

Unit 9: Selected Middle East Ethnic Groups

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Location of major ethnic groups within the Middle East
- Characteristics of Berber, Fellahin, Druze, Bedouin, Kurd, Armenian, and Nubian ethnic groups
- Fighting reputation of Druze
- Long-lasting and society-permeating influence of Bedouin culture within the Middle East
- Differences between Moroccan, Yemeni, and Marsh Arabs
- Background for the current Kurdish crisis
 - Impact of displacement upon Nubian peoples

Identify

- Berber
- Monogamy
- Fellahin, Nile Delta
- Druze, Sword of Syria
- Bedouin, blood money
- Amir
- Marsh Arabs
- Kurdish peoples
- Armenians, Anatolia
 - Nubian peoples

Realize

- Crowded conditions of Nile River Valley
- Distinctive Druze beliefs
- Position of poets within Bedouin society
- Leadership practices within Bedouin culture
- Persian Gulf society debt to Bedouin heritage

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Groups

I. Berbers

The term Berber (BEHR-behr) derives from ancient Greek descriptions of North African peoples. It is not a term used by traditional peoples themselves. In many North African countries, personal choice dictates whether a person identifies with Berber or Arab communities.



Berbers, who often live in mountainous regions, maintain traditions which predate the Arab conquest of their region. (See "Peoples of the Middle East," National Geographic Society Map, Washington, Jul 1972, text by Richard Furno and Alice Hall.)

II. Egyptian Fellahin

Fellahin (fel-uh-HEEN, peasants). These peasant of the Nile valley work the land. Traditionally the rise and fall of the Nile determined their livelihood. Now, dikes and irrigation channels transport water for their crops. (See "Peoples of the Middle East" [PME].)

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These landless villagers/farmers constitute up to 40 percent of Egypt's rural population. Today, most Fellahin live in the Delta and Upper Egypt regions. The peasants support their families by

- sharecropping land for absentee landowners.
- working as laborers for larger peasant owners.
- providing village services--carpentry, herding, maintenance.
- migrating to cities and other Arab countries, searching for short- and long-term employment.

III. Druze

Druze (drooz). This religious/ethnic community incorporates elements of traditional belief and Christianity along with Muslim practice. Founded in 1017 A.D. in Egypt, oppressed by Shia majorities, the Druze sought refuge in the mountains of Syria and Lebanon.

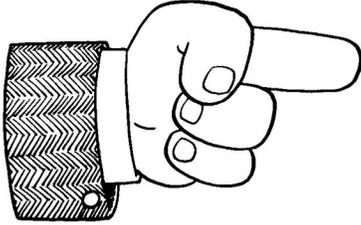
This mystery encased religion is located in the mountainous villages of Lebanon, Syria and Israel. Devout men, who wear the tarboosh (tahr-BOOSH, headgear), are the ones able to interpret the scriptures.



Druze fighters are known for their tenacity of spirit, warrior skill, and fierce loyalties.

IV. Bedouin

These nomadic herdspeople live in the desert regions of the Middle East. Most profess Islam, yet may hold to non-Muslim practice.



Though some informed estimates of Bedouin population are as low as 2 percent, still their overall historical and cultural influence remains strong.

Bedouin live from Morocco to Iran. Currently, they may work as oil drillers, truck drivers and farmers, in addition to those following a nomadic pastoral existence.

In his book entitled The Last Nomad, author, explorer and Arabist Wilfred Thesiger describes his affection for the Bedouin, based upon his many years of travel throughout the Arabian Peninsula:



"I shall always remember how often I was humbled by my illiterate companions, who possessed in so much greater measure generosity, courage, endurance, patience, good temper and light-hearted gallantry. Among no other people have I felt the same sense of personal inferiority... (pp. 60, 297, 299.)"

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The following narrative, adapted from Dr. Kamil Said, is instructive concerning Bedouin Arab history.

Bedouins live in tents made of camel or goat hair, moving from place to place to look for pasture and water for their animals. Dates, milk, and camel flesh are their major foods. Historically, raids were caused by lack of food, water, and pasture or to uphold honor.

Duties of [clan] leaders include: care for the poor, widows and orphans; hospitality to strangers and wanderers; payments of blood money (revenge when family honor was disgraced) to maintain order; and leading the group into battle. Leaders were elected, based upon seniority, personal qualities, and ability/wisdom.

Mobility prevented the development of social organizations, political institutions and legal systems.



As a result, blood ties substituted for law and loyalty to the tribal group became uppermost. The spread of Islam ended much of the Bedouin clannishness and reduced the tribal raiding so common in desert areas.



Bedouins practice endurance, self-reliance and a healthy personal pride. Traditional values of manliness, courage, loyalty and generosity are held in high regard.

Poets receive much respect, being considered wise guides, orators, historians, and representatives of the tribe.

The following observations apply to the Bedouin specifically within the Arabian Peninsula. These concepts are helpful in painting a picture of the background for many customs within Middle Eastern countries.

- *"The gulf states have not granted citizenship freely for two reasons: first, they are reluctant to share wealth with recent arrivals; second, the [clannish] nature of gulf society does not admit new members easily. A [clan] usually traces its lineage to a particular [named] ancestor."*
- *"Historically, the [clannish] nature of society has occasioned petty warfare in the gulf...In Arabia, it was impossible to survive in the desert alone, and so families banded together to find water and move their flocks to new grazing lands. Once they established the necessary resources through collective effort, they guarded them jealously and refused to share them with outsiders."*

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- *"The emphasis on the group [prevented] the rise of a strong leader. Accordingly, [clan] leadership is often described as 'the first among equals,' suggesting a collective leadership in which one among a number of leaders is recognized as the most authoritative.*

This principal leader must continue to consult with his lesser colleagues and so rules by consensus."



- *"An extension of this pattern of leadership is the concept of leading families within the [clan].*

Although [clans] tend to discourage inherited authority, traditions of leadership are nevertheless passed down, and [clans] expect that certain families will furnish them with leaders generation after generation."

- *"The existence of these ruling families is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of Arab [clannishness] in gulf society in 1993.*

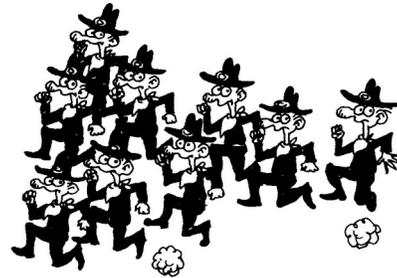
Another manifestation is the collective manner in which these families rule. In most of these states, the position of amir [ah-MEEHR: commander, ruler, prince] is not passed from father to son but rotates among different parallel patrilineal lines.

This makes the appointment of the next amir an open issue and something on which the entire family must agree."

- *"The way that government officials are appointed reflects the importance of [clan] connections. Members of the ruling family are accommodated first, followed by families and tribes with whom the rulers have been traditionally allied."*
- *"[Clan] cohesiveness is also reflected in the efforts of the gulf states to restrict citizenship. The gulf has always been relatively cosmopolitan...The tremendous influx since 1940 has caused the naturally restrictive nature of [clannish] society to reassert itself to prevent a further dilution of tribal identities." (Country Study, pp. 37-39).*

Distinctly Arab ethnic groups, related to the Bedouin, include the following:

1. Moroccan Arab In the 7th century, small bands of warriors conquered the south Mediterranean coast. Absorbing the Berbers, they invaded Spain.



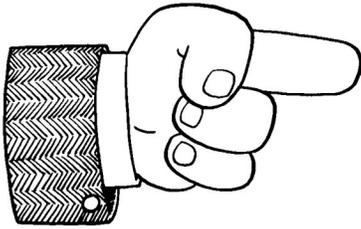
Moroccan Arabs of today are a composition of many of these earlier groups.

2. Yemeni Arab These farmers of Yemen raise grains, fruits, coffee and a mild narcotic (qat) on slopes of the southwest Arabian Peninsula.

3. Marsh Arab These peoples, inhabiting the regions of the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys northwest of Kuwait, are known for their historical canoes, reed shelters, and woven mats. Historically, staples of rice and fish provided their livelihood.

V. Kurds

Kurdish peoples maintain a dignified pride in their warrior heritage. After World War I, the promise of Kurdish nationhood was prominent. However, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran received portions of their native lands, leading to the current unrest felt even today.



The Kurdish language is their most distinguishing characteristic.

Concerning the current Operation Provide Comfort, the following background is helpful:

"The major consequence of the Persian Gulf War from the standpoint of Turkish security was the uprising of the Kurds in northern Iraq and the exodus of Kurds toward Turkish territory to escape Saddam Husayn's brutal suppression of the rebellion. Turkey was decidedly reluctant to accept the Kurds as refugees, considering them a potential destabilizing factor in its struggle with domestic Kurdish dissidents."

As an alternative, Turkey supported the UN-approved Operation Provide Comfort, which distributed relief and set up a safe haven in northern Iraq whose security was guaranteed by a coalition force of 2,000 soldiers from five countries.

Incirlik (een-JEHR-leek) served as the base for a rapid deployment of air forces to enforce a no-fly zone in the region. The Iraqi government's loss of control over Iraqi Kurdistan and elections in the area in May 1992 produced what was in effect an autonomous Kurdish government. Although Turkey permitted the lifeline to the Iraqi Kurdish enclave to originate on its territory, the Turks feared what they saw as the emerging outlines of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. For this reason, Turkey resisted any international action that could lead to Iraq's dismemberment and thus endanger the regional status quo." (Turkey, A Country Study, p. 316.)

VI. Armenian



These peoples flourished around Mount Ararat (AR-uh-rat) in eastern Turkey. In A.D. 301, they became the first kingdom to adopt Christianity. Their mastery of trade and maintaining a distinct ethnic identity--though subjugated by many invaders--is noteworthy.

"In 1915 the Ottoman government ordered all Armenians deported from eastern Anatolia (AN-uh-TOH-lee-uh) [Asia Minor--much of present day Turkey, the bridge connecting the Middle East and Europe]; at least 600,000 of the Armenians, who numbered up to 2 million, died during a forced march southward during the winter of 1915-16. Armenians believe--and Turks deny--that the catastrophe that befell their community was the

result of atrocities committed by Turkish soldiers following government directives. Armenians outside Turkey refer to the deaths of 1915-16 as an instance of genocide, and over the years various Armenian political groups have sought to avenge the tragedy by carrying out terrorist attacks against Turkish diplomats and officials abroad.

...The Armenians...are intensely attached to their Christian faith and their identity as Armenians rather than Turks. In addition, they have relatives in the Armenian Diaspora throughout the world."
(Turkey: A Country Study, p. 104.)

VII. Nubian

The Nubian (NOO-bee-uhn) Valley, a geographically and politically isolated valley in Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan, is the traditional home of these African peoples.



Construction of the Amman High Dam destroyed parts of Nubia, causing the Egyptian government to resettle most of these peoples. Government-built, cement-block construction homes proved unsatisfactory. This dissatisfaction with the resettlements led many Nubians to migrate to the urban areas of Cairo, Luxor, and Khartoum.

Vocabulary List: Selected Middle East Ethnic Groups

Amir (uh-MEEHR) Commander, ruler, prince in the Arabian Peninsula

Anatolia (AN-uh-TOH-lee-uh) Asia Minor--much of present day Turkey...the bridge connecting the Middle East and Europe

Armenian Some of the Middle East's earliest Christian peoples. During WW I, this ethnic group experienced mass genocide. The effects of this treatment continue today.

Bedouin (BED oo-in) Traditional peoples of the deserts and pastures of the Middle East

Berbers Traditional North African peoples. Presently, members of this ethnic group inhabit mountain regions or urban centers. Berbers trace their lineage to time before the Arab conquest.

Blood money Revenge taken out on a person, clan or group when family honor is disgraced

Druze (drooz) Ethnic minority living in Lebanon, Syria, and Israel. Their belief incorporates elements of mysticism, Islam, Christianity, and traditional belief. Known as serious, tenacious fighters.

Fellahin (fel-uh-HEEN) Peasant class inhabiting Egypt

Kurd Speaking a distinct language, these peoples occupy traditional homelands in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Marsh Arab Peoples who inhabit the river regions of southern Iraq

Monogamy Practice of marriage to only one wife or husband

Nile Delta Region in northern Egypt where the Nile River fans out to form well irrigated, rich farmland

Nubian (NOO bee-uhn) Traditional African peoples who inhabited the upper Nile valley. The Aswan dam destroyed their ancestral home. Now many Nubians live in Cairo, Luxor, and Khartoum.

Sword of Syria Name given to Druze militia personnel because of their excellence in military concerns

