Regions and nomenclature

The Ottoman Empire encompassed territories on three continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. This book’s focus, the Arab provinces of the empire, occupied a region roughly half the size of the United States. Although these provinces were located in the region commonly known today as the Middle East, that term was not applied to these territories until relatively recently. Inhabitants of the provinces in question, like many residents of these same regions today, did recognize a distinction between the Arab ‘West’ (Maghrib in Arabic) – that is, those parts of North Africa comprising present-day Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco but excluding Egypt – and the Arab ‘East’ (Mashriq), encompassing Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, and present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Iraq.

In the nineteenth century, western Europeans began to use the term Near East to refer to the eastern Mediterranean region and Anatolia (known to the ancient Greeks and Romans as Asia Minor), the peninsula comprising most of present-day Turkey; these territories were ‘near’ in relation to Europe and, of all the Ottoman lands, were most intensively in contact with Europe. The term Middle East, meanwhile, was coined in 1902 by the American admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan to designate the lands between the Mediterranean Sea and India; this term, then, encompassed a substantially larger territory than that conventionally designated by ‘Near East’. The meaning of ‘Middle East’ has broadened still further over the years, so that today it subsumes the original meanings of both Near and Middle East. Today, in fact, ‘Near East’ is often used in an academic context to refer to Egypt, Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean only as they existed in antiquity. In some cases, ‘Middle East’ can even include North Africa, although North Africa is usually regarded as falling outside the Middle East, strictly speaking.
Within the territory covered by the Ottoman Arab provinces, we can identify two major regions: Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, not coincidentally the title of P. M. Holt’s famous book. Egypt corresponds more or less exactly to the modern-day country of that name. Indeed, Egypt is the only country in the modern Middle East which has historically retained its territorial integrity. This is because Egypt is an almost completely flat land in which the vast majority of settlement occurs along the Nile River, which forms a long, fertile strip down the country. Accordingly, the flow of the Nile determines the chief territorial division within Egypt: between Lower Egypt — that is, the lower courses of the Nile — extending from Cairo to where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean Sea, and Upper Egypt, extending southward from Cairo to the borders of Sudan. In approximately 3500 BCE, the first Pharaoh united Lower and Upper Egypt, which have formed a single civilizational and political unit ever since. Agricultural cultivation in Egypt until the very recent past has depended on the annual Nile flood. Channelling the Nile waters through irrigation channels is critical to successful agriculture. Maintaining these channels would prove a continual struggle for Ottoman governors of Egypt and various other provincial authorities.

The Fertile Crescent, a term coined in the nineteenth century by European scholars of the Bible, is essentially the crescent of land extending between the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys although, strictly speaking, it does not include the Nile valley. The fertility in question is of two kinds. The eastern Fertile Crescent, roughly equivalent to modern Iraq, depends, like Egypt, on river floods: specifically, the flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In contrast to the Nile flood, floods along the Tigris and Euphrates have historically proven irregular and unmanageable. Devastating floods pervade the history of Baghdad, constructed in 762 CE as the new capital of the Abbasid dynasty, who claimed leadership of the Muslim community as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad’s uncle Abbas. Some of these floods damaged the capital irreparably. To exploit the rivers, the various rulers of the region developed a complex system of irrigation canals which arguably required a highly centralized government to maintain them.

The western Fertile Crescent, roughly equivalent to Greater Syria, which includes modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, has historically relied not on river-fed irrigation but on rain for its water. This fact, plus the region’s relatively inaccessible terrain — hilly to mountainous, especially in Lebanon and Syria — helps to explain why the region has tended to resist complete incorporation into centralized empires.
Geographical features

Deserts

The image many non-specialists have of the Middle East and North Africa is of a region that is predominantly desert. Although this impression is somewhat misleading, as will be explained below, the region does boast several very impressive deserts. Largest and grandest is the Sahara, which has historically separated the Muslim peoples of northern Africa, including Egypt, from the populations south of the desert, who consist largely of Christians and animists, or worshippers of spirits in nature. (Islam did, however, penetrate to sub-Saharan Africa during the Middle Ages, and substantial Muslim populations are found there.) More central to the territory covered by this book is the Arabian Desert, which covers most of the Arabian peninsula, with the notable exception of Yemen, and its extension, the Syrian Desert, which stretches north into southern Syria, eastern Jordan and western Iraq. The Sinai desert separates Egypt from the eastern Mediterranean littoral while serving as a continental divide between Africa and Asia.

The desert was hard put to support any lifestyle but nomadic herding. We might immediately think romantically of camel caravans in the desert. These there were, certainly, but there were also nomadic herders of sheep, goats, donkeys and mules. Nor did all nomads live in the desert; the Turkic nomads who would give rise to the Ottoman Empire originally inhabited the grassy steppes of Central Asia. Within the territory covered by this book, semi-nomadic Kurds and Turkic nomads commonly known as Turcomans lived in the mountainous regions of Lebanon, Syria and northern Iraq, as well as south-eastern Anatolia and western Iran. Mountainous Yemen, meanwhile, was home to semi-nomadic Arab tribesmen while a small population of Arabic-speaking nomads inhabited the only slightly less mountainous terrain of the Hadramawt, today the region encompassing south-eastern Yemen and western Oman. The largest nomadic and semi-nomadic populations inhabiting this territory, however, were the Arab Bedouin who dwelt in the Arabian, Syrian and Sinai deserts, as well as in various parts of Egypt, desert and otherwise. All these nomads were of necessity closely connected with the towns and the settled agriculturists who lived in and around the towns. On the other hand, a certain rivalry developed between the centres of settled civilization and the realm of the nomad, particularly in times of economic and political crisis. The boundary and the friction between ‘the desert and the sown’ form a recurring theme in Middle Eastern history.
River systems

Notwithstanding the high visibility of deserts, the Middle East breaks down regionally according to its river systems, which supply the arid region with the bulk of its water and which historically have tended to attract its highest concentrations of population. The Middle East boasts two of the world’s greatest river systems, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Nile, two of the earliest sites of settled agriculture in the world and, consequently, seats of two of humankind’s most ancient civilizations.

The German Orientalist Bertold Spuler once wrote that from antiquity to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517, Mesopotamia and the Nile valley belonged, with only rare exceptions, to separate political entities.¹ The Ottoman Empire was one of the few empires in history to rule the lands of these two river valleys – that is, Egypt and Iraq – simultaneously. As we shall see, the Ottomans struggled to keep Iraq out of the hands of the rulers of Iran and to keep Egypt from acquiring too great a degree of autonomy from the Ottoman central authority.

Mountains

Many readers’ image of the Middle East will not include mountains. Notwithstanding, the region is home to several impressive ranges, three of which lie at least partially in the Arab lands that are the subject of this book. The largest of these are the Zagros Mountains, a major chain extending through western Iran and northern Iraq, and the Taurus Mountains, which run across southern Anatolia to what is now the border region of Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Smaller ranges run through much of Syria and Lebanon. The Jabal al-Nusayriyya range runs north–south through western Syria, parallel to the coastal plain. The Jabal Druze range (recently renamed the Jabal Arab) and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains are located in south-western Syria, the former near the border with Jordan, the latter near the Lebanese border. Across the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, the Lebanon Mountains provide much of that country’s dramatic landscape. To the south and east of Beirut lie the Shouf Mountains, technically a branch of the Lebanon chain.

Several of the nomadic populations noted above roamed these mountains during the Ottoman era. Kurds were – and are – found in both the Zagros and Taurus ranges, while Turcomans inhabited the eastern portions of the Taurus range. Mountains could also serve as refuges to members of religious and ethnic minorities. High in Iraq’s Zagros range lived members of the tiny Kurdish Yazidi sect. Nusayris, also known as Alawis, inhabited the Jabal al-Nusayriyya, while Druze lived in the Jabal Druze to the south, as well as in Lebanon’s Shouf Mountains, which
were also home to Arab Christians of both the Orthodox and Maronite sects. (All these faiths are discussed below.)

Of the Turcomans living in the eastern Taurus Mountains, a number were Twelver, or Imami, Shiites who provided military might for the Safavid dynasty, which conquered Iran at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Before their collapse in 1722, the Safavids waged numerous campaigns against the Ottomans; these had a profound effect on the Arab lands, above all Iraq, where much of the fighting took place.

Peoples

At the time of the Ottoman conquest of the Arab lands, the Middle East was inhabited by peoples most of whom fall into one of four modern ethno-linguistic categories: Arabs, Persians, Kurds and Turks. These categories tend to confuse religious, ethnic, linguistic and biological identities, making a historical perspective on these peoples somewhat problematic. Nonetheless, they are useful as a means of description, though it is important to remain aware of variations in their meaning over time. Before the nineteenth century, people seldom identified themselves with any of these groups but rather defined themselves as members of a religious community, inhabitants of a city or region, or some combination of these.

Arabs

Before the advent of Islam in the early seventh century CE, Arabs lived in the Arabian peninsula and along the caravan routes that extended from the peninsula into Syria and Iraq. As a result of the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, their numbers in the region increased exponentially. During the Ottoman period, the word ‘Arab’ did not have the ethno-national connotations it does today but instead was a somewhat derogatory term used by speakers of both Arabic and Ottoman Turkish to refer to a nomadic or semi-nomadic inhabitant of the desert or the rural hinterlands of towns. (In Ottoman Turkish, furthermore, ‘Arab’ also frequently connoted a sub-Saharan African.) On the other hand, cities, towns and villages in the Ottoman Arab provinces were inhabited by Arabic speakers who tended to identify themselves by their places of residence and/or by the confessional communities to which they belonged.

Persians

Persians have inhabited Iran since approximately 1500 BCE History’s three great Persian empires, extending from the sixth century BCE to the Muslim
conquests of the seventh century CE, encompassed Iraq as well. In the centuries following the Muslim conquests, however, the Persians of Iraq became assimilated to the growing Arabic-speaking population. By the Ottoman era, Persian-speaking populations in the regions covered by this book were largely limited to southern Iraq, above all Najaf and Karbala, sites of the tombs of Ali ibn Abi Talib and his son Husayn, respectively, and therefore Shia Islam’s holiest cities. Because of the impact on the Arab lands of Ottoman antagonism towards Shiite Iran, however, Iran’s overwhelmingly Persian population should not be discounted in the history of the Ottoman Arab provinces. Indeed, the presence of Persians in southern Iraq resulted largely from Shiite immigration to the region from Iran during sporadic periods of Safavid rule in the region. The two shrine cities were powerful attractions for these immigrants.

Kurds
The term ‘Kurd’ appears to have been used since antiquity to refer very broadly to a population that speaks an Indo-European language related to Persian and inhabits the mountains of south-eastern Anatolia, north-eastern Syria, northern Iraq and western Iran. The Ottomans used the term in a similarly loose sense. During the Ottoman period, many Kurdish populations were nomadic or semi-nomadic.

Turks
As for Turks, they were not a significant presence in the Middle East until the ninth century CE, when Turkish tribes in Central Asia, under pressure from a centralizing Chinese government, began to migrate west. In the eleventh century, a huge Turkish tribal confederation known as the Oghuz crossed the Oxus, or Amu Darya, River, which now separates Turkmenistan from Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and swept through the heartland of what was then the empire of the Abbasids. Led by the Seljuk family, the Oghuz took control of the Abbasid capital of Baghdad in 1055. They did not depose the Abbasid caliph, however, but recognized him as the supreme religious authority in Sunni Islam while the Seljuk ruler, who took the title sultan, derived from an Arabic word for ‘power’ or ‘authority’, wielded political and military power. In the late eleventh century, a Seljuk offshoot founded a state in Anatolia with its capital at the ancient Byzantine city of Iconium, which under Turkish influence came to be called Konya. Because of this state’s location in former Byzantine, or Roman, territory, its rulers are commonly known as the Seljuks of Rum.
Until the nineteenth century, ‘Turk,’ like ‘Arab’, was a somewhat pejorative term for a member of a rural and, often, tribal population, with the added sense of rough and uncultured. Nomadic and semi-nomadic Turkic populations, who inhabited parts of northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, as well as eastern Anatolia and north-western Iran, during the Ottoman era, are typically called Turcomans in English. Meanwhile, speakers of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish tended to refer to Ottomans from the empire’s core lands in Anatolia and the eastern Balkans as Rumis, the adjectival form of Rum.

Other ethno-linguistic groups

Apart from these four major groups, the Arab lands counted significant populations of Armenian Christians, primarily in the cities of Greater Syria, above all Damascus, Aleppo and Jerusalem. In addition, Berbers, the indigenous population of North Africa, could be found among the semi-nomadic tribes of Upper Egypt, although they were far more numerous in what are now Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco. The Hawwara, a tribal confederation that would come to dominate Upper Egypt in the eighteenth century, were Arabized Berbers who had migrated into Egypt sometime in the thirteenth century.

The Ottoman Empire itself would greatly increase the ethnic diversity of the Arab lands, stationing soldiers from Anatolia and the Balkans in Arab cities and towns while appointing officials from these regions to Arab provincial posts.

Religious minorities

Although the population of the Arab Middle East had been predominantly Muslim since about the tenth century CE, when a steady wave of voluntary conversions to Islam becomes noticeable, the region under the Ottomans contained significant populations of non-Muslims, as well as Shiites. Several of these populations will be examined in more detail in Chapter 9. Here, we will briefly survey the wide variety of minority religious groups.

Christians

As part of the Byzantine Empire, Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean littoral acquired large numbers of Christians in the centuries after the Byzantine emperor Constantine (r. 306–37) made Christianity the
empire’s official religion. Following the pivotal Council of Chalcedon in 451, most Byzantine Christians adopted the Council’s ruling that Jesus Christ possesses two separate natures, divine and human. Christians adhering to this view are known as Diphysites; today, their ranks include the vast majority of the world’s Christians, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike. The Egyptian church, however, defied the Council of Chalcedon, insisting that Christ’s nature was one and inseparable; for this, Egyptian Christians, who came to be known as Copts, an appellation related to ‘Egypt’, suffered persecution by the Byzantines. Although another Monophysite church emerged in Syria, the Copts remained the world’s largest Monophysite sect and one of the largest Christian populations in the Arab lands.

Even before the Council of Chalcedon, the Christian bishops in the city of Antioch, located in the border area between Syria and Anatolia, were insistently Monophysite; the Syrian Orthodox church which they spearheaded, sometimes known as the Jacobite church after a proselytizing sixth-century bishop, has remained so to this day. Antioch’s Monophysitism prompted a dissenting priest known as John Maron (a local term for ‘lord’) to flee with his followers to the mountains of Lebanon. Followers of this priest, who died in roughly 410, came to be known as Maronites; they continue to be an important segment of Lebanon’s population. The Maronites acquired their own patriarch in the late seventh century, when they were cut off from the Byzantine patriarch in Constantinople by the early Muslim conquests. After aiding the Crusaders, however, they reconciled with the Vatican in 1182.

Following the schism between the Greek and Roman Churches in 1054, the overwhelming majority of Christians in Greater Syria, as well as those in Anatolia, remained loyal to the Greek Church, which today is commonly called the Orthodox Church. To this day, significant populations of Orthodox Christians remain in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestinian territories. These lands are also home to smaller, but not insignificant, numbers of Armenian Christians, who follow their own Diphysite rite.

In Ottoman Iraq lived remnants of the ancient Nestorian church, a sect espousing extreme Diphysitism which takes its name from John Nestorius, a monk of Antioch who became patriarch of Constantinople from 428–31. In fact, this sect, also known as Assyrians, have roots reaching back to at least the third century in south-eastern Anatolia and in Iraq. Nestorian Christians were patronized by the Sasanian empire, which ruled Iraq and Iran before the Muslim conquests, and held influential offices in the Abbasid administration. By the Ottoman period, however, their numbers and influence had dwindled.
Under the Ottomans, Christian merchants played important roles in trade within and among the Arab provinces. In addition, Armenians were particularly active in the overland trade with Iran and India. During the eighteenth century, as France and Britain became increasingly important commercial forces in the region, more and more Christian merchants engaged in trade with Europe as well. In Egypt, Copts served the Ottoman governors and the provincial grandees as financial officers.

**Jews**

Most cities in the Arab lands were home to small populations of Jews. At the time of the Ottoman conquest of these territories in 1516–17, most resident Jews were Arabic-speakers known as Mustarabs (‘Arabized’). But during these very years, the Arab lands were absorbing the influx of Jews expelled from Spain following the Catholic conquest of Granada and Spain’s consequent reunification under Christian rule in 1492. These Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews quickly came to dominate Jewish communities throughout the Ottoman Empire. While Christians of all sects were as likely to live in rural villages as in cities, Jews tended to be urban-dwellers. In the Arab lands, Sephardic Jews of some substance served in the financial administrations of various provinces and worked as merchants, bankers and physicians. Jews of the lower classes were disproportionately represented in textile manufacture, particularly dyeing.

**Shiites**

Small but occasionally problematic populations of Shiite Muslims lived under Ottoman rule. These included members of all three surviving subsects of Shiism: Twelvers, or Imamas; Ismailis; and Zaydis. Although all Shiites believe that Ali should have succeeded the Prophet Muhammad directly as leader of the Muslim community and that the community leader, or imam in Shi'ite parlance, must be a descendant of Ali, Twelvers, Ismailis and Zaydis differ in the specific lines of imams they recognize. Twelvers and Ismailis concur on the first six imams but disagree as to which son of the sixth imam, who died in 765 CE, continued the line. The Ismailis’ appellation derives from their recognition of Ismail, the sixth imam’s eldest son, as the rightful seventh imam (for which reason they are also sometimes called Seveners). Ismail in turn, they hold, passed the imamate to his son Muhammad, who, however, went into hiding from the Abbasids and died at an early age, perhaps in his twenties. Many Ismailis believed that he had entered an occulted state and would return at the end of
time; a large proportion, however, came to regard the Fatimid caliphs, who in the tenth century established an anti-Abbasid counter-caliphate, as living imams. From their capital at Cairo, the Fatimids ruled Egypt, Syria and the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina from 969–1171. By the Ottoman period, however, the leader of the one branch of Ismailism that continued to recognize a living imam was located in Iran while the chief missionaries of the two strands of the other main branch could be found in Yemen and India.

Twelvers contend that the line of imams continued through the youngest son of the sixth Shiite imam. The twelfth imam of this line, who disappeared when he was a very small child, is, they believe, in occultation and will return at the end of days as a messianic figure.

Zaydi Shiites take their name from a great-grandson of Ali who rebelled against the Umayyad caliphs in 740 CE and whom they initially regarded as the fifth imam (they are occasionally labelled Fivers as a result). Ultimately, however, the Zaydis came to recognize as imam any descendant of Ali’s elder son Hasan – or, more rarely, a descendant of his younger son Husayn – who was learned in Islam and who could defend the community.

**Twelver Shiites**

Since the Ottomans were officially Sunni and since most of the Arab provinces had had Sunni majorities even before the Ottoman conquest, Twelver Shiites living under Ottoman rule constituted a religious minority, and one regarded with more suspicion than virtually any other minority as a consequence of the Ottomans’ ongoing conflict with the Safavids of Iran. Shiites had constituted a significant presence in southern Iraq since the early Islamic period, owing to the concentration of followers of Ali ibn Abi Talib there and the presence in the cities of Najaf and Karbala, respectively, of the tombs of Ali and his son Husayn. Arab Shiites were an important component of the population of those two cities and, to a lesser extent, of the port of Basra. They also inhabited the extensive marshes at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, although mass conversion of the marsh Arabs to Shiism apparently did not occur before the late eighteenth century. As a result of sporadic Safavid occupation of the region, furthermore, as noted above, Persian Shiites could also be found in the shrine cities, in particular Karbala.

Outside southern Iraq, Twelver Shiites were relatively rare in major urban centres, although Aleppo in northern Syria did boast a prominent family of Shiite ashrat, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. In the countryside of southern Lebanon, however, lived a large population of Arab Shiite peasants, known collectively as Matawila.
Ismaili and Zaydi Shiites

Yemen, which the Ottomans ruled for only a century (1538–1636) during the period covered by this book, was the only Ottoman province inhabited by significant populations of Ismaili and Zaydi Shiites. Yemen’s Ismaili population dates from the heyday of the Fatimid caliphate; during these years, a sympathetic Ismaili dynasty, the Sulayhids, took control of Yemen. Following the collapse of the Sulayhids at the end of the twelfth century, Ismailis concentrated in the central highland regions of Yemen, where coffee was grown beginning in the fifteenth century, as well as farther north.

Zaydi Shiism, the smallest of the three surviving Shiite subsects, was established in Yemen in the late ninth century, when the imam Yahya al-Hadi migrated there from Medina. The Zaydi stronghold has always been mountainous northern Yemen. In contrast to Twelver and Ismaili Shiism, Zaydism posits an imam who is not only present in the community but defends the community, militarily if necessary. Perhaps for this reason, the Ottomans faced near-constant Zaydi rebellions during their century of rule over Yemen. It was a massive and prolonged Zaydi revolt that forced the Ottomans out of Yemen altogether during the 1630s. Yemen’s Ismailis, on the other hand, were divided in their political tendencies during the Ottoman period, as will be noted in Chapter 3. Most appear to have remained quietist, but some actively collaborated with the Ottomans while others joined Zaydi-led rebellions. Even after the Ottoman ouster, furthermore, merchants and administrators in Egypt continued to nurture relations with Ismaili coffee cultivators, who transported their beans to the Red Sea coast for shipment to Egypt, from where coffee was transshipped to the rest of the empire and to Europe.

Alawis and Druze

The mountains of Syria and Lebanon, like those of Yemen, offered a haven to religious minorities. Two mountain ranges in Syria are named after the members of sects loosely related to Shia Islam. In western Syria, the Jabal al-Nusayriyya takes its name from the Nusayris, also known as Alawis, a sect which, while not doctrinally Shiite, holds Ali ibn Abi Talib in special reverence. Likewise, the Jabal Druze, to the south, along with Lebanon’s Shouf Mountains, were home to members of the Druze sect, an offshoot of Ismaili Shiism which recognizes the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim (r. 996–1021) as a divinity. While the Alawis appear to have been relatively quiescent under Ottoman rule, the Druze, under the chieftain Fakhr al-Din Ma’n II, launched a major rebellion, lasting several years, during the early seventeenth century which was quashed only by an Ottoman expeditionary force.
Yazidis

Although most of the Kurds of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains were Sunni Muslims, as were the Ottomans, the Zagros were also home to Kurds of the tiny, much maligned Yazidi faith. At the core of Yazidism, an ancient religion influenced to some degree by Zoroastrianism, is the worship of powerful angels; because one of these angels bears the name Iblis, a Muslim appellation for Satan, the religion has sometimes been labelled devil-worship.

Like earlier Muslim rulers, the Ottomans tended to allow their non-Muslim, and even their non-Sunni Muslim, subjects a fair degree of autonomy so long as they remained obedient and paid their taxes. Non-Muslims and Shiites alike were obliged to observe restraint in their religious rituals; the degree of this restraint varied according to time and circumstance. The Ottoman central and provincial administrations employed non-Muslims in various positions, largely financial, while patronizing non-Muslim merchants, bankers, medical practitioners and money-lenders. Which groups the central and provincial governments favoured tended to vary with the times; during the eighteenth century in particular, the empire’s relations with various European powers often had a bearing on the patronage enjoyed by different minority populations.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, then, the Middle East has been a region of great demographic diversity, some of which corresponds to its geographic diversity. Demographic flux has also characterized the region, with new populations sweeping in periodically from different directions. The major population movements in the Common Era have come from the Arabian peninsula and from the Central Asian steppe. The Ottomans themselves ostensibly had their roots in one of the Central Asian migrations, as did the Mongols, whose invasion of the Middle East in the thirteenth century created the conditions for the Ottomans’ rise.

Note