007, the informal economy constituted as much 26 percent of regional GDP (as is the case of the United Arab Emirates), and as little as 17 percent (of Iran's GDP) and 14 percent (of the GDP in Qatar). (No data was available for the informal economy in Iraq.)[262]

Transport Infrastructure

One of the signs of underdevelopment is the lack of an efficient transportation network. An integrated transportation network, on the other hand, generates wealth in addition to numerous political and social benefits.

Most of the countries in the region have used their oil wealth to invest in improved maintenance of their transportation infrastructure. In Iraq and Yemen, on the other hand, warfare and lack of investments in the last decades have severely degraded the infrastructure. Among the countries in the region, the United Arab Emirates has the most modern infrastructure -- including well-built and well-maintained roads, airports, seaports, and a recently-installed metro system in one of the emirates – Dubai. Also, Iran enjoys a well-developed robust and busy metro system in the capital of Tehran.

Quality of port infrastructure (1=extremely underdeveloped to 7=well developed and efficient by international standards)
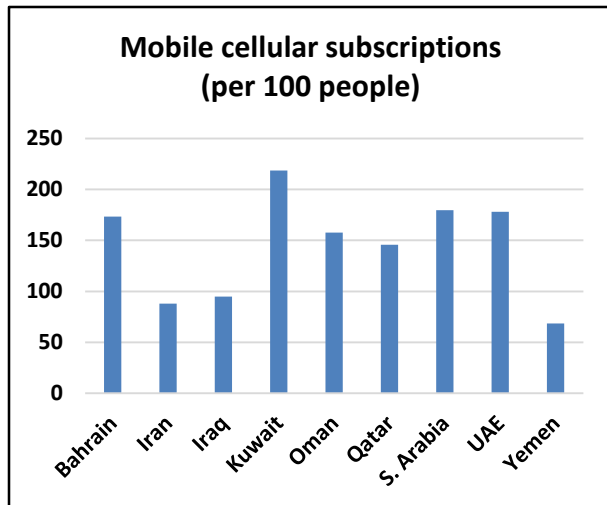
Source: World Bank Data

The low cost of fuel and the long stretches of straight roads (except in Iran where mountainous terrain poses a challenge) have traditionally favored road transportation in the region.

Until the late 2000s only Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia had a railroad infrastructure. However, Saudi Arabia's railroad system is relatively short (1,412 km[263]), while rail systems in Iran (8,560 km) and Iraq (2,138 km) are in need of a massive reconstruction after years of neglect. Many countries in this region see railroads as an alternative to road, air, and sea transportation, because they recognize that rail systems create jobs and facilitate and support growing trade. Accordingly, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and UAE are building a 2,177 km high-speed railroad system that will eventually connect these six states.[264] The project is expected to be completed by 2018.

Communications Infrastructure

For many years all countries in the region had poor communication infrastructure – the number of phone lines was limited. In the last few decades, instead of investing in fixed line communications, almost all countries in the region have invested in mobile phone infrastructure and now cell phones are ubiquitous. In fact, in all but three of the countries there are more mobile phone subscriptions than people. The region has also witnessed the spread of Internet use. Predictably, it is in countries which have experienced war (Iraq and Yemen) or international isolation (Iran) which are lagging behind in Internet use.

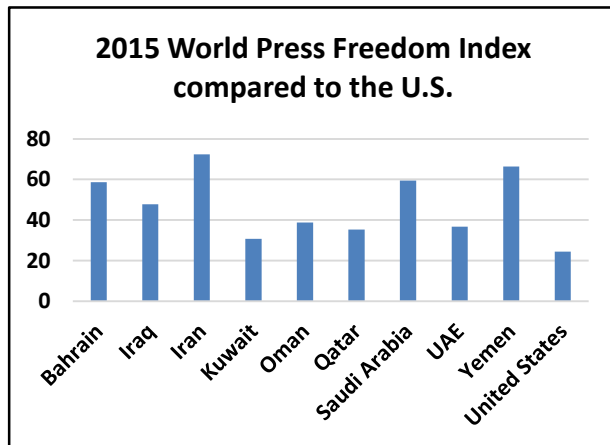**Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)**

Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, S. Arabia, UAE, Yemen

Internet users (per 100 people)

Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, S. Arabia, UAE, Yemen
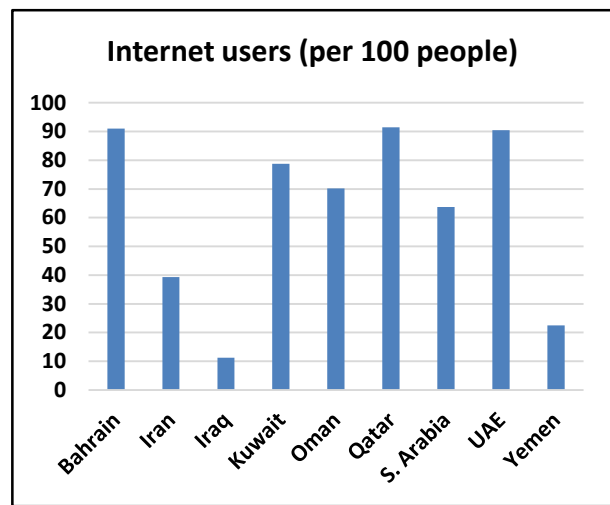
Media

The media in the region faces numerous challenges. None of the countries in the region-- except for Kuwait-- democratic, and accordingly, the media reflects this condition. If not in outright control and ownership, governments exert control over media content and form, especially in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Governments impose both formal and informal limits to freedom of speech. This forces most media outlets, including TV stations, newspapers, radio, and news websites to practice self-censorship lest they offend government and powerful interests. Thus, although all countries have thriving media markets, there are limits to what and how media informs the public.

2015 World Press Freedom Index compared to the U.S.

Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen, United States

Zero corresponds to the highest rank with the most press freedom and 100 correspond to the lowest rank countries with the least press freedom (Source: World Bank data)

According to the 2015 World Press Freedom Index, the country with the most moderate press freedom in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf is Kuwait; the country with the least press freedom is Iran.[265] Meanwhile, Iraq's deteriorating security, particularly since 2014, and lack of stability, makes it challenging for reporters and news agencies to provide fair and unbiased news coverage without bearing the possible consequence of being targeted by either terrorists, non-state actors, or the government.[266] Many local and international journalists were targeted and assassinated by terrorists; as a result, Iraq was considered one of the deadliest countries for journalists. However, following decades of dictatorship and media censorship under the previous regime, Iraq in 2003 embarked on a new phase of relative freedom for the press when compared to its past.[267]

Although governments that comprise the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf make a considerable effort to control media, over the last decade -- and especially since the Arab spring -- there has been a growing influence in the region of alternative sources of information. Lacking access to truly independent local media, people in the region, and especially youth, are increasingly turning to the Internet and social

media as a primary resource for information.[268] In fact, the Internet and social media are now challenging the dominant role enjoyed by traditional media as a primary source of information. In response to this trend, most governments in the region have slightly relaxed pressure on traditional media, allowing the media to publish and broadcast -- within limits -- more critical content. Accordingly, many people in the region are beginning to have a more positive opinion about the credibility of the media in their respective countries.

Regional Security Issues

Why Regional Security Issues Matter to You as a Marine

A thorough understanding of a region is difficult without an account of its most significant security challenges. These challenges tend to affect not only relations between states in the region but also the behavior of its people and the choices they make. Regional security issues encompass a host of topics ranging from wars between states, to insurgencies, to organized crime, to weak institutions, to systemic corruption. Some of them involve violence, while others weaken states and societies and have the potential to turn low-level conflicts into violent confrontations.

Introduction

This section discusses regional issues that have security implications for the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. The region's internal problems range from dysfunctional institutions and widespread corruption, to security instability and the spread of violence, sectarian conflicts, and economic problems. These internal problems are intertwined with external problems that are transnational in nature, such as the activities of terror groups, the interference of regional power players, proxy wars, and criminal activities. Some issues -- such as economic imbalances and social injustice -- have precipitated several civil uprisings that have swept across this region since 2011.

Although the RCLF-designated Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region consists of nine countries, the region's security threats extend beyond these nine countries. The Arabian Peninsula is the heartland of the greater Middle East and any issue originating in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf will undoubtedly reverberate regionally, especially to the Levant and Southwestern Asia regions. The U.S. has many security priorities in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, notably ensuring energy security and stability in the region, while also seeking to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions.[269]

The U.S. Central Command (U.S. CENTCOM), in coordination with "national and international partners, promotes cooperation among nations, responds to crises, and deters state and non-state aggression, and supports development and, when necessary, reconstruction in order to establish the conditions for regional security, stability and prosperity."[270]

This section identifies nine broad regional issues:
- The Iranian Threat and Sunni versus Shi'a Sectarian Violence
- Security Challenges After the "Arab Uprising"
- Terrorism and Militant Groups

- Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
- Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), or *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fe Al-Iraq wa Belad Al-Sham* (DAISH)
- The Threat to Iraq by the Shi'a Militias
- The Yemen Conflict
- Drug Trafficking
- Trafficking in Persons

The Iranian Threat and Sunni versus Shi'a Sectarian Violence

While Iran's role in the region remains one of the top security issues, it is important to note that Iran's impact is not limited to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region; this is because Iran's role reaches far beyond this region into the heart of the Middle East and Levant.

Iranian missile (Source: Wikimedia)

A theocratic Shi'a regime has ruled Iran since 1979. Since then, the country's expansionist strategy has played a unique and dangerous role in the region. Following the incident of 1979 when Iranian protestors seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostages,[271] the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Iran. Iranian influence is one of the most significant factors contributing to increasing instability in this region and the greater Middle East.

The increasing self-assurance of the Iranian regime is bolstered by its uncontrolled activities in the region and beyond its borders via proxy players. Iran has funded and trained armed groups in other countries, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas in Gaza (and other Palestinian terrorist groups), Taliban in Afghanistan, the Houthis in Yemen, and several Iraqi Shi'a militias. Iran's proxies are mainly Shi'a; however, it has also armed and trained Taliban in Afghanistan,[272] and is still arming and funding Hamas, which is a Sunni-radical Islamist movement.[273]

Iran's activities have been particularly harmful throughout the region with frequent acts of intimidation or coercion, turning countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, into war theatres for their proxy wars with Sunni regional powers such as the Gulf States, most notably Saudi Arabia.

Designated a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1984 by the U.S. State Department (DoS), Iran continues to sponsor terrorism and terrorist-related activity through surrogates and its Quds Force, an elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.[274] Iranian terror networks have spread harmful influence and activities in the region, while Iran has threatened and attacked shipping in the Gulf, creating constant regional maritime tensions.[275] The development of weapons of mass destruction by Iran and the overall arms race in the region, are major security concerns for the United States and its global strategic partners, especially Israel. In 1996, the U.S. congress passed the Iran Sanction Act[276] (also

known as the Iran-Libya Sanction Act[277]), which charged foreign and U.S. firms believed to be involved in Iran's energy sector.[278]

Iran's aspiration to become a nuclear power is considered one the biggest threats to the region and greater Middle East. One of the reasons for Shi'a Iran's obsessive drive to become a member of the "nuclear club" is the fact that Pakistan, a Sunni Muslim country, already has nuclear weapons, which has created a rivalry between Pakistan and Iran over the existence of a "Sunni bomb."[279]

Iran has refused to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to its facilities to confirm or deny international concerns over its uranium enrichment program.[280]

The ministers of foreign affairs of France, Germany, the European Union, Iran, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as Chinese and Russian diplomats, announcing the framework for a Comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear program (Source: Wikimedia)

Additionally, Iran has consistently ignored the directions and provisions of a United Nations resolution which called on Iran to fully comply with the requirements of the IAEA, or suffer further trade sanctions.[281] Iran's refusal to comply with the IAEA has always been coupled with assurances that Tehran's nuclear research and activities were for "peaceful purposes only."

In 2005, after years of Iranian foot-dragging and delays, the United Nations declared Iran "noncompliant" with the IAEA and imposed international sanctions.[282] The U.S., European Union, and United Nations sanctions collectively targeted all material and technology related to uranium production and development of ballistic missiles.[283] Sanctions also targeted trade, financial/banking transactions (including Iran's central bank), as well as any investments and exports from Iran's energy sector: oil, gas, petrochemicals, and refined petroleum products. The international sanctions imposed on Iran also included a freeze on the country's overseas assets, and a travel ban on a long list of Iranian individuals and institutions (especially anyone associated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps).

The economic impact of international sanctions led to a broad sentiment of internal dissatisfaction, particularly among young Iranians. This internal discontent eventually prompted the Iranian regime to reconsider negotiations with the international community. In 2015, after 20 months of negotiations, Iran reached an agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with representatives of the international community -- the United States, China, France, United Kingdom, Russia, and Germany -- to suspend its nuclear military program. In return for Iran's compliance with IAEA rules, the global community agreed to partially lift trade sanctions.[284]

Iran, with its large population, substantial oil reserves, relatively high level of economic development, and importance to adherents of Shi'a Islam, will play a critical role in the foreseeable future in the region, the larger Middle East, and on the global stage, regardless of who rules it. While the U.S.

regards Iran as a threat, it has also been U.S. policy to encourage the country to abandon its nuclear aspirations and play a more responsible role in regional and international affairs.[285]

Besides the Iranian threat to the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region and the greater Middle East, Iran is also seen as threat in the Islamic world more broadly. The threat of Iran's regional role is centered on two ancient and volatile factors: the first is the Shi'a-Sunni rivalry (explained in a previous chapter) and embedded hatreds; the second factor is the centuries-old enmity between Persians and Arabs. These factors are distinctly separate, yet they overlap in many areas and have increasingly polarized societies within a huge swath in the region, notably in the Middle East (Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, and the Levant), and Southwestern Asia, such as in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan, and in the Gulf States.

Some experts see the ascendancy of Shi'ism as a counter reaction to the growth of Sunni extremism, as typified by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Taliban, which has always had an embedded prejudice against the Shi'a. However, the same argument could be made to explain the growth of Sunni extremism in the face of increased Shi'a influence and militancy in the region, particularly following Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979.

Moreover, the Shi'a threat, as represented by Iran, is a revolutionary, militant, and politically involved brand of Shi'ism; this is exemplified by groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, al-Sadr militia in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen. This Iranian version of Shi'ism is known as *al-howza an-natiqa,* (the "vocal Shi'a seminary" or "outspoken Shi'a seminary"), as opposed to what is perceived by Iran and its followers as the more "quiet" and "passive" version of Shi'ism, or *al-howza al-samita* (the "silent Shi'a seminary"), espoused by Iraq's leading clerics in Najaf, notably Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and those who follow him worldwide.[286]

The turmoil in the Islamic world is not simply a product of the Shi'a-Sunni conflict, but when this dynamic is combined with the age-old Arab-Persian rivalry, the resulting situation becomes much more dangerous. The everlasting dispute over the name of the Gulf, "Persian Gulf" versus "Arabian Gulf," between Iran and its Arab neighbors is but one foretaste of this ancient hostility.

Having the world's largest number of Shi'a population, Iran sees itself as the defender of Shi'a populations located throughout the Middle East and Southwestern Asia. The majority of the people of Iraq and Bahrain are Shi'a; about half the Muslim population of Lebanon is Shi'a. In Kuwait, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, minority Shi'a communities have become increasingly agitated, asking for more rights since the 2011 Arab uprisings. Also, both Afghanistan and Pakistan have significant minority populations of Shi'a. (Pakistan, after Iran, has the world's second-largest number of Shi'a.) The minority Alawites in Syria are also classified as Shi'a by Iran, and have historically been supported by the country's ayatollahs. It is safe to assume that Iran has used these connections in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen to advance its expansionist strategy.

In Iraq there can be little doubt that the Iranians have pursued an agenda to intensify the Shi'a-Sunni enmity, thereby keeping Iraq weak and divided, with the Shi'a population dependent on the good will of Iran. Furthermore, Iran's occupation of the Greater Tunbs, the Lesser Tunbs, and Abu Musa -- islands belonging the UAE which Iran occupied since 1971 -- has convinced many Gulf Arabs of the Iranian regime's intentions for historic territorial acquisition, although this occupation took place prior to the advent of the Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran.

Iran's involvement in Middle East sectarian violence, and its rivalry with Saudi Arabia and other regional powers, is best exemplified by the Syrian conflict that began 2011. While civil uprisings in other countries have resulted in regime change, Syria's uprising led to a full-blown civil war, the spread of terrorist groups, and widespread regional instability. Most of the country, especially the northern and eastern regions, fell into the hands of terrorist organizations such as *Jabhat Al-Nusra*, *Ahrar Asham*,[287] and Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), or the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[288]A brutal crackdown by the Syrian authoritarian regimebegan as a non-violent civil protest in the southern city of Dera'a. It quickly devolved into a bloody sectarian conflict between the country's Sunni majority and the regime's Shi'a Alawites.

The Syrian conflict did not remain domestic, and soon spread regionally along sectarian lines. The conflict spilled over into neighboring countries such as Iraq and Lebanon; soon after, the hostilities were joined by several regional powers: Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar -- thus transforming Syria into the stage for a proxy war.[289] While Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey supported the Syrian armed opposition known as the Syrian Free Army (SFA); Iran and Russia backed the Syrian regime.[290]

The rise of terrorist groups further complicated the Syrian conflict.[291] As violent Sunni extremist groups joined the Syrian armed opposition, Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Baseej forces fought alongside the Syrian regime.[292] Meanwhile, the Kurdish Peshmerga and fighters of Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK) (listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S., NATO, and the European Union) supported the Syrian Kurdish fighters, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), in their fight against ISIS.[293]

Issues in the region cannot be analyzed or looked at from a black and white perspective; rather, there are many shades of gray. While all of these rivals are supporting different players in Syria, many adversaries are fighting not just each other, but also the same enemy (ISIS, for example). Some consider ISIS to be the top threat to the region and the world, while other countries (such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) view Iran's influence in the region as more dangerous than ISIS terror.[294] In general and for the last four decades, the Gulf States' primary foreign policy concern has always been Iran.

Security Challenges after the "Arab Spring"

One of the most significant events in the recent history of the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf in particular, are the civil uprisings, also known as the "Arab spring" or the "Arab awakening," which swept through the region in 2011. Some analysts believe that the Arab spring was triggered by the Iranian Green Movement[295] following Iran's corrupt 2009 elections, which initiated civil uprisings throughout the rest of the region.[296]

These civil uprisings reshaped the Middle Eastern political landscape and continue to affect countries across the region. The self-immolation of **Mohammed Bouazizi**, a fruit vendor in Tunis, precipitated a wave of civil uprisings across Tunisia in late 2010 and early 2011. These protests were largely organized with the aid of social networking platforms and information technology tools.[297] The uprisings led to political change across the greater Middle East that toppled autocratic and aging regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt.[298]However, these uprisings also produced instability in these countries that continues to the present day.

Mohammed Bouazizi was a 26-year-old fruit vendor who set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, in protest to his treatment by local authorities. His act became a catalyst for the Tunisian civil uprising known as the "jasmine revolution" and the wider, regional unrest called the "Arab spring." Bouazizi's desperate act incited massive demonstrations and riots throughout Tunisia in protest to long-simmering social and political issues. Escalating public anger and violence following Bouazizi's death prompted then-President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali to step down on January 14, 2011, ending 23 years of autocratic rule. The success of the Tunisian protests inspired uprisings in several other Arab and non-Arab countries.[299]

It is worth noting that the main triggers of these revolutions were more social than political. A majority of the mass protests were a reaction to years of endemic corruption, high rates of poverty and unemployment especially among youth, a lack of free elections and freedom of speech, and violations of political and human rights (or, as people called it, "a lack of dignity"). These political transitions have had significant implications for regional security. Weak governments, crumbling economies, and porous borders produced by the uprisings have contributed to security challenges in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf, Levant, and -- more generally -- the Middle East.

In the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf countries, the Arab Spring is exemplified by the uprisings in Yemen, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia -- to a lesser extent in Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman -- that began in 2011. While civil uprisings in other countries resulted in regime change, in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf countries, the uprisings led to one regime change in Yemen. The uprising in neighboring Syria has grown into a full-blown civil war, and has spawned terror groups and widespread regional instability that now threaten Iraq. Also severely threatens Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and arguably Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Yemen's 2011 uprising ended Ali Abdulla Saleh's 33-year rule. Following 11 months of civil protests and a government crackdown that left hundreds of people dead, Saleh agreed to step down in November 2011. He handed over power to his deputy Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi through a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council.[300] (More on the Yemen conflict will be discussed in a separate section).

In both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain the Shi'a are largely disenfranchised and excluded from power-sharing positions. They are regarded by both regimes with suspension and seen as a potential threat. The connection between Bahrain and Iran is a long one and it should be remembered that under the Shah, Iran claimed that Bahrain was its rightful territory. Approximately 65-75 percent of the Muslim population in Bahrain is Shi'a, and mostly Arabs. This estimate might have changed somewhat since 2011, as the Bahraini government has recruited extensively in Pakistan, bringing in thousands of former Pakistani soldiers as security forces, all Sunnis. The Bahraini government granted them citizenship (along with their immediate families, who also came along). Therefore the current sectarian ratio might have shifted to 40 percent Sunnis and 60 percent Shi'a; a drastic change demographically in just five years.

Bahrain has always been vital as a naval base for both the British and Americans and continues to be so today. Saudi Arabia considers Bahrain crucial to its national security. This is exemplified by its commitment to shore up the Sunni regime when it appeared that the Shi'a protests would get out of hand back in 2011.

Bahrain has always been a strategic financial and entrepreneurial hub for the Persian Gulf, and its appeal to the Iranian acquisition appetite would be a severe blow to the West and to the Gulf Arabs. The Saudis, in an effort to bind Bahrain closer to them, constructed a 15 mile (24 km) causeway, also known as King Fahad Causeway, to link the mainland of Saudi Arabia to the island of Bahrain. Although most of the Bahraini Shi'a are Arabs and have no particular tie to Iran, the Iranians have been working assiduously to create cells of supporters to incite anti-government disturbances when deemed necessary.

In February, 2011, Bahrain's protesters, mostly from the Shi'a majority, took their dissatisfaction with the Sunni-led monarchy, and what they perceived as a discriminatory treatment of a "second-class citizens," to the streets. The protesters occupied a major traffic area called "the Pearl Roundabout" in Manama, the country's capital. The protestors demanded reform and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, a goal that was never attained. The government responded to the civil protest with force, formally requesting the assistance and intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council emergency troops, known as the Peninsula Shield unit.[301] The Bahraini security forces, assisted by the Peninsula Shield unit -- comprised largely of forces from Sunni-led neighboring Gulf States and led by Saudi Arabia[302] -- managed to crackdown and clear away the demonstrators and then demolished the Pearl Roundabout.[303]

The Peninsula Shield unit that intervened in Bahrain comprised of predominantly Saudi forces, Emirati Paramilitary Police, with a small number of Qataris and Kuwaiti sailors. Oman's government refused to participate as it considered it an illegal action. Qatar soon withdrew its own contingent, and as the Kuwaiti naval contingent had a few Shi'a sailors, they were asked to leave.

Since this event, there have been several attempts by the government to initiate dialogue with leaders of the Shi'a opposition in Bahrain with the offer of very minor political reforms.[304] However, political dialogues failed to reach any agreement, which prompted the opposition to boycott parliamentary and municipal council elections in late 2014. While the protest in Bahrain was forcefully put down by the government and eventually it lost its international attention, the situation remains unresolved. In the months since the 2011 uprising was suppressed, there have been smaller demonstrations calling for reform that have resulted in violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces.[305]

The wave of the 2011 civil uprising also reached Saudi Arabia, particularly among its Shi'a population in the Eastern province *Ash-Sharqiyah*. The government responded to these Shi'a protests with a crackdown which led to several bloody encounters between protesters and the Saudi security forces. The Saudi government arrested a prominent and outspoken Shi'a cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, charging him with "incitement to treason and alleged involvement with individuals responsible for attacks on security forces."[306] Al-Nimr was later executed in January 2016, along with dozens of people accused of being members of al-Qaeda.

Within Saudi Arabia, the execution of al-Nimr intensified tensions and clashes between Shi'a protestors and Saudi security forces. Outside the Kingdom, angry Iranian protesters violently attacked and vandalized the Saudi embassy in Tehran and the consulate in Mashhad, Iran. This prompted Saudi Arabia to sever diplomatic, trade, and air connections with Iran.[307]

Although the number of Shi'a in Saudi Arabia is relatively small, they are situated in the most strategic areas of the Kingdom, in the Eastern provinces, especially in the cities of al-Qatif and al-Ahsa.[308] This

small number only accounts for 10 -15 percent of the total Saudi population, but these cities also happen to be located in the richest oil centers of Saudi Arabia.

Shi'a existence in Saudi Arabia has been made much more perilous due to the Sunni Wahhabism, the dominant sect of Islam in Saudi Arabia.[309] As explained earlier, most of the Sunni Saudis belong to the Wahhabi hard-line brand of Islam who believe that the Shi'a are basically apostates and non-believers. The Shi'a in Saudi Arabia have always been very poorly treated by the government; there have been a number of sectarian riots in recent years, which many Saudis believe was instigated by the Shi'a Islamist regime in Iran.[310]

The Yemen Conflict

The instability in Yemen provides a contemporary example of the geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In 2011, the crisis in Yemen took center stage in the Persian Gulf as a standoff took place in Sanaa between security forces and protestors calling for Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down. This occurred in conjunction with similar protests, mainly by the disenfranchised Shi'a populations in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. In 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council brokered an agreement with President Ali Abdullah Saleh for him to resign, and for his vice-president Abd Rabboh Mansour Hadi to assume the presidency.[311] After President Saleh stepped down, the GCC and the UN established a National Dialogue in order to build a new system of government in Yemen. The political transition did not ease the instability in Yemen, and disunity in the military made it incapable of maintaining order.

In 2014, armed Houthi forces assumed a defining role in Yemen's political transition for the first time. Houthis, a group that follows a Zaydi Shi'a Islam, were led by Abdul-Malik al-Houth. During the National Dialogue, the Houthi representatives withdrew from the conference after the assassination of their representative. Saudi Arabia has asserted that the Houthis have received backing from Iran, citing Iran's effort to spread its regional influence.

Zaydisim is a variety of Shi'a Islam (followers of the fifth Shi'a imam Zayd).

There is much debate about whether or not Iran has been backing the Houthis. Some scholars, including United States Institute of Peace Middle East specialist Robin Wright, said "accusations of Iranian involvement have been exaggerated and may divert international policy debates from the deep domestic causes of Yemen's violence."[312] She added: "U.S. officials have accused Iran of involvement in Yemen but also have said the Houthi rebellion has been armed and driven by domestic events."[313]

Houthi rebels were able to take over the capital of Sanaa in September 2014 and by January 2015 they placed President Hadi, along with several members of his government under house arrest. By February 2015, the Houthis issued their own constitutional declaration and established governing bodies. These moves provoked public backlash and international condemnation, prompting the UN Security Council to call on the Houthis to withdraw from government and security institutions.[314]

Fearing that the instability in Yemen would spread, Saudi Arabia led a coalition and launched an air campaign in March 2015, in order to reinstate Yemen's internationally recognized government. The decision to launch airstrikes against Yemen signaled a shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy -- and occurred shortly after the Kingdom experienced a change in leadership.

Following the death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in January 2015, his half-brother Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud was sworn in as the King of Saudi Arabia and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Soon after his appointment, King Salman appointed his son Mohammed bin Salman to the position of Minister of Defense; bin Salman is credited with leading military operations targeted at Yemen.[315]

The Saudi-led air campaign has pushed Yemen into a state of humanitarian crisis, preventing international organizations and nongovernmental organizations to access air or sea ports in order to deliver the humanitarian aid. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the civil war in Yemen has created a wide range of humanitarian problems, including concerns for the basic needs and protection of refugees. In its statement, OCHA highlighted that "more than half of the population or 14.4 million people need protection and assistance, including 7.4 million children."[316] Some of the main issues and concerns flagged by OCHA include "lack of water and sanitation and in some cases overcrowded shelters, expose displaced people to serious risks of disease and gender-based violence." As noted by OCHA: "Civilians are bearing the brunt of the violence in Yemen, with the conflict posing grave risks to their safety and psychosocial well-being." As the poorest country in the region, Yemen is ill equipped to deal with the humanitarian crisis at hand, and is facing a humanitarian and social catastrophe that will further complicate any future prospects for peace.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP): A Sunni extremist group based in Yemen, affiliated with the larger Al-Qaeda network.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges, the security vacuum in Yemen has also created a space for rivalry between al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS. In November 2014, ISIS declared that it was annexing territory in Yemen, using the term *Wilayat al-Yaman* (Province of Yemen).[317] Following ISIS's announcement of expansion into Yemen, AQAP openly rejected ISIS's claims, and ultimately rejected the call for ISIS to expand beyond territory in Iraq and Syria. Tensions between AQAP and ISIS in Yemen, reflect the complicated history of the relationship between the two groups.

Terrorism and Militant Groups

America's top security concern in this region is the persistent threat of terrorism and violent extremism posed by groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in Iraq (and its various affiliates such as *Jabhat al-Nusra*) to name few. Extremism is no longer local: it has turned into a transnational "borderless threat," spreading through countries and regions, attracting foreign fighters from all over the world, especially Europe.

Most of the terrorist groups operating in the region are jihadist, apocalyptic in nature and possess either a Sunni jihadist ideology (such as al-Qaeda and its franchise, ISIS, and Naqshabandi army in Iraq), or Shi'a revolutionary violent extremist ideology (such as Kata'ib Hezbollah[318] militia in Iraq which is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by DoS in 2009[319]). The civil uprisings in the greater Middle East have emboldened many local terrorist groups[320] to openly promote their militant ideologies. For ISIS and al-Qaeda, this rise in local militancy fulfills a vision of establishing a larger foothold in the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region, the Levant region, and beyond.

Competition between al-Qaeda and ISIS and their expansion into the Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Levant and North Africa was made easier by the collapse of security in the region, especially in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This expansion was furthered by uncontrolled access to and easily-obtained weaponry, and the group's ability to capitalize on the grievances of some marginalized groups such as the Sunni-Arab population in Iraq and their frustration against the Shi'a-led government.[321]

Following the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003, Sunni-Arab provinces – namely al-Anbar, Mosul, Salahaddin, and Diyala -- became strongholds and hotbeds for terrorist groups and insurgencies such as al-Qaeda, which eventually evolved into ISIS. When Saddam Hussein -- a dictator from the minority Sunni minority – was unseated, members of Saddam's Ba'athist regime, managed to mobilize the Sunni population against the newly elected, Shi'a-majority government. Using Sunni versus Shi'a narratives to serve their agenda, those former Ba'athists and members of Saddam's intelligence service (along with Islamist militants who later became AQI and ISIS), exploited the simmering discontent of Iraqi Sunnis who had become marginalized under the new Iraqi political system.

A lack of services, employment, and basic needs made the Sunni population in Iraq an easy target for terrorist recruitment. As a result, Sunni-dominant provinces became hotbeds for terrorism recruitment and terrorist activities. These areas were launch-pads for many attacks against Iraqi military forces, civilians, and U.S. troops operating in Iraq. However, one significant and lasting aspect of these conflicts should be noted; alliances among combatants on both sides of the regional civil war are fleeting and there are no permanent allies or enemies, as groups and warlords shift alliances according to temporary interests and gains. This is exemplified in the events following the Syrian uprising in 2011, when several Sunni militant groups were operating under an umbrella organization known as *Ahrar Al-Sham*.[322] All these militant groups, including al-Qaeda's franchise *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and ISIS, have at times joined forces against the Ba'ath regime in Syria, and at other times fought each other.[323]

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

A merger between the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda in January 2009 produced the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The jihadist movement in the region can be traced back to the late 1980s and early 1990s, when thousands of Saudi and Yemeni fighters "*mujahdeen*" returned home from years of fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.[324] These former *mujahdeen* would eventually make up most of al-Qaeda's rank and file.

Designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the Department of State on January 2010,[325] AQAP is considered by analysts to be the most violent and lethal al-Qaeda franchise as it manages to maintain a presence in local insurgencies while launching attacks on Western targets.[326] According to U.S. State Department estimates, AQAP had "close to a thousand members" in 2014.[327] The primary objective and self-stated goals of AQAP include "the establishing of a caliphate in the Arabian Peninsula and the wider Middle East, as well as implementing Islamic *sharia* law.[328]" AQAP's goals are in line with the general principle of militant jihad: to free the region from what it perceives as secular "apostate" governments, as well as from Western influences, particularly the influence of Americans.[329]

Some of the core AQAP predecessors were a corps of jihadists who were trained under Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan and who formed the militant group Islamic Jihad in Yemen in the 1990s. Other founders of AQAP include groups such as the Army of Aden Abyan, and al-Qaeda in Yemen.[330] The Saleh regime in Yemen used these jihadist groups in the late 1980s in what was known then as North Yemen to fight the

Soviet-backed Marxist government of the South Yemen. Their stated goal was to dismantle the southern secessionists and eventually unify North and South Yemen.

AQAP has launched countless terrorist attacks in the region since 2006, including the failed assassination attempt on Saudi prince Mohammed bin Nayaf in August 2009 and the "underwear bomb" plot in the same year. In 2008, AQAP also launched an attack on the U.S. embassy in Sana'a, an attack on British and Italian embassies, and several suicide bombing attacks targeting Western tourists.[331] The "toner cartridge" bomb plot and the UPS cargo plane crash in Dubai both in 2010. In May 2012, AQAP claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing attack that killed more than 90 Yemeni soldiers training for a military parade in Sana'a. It also claimed responsibility for a December 2013 attack on a defense ministry and military hospital that left more than 50 people dead.[332] Prior to the emergence of AQAP in 2009, al-Qaeda in Yemen (AQY) launched several terrorist attacks in the region, including: USS Cole attack in 2000 in Aden where 17 U.S. servicemen were killed. In 2002, AQY claimed the responsibility for a suicide bombing attack that targeted a French oil tanker.

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL), or *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fe Al-Iraq wa Belad Al-Sham* (DAISH)

Name of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS): the groups came out as *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fe Al-Iraq wa Belad Al-Sham* (DAISH) which is Arabic for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL). Right after its emergence in 2014, the group changed its name to al-*Dawlat al-Islamia*, and sometimes *Dawlat al-Khilafa al-Islamia*, which is Arabic for the Islamic State (IS) or the Islamic Caliphate. The name DAISH is the Arabic acronym for ISIS/ISIL and it's a denigrating and pejorative term in Arabic. ISIS does not like to be referred as DAISH and it punishes everyone who uses that term.

According to a Congressional Research Center report, ISIS is a "transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that controls large areas of Iraq and Syria, has adherents in several other countries, and disrupts regional and international security with violence and terrorism."[333] Capitalizing on the Sunni-Arab frustration and dissatisfaction with the Shi'a-led government in Iraq[334] as well as the Sunni-majority uprising against the Alawite-led government in Syria, ISIS operates in those two major theaters.[335] The unstable environment in both countries has created a fertile soil for ISIS's existence. It has managed to seize and control large swaths of land in both countries, impose its strict version of Islam, and announce itself as a "state," or what is known as the "Caliphate."[336] ISIS has emerged as one of the most dangerous, brutal, and cash-rich terrorist groups in the region and was even renounced by al-Qaeda for its atrocities.[337]

Caliphate is an Islamic government or a state governed by a caliph who is a political and religious leader with absolute power and authority.[338]

ISIS, as opposed to al-Qaeda, is a movement with an apocalyptic narrative which aims to function as a state, presumably as the first step to the cherished goal of reviving the Caliphate. Therefore, as a state, ISIS needs permanent territory, whereas al-Qaeda needs only safe havens to communicate with its cells throughout the world. Further territorial expansion is critical to ISIS for continued appeal and growth, therefore it relies on soft borders to push across in order to maintain and expand territory.

Following the appearance of ISIS, al-Qaeda's global leadership witnessed internal divisions over allegiances to the new group.[339] *Jabhat Al-Nusra* (the AQI franchise in Levant) refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS. By

contrast, a splinter group of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in North Africa called *Jund Al Khalifa fi Ard Al Jazayer* ("Soldiers of the Caliph in the Algeria land"), formally announced its formation and pledged allegiance to ISIS and its self-declared Caliph, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. Soon after, allegiance to ISIS was also pledged from the Nigeria-based Boko Haram.[340] These allegiances turned North Africa to one of the main suppliers of young jihadists for ISIS.[341] Other groups in Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan have also pledged allegiance to ISIS by their self-description and usage of the Arabic term *wilayah,* meaning state or province.[342]

ISIS's organizational and ideological roots date back to a group (active 2002-06) known as *Tawhid wal jihad* (Monotheism and Jihad). At that time, this group was known as al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers; or al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).[343] The group, led by the late Abu Musa'ab Al-Zarqawi, launched an insurgency against the U.S. and Iraqi forces. Following the death of Zarqawi by American forces in Iraq in 2006, the group reemerged as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).[344] In time, the formation of the tribal Awakening Councils sponsored by U.S. forces in Al-Anbar, as well as the killing of its two major leaders in 2010, weakened the group. As a result, it lost one of its strongest strongholds, Al-Anbar Province. By the time U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq, the group was defeated -- but not completely eliminated.[345]

Supported by Iraqi Ba'athists and former intelligence officers linked to the late president Saddam Hussein under Naqshabandi army in Iraq, the group resurfaced once again in 2013 under the leadership of Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim Al-Badri Al-Samarra'i (known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi).[346] The group again launched deadly attacks, this time on civilians and Iraqi forces. The German newspaper *Der Spiegel*[347] published an article based on unearthed documents belonging to a suspected ISIS architect and terror strategist, that revealed the strong leadership roles played by former Iraqi leaders in ISIS; the article claims Ba'athists and Saddam Hussein's former intelligence officers helped to reorganize and rebrand the groups.[348]

The Naqshabandi army in Iraq also known as Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandi (JRTN), was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the Department of State in 2015.[349]

In 2014, the group merged forces in Iraq and Syria under the name the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham or Levant (ISIS/ISIL) or *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fe Al-Iraq wa Belad Al-Sham* (DAISH) in Arabic. The group perceives itself as a state and sovereign political entity; therefore, it declared that it is not and was never a branch of al-Qaeda. As mentioned earlier, *Jabhat Al-Nusra* and the main al-Qaeda leadership neither accepted the merger, nor did it acknowledge or pledge allegiance to ISIS.[350] While *Jabhat Al-Nusra*[351] and ISIS are generally at odds with each other, in certain battles -- such as in *Al-Qalamoun* region -- they have cooperated tactically.[352] They went back to fighting each other shortly thereafter, according to reports.[353]

In September of 2014, a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) spokesperson estimated that ISIS could muster 20,000 to 31,500 individuals.[354] Foreign fighters make up the bulk of the ISIS ranks. According to Nicholas Rasmussen, director the CIA's National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), it is estimated that more than 20,000 foreign fighters from about 90 countries (including more than 3,400 Westerners) may have traveled to Syria since 2011.[355]

Experts believe that ISIS, at its core, is a criminal enterprise and its main funding comes from several sources: smuggling and selling oil from oil refineries in areas under its control in Syria and Iraq,[356] and along the Turkish border;[357]looting of banks and museums and selling artifacts;[358] taxing residents under ISIS control; confiscating personal possessions and collecting higher taxes (*Jizya*) from minorities;[359] collecting ransoms from kidnapped hostages; and receiving donations from private

donors and sympathizers -- most of whom are from Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other Islamic organizations.[360]

The Threat to Iraq by the Shi'a Militias

While ISIS is the primary threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq and the region in general, Shi'a militias also constitute a serious threat to the State of Iraq for two primary reasons: first the Shi'a militias are divisive, fragmented, and under different commands and with dissimilar ideological motives.

For the most part, Shi'a militias are believed to be under overall Iranian control, with the only exception being the militia under the loose control of the vehemently anti-American Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr himself is somewhat also connected to Iran: his new formation called the "Peace Brigades," is a rebirth of the old anti-American Mahdi army.

Members of the Iraqi Shi'a Popular Mobilization Unit PMU (Source: Wikimedia)

The other exception is the Shi'a group under the Popular Mobilization Unit (PMU) or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), known as *al-hashd al-sha'abi* in Arabic. PMU was formed in June 2014 (following ISIS emergence) when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, issued a *fetwa* (Arabic for Islamic verdict) calling on young men to defend their land and stop ISIS's approach to Baghdad. However, PMU became a loose umbrella for all Shi'a militias fighting ISIS, even though each group reports to a different command and emulates a different religious leader. All the other Shi'a militias, including the largest Badr organization, are very closely connected to the Iranian regime and its brand of political Shi'a Islam known as *Velayat-e faqih*, an ideology calling for loyalty to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. However, even within the Shi'a militias there are secessionist movements, such as the one calling for an autonomous Basra region. It is worth noting that among the group of Shi'a militias operating in Iraq, only Kata'ib Hezbollah has been listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by DoS.

The second problem threatening the State of Iraq is the deeply embedded fear among the Iraqi Sunni population of Shi'a militias dominance.[361] The likely revenge of Shi'a militias from the Sunni population for decades of persecution at the hands of the Sunni regimes and the latter's perceived ties to radical Sunni jihadist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. While ISIS may not be the regime of choice for most Sunnis, it is feared less than the absolute control of a sectarian Shi'a regime.[362] As long as the Shi'a militias are stronger than the Iraqi army and are capable of recapturing Sunni-majority areas from ISIS control,[363] any progress for a political reconciliation where Sunnis would participate to defeat ISIS might be challenged.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi army remains undisciplined, fragmented, poorly trained, led by a generation of unprofessional officers, and composed of a rank and file likely to be more loyal to the various Shi'a or Sunni political or religious figures than an Iraqi nation.[364] However, the Iraqi "Counterattack Brigades" which have been extensively trained by the U.S. Advise and Assist Teams (AATs) have a good reputation as reliable forces, vice the other brigades destroyed in 2014 with the ISIS emergence. The PMU on the other hand, often called "saviors of Iraq or saviors of the nation" by some Iraqis,[365] have

proven both unreliable as well as extremely fragile when used in the offense; they are known to be best employed as static security.

Until the army can subdue the militias and bring them under control, a weak, divided Iraq might persist. This situation poses a problem for Iraq, but it perfectly suits the Iranians, who want to sustain a weak and divided Iraq, with the Shi'a-led government and militias controlled by Iran.

Drug Trafficking

Iran's 1,194-mi (1,923-km) porous eastern border with Afghanistan (the world's largest producer of opium and hashish) and Pakistan makes it a major transit country for illicit drugs bound for Europe.[366] The country has built an effective counter-narcotics enforcement capability. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Iran accounted for 74 percent of the world's opium seizures in 2014; in 2012, Iran made 25 percent of the world's heroin and morphine seizures.[367] Despite the country's substantial efforts and extensive control measures, illegal drugs still travel through Iran to Turkey and Europe, with a large portion being consumed domestically. While Iran imposes the death penalty on drug offences, it struggles with one of the highest drug addiction rates in the world, as well as high numbers of people addicted to synthetic drugs.[368]

UAE's proximity to drug-producing countries in the Southwest Asia such as Afghanistan and Pakistan made it a major drug transshipment point for traffickers. Meanwhile, money laundering and informal banking remain an issue in UAE, especially with the UAE's strategic position as a major financial hub.[369]

Trafficking in Persons

Trafficking in persons is a major security issue in countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf. Human trafficking is a major human rights violation and a multi-dimensional threat that stokes the growth and spread of organized crime, damages economies, and destroys the credibility of all nations involved.

Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery involving victims who are forced into labor or are sexually exploited.[370] According to the International Labor Organization and the United Nations, there are an estimated 12.3 million people worldwide enslaved in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, sexual servitude, and involuntary servitude.[371]

The Trafficking in Persons Report, an annual assessment by DoS, summarizes the human trafficking situation and governments' responses in approximately 150 countries where this activity is known to occur.

The countries named in this DoS report on the issue of global human trafficking are assigned the following ratings:[372]

Tier 1: countries whose governments fully comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's (TVPA) minimum standards.

Tier 2: countries whose governments do not fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.

Tier 2 Watch List: countries whose government do not fully comply with the TVPA's minimum standards, but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards, and: the absolute number of victims of severe forms of trafficking is very significant or is significantly increasing; there is a failure to provide evidence of increasing efforts to combat severe forms of trafficking in persons from the previous year; or the determination that a country is making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with minimum standards was based on commitments by the country to take additional future steps over the next year.

Tier 3: countries whose governments do not fully comply with TVPA's minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so.[373]

Iran is classified as Tier 3 country. The government does not share information on its anti-trafficking efforts. Iranian law does not clearly and strictly prohibit any form of human trafficking. This, combined with Iran's systematic corruption, lack of transparency, and consistent refusal to cooperate with or share its anti-trafficking efforts with the international community, makes it difficult to accurately assess the country's human trafficking situation. Iran is a source, transit point, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor. It is reported that Iranian women and children are subjected to sex trafficking in Iran, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, and Europe.[374] Azerbaijani and Uzbek women and children are subjected to sexual exploitation inside Iran as well. Moreover, Iranian and Afghan boys are reportedly being forced into prostitution in male brothels inside Iran, or trafficked to Afghan and Pakistani warlords.[375] It is also reported that Iranian children are being forced, often by their families or criminal networks, to beg on the streets or to work at factories. Men and women from Pakistan and other countries in the region voluntarily migrate to Iran seeking work, but -- upon arriving -- are frequently diverted by organized criminals into forced labor or a subjected to debt bondages.[376]

According to the 2014 DoS *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Yemen are all classified as a Tier 3 countries. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are both a destination countries for men, women, and children, particularly from South and East Asia, who are subjected to forced labor, and to a lesser extent forced prostitution. While most foreign laborers travel legally to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for low and semi-skilled work, they often end up in forced labor positions, which include debt bondage, delayed or no salaries, no benefits, verbal and physical abuse, hazardous work conditions and confiscation of passports. Meanwhile, Yemen is a source, and to a lesser extent, a transit point and destination country for men, women, and children who are subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking. According to Tier 3 definition, these countries do not comply with the minimum standards for elimination of trafficking in persons, and they are not making any sufficient efforts to do so.

Qatar is classified as a Tier 2 Watch List country according to the 2014 *Trafficking in Persons Report*. It is a destination country for people of all ages and genders who are subject to forced labor, and to a lesser extent, forced prostitution. Like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, foreign workers, enter Qatar legally; however, they often end up being part of forced-labor, which includes debt bondage, delayed or no payment, verbal and physical abuse, with no benefits or humane living conditions.[377]According to Tier 2 Watch List definition, Qatar does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but it is making significant efforts to do so.

Case Study: Marsh Arabs - Ma'dan

The case study in this chapter introduces a culture from the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf region, using the concepts introduced in the Operational Culture General (OCG) document (see attached document).

Introduction

The Mesopotamian marshes (Source: Wikimedia)

Mesopotamia, meaning "the land between two rivers," is known as the birthplace of many of mankind's earliest cities, cultures, civilizations, and empires.[378] Known as the "cradle of civilization,"[379] the region, located in modern-day-Iraq, has been home to a diversity of ethnic, religious, and cultural groups. While the country's majority populations are ethnic Arabs, there are dozens of other smaller minority groups living within Iraq.

The Mesopotamia Marshes, or the Iraqi Marshes (*al-Ahwar,* in Arabic), lie in southeastern Iraq (straddling the Iraq-Iran border), and are in the northern end of the Persian Gulf -- the region often referred to as the "fertile crescent." This part of Iraq is often called "the Venice of the Middle East" because of its unique reed homes, floating like giant baskets in the massive marshlands.[380]

These marshes extend over three provinces in southern Iraq: Basra, Nasiriya, and Amara. They are large, shallow freshwater lakes -- seasonally flooded deltaic plains[381]-- that are part of a major international river system -- the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers -- which is one of the largest river systems in southwest Asia.[382] The convergence of the two rivers in southern Iraq, and its seasonal flooding, forms the marshes.

The Mesopotamia Marshlands are considered the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East and Western Eurasia.[383] At its peak season, the marshes cover an estimated area of 7,700 sq mi (equivalent to 15,000-20,000 sq km);[384] other estimates[385] suggests 9,000-12,000 sq mi (23,310-31,080 sq km),[386] an area approximately three to four times the size of the Florida Everglades.[387]
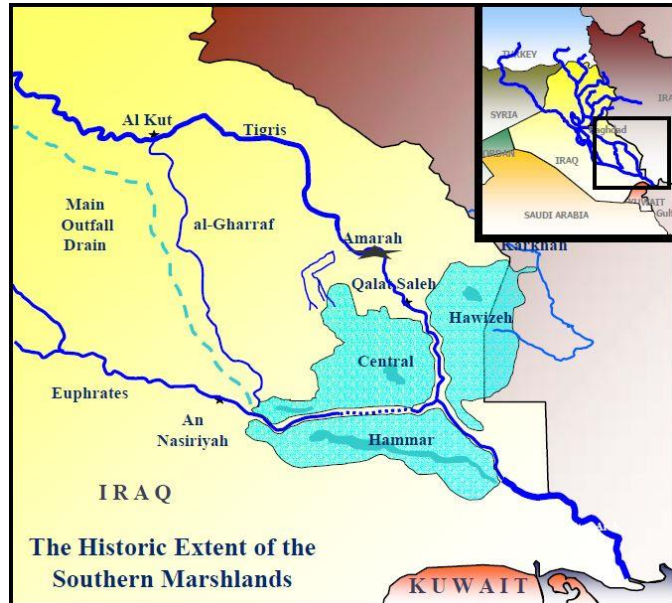
Iraqi Marshlands map (Source: USAID)

The marshes are the heartland where successive human civilizations thrived, beginning with the Sumerians more than 5,000 years ago. Some scholars consider the Mesopotamian Marshes as truly being the "Cradle of civilization." Some Bible experts believe that this is the place where the biblical "Garden of Eden,"[388] and the "Great Flood," were actually located.[389]

The area was also called the "Land of Water" by the Chaldeans, a civilization indigenous to Mesopotamia.[390] The southern region of Mesopotamia where the wetlands are located are also known as the region of "Ancient Sumer." This region, and the areas surrounding it, witnessed the emergence of some of the world's oldest cities: Uruk (credited as one of the oldest city in the world.[391]), Ur (birth place of patriarch Abraham), and Eridu. Therefore, the Iraqi marshlands are "an area of major significance in the history of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, Mandaeism (Sabianism), and Islam."[392]

People have lived in the Mesopotamian Marshlands for over 5,000 years. The wetlands are home of the "marsh dwellers," also known as the "Marsh Arabs," or the *"Ma'dan,"* who, until the early 1980s, numbered over a half a million people. The Ma'dan are believed to be descendants of the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians, whose population had increased and multiplied because of the migration of Arab Bedouins and Persians.[393] Sam Kubba, author of *The Iraqi Marshlands and the Marsh Arabs*, observed that "this 5,000-year-old cultural heritage represents a link from the modern world to the roots of its civilization and ancient history."[394]

Ma'dan: a seminomadic tribal group with a culture similar to the ancient Sumerians who inhabited lower Mesopotamia 5,000 years ago. The name Ma'dan is not Arabic; it is believed to be derived from "Madana," a word in the ancient Eastern Aramaic language the Mandaic that means "east." This ancient language is spoken by the Sabi'a al-Mandaeans, a religious minority group, followers of John the Baptist, and who have lived in southern Iraq and in the marshes for thousands of years. To central and northern Iraqis, the name *Ma'dan* (plural) and *Ma'idi* (singular) is a derogatory terms used to imply a person is primitive, poor, or uneducated. The existence of such an implication illustrates the prejudice historically shown towards Shi'a southerners and particularly marsh dwellers by Sunni Arabs and the successive Iraqi governments. Government leaders have traditionally distrusted the marsh dwellers, regarding them as anti-government rebels. Many Iraqi Sunnis continue to perceive Shi'a from the south as "non-Arabs"; some people even dismiss them as "Persians" or "West Asians." Another derogatory term for marsh dwellers, (and, more generally, for Shi'a and southern Iraqis) is *shrugi*. The word is derived from *sharq* (Arabic for "east"), a reference to those who live to the east of ancient Mesopotamia.

Since the 1950s, in addition to Iraq's oil exploration plans, countries upstream from this area have implemented far-reaching water diversion plans, and irrigation policies. These efforts have affected the quantity and quality of water flowing down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers into the marshes. (One British plan -- proposed in the 1950s, but never implemented -- would have built a series of canals to divert salty and polluted water away from the area in order to create arable land suitable for agriculture.)

However, in the late 1980s and 1990s, the Mesopotamian Marshlands witnessed the greatest devastation in its history: shortly after Iraqi president Saddam Hussein came to power in the late 1970s. The government

Central Marsh is largely desiccated and the terrain is littered with unexploded ordnance (Source: USAID)

drained parts of the marshes in order to build plants for military industry and other industrial and chemical facilities. During the Iran-Iraq war, additional marshland was drained (mainly by Iraq, but also by Iran) because of the strategic and tactical value of this area.[395]

Several decades earlier, water levels in the Mesopotamian Marshlands slowly started to drop when Turkey, Syria, and Iraq constructed several reservoir dams on the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers.[396] However, the most devastating reduction in the flow of water to the marshes occurred shortly after the end of 1991 Gulf War; the measure was initiated by the Iraqi government in response to the Shi'a uprising in the south.[397]

When Shi'a rebels took refuge among the Marsh Arabs in the reed-filled wetlands, Saddam Hussein -- as punishment -- ordered the construction of massive diversion canals and dams. These drastic measures were part of a deliberate campaign to drain, poison, and burn the marshland completely in order to expose the hideouts of the rebels.[398]

Forces loyal to the regime of Saddam Hussein bulldozed thousands of Ma'dan houses and, in the process, killed many people.[399] This led to the complete destruction and desiccation of about 90 percent of the 7,722 sq mile marshes.[400] This destructive campaign turned the once densely-vegetated marshes into dry, lifeless bare land crusted with dried salt brine.[401] The brutal measures also precipitated a massive exodus of marsh-dwellers from their ancient homeland.[402] Many people were forced to migrate to other parts of the country or to nearby cities; about 40,000 people sought refuge in neighboring Iran.[403] Although Saddam's drainage plan had different goals, it bore a strong resemblance to the British water diversion

In Hawizeh, a dike built by the army in 1984 has drained much of the western parts (Source: USAID)

plan conceived in the 1950s. While the British project intended to create agriculture land, Saddam merely used the harsh measures to hit back at Shi'a rebels.

By the time Saddam was unseated in 2003, the marshlands were reduced to about seven percent of their original size. No more than 30,000 inhabitants survived this devastation and continued to live there.[404] The only remaining portion of wetland was near the Iraq-Iran border, fed by the Karkheh River, a source of water that -- because it was in Iran -- was not cut off by the Iraqi government.

Many experts have condemned the deliberate draining of the ancient Mesopotamian Marshlands as a tragic humanitarian, cultural, and environmental catastrophe;[405] others have called it "environmental genocide" and "environmental terrorism."[406] UNHCR eventually took the extraordinary step of classifying the Ma'dan who fled the devastation as "Environmental Refugees."[407] Think of the marshes as providing a kidney-like purification function for Iraq, the Gulf, and the region, cleaning the Euphrates and Tigris before they join and flow into the Persian Gulf. Death is inevitable when a body loses the functions of its kidneys.

Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime, there has been numerous projects and initiatives to restore the Mesopotamian Marshes to their original state. Advocates for this restoration effort include: the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and the Canadian Iraqi Marshlands Initiation (CIMI), Italy's Ministry of the Environment and Territory (IMET), and the Government of Japan. These governmental and non-governmental organizations have all financially contributed to the revival of the marshes via environmental projects.

Many displaced marsh dwellers now live in new settlements on the margins of the marsh without basic health and social services (Source: USAID)

One of the best-known voices to call for the preservation of this natural treasure and revival the marshes' original habitat is Dr. Azzam Alwash, Iraqi-born American environmental engineer and environmental activist, founder of the Eden Again Project, then the non-governmental organization Nature Iraq, and. most recently, the Twin River Institute for Scientific Research.[408] Dr. Alwash led a massive campaign to create awareness, and is currently working with several partners to restore, protect, and preserve Iraq's marshlands and its delicate ecosystem.[409]

As a result of this advocacy campaign, 60-75 percent of the marshes were re-flooded and restored;[410] with the wetlands now flourishing, many marsh-dwellers have returned and reestablished their original lifestyle.[411] However, since 2014, with the ongoing fight with ISIS, the water flow down the Euphrates has again dropped. As ISIS fighters have either denied water flow by retention, or more usually, have diverted the water flow in order to flood Shi'a-dominated Iraqi urban areas for tactical and operational reasons. Fortuitously, the timetable for restoring the Mesopotamian Marshes was accelerated by an unseasonable increase of upstream rain and snowmelt in neighboring Turkey in the Zagros Mountains. In July 2013, the government of Iraq designated the marshes as the country's first national park.[412] In 2016 the Iraqi government along with local and foreign activists submitted a proposal to UNESCO to classify the Mesopotamian marshes in Iraq as a world heritage site.

The Mesopotamian Marshes have long been the focus of significant international attention, particularly when they were transformed into a man-made desert by Saddam Hussein. The unique ecosystem of the marshes, and the culture of the people who live there, have fascinated many scientists, scholars, and writers hoping to better-understand this special place.

Physical Environment

The Iraqi marshlands are "vast extensions of reed beds and open theaters of water that geologically were formed thousands of years ago as a result of the Tigris and Euphrates sedimentations in this plain area."[413] The marshes are often referred to by scholars as the "gift of the Twin Rivers." The Mesopotamian Marshlands have been home to some the earliest human settlements and villages, including those of the Ma'dan.

Once the Tigris and Euphrates merges, they produce the massive marshland which divides into three primary areas: the al-Hammar Marsh, located south of the Euphrates; Central (al-Qurnah) Marsh, located between the Tigris and Euphrates River; and the al-Huweizah Marsh, which is located east of the Tigris River.[414]

Map of the three marshes in southern Iraq (Source: Wikimedia)

The al-Huweizah Marsh straddles the Iraq-Iran border; the border divides it into two asymmetrical parts. The larger portion (75-80 percent) lies within Iraq's borders; the lesser portion lies within Iran, and is known there as Hawr al-Azim.[415] The al-Huweizah Marsh is fed mainly by the Tigris; however, another water inflow -- the Karkheh River -- feeds into the marsh from the Iranian side. This explains the survival of a very small segment of the al-Huweizah Marsh, despite concerted efforts by the Iraqi government to destroy it.

Although the Mesopotamian Marsh lies within the borders of Iraq (except for a small portion of al-Huweizah Marsh), the wetlands have a significant regional dimension that is greatly affected by regional dynamics and the policies of two countries that share responsibility for safeguarding the water that supports this wetland.[416]

The marshes are located at the lower end of the Tigris-Euphrates River System, are fed by the waters of these two historic rivers, and owe their ecologic survival to seasonal flooding. However, sources for both the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers lie in eastern Turkey. The rivers run through Syria and Iraq, then converge just before emptying into the Persian Gulf. Therefore, a great part of the quality and quantity of water that the marshes receive is dependent on the environmental policies of several not-always-cooperative regional players.

The Mesopotamian Marshlands are in the heart of the Mesopotamian lowlands in southern Iraq (which is a continuation of the Eurasian and Afro-Asian Steppes[417]), sandwiched between the Iranian Plateau in the northeast and the Arabian Peninsula and desert in the southwest. These two sub-regions are separated in the north, by the Mesopotamian lowlands (mainly flat except for several dunes which are believed to be ruins of ancient towns) and to the south, by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. The Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian Plateau have very different topography, climate, and weather patterns. Therefore the Mesopotamia lowland and its fertile plains offer a moderate geographic relief

Tamarix, cattail and reed grass deep inside Hammar marsh where marsh dwellers live (Source: USAID)

between the two rigid climates; the dry arid desert (with large stretches of sand, dunes, and salt flats) in the Arabian Peninsula, and the mountainous climate on the Iranian Plateau.

The Mesopotamian Marshlands and Iraq in general enjoys a strategic geographic location. It lies between the Eurasian cold and the African warm zones, making it the world's most important intercontinental transit stopover hub for millions of birds migrating from West and Central Asia, and Siberia to Africa. These migrating birds include several types of ducks, herons, flamingos, and pelicans.[418] Some of these birds are unique and do not look like any other birds in the Middle East.

The overall topographic diversity in Iraq offered the country a rich biodiversity that, in turn, led to the formation of biologically diverse macro-habitats, including the unique ecosystem of the Mesopotamian Marshlands.[419] Until its destruction in the 1990s, the Iraqi Marshlands were home of

various mammals, hundreds of thousands of birds (from about 200 different indigenous species), and about 40 species of freshwater fish.[420]

Each dimension of the marshlands offers different species a suitable harbor. For instance, the open theater of water is suitable for ducks and pelicans; the dense reed beds (known as *qasab* in Arabic, look like bamboo, and grow up to 25 ft high, and are suitable for songbirds; while the edges of the marshes are ideal for amphibians and snakes. In fact, the reed beds play a vital environmental role in cleaning the flowing-water of dirt and impurities. Similarly, other marsh vegetation, like marsh grass, perform the same function, as well as offer food for water buffalo and serve as a breeding ground for the fish.[421]

Marsh men in their *mashhuf* boats (Source: Wikimedia)

Environment and topography significantly shaped the culture of the people who lived in the Mesopotamian Marshlands. The main inhabitants of the marshes are the Ma'dan; the marshes are the foundation of their existence. Therefore, when the former regime launched its campaign to drain the marshland, punish its people, and drive the Ma'dan out, it directly targeted the core existence of the Ma'dan, as it destroyed their economy, culture, habitat, and ancient way of life.[422]

Marsh Arab reed-house architecture (Source: USAID)

The Ma'dan relied on what the marshes had to offer and their way of life revolved around the environment. They had no electricity, heat, fresh water, or wastewater treatment facilities. Much like their Sumerian ancestors, they maintained an organic and eco-friendly culture centered on the marsh's natural resources.[423]

The wetlands generously offered the Ma'dan a natural, readily-available supply of building materials (reeds, rushes, date palms, and compressed mud) to construct their floating houses. Ma'dan dwellings are largely made of woven marsh reeds, and are constructed without nails or lumber. The process of building the house is often a community affair: it takes three days to construct a single home that can last as long as 25 years with proper maintenance. These dwellings rest on small artificial islands called *tuhul* – some floating and some anchored -- made of mud, reeds, and rushes -- all taken from the marshes.[424] The advantage of making these floating houses portable is evident during the flood season, mainly in the spring, when the Ma'dan take less than a day to move and anchor their huts on higher ground.[425]

The Ma'dan used a mix of mature reeds and fresh, easy bendable reeds to weave their arched huts. The roofs of these houses are covered with overlapping layers of bitumen-soaked reed mats (similar

to the flooring mats). (The bitumen serves as waterproofing.) These construction methods have been practiced for about 5,000 years, as evidenced by illustrations found on ancient Sumerian cylinder seals.

Ma'dan's portable reed huts are furnished with bitumen-soaked reed matting, handmade wool rugs, and wool-stuffed pillows. Also, palm tree wood and leaves are used for making mats, furniture, and basketry; palm products are also used for cooking and heating.

Marsh Arab man riding his mashhuf (Source: USAID)

For transportation, the Ma'dan use long, bitumen-covered wooden canoes known as *mashhuf* or *tarrada*. These "gondolas of the marshes" can fit about up to four people, and easily navigate reed-dense shallow water.[426] Each family owns a *mashhuf* for transportation, fishing, and -- during harvest season -- carrying farming produce. The *mashhuf* is also depicted on ancient Sumer cylinder seals.[427] Some anthropologists suggest that life and culture in the marshes has not changed much in 5,000 years, or since the Sumerian times.[428]

Southern Iraqi climate is hot and dry, with limited winter precipitation, and short spring and fall seasons. Average temperatures in summer time are 77-104 F; and 41-59 F in the winter, with January having the lowest temperatures and August having the highest. The gradual and eventually drastic drainage of the marshes led to the reduction of evaporation, which in turn increased summer temperatures in the region.

There are two strong climatic winds that are common in the Mesopotamian Marshes: the *shamal* wind that comes from the north and northwest; and the *sharqi* wind that comes from the south and southeast. *Shamal* winds are dry,

Reeds used for mat-making are also trucked outside the marshes for construction (Source: USAID)

steady winds that occur from June through September; they offer a cool breeze for the inhabitants of the marshes. The *sharqi* are gusty winds that prevail mainly in spring and autumn; they are accompanied by blinding dust storms that are responsible for much of the desertification in this region.[429] The *sharqi* winds have increased significantly since the 1990s drainage campaign.

The freshwater flow in the marshes and the rich fertile soil in lower Mesopotamian helped to sustain the agriculture-based societies on the shores of the wetlands, and directly or indirectly benefit farmlands and people living in southern Iraq. Rice (known as *ambar*), wheat, millet, and barley cultivation (mainly in areas along the main canals), provide a visual reminder of the Ancient Sumer's rich agrarian history.

Large groves of date palms once grew by the shores of the river marshes. Dates have been cultivated in Mesopotamia for over 5,000 years. Dates have always been a very important food source for the Ma'dan and for many southern Iraqis.[430] Prior to the draining of the marshes, Iraq had the largest date orchards in the world, with 600 varieties under cultivation. An unspoken tragedy was the destruction of the Iraqi palm tree industry, which before Saddam's actions, the country produced three quarters of the world's total harvest. Located primarily on the 120 mi length Shatt-al-Arab, the marsh destruction and the decreased flow of fresh water led to creeping salinization of the Shatt al-Arab.

With the reflooding, rice is cultivated for the first time in 12 years on the western periphery of Hammar marsh (Source: USAID)

Salt water from the Persian Gulf, not countered by the flow of fresh water, penetrated 90 miles up Shatt al-Arab, and thus poisoned the palm gloves. For those Iraqis living and working there, this was a true disaster that nobody talks about, much less acknowledged. Today, many countries in the region-- notably Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt --produce more dates than Iraq.

The reed-dense marshes offered its inhabitants geographic isolation, which helped preserve their unique and independent culture over the centuries. The reeds also turned the marshes into an inaccessible region that, throughout history, often remained outside government control. This is mainly because the difficult navigation of these reed-dense marshlands, gave

Marsh Arab men during rice cultivation season (Source: USAID)

people who knew the routes advantage to hide and escape from the government's sight. Therefore, the marshes have always offered sanctuary to many people who were persecuted by the government: political dissidents, slaves, smugglers, and people avoiding legal prosecution.[431] People of the marshes have been regarded with suspicion by the successive authorities down through the ages, including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Abbasids, Ottomans, the British, and the post-colonial Iraqi governments.

Marsh-dwellers remain secluded from the outer world, despite changes that have occurred in this region during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Despite their harsh environment, they the Ma'dan have maintained a survivalist way of life, and have remained untouched by the world's technological revolutions.

They Ma'dan have always believed that the marshes offered them everything that they needed to survive; in return, they became the true guardians of that environment. By today's standards, the

Ma'dan are considered genuine environmentalists; their way of life embodies environmental conservation.[432]

Economy of the Culture

Due to the Ma'dans' physical and cultural isolation, successive wars, and political persecution, this region is economically underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the region has always been self-sufficient due to its natural resources and vibrant agricultural sector. Most marsh dwellers are "primarily cultivators, reed gatherers, skilled fishermen, or buffalo breeders."[433]

Historically an agrarian society, the Ma'dan population was divided between crop cultivators and those who earned a living in animal husbandry. Although agriculture currently represents a small yet significant aspect of their economy, the Ma'dan

Fisherman in the recently reflooded Hawizeh marsh now open to displaced dwellers forcibly relocated nearby (Source: USAID)

continue to engage mostly in farming on the shores of the marshes. Their main agricultural crops include rice, wheat, millet, barley, and the products from date palms. Curiously, vegetable cultivation has always been regarded by many Ma'dan as a "despised occupation"; therefore, vegetables have always been brought in from Basra or cultivated by "strangers" (*hasawiya)* residing in villages on the outskirts of the marshes.[434]

Prior to the drainage of this region in the 1990s, rice cultivation was a significant component of the Ma'dan economy. Areas where rice was grown were -- by necessity -- naturally inundated marshlands. The type of rice cultivated was called *ambar,* or *anber* and was famous for its distinct aromatic flavor and sweet smell.[435] Rice was cultivated for both consumption and sale; cultivation seasons were dependent on the certain horoscopic signs. Rice cultivation diminished significantly after the area was drained; but it continued to be a staple in the diet of the marsh dwellers.

Marsh woman selling dairy products (Source: USAID)

Livestock such as water buffalo, cattle, sheep, and goats are domesticated for milk and dairy products for both local consumption and export. Buffalo milk is very sweet; the Ma'dan use it to make several sought-after dairy products, including a clarified butter (ghee) called *dahn hur*, thick milk-cream called *qaimar*, a kefir-like yogurt called *roba*, and a white cheese. Ma'dan women create these products and sell them in neighboring towns and villages.

Another aspect that demonstrates the Ma'dan's sustainable living is that no product from the water buffalo is wasted. Even the manure is burned for heating and cooking. Preparing the manure, called *muttal*, as fuel requires mixing it with grass, shaping it into small cakes, and drying it in the sun. Water buffalo are also used to navigate through the wetlands and clear channels through the reeds to ease the passage of canoes (*mashhufs)*.

Fishing and bird-hunting are practiced by the marsh dwellers for personal consumption or to generate income; these activities are not considered a sport.[436] Fishing is done with nets

Marsh Arab fisherman (Source: USAID)

or tri-hooks while standing in *mashhufs;* fishing is the biggest contributor to the livelihood of the marsh Arabs.

Prior to the 1990s drainage, marsh dwellers exported approximately 500 tons of fresh fish daily to fish markets in southern Iraqi towns and cities. The marshes were rich with various kinds of fish; the most common and plentiful were the *al-Gattan* and *al-Shaboot*. (The importance of these fish to the Ma'dan is illustrated by the fact that two of the best-known tribes in the marsh are named after these fish.[437]) Today, about 80 percent of people who have returned to the restored marshlands work as fishermen.

Crudely made mats are still woven in the marshlands for floor covering and house construction (Source: USAID)

Handicrafts are another source of income for marsh dwellers. Many of these products are made of raw material such as reeds, palm tree leaves, and wool. Reed mats (waterproofed with bitumen) are always in demand in neighboring towns and villages and often were sold in market centers in cities like Basra, Nasiriya, and Amara.
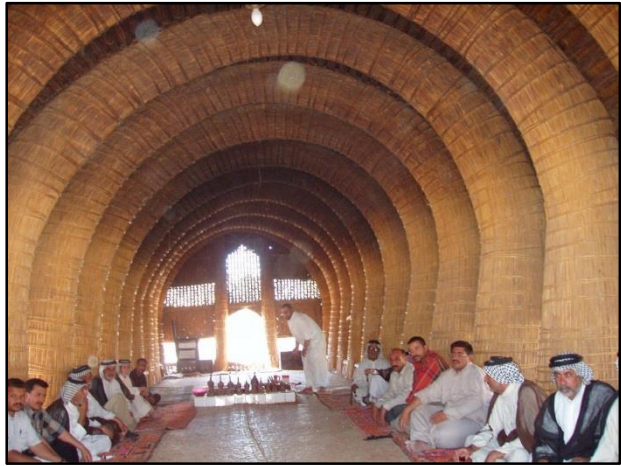
It is rumored that beneath the marshes lies a wealth of untapped oil reserve. Secret documents from the former Ba'ath regime, found in Erbil, revealed that the regime's plan to drain the marshes (dating from as far back as the 1980s) was also seen as an opportunity to and explore what was believed to be one of Iraq's largest oil fields resting underneath the marshlands. However, following the fall of the regime, this exploration plan never took off.[438] In fact, Iraq's oil field, the *majnoon,* is located at the mouth of the al-Qurna Marsh.[439] Most of the economic development in southern Iraq has occurred within the oil sector.

Al-Ahwar today has been attracting some Westerners environmental researchers. It is anticipated that tourism will soon be one of the primary economic drivers for this region, once it is fully restored.

Social Structure

The Ma'dan culture and social structure is rural and tribal; the authority of each tribe lies in the tribal sheikh. The Ma'dan people live in excluded villages; these settlements consist of reed huts that sit on floating, man-made islands. Each village has a headman and is usually home for several clans or one clan, with each having their own sheikh or section sheikhs. These clans all fall under a specific tribe.

Each tribal sheikh collects tribute from members of his tribe in order to maintain and sustain the tribal guest house known as the *mudhif*. The *mudhif* is considered the social, political, judicial, and religious center for the tribal life of marsh

Marsh Arab men gathered at a tribal *mudhif* (Source: Wikimedia)

dwellers. It's the place where tribe sheikh and member gather to discuss and manage community affairs, "settle disputes, and conduct diplomacy with other tribes and religious festivities."[440] The architecture, structure, and building material of the arched *mudhif* is similar to the village's reed huts; however, the *mudhif* is considerably bigger, with impressive and more refined architecture. The *mudhif* also serves as a stop for travelers and visitors from other regions to spend the night.

Tribe: headed by a tribal sheikh, it "consists of a political federation of clans based on local perceptions of kinship, whether real or factitive."[441] Clan members have a shared lineage and is usually headed by a sheik.

In Hammar marsh, the vegetation is largely salt bush, suggesting recent reflooding since the end of the war (Source: USAID)

The Ma'dan is a communitarian and tribal culture where the group identity is more important than that of the individual; members are part of a circle of relations and networks. Yet, the Ma'dan also place significant value on the immediate family: family is the basis of the tribal social structure. Kinship ties and extended families are valued and trusted as well. *Wasta* and nepotism within this tribal society is perceived positively.

Any family that claim a lineage from the prophet Mohammed is regarded with respect and authority among the Ma'dan. For these descendants, men have the title, *sayyad;* women are addressed, *e'lwiyah.*

Marsh Arabs follow a traditional Arab Bedouin code of honor and code of behavior, but not as strictly as neighboring cultures. Consisting of different Shi'a Arab tribes and tribal confederations, marsh

dwellers offer equal hospitality to guests, travelers, strangers, and people seeking refuge, providing food and lodging without asking questions or expecting any sort of payment in return. A marsh-dweller host will never carry a departing guest's luggage; in the Ma'dan culture, this implies that the host wants the guest to leave.[442] This tradition of hospitality -- which included offering refuge to Shi'a rebels opposed to the Hussein regime -- is one of the reasons why the Ma'dan were targeted by the Ba'athists in 1990s.

Ma'dan tradition holds that anyone traveling by canoe must shout a greeting to people on the shore; additionally, people traveling downstream via canoe are required to greet all canoes traveling upstream.[443] Also, when men and women travel together in a canoe, women always sit behind male members of the family.

Much like the Arab tribal code of honor, blood feuds and honor killings are prevalent within the tribal culture of marsh Arabs.

Water buffalo swimming in the marshes (Source: USAID)

Wealth and status among marsh dwellers are measured by livestock, particularly the number of buffalo that a person owns.[444] Scholars note that "the buffalo were to the Ma'dan what camels were to the Arab Bedouins."[445] However, scholars differed over the number of buffalo one must own in order to reflect true wealth: some scholars say that a family that owns 7-10 buffalo is considered rich; other experts say that a rich Ma'dan family must own over 30 buffalo.[446]

Other than the essentials, families in the marshes have very few possessions. However, each family owns a gun for hunting and protection against wild boar attacks; families also usually have a *mashhuf* for transportation and fishing. Children are taught at an early age how to navigate a canoe; many children have their own *mashhuf*. Every family member in the Ma'dan culture has a role and daily chores to perform, even children: men hunt and fish, women make dairy products and sell them at local markets, and children are expected to tend the livestock.

Marsh Arab woman riding her mashhuf (Source: USAID)

Although known as marsh Arabs with tribal culture, their norms are somewhat different from known Arab Bedouin tribal culture. And to that effect, Scottish traveler and novelist, Baillie Fraser, admired the Ma'dan's "openness, frankness, and civility." Attracting the Western world's attention to this unique organic culture, he described them in 1824 as the "stoutest, fairest, and comeliest of all Arabs."[447]

The Ma'dan are known for being less dedicated and committed to the traditional Arab code of honor. For instance, unlike Arab Bedouin women, Ma'dan women do not cover their faces – unless for protection from sun or sandstorms -- and they are known to be confident and not shy when talking to strangers. Ma'dan women have an active role in the family and the village economy. They navigate their own *mashhufs*, and -- alongside male members of the family -- cultivate rice and other produce.

Women make dairy products, and weave reed mats and wool rugs. They are also responsible

Marsh Arab man during rice cultivation season (Source: USAID)

for all trading in the market place, whether selling fish, dairy products, or mats. However, there is still a defined role for each sex: men are responsible for fishing and hunting; women cook, make bread, fetch water, and grind the grain. Moreover, "women and men eat separately and rarely speak during the meal."[448] During the 1980s, and the 1990s, Ma'dan women had to take a more active role in the family and community; this was because many marsh Arab men had been killed in wars or by Saddam Hussein's 1991 retaliation campaign.

Marriage in the Ma'dan culture is no different from the traditional marriage in Arab culture. Marriages are traditionally arranged by the parents or extended family. However, in Ma'dan culture, both bride and groom often have some choice in this decision. Fathers of both the bride and groom have the ultimate authority in choosing a union; marriage among first cousins is very common and encouraged.

A man usually has the first claim and right to a female paternal cousin; only the female's father can oppose it. Marriage between cousins and relatives is preferred because it keeps wealth within the family, keeps the cost and dowry of marriage at a minimum, and provides support and comfort knowing that both bride and groom come from the same culture and background. Also, "marriage by exchange" is very common, particularly among cousins. A father would accept a symbolic and unusually very low dowry – or no dowry -- for his daughter, if -- in return -- he is permitted to pay an equally modest dowry – or no dowry -- for a girl that his son intends to marry. Dowries are commonplace in Iraq's culture -- as they are in many areas of the world. In the Ma'dan culture, some sort of dowry is always paid from the groom's family to the family of the bride. Today, dowries in Iraq are primarily composed of jewelry, money, property, and clothes. However, for the Ma'dan, traditional dowries are confined to cash or livestock.

The isolated landscape of the marshes, with its high, dense reeds, make relationships, communication, and meetings between the two sexes quite possible. Culturally, however, meetings between unmarried people are unacceptable. If a couple is observed together, they will be punished according to tribal law, which in most cases involves honor killing.[449]

Staples in the Ma'dan diet are rice, fish, duck, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and bread, with very little red meat. It is believed that because of their diet, and active lifestyle, the Ma'dan tend to live longer and maintain a strong and healthy body with no signs of obesity and cardiovascular diseases. Wheat bread is cooked on a round clay platter over an open fire made out of palm tree leaves and

buffalo manure cakes. Ma'dan also eat a special flat bread made from rice flour, known as *siyah*. *Siyah* is baked on a flat round clay plate (similar to a pizza stone) where fire would sit underneath it.

Because the Ma'dan were shunned, persecuted, and neglected for decades by the Iraqi government, they lacked (and continue to lack) basic infrastructure, including electricity, clean drinking water, sewage treatment facilities, refuse collection, health clinics, schools, and other public facilities.[450]

This absence of basic sanitation services and clean water has caused the Ma'dan to suffer from bilharziasis (a disease of the bladder caused by flatworms passing from snails to humans), malaria, kidney stones, and dysentery.[451] These diseases are widespread because the marshes are simultaneously used for drinking water and the disposal of raw sewage.[452] Despite this lack of adequate sanitation,

Guesthouse interior in Al Chibayish in Hammar marsh (Source: USAID)

the Ma'dan are known to be physically strong and healthy people.[453] Because they do not have access to medical services, many marsh dwellers resort to herbs and spiritual healing to cure and treat diseases.

The Ma'dan speak Arabic, however their southern Iraqi dialect differs considerably from people living elsewhere in Iraq. The Ma'dan dialect is so distinct that people from a nearby towns often may not fully understand it. A good example of this difference would be the contrast between the British English dialect and the Scottish English dialect. Iraqis from Baghdad, and other northern provinces, often look down on the Ma'dan Arabic dialect; they consider it a low-class type of dialect.[454]

Ma'dan social customs, tribal culture, and way of life have all been greatly affected by the deliberate drainage of the marshes in the 1990s; this catastrophe created a major exodus of the Ma'dan people to towns and urban centers.

Belief System

Marsh Arabs or the Ma'dan the Mesopotamian Marshlands share similar physical characteristics with the majority of Iraqis. However the Ma'dan, a seminomadic group, are believed to be descended from the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians. Their population increased and was influenced over the years mainly by the migration and intermarriage of Bedouins from the Arabian Peninsula[455] and Persians from the east.[456] Throughout history, the Ma'dan faced persecution and prejudice by the surrounding Sunni Arab populations, mainly due to their perceived "impure" Arab roots.

Over the years, many anthropologist have studied the marsh-dwellers, and have concluded that marsh-dwellers of the lower Euphrates region tend to be close and similar to

Marsh Arab girl (Source: Wikimedia)

the Bedouins in terms of culture and physical traits. On the other hand, the eastern marsh-dwellers who inhabit the Tigris region have traditionally had close contact (and share a similar culture) with the Persians.[457]

The Ma'dan are nominally Shi'a Muslims; they do not strictly observe mainstream Islamic religious practices. Instead, they have focused on Shi'a practices that place a great emphases on Shi'a imams and shrines (notably Ali bin Abitalib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law; and his sons, Hassan and Hussain; and their sons).

It is believed that the southern Ma'dan were among the many non-Muslim tribes that inhabited the marshlands and converted to Shi'a Islam during the late eighteenth century and through much of the nineteenth century. The powerful Ma'dan tribe, Albu Mohammed, is known to be one of these tribes. According to anthropologist Dr. Shakir Salim, the Ma'dan "abandoned many tenets of Islam and concentrated on their devotion to imams." However, most Ma'dan observe fasting rituals during the month of Ramadhan, and celebrate the two Eids of Islam. Therefore, unlike Sunnis Muslims, who traditionally make a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Ma'dan prefer to make a pilgrimage to Shi'a shrines (the burial sites of the Shi'a imams) in Najaf and Karbala, in Iraq; and to Mashhad, in Iran.

Marsh Arab women with their children (Source: USAID).

In fact some Shi'a marsh dwellers consider pilgrimage to Shi'a shrines is more important than traveling to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. For those who can afford it, the pilgrimage to the Shi'a shrine in Mashhad, Iran (known among Shi'a Muslims as the "east pilgrimage" or the "east visit"), earns a pilgrim the title, *zair* ("visitor," in Arabic), in much the same way that performing the pilgrimage to Mecca earns a Muslim the title, *hajji*.

Marsh dwellers living in the interior of Hammar marsh (Source: USAID)

Emphasizing the notion that most Ma'dan were non-Muslim tribes who converted to Shi'ism, is their known religious and spiritual visit to the tomb of the Jewish prophet Ezra the Scribe (known is Arabic as *al-Uzair*). The tomb of *al-Uzair* is located on the Tigris River, 50 mi les north of Basra. Although Shi'a shrines are known to have green or gold domes, the *al-Uzair* tomb lies underneath a blue dome, and the walls of the shrine are covered with Hebrew text. The Ma'dan believe that *al-Uzair* answers prayers for the relief of illness and personal hardship. This belief is shared by the old Iraqi Jewish community that traditionally brought sick children to the tomb for the prophet's blessings.[458]

Because there are few mosques in the marshes, most Ma'dan conduct Muslim religious services in their homes.

Among the Shi'a marsh dwellers, there is the Sabi'a al-Mandaeans, a religious minority group who follow John the Baptist, and who have lived in southern Iraq and in the marshes for thousands of years. Known in the local Iraqi dialect as *Subba*, they sought refuge in the marshes when they were facing religious persecution by the majority Sunni Muslims. Except for their religious beliefs that are usually practiced in seclusion, *Subba's* culture and traditions are similar if not identical to the Ma'dan and southern Iraqis. In fact, most *Subba* perform the traditional Shi'a rituals (Ashura) and engage frequently in shrine pilgrimages.[459]

Ma'dan believe in legends and the telling of mythical stories. They believe that heaven is an island, known as *hufaidh*, located in the southwest stretches of the marshes, despite the fact that no one knows the precise location of that island. They believe that this legendary island has palaces, palm trees, and gardens of pomegranates, and is populated with huge water buffalo. The island of *hufaidh* is supposedly protected and made invisible by a *jinn* whenever humans approach it. (In the Muslim culture, *jinn* is a bad spirit who can take human or animal form, and who can have a supernatural influence over people.). The legend goes that anyone who sees the island will be cursed. Ma'dan also believe the marshes are home to two deadly monsters: the *henfish*, a giant hairy serpent; and the *afa*, a giant serpent with legs.[460]

Marsh Arab man wearing the *dishdasha* and *Koufiya* (Source: USAID)

Marsh dwellers wear clothes that are is similar to traditional Arab Bedouin dress, but not identical. Men wear the traditional Arab wardrobe, a long garment with long sleeves known as a *dishdasha* -- a white, beige, or dark garment that is also worn in the Gulf States. Jackets are worn over the *dishdasha* in cold weather. However, rich and influential sheikhs wear *abaya* on top of the *dishdasha*, which is usually made of fine wool and embroidered with gold-colored threads.

The head cover worn by men is a *koufiya* or *shmagh;* on top of the *koufiya* is the *igal* (black head rope). The type of *igal* and the way it is worn or not worn, signifies one's honor, status, social class, and emotional status. The *koufiya* is either red-and-white checked, black-and-white checked, or solid white -- depending of the person's status and social class. Those who claim lineage from Prophet Mohammed usually wear black or green *Koufiyas*, and wear a black turban if they are religious sheiks.

Ma'dan women traditionally wear black over their entire body, except their faces. They wear the *abaya* (cloak), and underneath it they wear *dishdasha* (a long garment with long sleeves that is sometimes colored). Women cover their hair with *sheila* (a piece of black cloth wrapped around the head). Influential and elderly women usually wrap their heads with another piece of cloth called a *bouyma* or *laffah* (some are made of silk), forming a turban-like shape. Marsh women usually wrap their legs to avoid thorn stings.[461]

Ma'dan women, and less often men, have special indigo-colored tribal tattoos, known as *dagg* (meaning strike or knock in Arabic) which is also a common practice among Arab Bedouins, although not as elaborate.[462] Tattooing among Ma'dan are either for healing, magic, or beauty purposes. For instance, a dot on the tip of the nose for men, women, and children, means protection from illness and death, while three dots on the palm of the right hand means securing a spouse's love.[463] As for beauty, Ma'dan women have very decorative and extensive tribal tattoos. Ma'dan women start tattooing right around puberty (which is about the same time when they are ready for marriage), particularly their faces, (eyebrows, chin, cheeks, and tip of the nose), hands, and feet. Later, and as part of the marriage rituals, permanent indigo tattoos are usually applied on the bride's body (back, abdomen, thighs).[464] These tattoos are usually done by a professional women tattooers. Men's tattoos are very minimal, limited to their faces, arms and hands and for healing and magic purposes only.

Political Structure

Due to their historic persecution by successive Iraqi governments, the Ma'dan never took an active role in Iraqi politics. In the 1990s, during the Shi'a uprising and the years that followed, the Ma'dan actively opposed the regime of Saddam Hussain.

Tribal laws of the Ma'dan always took precedence over any rules or regulations imposed by the successive Iraqi governments. The "marsh dwellers avoided paying any taxes and they did not anticipate receiving any government services."[465]

Marsh Arab society is based on the tribal system, which encompasses a number of clans, or groups of families, with shared lineage and headed by a sheikh. Iraqi tribes, including the Ma'dan tribes, have played a central role in Iraq's history. However, with urbanizations, nationalism, the abolition of sheikhdoms in 1924, and the imposition of changes (such as the drainage of the marshes), the influence of these tribes declined. With people moving to cities and towns and changing their lifestyle, many failed to maintain kinship and tribal connections. Instead, some Ma'dan joined organized political parties, such as the Ba'ath, the Da'wa and other socialist parties.[466]

Over the years, and since the time of the Abbasid Caliphate, the marshlands became a refuge and stronghold for anti-government political rebels and those who were persecuted. From 869-883, black-slaves (brought in from East Africa to Basra) rebelled against the Abbasid Caliphate in what is known as the Zanj rebellion, and took refuge in the marshes.[467] For over seven centuries, the "southern Mesopotamian countryside was home to largely self-governing tribal groups."[468] These tribes fought amongst each other over the land without the any interference from the central government or administrative authority.[469] The marshlands were notorious for being the epicenter for lawlessness,[470] as these tribes and confederations have always held no defined or fixed areas of land and paid no taxes. However, by 1880, and in an attempt to impose government control and political stability in the marshlands, the Ottoman government declared the whole marshlands as a "State Domain." The

People from the village returned to the marshes after 12 years, following the reflooding of the marshes (Source: USAID)

Ottoman government forced the marsh dwellers to either buy titles (*tapu*) for a defined land, or to lease plots directly from the State.[471]

Iraqi Marshes restored in May 2016 (Source: U.S. Consulate General Basra, Iraq)

By the time the British took control of the region, they increased the power of the local tribal sheikhs, making them political agents in control of different tribal regions. This process transformed the tribal sheikhs into affluent landlords, and, in turn, rendered their fellow tribesmen into tenants. This drove many people away from the tribe into the market economy and city centers, where they were obligated to pay rents and taxes (an option marsh dwellers seldom exercised).

Persecution in the 1990s by Saddam's regime drove many Ma'dan from their ancient homeland. Some people lost family members, but almost all Ma'dan lost their homes, livelihoods, and incomes. Internally displaced, they were forced to adapt a new way of life much different from what they were born into.

The disastrous events of the 1990s led a great number of the Ma'dan to become political rebels. Some fled to Iran and joined the opposition, others remained inside Iraq; yet they were always regarded with suspicion and were frequently persecuted by the Ba'athist regime. Many Ma'dan rebels were killed by the Saddam regime during the 1991 Shi'a uprising. It is believed that the bodies of Ma'dan who died in this uprising are buried in mass graves discovered in southern Iraq in 2003.

After the unseating of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, some affluent Ma'dan tribal sheikhs joined Iraqi political parties, mainly groups aligned with the Shi'a; today, many of these Ma'dan are serving in the government. The most prominent of these Ma'dan political figures is Karim Mahood Hattab al-Mohamadawi -- popularly referred to as *Abu Hatim*, "the Prince of the Marshes." Hattab heads the Prince's Political Party, a rural-tribal and relatively secular political party.[472]

Today, many marsh-dwellers have returned to their ancient homeland -- what they call their "Garden of Eden." Gradually, they are resuming their unique way of life, and are trying to undo many years of persecution, hardship, desiccation, and devastation.

Conclusion

You might have noticed that the case study does not include all, or even many, of the concepts discussed in the Operational Culture General document. This is only natural; a comprehensive body of literature devoted to the study of a single culture is rare. In fact, Marines are frequently called upon to operate in areas where current information on local culture is scarce. What the OCG and the chapters in this document do is help Marines learn about their assigned region and acquire skills and concepts that will assist them in operating effectively in complex cross-cultural situations in any part of the globe when information is scarce or rapidly changing.

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