

What Is the Middle East?

An area known for war and protests creates a lot of geographic confusion

The news from the **Middle East** is troubling. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad is cracking down on citizens who've been fighting for **government** reforms. His forces have killed nearly 8,000 Syrians in the past year. Meanwhile, Israel is in a tense standoff with Iran, which may be trying to build nuclear weapons.

Sadly, this type of unrest in the **Middle East** is nothing new. But what exactly is the **Middle East**? A country? A continent?

The **Middle East** is actually a region. Most of its land is in Asia, but parts of it stretch into Africa and Europe. The nations that make up the **Middle East** are linked by more than geography, however. Places within any region usually have other things in common, such as climate and natural resources.

For example, much of the **Middle East** is a hot, dry desert. And to many people, the region means oil. About half the world's oil reserves are found there.

The **Middle East** is also defined by its people. About three quarters of them are Arabs, and most practice the religion of Islam.

Then and Now

The **Middle East** holds a special place in world history. Some of the greatest ancient civilizations sprang up along its three main rivers, the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile. The region is also the birthplace of three major religions--Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

More recently, the **Middle East** has been known mainly for **turmoil**. Israel and its Arab neighbors have gone to war several times since the 1940s. For much of the past decade, the United States was locked in a bitter war in Iraq. Since early last year, the **Middle East** has been gripped by a wave of protests called the "Arab Spring." People throughout the region have been demanding a greater say in how their countries are run.

As the fighting in Syria rages on, the **Middle East** is sure to stay in the news for some time to come.

News IQ

1. Which statement about the Middle East is false?

- A It is known for conflict and unrest.
- B Three major religions started there.
- C It is a continent made up of several countries.
- D Its importance dates back to ancient times.

2. From the article, what can you conclude about most regions in the world?

- A They are full of war and protest.
- B They are defined only by geography.
- C Their climate is hot and dry.
- D none of the above

3. According to the map, the Euphrates River runs through which three nations?

- A Syria, Iran, and Iraq
- B Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt
- C Turkey, Syria, and Iraq
- D Turkey, Syria, and Israel

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Answer Key

1.C 2.D 3.C 4.C

Background

The definition of the **Middle East** varies among sources, adding to the confusion about the region. For instance, the *CIA World Factbook* doesn't include Egypt as part of the region, but does include the former Soviet states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Other sources recognize Libya and Tunisia as part of the **Middle East**.

Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was the first **Middle** Eastern leader to be forced out during the Arab Spring protests. The latest leader to step down was President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen.