

7h

Chapter 16

SS7G8 *The student will describe the diverse cultures of the people who live in Southwest Asia (Middle East).*

- a. Explain the differences between an ethnic group and a religious group.
- b. Explain the diversity of religions within the Arabs, Persians, and Kurds.
- c. Compare and contrast the prominent religions in Southwest Asia (Middle East): Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.
- d. Explain the reason for the division between the Sunni and Shia Muslims.
- e. Evaluate how the literacy rate affects the standard of living.

Contrasting Cultures

The Middle East is home to different ethnic and religious groups. An ethnic group is a group identified on the basis of religion, race, or national origin. A religious group has a distinct identity based on common religious beliefs and practices. While this mix of ethnic and religious groups can provide layers of richness to a nation's culture, it can also lead to tensions among the various groups.

Three major ethnic groups in the Middle East are the Arabs, Persians, and Kurds. The majority of people in the Middle East are Arabs, an ethnic group who speak Arabic as a native language and identify themselves as Arabs.

Persians live in Iran. Until 1935, Iran was known as Persia, and most Iranians today are not Arabs, but Persians who speak Farsi.

Kurds are an ethnic group that originated as a semi-nomadic, tribal people. Kurds now live mostly in the mountains of several countries in an area informally named Kurdistan. At various times, Iraq and Turkey have both suppressed the Kurds and their traditions. Although there is a strong nationalist movement among the Kurds for their own nation, the Kurds have never united in this effort outside their individual countries.

Many ethnic groups make up Afghanistan's population. Migration from its neighbors like Iran and China, plus invasions and wars, have led to great ethnic diversity within the country.

The Jewish people are considered to be both an ethnic group and a religious group. Religious Jews believe in Judaism, but half of the Jewish people living in Israel are secular, with no belief in Judaism. In Biblical times, the Jewish people were considered to be a nation.



Beliefs and Customs of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity

READ! Look over carefully.

| | Judaism | Islam | Christianity |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| Origins | Began about 1800 B.C.E. when God spoke to Abraham | Begun in 7th century by Muhammad | Christianity began with Jesus in first century C.E. |
| Beliefs | Believe in Abraham and Moses as prophets | Believe in Abraham and Moses as prophets; Muhammad is last prophet | Believe in Abraham and Moses as prophets |
| The Messiah | Jews are still awaiting the Messiah | Believe Jesus was a prophet | Believe Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah |
| Sacred Book(s) | Old Testament of Bible, the Talmud | Parts of the Bible's Old and New Testaments and the Quran | Old and New Testaments of the Bible |
| Sacred Places | Remains of the Jerusalem temple, Hebron, Palestine, burial place of Abraham | Holy cities of Mecca and Medina; Jerusalem | Many places in the Holy Land (parts of Israel) where Jesus lived |



Quick Quiz

Write the statement.

Using the information from the above chart, label the questions True or False.

- ___ 1. The oldest religion in the Middle East is Judaism.
- ___ 2. Christians believe Muhammad was a prophet.
- ___ 3. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe in all or part of the Bible.
- ___ 4. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam believe Abraham was a prophet.
- ___ 5. In Judaism, Mecca is a sacred place.



Arabs, Persians, and Kurds

There are various religious groups within the ethnic groups of Arabs, Persians (Iranians), and Kurds.

The majority of Arabs in the Middle East are Muslims, a religious group who practice the religion of Islam. However, not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs. More than a billion people in the world are Muslims, but fewer than 15 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arabs.

In Iran, most Persians are Muslim, with a small minority each of Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian, and Bahá'í religions. Zoroastrians believe in one God and "good thoughts, good words, good deeds." Despite their small numbers, their celebrations spill over into Iranian culture. A popular tradition is the Persian New Year celebration in March with bonfires, firecrackers, and dancing. While some Muslims frown on religious Persian celebrations, many Iranians still participate in them. The Armenians and Assyrians who live in Iran are Christians. A growing number of Muslims are converting to Christianity, even though this is an offense punishable by death.

About 60 percent of Kurds are Muslim. There are substantial numbers of Christians and Jews among Kurds also. One other Kurdish religious group is the Bábís who believe that when a person dies, his or her soul enters that of another, usually a newborn baby.

In general, the Christian population is small in the Middle East. In the Gaza Strip, Muslims and Christians live and work together peacefully. In Iraq, however, attacks on Christians following the U.S. invasion have grown, causing many Christians to leave the country.

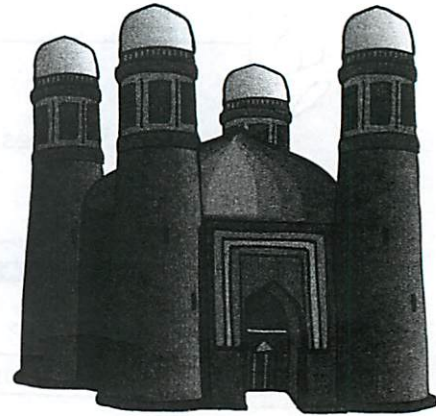


Quick Quiz

Write T for True and F for False.

Write statements.

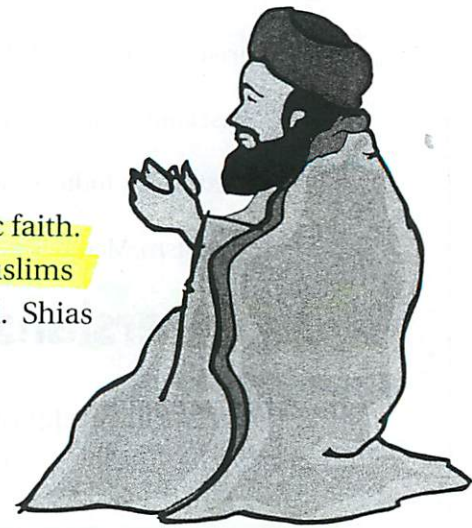
1. ___ About 10 percent of Kurds are Muslim.
2. ___ Islam is the most common religion in Iran.
3. ___ Many Iranians celebrate Zoroastrian traditions.
4. ___ Christians converting to Islam is a punishable offense in Iran.
5. ___ The majority of Arabs in the Middle East are Muslims.
6. ___ There is a huge number of Christians in the Middle East.



Sunnis and Shias—Both Muslims

As there are divisions in many religions, so it is within the Islamic faith. Two major groups are the Sunnis and Shias. About 90 percent of Muslims are Sunnis. The Sunnis follow the *sunnah*, or custom of Muhammad. Shias are Muslims who follow Ali, Muhammad's closest relative.

Ali was Muhammad's cousin and was married to his daughter. After Muhammad died, Muslims split over who would succeed Muhammad as leader of Islam. The Sunnis wanted the community to choose the best leader to succeed Muhammad, while the Shia favored Ali, feeling that leadership should stay within the prophet's family.





Think About It

Answer the questions below.

Write questions.

1. What are the two divisions of the Islamic faith? _____
2. Which division includes about 90 percent of Muslims? _____
3. Which group wanted Ali as their leader after Muhammad's death? _____
4. Which group wanted the community to pick the best leader after Muhammad's death? _____



Question for Discussion

Shia Muslims are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq, and southern Lebanon, and make up about 80 percent of the population in the oil-rich areas of the region. How do you think this fact might add to the current problems between the two groups?

Reading the Way to a Better Life

Usually there is a high correlation between the standard of living and the literacy rate (the percentage of adults who can read and write). Literacy rates in the Middle East have improved significantly in recent years, but are still low by United States' standards.



Word Definition

standard of living: the financial health of a nation measured by how much that nation consumes

Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have a reasonably high standard of living and a literacy rate that ranges from a low of 63 percent in Saudi Arabia to a high of 87 percent in Turkey. With a per capita income of \$25,800, Israel has the highest literacy rate in the Middle East at 97 percent.

With 80 percent of its people living below the poverty line, the Gaza Strip manages to have a literacy rate of 92 percent. The United Nations Committee for Children (UNICEF) has supported education in the Gaza Strip in an effort to offset the unstable, sometimes violent political environment.

Afghanistan has been in political turmoil since the mid-1970s. The Taliban, a violent political group, was in power until the United States invaded in 2003. The United States expanded education to include women, whose literacy rate had been less than three percent. Still, the overall literacy rate in Afghanistan is only 28 percent and the standard of living is roughly \$800 per person per year.



Girls in Afghani school
USAID photo

Wars in Iraq over the past two decades have hurt both education and the economy. The literacy rate is 74 percent. Although the government is rich from oil revenue, the income per person in Iraq is estimated to have been only \$3,600 in 2007.



Quick Quiz
Fill in the blanks below.

Write questions.



Learning to read

1. Usually there is a strong correlation between the standard of living and the _____.
2. _____ has the highest literacy rate in the Middle East.
3. Since the middle of the 1970s _____ has been in political turmoil, and the literacy rate is only 28 percent.
4. Wars in the past two decades in _____ have caused problems in both the economy and education.
5. With help from UNICEF, the Gaza Strip has a literacy rate of _____.

Government/Civics Understandings

Chapter 17



READ: IMPORTANT INFORMATION

SS7CG4 *The student will compare and contrast various forms of government.*

For detailed information and activities for this standard, see pages 27-30.



SS7CG5 *The student will explain the structures of the national governments of Southwest Asia (Middle East).*

- a. Compare the parliamentary democracy of the State of Israel, the monarchy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the theocracy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, distinguishing the form of leadership and the role of the citizen in terms of voting rights and personal freedoms.*

Different Countries, Different Governments

The countries of the Middle East have different forms of government. Keep reading to discover how the governments of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran work.