

Module: North Africa and Southwest Asia
Topic Content: Major Countries of Southwest Asia

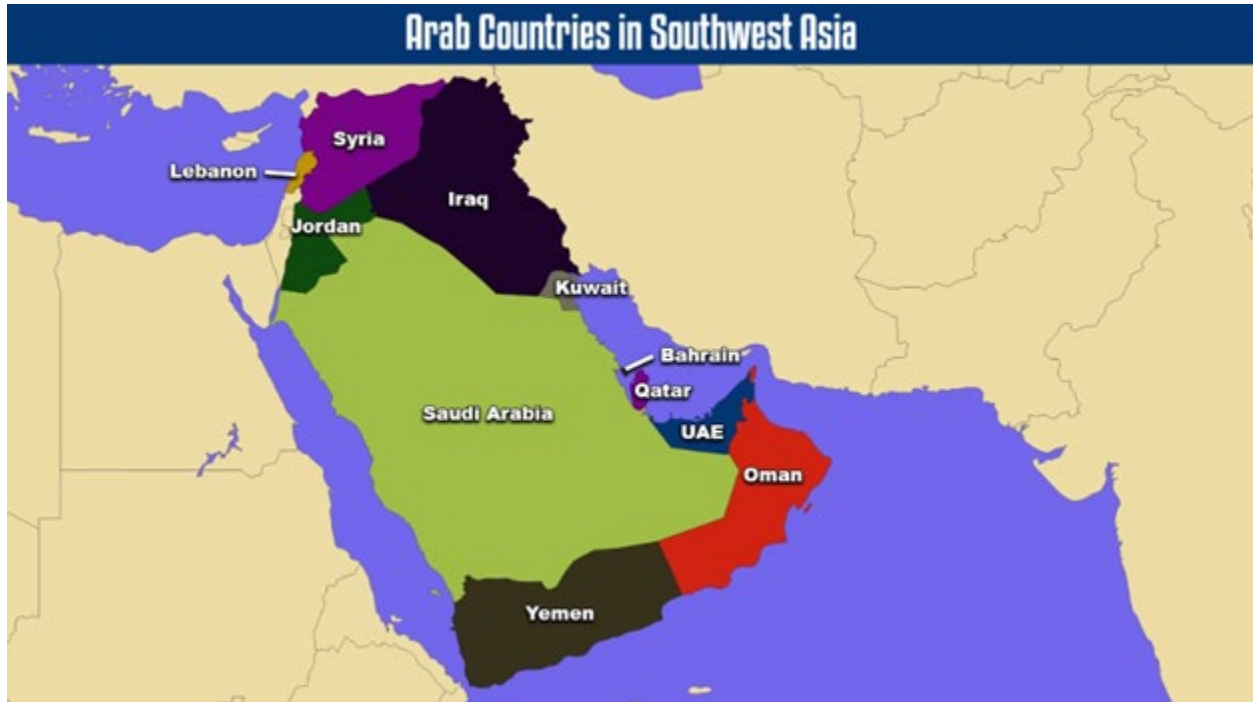
Major Countries of Southwest Asia



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Arab Countries in Southwest Asia



Most of the countries located in Southwest Asia are Arab. The majority of people living in these countries speak Arabic and practice Islam. The cultures and customs of these countries are unique, but they are unified by their shared Arab heritage. The Arab nations of Southwest Asia include Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates or UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq.

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Syria



Syria is located on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, between Turkey and Lebanon. Syria has a Mediterranean climate near the coast, but most of the country is dry. The population is concentrated near the Mediterranean Sea and the Euphrates River. The capital of Syria is Damascus. This city is located at an oasis site in the southwestern part of the country.

Syria was once a part of the Ottoman Empire. After World War I, the French government administered the region. Syria gained independence in 1946, but experienced years of political instability. In the 1970s, Hafez al-Assad took control of the country. Assad ruled as President of Syria until his death in 2000. After his death, his son Bashar al-Assad became the president.

Since 2011, Syria has been torn apart by a civil war. The conflict began with peaceful protests against the government. Protesters wanted President Assad to resign. The government responded with violence, which led to an armed rebellion. As of 2019, it is estimated that 400,000 people have been killed. Approximately five million refugees have fled the country. A terrorist organization, known as the Islamic State (ISIS), has only made the conflict worse.

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Saudi Arabia



Saudi Arabia is located on the Arabian Peninsula. This country covers most of the northern and central areas of the peninsula. It is bordered by the Red Sea in the west, and the Persian Gulf in the east. Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of the Islamic religion. The country contains the city of Mecca, which is the most important city in the Islamic faith.

Mecca is the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and the home of the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a cubic shrine that is the holiest site in Islam. When Muslims pray to Allah, they face toward the Kaaba in Mecca. All Muslims are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lives. This pilgrimage, called the hajj, is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Only Muslims are allowed into the city of Mecca.

The government of Saudi Arabia is a theocratic monarchy. A theocratic government bases its laws in religious doctrine. In this case, that religion is Islam. The Saudi government has attempted to balance strict Islamic tradition with modernization. Saudi Arabia has vast oil reserves and is a founding member of OPEC. This resource has made the country very wealthy and supported the development of infrastructure.

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United Arab Emirates (UAE)



The United Arab Emirates is located on the Arabian Peninsula, on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Gulf. The United Arab Emirates, or UAE, is a federation of seven emirates. An emirate is a territory that is ruled by an emir. Emir is a high title given to leaders in Arab countries that is similar to general, commander, or lord. The country was established in 1971, after gaining independence from the United Kingdom.

Dubai is the largest and most populous city in the UAE. The city of Dubai is also the capital of the Emirate, or state, of Dubai. The city of Dubai has experienced rapid urbanization and is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. It is a major center for international trade and tourism in the region. Outside of Dubai, the economy is mainly based on oil.

The United Arab Emirates has managed to avoid the political unrest and violence found in nearby countries. This is partially due to wealth and partially due to the suppression of those who seek political reform. Citizens of the UAE, called Emiratis, make up less than 15% of the population. The rest of the population is made up of guest workers from countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

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Qatar



Qatar is located on the western coast of the Persian Gulf, also known as the Arabian Gulf. The country spans a small peninsula that extends from the Arabian Peninsula. Qatar is a small country with a small population. It also has one of the world's highest GDP per capita rates. The economy is mainly supported by oil exports.

Oil wealth has led to rapid urbanization and modernization. This has created a reliance on immigrant labor. In fact, approximately 80% of the population consists of guest workers. Guest workers migrate to a country to find temporary work at wages higher than those available in their home countries. Companies hire guest workers to fulfill shortages and meet labor demands. This is a common practice in the construction, mining, and oil industries. Qatar's high level of wealth has helped protect it from the political unrest and violence that have arisen in other parts of Southwest Asia.

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Kuwait



Kuwait is located on the northwestern corner of the Persian Gulf, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait is a small country covered by desert. The country is highly urbanized, as most of the population lives in cities near the coast. Kuwait is a wealthy country with an economy that is primarily supported by petroleum exports. Kuwait is one of the founding members of OPEC. OPEC stands for the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

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Iraq



Iraq is located in an area that was known as Mesopotamia in ancient times. Mesopotamia is a fertile region that lies between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. These rivers empty into the Persian Gulf, near Iraq's tiny strip of coastline.

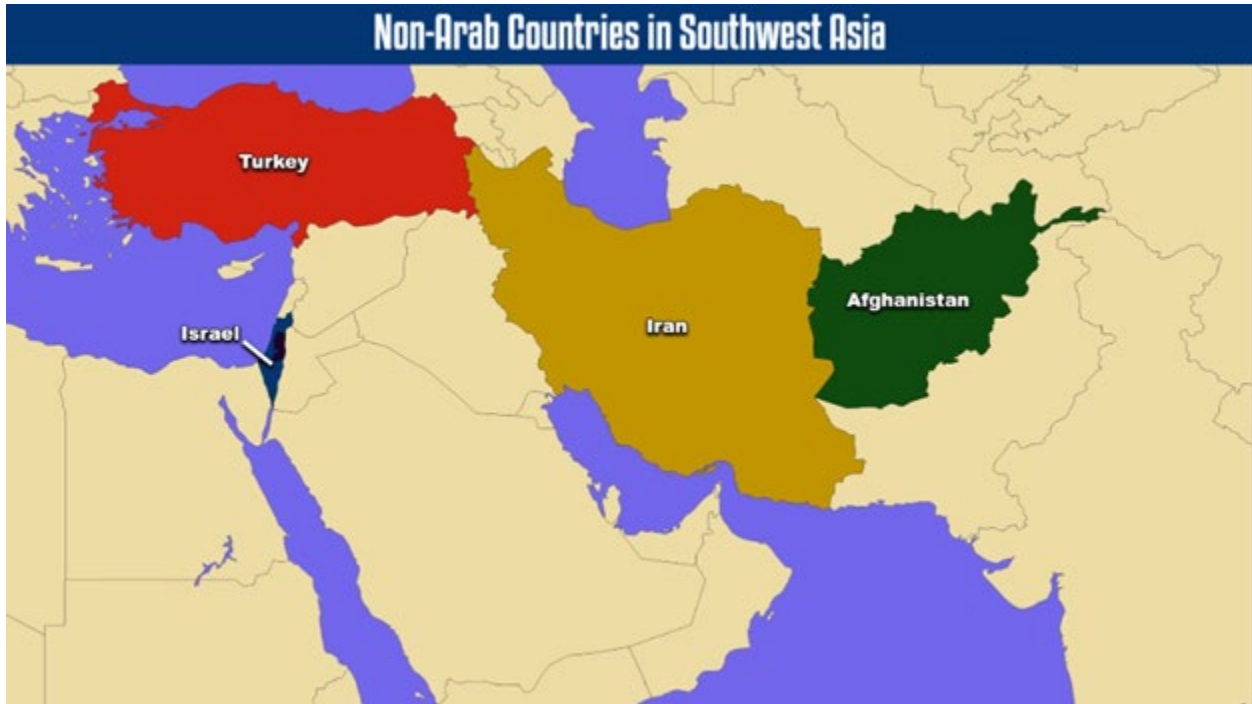
Baghdad is the capital and most populous city in Iraq. The city is situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These rivers provide fresh water and fertile land. They also act as natural defensive barriers and operate as trade routes to the Persian Gulf. Historically, Baghdad was one of the world's major centers for culture, trade, and knowledge.

The modern state of Iraq was established as a monarchy in 1932. It was later ruled by a series of dictators, the last of whom was Saddam Hussein. In 2003, the United States led a coalition that invaded Iraq and displaced Saddam Hussein. In 2005, free elections were held and a new constitution was drafted. The new Iraqi government and U.S. forces faced violent resistance for many years. The U.S. withdrew from Iraq in 2011, but became re-involved in 2014. The Iraqi government requested help fighting a terrorist organization known as the Islamic State (ISIS). As of 2019, the Islamic State has lost its territory in Iraq and the threat is mostly contained.

Iraq is a predominantly Muslim country. Approximately two-thirds of the population identify as Shi'a and one-third identifies as Sunni. Arabs make up about 75% of the population in Iraq. Kurds make up about 20% of the population. The new constitution guaranteed many rights to the Kurdish people that were previously limited. It also established Kurdish as an official language alongside Arabic.

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Non-Arab Countries in Southwest Asia



There are a few countries located in Southwest Asia that do not have Arab heritage. The populations of these countries are made up of different ethnic groups like Turks, Jews, Persians, and Kurds. These cultural differences have been the cause of conflict in the region. The non-Arab countries of Southwest Asia include Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Afghanistan.

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Turkey



The nation of Turkey is located on the Anatolian Peninsula. It is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea in the south, and the Black Sea in the north. Most of the country is located in Asia. However, part of Turkey extends into Europe. Asian Turkey and European Turkey are separated by the Sea of Marmara, the Dardanelles Strait, and the Bosphorus Strait.

The city of Istanbul straddles the Bosphorus Strait. This means part of the city is in Europe and part of the city is in Asia. Istanbul is the most populous city in Turkey. It is also the country's commercial and cultural center. Istanbul is an ancient city that was once known as Byzantium. The city later became part of the Roman Empire and was renamed Constantinople. In the fifteenth century, the city became part of the Ottoman Empire and was renamed Istanbul.

The modern republic of Turkey was established in 1923, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Ethnic Turks make up about 75% of the population. There is also a large minority of ethnic Kurds living in the country. Many Kurdish people have pushed for an independent state, known as Kurdistan. This has led to conflict with the Turkish government. Sunni Islam is the predominant religion. Turkish is the official language, but Kurdish is spoken among the Kurdish population.

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Israel



Israel is located on the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Settlement in this region dates back thousands of years, but the modern state of Israel was established in 1948. Israel is considered a Jewish nation. About 75% of the population identifies as Jewish. The country also has a significant Arab minority, and many residents practice Islam or Christianity. Hebrew is the official language. English is commonly spoken as a second language. Arabic is also spoken by the Arab population.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Israel was a part of the Ottoman Empire and was known as Palestine. After World War I, the British government administered the territory. In search of a homeland, Jewish people from around the world began migrating to Palestine.

The demand for a Jewish homeland greatly increased after the Holocaust. The United Nations divided Palestine between the Arab and Jewish populations. Palestinian Jews accepted the proposal, and declared Israel an independent nation. Palestinian Arabs formed a military coalition with other Arab nations in the region and declared war on Israel. The conflict has continued ever since.

In 1967, Israel captured several territories. These territories were the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, Gaza Strip, West Bank, and East Jerusalem. Israel withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula and returned the territory to Egypt. However, it still controls the rest of the territories. The Golan Heights is a disputed territory with Syria. Israel has withdrawn from Gaza, but still controls the West Bank. Palestinian Arabs have declared Gaza and the West Bank to be an independent state, but Israel does not acknowledge a Palestinian state. After gaining control of East Jerusalem, Israel claimed the city as its capital. Jerusalem was previously divided based on an earlier agreement, but is currently under Israeli control. This remains a source of tension since the city is an important religious center for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

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Iran



Iran is situated between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Iran can trace its history back to some of the world's oldest civilizations, including the First Persian Empire. In fact, the country was known as Persia until 1935. Tehran is the capital and most populous city in Iran. The city is located in the northern-central part of the country, near the Caspian Sea. Tehran became the capital almost 250 years ago, and has developed into one of the largest urban centers in Southwest Asia.

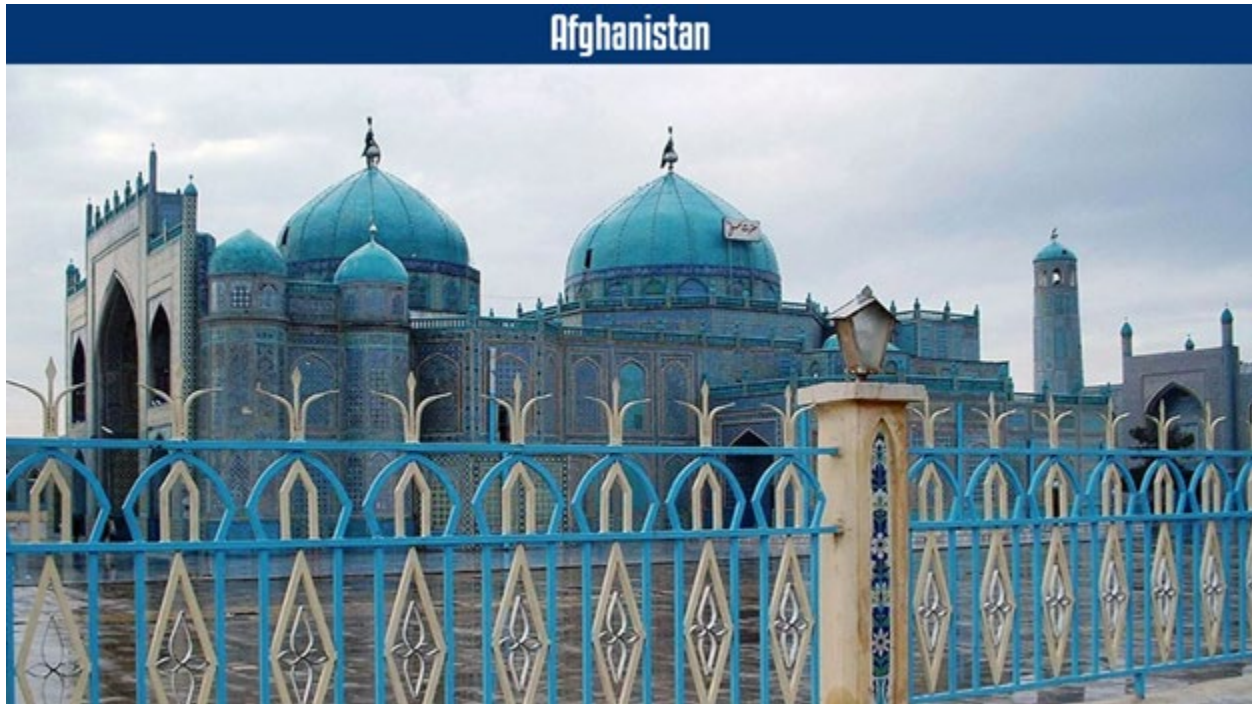
Iran is an ethnically diverse country. The population consists of Persians, Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and more. Each of these ethnic groups speaks a different language. However, Persian is the official language and it is spoken by the majority of the population.

Iran became a theocratic Islamic republic in 1979. A theocratic government bases its laws on religious doctrine. The country's religious leader is also the head of state. In Iran, Shi'a Islam is the official religion and the head of state is known as the Supreme Leader.

Iran is one of the founding members of OPEC. Oil accounts for roughly 80% of all exports. Iran's relationship with the international community, particularly the U.S. and Europe, has had ups and downs. In recent years, much of the tension between the U.S. and Iran has focused on its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

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Afghanistan



Afghanistan is a landlocked country located east of Iran. The Hindu Kush mountain range makes up most of the country's terrain. About 75% of the population is rural, living in isolated villages. Afghanistan has a diverse population made up of several ethnic groups. The country has two official languages, and many Afghans are bilingual. Dari, also called Afghan Persian, is spoken by about 80% of the country. Pashto is spoken by about half of the population.

Afghanistan is a poor country with a history of conflict. A communist government seized control of the country in 1978. Insurgents fought against the government for more than a decade. Despite having Soviet support, the government collapsed in 1992. After the fall of the government, Afghanistan was torn apart by civil war. An extreme religious movement called the Taliban rose to power during this time.

The Taliban established a theocratic regime in the country. It also supported terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, which was led by Osama bin Laden. Terrorists from al-Qaeda attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. In response, the U.S. led a military campaign that removed the Taliban from power. Afghanistan currently has a democratically elected government. However, the Taliban remains a threat.