Pre AP Social Studies  
Notes Physical Geography  
The Middle East: Southwest Asia and North Africa

The Middle East lies at the intersection of three tectonic plates: the African, Eurasian, and Arabian. It is also found on three continents Europe (corner of the Balkan Peninsula), Southwest Asia and North Africa—it is literally in the middle.

**Major regions of the Middle East**
- **Northern Tier:** The Northern Tier stretches across Turkey and Iran and is a region of mountains and plateaus. Mountains have an important effect on the region’s climate. They help create pockets of fertile land in a region otherwise known for its dryness while others help in creating the region’s deserts.
  - a. The Plateau of Iran: bordered by the Zagros Mountains to the southwest and by the Elburz Mountains to the north is a dry rugged plateau in the heart of Iran. The Great Salt Desert is located in central Iran on the Plateau.
  - b. Anatolian Plateau: located in Asia Minor (a historical name for the region that is today Turkey). The Anatolian Plateau is in the center of Turkey, has fertile soil and receives enough rainfall to support farming. The Taurus (in the south) and the Pontic Mountains (in the north) border the Plateau. It has a large population.
- **Arabian Peninsula:** The Arabian Peninsula is a desert plain which stretches from the Persian Gulf to the mountains along the Red Sea. It has a small population because of the lack of water. Most people live around oases—a fertile desert area that has enough water to support plant and animal life. The southern part of the peninsula is known as the Rub al-Khali or "Empty Quarter"—this land is uninhabited windswept sand. Beneath the desert surface lie huge amounts of oil.
- **The Fertile Crescent:** An arc-shaped region that consists of two parts (1) an area that stretches along the eastern Mediterranean coast and (2) an area between the Tigris and Euphrates River (called Mesopotamia or "land between the rivers" which is a rich fertile plain). Very fertile soil and abundant water have made it a major population region and an ancient cradle of civilization. The Fertile Crescent has few natural barriers, which has left it open to invasion. The flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is unpredictable sometimes bringing disaster and death.
- **Nile Valley:** The Nile Valley is another fertile area of the Middle East (and also a cradle of civilization). This region is protected in the east and west by deserts. The Nile River floods predictably and dependably.
- **The Maghreb:** Comes from the Arab term meaning “western isle” it includes the western most North African nations of Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. Five other African nations share geographic and cultural links to the Maghreb—Libya, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania. The Maghreb is an isolated land surrounded by water, mountains, and deserts—it has few inhabitants. Two important areas of the Maghreb are:
  - a. Atlas Mountains: located in Morocco and Algeria—the narrow strip of land on the windward side of these mountains receives rain, so plants and crops flourish (where most people in the Maghreb live) while the leeward side of the mountain is harsh desert.
  - b. Sahara: The Sahara stretches for 3.5 million square miles across northern Africa and is the world’s largest hot desert about the size of the Unites States.
Climate Regions of the Middle East: For people in North Africa and the Middle East water is one of the most precious resources. Many governments of Middle Eastern countries have used the wealth from oil to build desalination plants—that convert sea water into fresh water for drinking and irrigation. Also people have clustered in well-watered places—along the coasts and in river valleys.

- Desert (arid regions): The Middle East is at the center of the world's largest desert region. Deserts experience dramatic temperature changes from 125°F in the day to 40°F at night. Plants and animals have adapted to the desert climate however life in the desert is spread out over great distances. With little vegetation to hold the soil in place, wind becomes a powerful force that shapes the landscape of the region. Wind carries the sand away leaving “desert pavement”—a thin surface covering of pebbles, gravel, and boulders—on the desert floor. Deserts of note include the Arabian Desert which covers most of the Arabian Peninsula, the Great Salt Desert located in central Iran on the plateau, the Sahara—that stretches across northern Africa, and the Syrian Desert.

- Steppe (Semiarid regions): Located on the fringes of desert regions Steppe climates are located on the Anatolian Plateau and the Plateau of Iran. These climates receive some rainfall and can support a few crops and livestock.

- Mediterranean: Climates located along the Mediterranean, southern Black and Caspian Seas and in the Zagros Mountains in Iran. They receive enough rainfall in the winter to support farming. They used to have forests however most have disappeared due to human activity.

Agriculture of the Middle East: Agriculture is the major occupation in much of Southwest Asia and North Africa. Most farmers raise only enough crops and animals to support their own families (subsistence farmers). Commercial agriculture is widespread only in Israel. Irrigation was first developed in Southwest Asia and is very important to agriculture in the region. Shaduf irrigation, a simple hoist to transfer water from ditches and canals to fields, was used by ancient Egyptians. A more modern technique is drip irrigation which delivers a measured amount of water to fields. Of all the countries in the Middle East only Israel is considered developed.

Natural Resources: Oil is the regions richest mineral resource: the main deposits lie along the shores of the Persian Gulf and in Iraq. It is unevenly distributed across the region. As a result, great economic differences exist between oil rich countries and those that lack oil. OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) is an organization of oil-rich countries around the world that have joined together to have more control over world oil prices. Other than oil the countries of Southwest Asia have few resources.

Strategic Waterways: The Middle East is also in the middle of many important waterways. The Suez Canal connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea. The Turkish straits, the Dardanelles and the Bosporus Straits, join the Black and Mediterranean Seas and the Strait of Hormuz links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and then the Indian Ocean.

The People of the Middle East: The Middle East is a crossroads of many people and therefore a culturally diverse area.

- Arabs: speak a Semitic language—Arabic and make-up the majority of the people in the Middle East.
- Hebrews (also known as Jews and/or Israelites): speak a Semitic language, live in the present day country of Israel.
- Persians: speak an Indo-European language and live in present day Iran historically known as Persia.
- Turks: speak a Central Asian language because that is their original homeland (some Turks settled in Asia Minor in the 11th century)—live in present day Turkey.
- Kurds: minorities in present day Iraq, Turkey and Syria.