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| **LESSON 3**  **Life in Southwest Asia**  **ESSENTIAL QUESTION: *How does religion shape society?*** | |
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| *Because of its strategic location at the convergence of three continents, its huge petroleum reserves, and the deep-rooted conflicts that divide its people, Southwest Asia occupies a central place in world affairs.*  **People and Places**  ***In what parts of Southwest Asia do most people live?***  Southwest Asia’s population is slightly greater than that of the United States, although the region is only about three-fourths as large as the United States in area. Throughout history, population patterns in Southwest Asia have been shaped largely by the availability of water. In recent times, another resource—petroleum—has also played an important role.  **Population Profile**  Southwest Asia is home to about 330 million people. Iran and Turkey, its most populous countries, each have about 80 million people. Some oil-rich countries around the Persian Gulf are experiencing population booms as their fast-growing economies attract foreign workers. Qatar has had one of the world’s highest population growth rates in recent years.  Today, many countries of Southwest Asia are highly urbanized. In Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, for example, more than four of every five people live in cities. In Afghanistan and Yemen, however, more than two-thirds of the people live in rural areas. However, these countries have the region’s highest annual urbanization rate as people move to the cities. As a whole, the region has a rapidly growing population and a high percentage of people below 15 years of age. |  |

**Where People Live**

Population is not evenly distributed across Southwest Asia. The highest densities are in the region’s northern and western parts and in its southern tip. These areas include parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan; the countries along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea; and the highlands of southern Saudi Arabia and southwestern Yemen. Most of these areas have relatively higher rainfall.

Areas with dry or somewhat dry climates are more sparsely populated. These areas include the Arabian Desert and the desert lands that spread across central and eastern Iran. Some desert areas are almost completely uninhabited. One exception is Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Iraq. Although its climate is relatively dry, the area supports high population density because the rivers provide abundant water for irrigating crops.

Southwest Asia has metropolises, such as Istanbul, Damascus, Tehran, and Baghdad, that are home to millions of people. Gleaming modern cities, such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh, rise from the sands of oil-rich Persian Gulf countries. Tel Aviv, Israel’s largest city after Jerusalem, is a thriving urban center. These cities stand in sharp contrast to ancient rural villages that seem untouched by the passing of time. In some of the region’s desert areas, nomads, known as Bedouins, sleep in tents and raise herds of camels, sheep, goats, and cattle.

***Citing Text Evidence*** Why do some countries around the Persian Gulf have rapidly growing populations?

**People and Cultures**

***What cultural differences are found across Southwest Asia?***

Southwest Asia is often thought of as an Arab or an Islamic realm. The reality, however, is more complex. The region, which has always been a crossroads of humanity, is home to many different people.

**Ethnic and Language Groups**

Arabs represent the largest group in Southwest Asia. In Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, and other countries, 9 out of 10 people are Arab. The two most populous countries in the region, however, have only small Arab populations. In Turkey, Turks form the majority. In Iran, which once was the historical region called Persia, most people are Persian.

In Israel, which was founded as a Jewish state, Jews account for about three-fourths of the population. Kurds, who have no country of their own, represent significant minorities in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. The region they inhabit is traditionally known as Kurdistan.

Arabic, spoken by Arabs, is the most **widespread** language in Southwest Asia. Other important languages include Turkish and Farsi, the language of Persians. Hebrew is the official language of Israel, and Kurdish is spoken by Kurds.

Some of the region’s countries have complex ethnic and linguistic makeups. Afghanistan, for example, is home to Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Aimaks, Turkmen, and Balochs. In addition to the official languages of Afghanistan—Pashto and Afghan Persian—the Afghani people speak Uzbek and more than 30 other languages.

The presence of so many ethnic and language groups in one country presents a challenge to national unity. Many people in Southwest Asia identify with their ethnic group more strongly than with the country they live in. This is clearly evident in countries such as Afghanistan, where people identify themselves as Pashtun or Hazari rather than as Afghani. Even in countries that are mostly Arab, such as Syria and Iraq, people identify with tribes that are based on family relationships. Tribal identity is often stronger than national identity.

**Religion and the Arts**

From its birthplace in the cities of the Arabian Peninsula, Islam spread across Southwest Asia some 1,300 years ago. It remains the region’s dominant religion, helping to unite people of different ethnicity and languages. It is practiced by Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds, and many other groups.

Islam has two main branches, Sunni and Shia. Most of Southwest Asia’s Muslims are Sunnis. In Iran, however, Shias—Muslims of the Shia branch—outnumber Sunnis nine to one.

Judaism is practiced by about three-fourths of the people in Israel. Christians represent about 40 percent of the population in Lebanon and 10 percent in Syria.

Religion and art have been closely tied in Southwest Asia throughout history. Some of the region’s most magnificent works of architecture are mosques, temples, and other religious structures. Sacred texts such as the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and Islam’s Quran stand as works of literature as well as guides to their followers.

The region also has other rich artistic traditions, including calligraphy, mosaics, weaving, storytelling, and poetry. Colorful, handwoven carpets from Persia, or present-day Iran, have been famous for centuries, as has the collection of folktales known as The Thousand and One Nights.

**Daily Life**

Across Southwest Asia, daily life varies greatly. Some people live in cities, some live in villages, and a few live as nomads. Throughout the region’s history, most people practiced traditional livelihoods such as farming, raising livestock, or fishing. In recent times, more people have been leaving the land to work in petroleum production, food processing, auto manufacturing, textiles, and construction.

Religion plays a central role in the daily lives of many people in Southwest Asia. Islam is a complete way of life, with rules regarding diet, hygiene, relationships, business, law, and more. To Muslims, families are the foundation of a healthy society; maintaining family ties is an important duty.

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, is a holy month of fasting. Between dawn and dusk, Muslims are obligated to refrain from eating and drinking. After ending their fast with prayer each evening, people enjoy festive meals. The end of Ramadan is marked by a three-day celebration called *Eid al-Fitr*, which translates as Festival of Breaking Fast.

***Identifying*** What is the major ethnic group in Iran, and what language does that group speak?

**Issues**

***How have oil wealth and availability of natural resources created challenges for countries of Southwest Asia?***

The period since World War II has brought a great deal of change and conflict to Southwest Asia. Looking to the future, the region faces many difficult issues. Some of them relate to resources and others to ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions. Some are new, and others are rooted in the distant past.

**Oil Dependency and Control**

The discovery in the mid-1900s of vast petroleum deposits in Southwest Asia had a strong impact on the region. Exports of petroleum products have brought great wealth to countries around the Persian Gulf, where the largest deposits are found. With this wealth came modernization in some countries. In other countries, little has changed, especially for the average person.

Petroleum has brought new challenges. Many people living in modern cities in oil-producing countries grew up living in tents and practicing traditional farming and herding. Some Muslims believe that increased exposure to Western ways is corrupting the region’s people. Another issue is the growing gap between rich and poor countries. Qatar and Kuwait, for example, rank among the wealthiest countries in the world; Afghanistan ranks among the poorest. The struggle to control oil has led to tension and wars. It has also resulted in increased intervention in Southwest Asia by foreign powers.

Oil dependency is also an issue. Exporting countries thrive when oil commands high prices, but they suffer when worldwide prices drop. Further, oil is not a renewable resource, and the countries have already depleted some of their reserves. To lessen their dependency on oil, exporting countries have invested money in other industries. Countries that import oil are investigating alternatives to oil.

**Changing Governments**

More than six decades after it began, the Arab-Israeli conflict continues as one of the biggest issues facing Southwest Asia. At the heart of the conflict are the Gaza Strip and West Bank territories, which Israel captured in 1967. Eruptions of violence have hampered progress toward a peaceful solution.

The years 2010 and 2011 marked the beginning of the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings in North Africa and Southwest Asia. Protests against authoritarian rulers broke out in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, Jordan, and Oman in early 2011.

By the end of the year, leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen were overthrown. Protests in Bahrain were quashed by security forces, but the government later agreed to implement reforms. Syria fell into upheaval when the government used armed force to stop protests. More peaceful reform efforts are underway in Jordan and Oman.

**Water Concerns**

Scarcity of freshwater has plagued Southwest Asia throughout history. Dramatic population growth has produced greater demand for this precious resource, making the situation more dire and increasing the importance of **hydropolitics**, or politics related to water usage and access.

Water from the saltwater seas that surround Southwest Asia can be made into freshwater through desalination, or the removal of salt. Unfortunately, this process is expensive and therefore not practical for meeting the region’s water needs.

Saudi Arabia, which has no rivers that flow year-round, has tapped into**fossil water**. This term refers to water that fell as rain thousands of years ago, when the region’s climate was wetter, and is now trapped between rock layers deep below ground. By pumping the water to the surface for irrigation, Saudi Arabia has transformed areas of barren desert into productive farmland. Fossil water is not a renewable resource, however, and the underground reservoirs could soon run dry.

The region’s greatest source of freshwater is the Tigris-Euphrates river system. From their sources in the mountains of eastern Turkey, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow southeastward through the desert plains of Syria and Iraq.

The three countries depend heavily on the rivers and their tributaries. In recent decades, all have built dams to control flooding, to generate electricity, and to capture water for irrigation. Syria and Iraq, which are downstream from Turkey, have bitterly opposed an ambitious, decades-long dam-building project in Turkey that threatens to reduce river flow.

***Describing*** What was the Arab Spring? What countries in Southwest Asia were involved?

**Lesson 3 Review**

**Reviewing Vocabulary**

1. What is *fossil water*?

**Answering the Guiding Questions**

1. ***Identifying*** What are Southwest Asia’s two most populous countries, and approximately how many people live in each country?
2. ***Determining Word Meanings*** What is hydropolitics?
3. ***Analyzing*** How might dams built on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Turkey affect agriculture in Syria and Iraq?
4. ***Identifying*** What are the two main branches of Islam, and to which branch do most Muslims in Southwest Asia belong?
5. ***Identifying Point of View*** How might Persian Gulf countries be affected if oil-importing countries begin turning to alternate energy sources?
6. ***Describing*** Who are the Bedouin?
7. ***Narrative Writing*** Imagine that have you spent your whole life in a poor village somewhere in Southwest Asia. Then, one day you visit Dubai, a bustling, modern city of skyscrapers and shopping malls. Write a letter to a friend or a family member back in your village describing your experience in Dubai.