

History

The Middle East is a place where history is being remade daily. It has always been a battleground for empires seeking control over strategic riches, a constantly regenerating birthplace of civilisations and faiths, and home to the great myths of antiquity.

This section sketches out the broadest sweeps of Middle Eastern history – for further details see the more-specific history sections in the individual country chapters throughout this book.

CRADLE OF CIVILISATION

Although rock art dating back to 10,000 BC lies hidden amid the desert monoliths of the Jebel Acacus in Libya, little is known about the painters or their nomadic societies, which lived on the outermost rim of the Middle East.

The enduring shift from nomadism to more-sedentary organised societies began in the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia (ancient Iraq) and the Nile River Valley of Ancient Egypt.

In about 5000 BC a culture known as Al-Ubaid first appeared in Mesopotamia. We know little about it except that its influence eventually spread down what is now the coast of the Gulf. Stone-Age artefacts have also been found in Egypt's Western Desert, Israel's Negev Desert and in the West Bank town of Jericho.

Sometime around 3100 BC the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were unified under Menes, ushering in 3000 years of Pharaonic rule in the Nile Valley. The Levant (present-day Lebanon, Syria and Israel and the Palestinian Territories) was well settled by this time, and local powers included the Amorites and the Canaanites. In Mesopotamia it was the era

The Sumerians of Mesopotamia are credited with inventing cuneiform, the world's first form of writing.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in 2700 BC and was one of the first works of world literature; it tells the story of a Sumerian king from the ancient city of Uruk (which gave Iraq its name).

THE MIDDLE EAST'S INDIGENOUS EMPIRES AT A GLANCE

Few regions can match the Middle East for its wealth of ancient civilisations, all of which have left their mark upon history.

Sumerians (4000–2350 BC) Mesopotamia's first great civilisation developed advanced irrigation systems, produced surplus food and invented the earliest form of writing.

Egyptians (3100–400BC) The most enduring of ancient empires was a world of Pharaonic dynasties, exquisite art forms, the Pyramids and royal tombs. The monumental architecture of the empire reached new heights of aesthetic beauty.

Babylonians (1750–1180 BC) The empire further developed the cuneiform script and was one of the first civilisations to codify laws to govern the Tigris–Euphrates region from the capital at Babylon, one of the great centres of the ancient world.

Assyrians (1600–609 BC) Conquerors of territories far and wide and shrewd administrators of their domains from their exquisite capital at Nineveh, the Assyrians also developed the forerunners of modern banking and accounting systems. Their heyday was the 9th century BC.

Garamantes (900 BC–AD 500) First mentioned by Herodotus, the Garamantes of southern Libya made the desert bloom, built cosmopolitan urban centres, controlled trade routes across the Sahara and introduced writing, camels and wheeled transport to the Sahara and further south.

Persians (6th–4th centuries BC) The relatively short-lived dynasties begun by Cyrus the Great ruled from India to the Aegean Sea and produced the stunning ancient city of Persepolis.

Ottomans (13th century AD–AD 1918) The last of the great indigenous empires to encompass most of the Middle East. From the opulent capital in Constantinople they governed from Iraq to Libya before the decadence of Ottoman rule (and the ungovernable size of their realm) got the better of them.

THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Middle East's dominance of ancient history is reflected in the fact that five out of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World are to be found within the boundaries of the modern Middle East. Apart from the Pyramids, there's little left standing.

- Temple of Artemis (p586; 550 BC, Selçuk, Turkey) – once one of the most complex temples of the ancient world with a marble sanctuary and a tiled roof
- Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (p591; 353 BC, Bodrum, Turkey) – a white marble tomb, 135m-high, built by a provincial Persian king
- Hanging Gardens of Babylon (p262; 600 BC, Babylon, Iraq) – perhaps-mythical gardens built by King Nebuchadnezzar II for one of his wives, elevated high above the ground and irrigated by the waters of the Euphrates
- Pharos of Alexandria (p119; 270 BC, Alexandria, Egypt) – 120m-high lighthouse in Alexandria's harbour, which guided sailors for 1500 years using fires and sun-reflecting mirrors
- Pyramids of Giza (p106; 2700–2500 BC, Giza, Egypt) – the only ancient wonders to survive the test of time; the Great Pyramid was built over a period of 20 years by 100,000 workers using 2.3 million limestone blocks
- Statue of Zeus (457 BC, Olympia, Greece) – an ivory statue to the Greek god, seated on a throne and draped in gold
- Colossus of Rhodes (200 BC, Rhodes, Greece) – a 36m-high bronze statue to the sun god, Helios

of Sumer, which had arisen in around 4000 BC and became arguably the world's first great civilisation.

In the late 24th and early 23rd centuries BC, Sargon of Akkad conquered much of the Levant and Mesopotamia. Other powers in the region at that time included the Hittite and Assyrian empires and, in Greece and Asia Minor, Mycenae and Troy.

By 900 BC the sophisticated Garamantes empire had arisen in Libya's Wadi al-Hayat, from where it controlled Saharan trade routes that connected central Africa to the Mediterranean rim. This facilitated the spread of Islam, many centuries later, along well-established livestock routes.

The 7th century BC saw both the conquest of Egypt by Assyria and far to the east, the rise of the Medes, the first of many great Persian empires. In 550 BC the Medes were conquered by Cyrus the Great, usually regarded as the first Persian shah (king). Over the next 60 years Cyrus and his successors Cambyses (r 525–522 BC) and Darius I (r 521–486 BC) swept west and north to conquer first Babylon and then Egypt, Asia Minor and parts of Greece. After the Greeks stemmed the Persian tide at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, Darius and Xerxes (r 486–466 BC) turned their attention to consolidating their empire.

Egypt won independence from the Persians in 401 BC only to be reconquered 60 years later. The second Persian occupation of Egypt was brief – little more than a decade after they arrived, the Persians were again driven out of Egypt, this time by the Greeks.

THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

In 336 BC Philip II of Macedonia, a warlord who had conquered much of mainland Greece, was murdered. His son Alexander assumed the throne and began a series of conquests that would eventually encompass most of Asia Minor, the Middle East, Persia and northern India.

Under Alexander, the Greeks were the first to impose any kind of order on the Middle East as a whole. Traces of their rule ring the eastern

Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City, by Gwendolyn Leick, takes a walk through the history of the great cities of Mesopotamia, including Babylon and Nineveh, and the civilisations that built them.

The patriarch Abraham (a prophet in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) was born in Ur of the Chaldees on the Euphrates River; he migrated from Ur to Canaan in around 1800 BC.

Mediterranean from Ephesus in Turkey to the oasis of Siwa in Egypt's Western Desert. Perhaps the greatest remnants of Greek rule, however, lie on the outer boundaries of the former Greek empire, in the Cyrenaica region of Libya. The great cities of the Pentapolis (Five Cities), among them glorious Cyrene, bore the hallmarks of Greek sophistication and scholarship.

As important as the archaeological evidence is regarding Greek hegemony, it's the myths and legends – above all the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – and the descriptions left by historians such as Strabo, Herodotus and Pliny that present us with strong clues to the state of the Middle East 300 years before Christ and 900 years before the coming of Islam.

Upon Alexander's death, his empire was promptly carved up among his generals. This resulted in the founding of three new ruling dynasties: the Antigonids in Greece and Asia Minor; the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt; and the Seleucids. The Seleucids controlled the swath of land running from modern Israel and Lebanon through Mesopotamia to Persia.

That's not to say that peace reigned. Having finished off a host of lesser competitors, the heirs to Alexander's empire then proceeded to fight each other. The area of the eastern Mediterranean splintered into an array of different local dynasties with fluctuating borders. It took an army arriving from the west to again reunite the lands of the east – this time in the shape of the legions of Rome.

ROMANS & CHRISTIANS

Rome's legionaries conquered most of Asia Minor in 188 BC, then Syria, Palestine and the North African territories of Carthage and Libya by 63 BC. When Cleopatra of Egypt, the last of the Ptolemaic dynasty, was defeated in 31 BC, the Romans controlled the entire Mediterranean world. This left the Middle East divided largely between two empires and their client states until the coming of Islam. Asia Minor, the Levant, Egypt and

Alexander the Great on the Web (www.isidore-of-seville.com/Alexanderama.html) contains good links to books and other references to the Middle East's youngest and most successful empire-builder.

Alexander the Great, directed by Oliver Stone, made much of Alexander's supposed sexual ambiguity, but it's a spectacular Hollywood adaptation of the life of the great man.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

One of the greatest figures to ever stride the Middle Eastern stage, Alexander (356–323 BC) was born into greatness. His father was King Philip II of Macedonia, who many people believed was a descendant of the god Hercules, and his mother was Princess Olympias of Epirus, who counted the legendary Achilles among her ancestors. For his part, the precocious young Alexander sometimes claimed that Zeus was his real father.

Alexander was the ultimate alpha male, as well versed in poetry as in the ways of war. At the age of 12, the young Alexander tamed Bucephalus, a horse that the most accomplished horsemen of Macedonia dared not ride. By 13 he had Aristotle as his personal tutor. His interests were diverse – he could play the lyre, but he also learned Homer's *Iliad* by heart and admired the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great for the respect he granted to the cultures he conquered.

He rode out of Macedonia in 334 BC to embark on a decade-long campaign of conquest and exploration. His first great victory was against the Persians at Issus in what is now southeast Turkey. He swept south, conquering Phoenician seaports and thence into Egypt where he founded the Mediterranean city that still bears his name. In 331 BC the armies of Alexander the Great made a triumphant entrance into Cyrenaica (modern Libya), although the great man himself stopped at the border after the Cyrenaicans greeted him with promises of loyalty. From Egypt he returned north, heading for Babylon. Crossing the Tigris and the Euphrates, he defeated another Persian army before driving his troops up into Central Asia and northern India. Eventually fatigue and disease brought the drive to a halt and the Greeks turned around and headed back home. En route, Alexander succumbed to illness (some say he was poisoned) and died at the tender age of 33 in Babylon. The whereabouts of his body and tomb remain unknown.

THE JEWISH REVOLTS

By the middle of the 1st century AD, Jews across the Roman Empire had had enough of Roman rule. Primary among their grievances were punitive taxes, the Roman decision to appoint Jewish high priests and Emperor Caligula's decision in AD 39 to declare himself a deity. The anti-Roman sentiment had been bubbling away for three decades, in part due to one rebellious orator – Jesus of Nazareth – and to a Jewish sect called the Zealots whose creed stated that all means were justified to liberate the Jews.

Led by the Zealots, the Jews of Jerusalem destroyed a small Roman garrison in the Holy City in AD 66. Infighting within the revolt and the burning of food stockpiles in order to force wavering Jews to participate had disastrous consequences. Jerusalem was razed to the ground and up to 100,000 Jews were killed in retaliation. Some Jewish historians claim that the number of dead over the four years of the revolt reached one million. Jerusalem was rebuilt as a Roman city and the Jews were sent into exile. It's an exile that many Jews believe ended only with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The Revolt, also known as the First Jewish-Roman War, was followed by further, equally unsuccessful uprisings in AD 115 to 118, when Jewish settlers sacked the ancient city of Cyrene in Libya, and AD 132 to 135.

Libya were dominated by Rome, while the Sassanids in Persia ruled the east. Only the nomads of the desert remained independent of the great powers of the day.

While the mighty empire of Rome suffered no great external threats to its eastern Mediterranean empire, there was plenty of trouble fomenting within, most notably a succession of rebellions by the Jewish inhabitants of the Roman dominions.

In AD 331 the newly converted Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the 'Holy Roman Empire', with its capital not jaded, cynical Rome but the newly renamed city of Constantinople (formerly Byzantium, later to become Istanbul).

THE COMING OF ISLAM

Constantinople reached its apogee during the reign of Justinian (AD 527–65), when the Byzantine Empire consolidated its hold on the eastern Mediterranean, while also recapturing the lost domain of Italy. Meanwhile, the Sassanid empire to the east was constantly chipping away at poorly defended Byzantine holdings, creating a fault line between the two empires running down through what we know as the Middle East.

Far to the south, in lands that were independent of the two great empires, a new force was preparing to emerge. A merchant named Mohammed, born around AD 570 in the Arabian town of Mecca (now in Saudi Arabia), had begun preaching against the pagan religion of his fellow Meccans. For full details on the birth of Islam and Mohammed's emergence as its most revered prophet, see p53.

Mohammed died in 632 but under his successors, known as caliphs (from the Arabic word for 'follower'), the new religion continued its rapid spread, reaching all of Arabia by 634. Libya, Egypt, Syria and Palestine had been wrested from the Byzantines by 646, while most of Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan were taken from the Sassanids by 656.

Arguments over the leadership quickly arose and just 12 years after the Prophet's death a dispute over the caliphate opened a rift in Islam that grew into today's divide between Sunni and Shiite Muslims (see p53). Civil war broke out, ending with the rise to power of Mu'awiyah, the Muslim military governor of Syria and a distant relative of Mohammed.

EARLY ISLAM

Mu'awiyah moved the capital from Medina to Damascus and established the first great Muslim dynasty – the Umayyads.

The Umayyads were descended from a branch of the Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, known more for expediency than piety. Mu'awiyah's father was one of the last people in Mecca to embrace Islam and had long been Mohammed's chief opponent in the city. By moving the capital to Damascus the Umayyads were symbolically declaring that they had aspirations far beyond the rather ascetic teachings of the Quran.

The Umayyads gave the Islamic world some of its greatest architectural treasures, including the Dome of the Rock (p289) in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque (p514) in Damascus. History, however, has not been kind, remembering them largely for the high living, corruption, nepotism and tyranny that eventually proved to be their undoing.

In 750 the Umayyads were toppled in a revolt fuelled, predictably, by accusations of impiety. Their successors, and the strong arm behind the revolt, were the Abbasids. The Abbasid caliphate created a new capital in Baghdad and the early centuries of its rule constituted what's often regarded as the golden age of Islamic culture. The most famous of the Abbasid caliphs was Haroun ar-Rashid (r 786–809) of *The Thousand and One Nights* fame (see p75). Warrior king Haroun ar-Rashid led one of the most successful early Muslim invasions of Byzantium, almost reaching Constantinople. His name will forever be associated with Baghdad, which he transformed into a world centre of learning and sophistication.

After Haroun ar-Rashid's death the empire was effectively divided between two of his sons. Predictably, civil war ensued. In 813 one son Al-Maamun emerged triumphant and reigned as caliph for the next 20 years. But Al-Maamun's hold on power remained insecure and he felt compelled to surround himself with Turkish mercenaries.

By the middle of the 10th century the Abbasid caliphs were the prisoners of their Turkish guards, who spawned a dynasty of their own, known as the Seljuks (1038–1194). The Seljuks extended their reach throughout Persia, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Anatolia where the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum made its capital at Konya. The resulting pressure on the

The Court of the Caliphs, by Hugh Kennedy, is the definitive account of Abbasid Baghdad in its prime, blending careful scholarship using Arab sources with a lively and compelling style.

The Golden Age of Persia, by Richard N Frye, is a fine historical work that traces myriad Persian contributions to civilisation from the rise of Islam to the 11th century.

History of the Middle East Database (www.nmhschool.org/tthornton/mehistorydatabase/mideastindex.htm) has longish, informative essays on the great moments of Middle Eastern history and is especially good on the early Islamic period.

BAGHDAD THE BEAUTIFUL

When Haroun ar-Rashid came to power, Baghdad, on the western bank of the Tigris, had only been in existence for 24 years. By the time he died, Baghdad had become one of the world's preeminent cities.

Haroun ar-Rashid tried to rename the city *Medinat as-Salaam* (City of Peace). Although the name never caught on, everything else that Haroun ar-Rashid and his immediate successors did was an unqualified success. Baghdad was remade into a city of expansive pleasure gardens, vast libraries and distinguished seats of learning where the arts, medicine, literature and sciences all flourished. It was soon the richest city in the world. The crossroads of important trade routes to the east and west, it rapidly supplanted Damascus as the seat of power in the Islamic world, which stretched from Spain to India. Al-Maamun, Haroun's son and successor, founded the *Beit al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom), a Baghdad-based academy dedicated to translating Greek and Roman works of science and philosophy into Arabic. It was only through these translations that most of the classical literature we know today was saved for posterity.

Although the city would later be much reduced by wars, civil and otherwise, and be sacked by the Mongols, the name of Baghdad has never lost its allure. It's a reminder of the time when Baghdad was the world's most beautiful and intellectually creative city on earth.

Byzantine Empire was intense enough to cause the emperor and the Greek Orthodox Church to swallow their pride and appeal to the rival Roman Catholic Church for help.

THE CRUSADES

In 1095 Pope Urban II called for a Western Christian military expedition – a ‘Crusade’ – to liberate the holy places of Jerusalem in response to the eastern empire’s alarm. Rome’s motives were not entirely benevolent: Urban was eager to assert Rome’s primacy in the east over Constantinople.

After linking up with the Byzantine army in 1097, the Crusaders successfully besieged Antioch (modern Antakya, in Turkey) and then marched south along the coast before turning inland, towards Jerusalem. A thousand Muslim troops held Jerusalem for six weeks against 15,000 Crusaders before the city fell on 15 July 1099. The victorious Crusaders then massacred the local population – Muslims, Jews and Christians alike – sacked the non-Christian religious sites and turned the Dome of the Rock into a church. For more information on the Crusades and their implications, see p61.

These successes were short-lived. It took less than 50 years for the tide to begin to turn against the Crusaders and only 200 before they were driven out of the region once and for all. The Muslim leader responsible for removing the Crusaders from Jerusalem (in 1187) was Salah ad-Din al-Ayyoub, better known in the West as Saladin.

Saladin and his successors (a fleeting dynasty known as the Ayyubids) battled the Crusaders for 60 years until they were unceremoniously removed by their own army, a strange soldier-slave caste, the Mamluks, who ran what would today be called a military dictatorship. The only way to join their army was to be press-ganged into it – non-Muslim boys were captured or bought outside the empire, converted to Islam and raised in the service of a single military commander. They were expected to give this commander total loyalty, in exchange for which their fortunes would rise (or fall) with his. Sultans were chosen from among the most senior Mamluk commanders, but it was a system that engendered vicious, bloody rivalries, and rare was the sultan who died of natural causes.

The Mamluks were to rule Egypt, Syria, Palestine and western Arabia for nearly 300 years (1250–1517) and it was they who succeeded in ejecting the Crusaders from the Near East, prising them out of their last stronghold of Acre (modern-day Akko in Israel) in 1291.

SALADIN – THE KURDISH HERO OF ARAB HISTORY

Saladin – Salah ad-Din (Restorer of the Faith) al-Ayyoub – was born to Kurdish parents in 1138 in what is modern-day Tikrit in Iraq. He joined other members of his family in the service of Nureddin (Nur ad-Din) of the ruling Zangi dynasty. By the time Nureddin died in 1174, Saladin had risen to the rank of general and had already taken possession of Egypt. He quickly took control of Syria and in the next 10 years extended his authority into parts of Mesopotamia, but was careful not to infringe too closely on the territory of the now largely powerless Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad. In 1187, Saladin crushed the Crusaders at the Battle of Hittin and captured Jerusalem, precipitating the Third Crusade and pitting himself against Richard I (the Lion-Heart) of England. After countless clashes the two rival warriors signed a peace treaty in 1192, giving the coastal territories to the Crusaders and the interior to the Muslims. Saladin died three months later in Damascus, where he is buried.

The Crusades Through Arab Eyes, by Amin Maalouf, is brilliantly written and captures perfectly why the mere mention of the Crusades still evokes the anger of many Arabs today.

THE OTTOMAN TURKS

In 1258, just eight years after the Mamluks seized power in Cairo and began their bloody dynasty, a boy named Osman (Othman) was born to the chief of a Turkish tribe in western Anatolia. He converted to Islam in his youth and later began a military career by hiring out his tribe’s army as mercenaries in the civil wars then besetting what was left of the Byzantine Empire. Payment came in the form of land.

Rather than taking on the Byzantines directly, Osman’s successors (the Ottomans) deliberately picked off the bits and pieces of the empire that Constantinople could no longer control. By the end of the 14th century the Ottomans had conquered Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia, Hungary and most of present-day Turkey. They had also moved their capital across the Dardanelles to Adrianople, today the Turkish city of Edirne. In 1453 came their greatest victory when Sultan Mehmet II took Constantinople, the hitherto unachievable object of innumerable Muslim wars almost since the 7th century.

On a battlefield near Aleppo 64 years later, an army under the sultan Selim the Grim routed the Mamluks and, at one stroke, the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt and coastal Libya, was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire.

The empire reached its peak, both politically and culturally, under Süleyman the Magnificent (r 1520–66), who led the Ottoman armies west to the gates of Vienna, east into Persia, and south through the holy cities of Mecca and Medina and into Yemen. His control also extended throughout North Africa.

After Süleyman, however, the Ottoman Empire went into a long, slow period of decline. Only five years after his death, Spain and Venice destroyed virtually the entire Ottoman navy at the Battle of Lepanto (in the Aegean Sea), thereby costing the Ottomans control over the western Mediterranean. North Africa soon fell under the sway of local dynasties. Conflict with the Safavids – Persia’s rulers from the early 16th century to the early 18th century – was almost constant.

See p62 for further analysis of the Ottoman Empire.

ENTER EUROPE

Despite Portuguese interest around the southern Arabian Peninsula from the late 15th century, it was not until the late 18th century that the European powers truly began chiselling away at the ailing Ottoman Empire. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt in what he planned as the first step towards building a French empire in the Middle East and India. The French occupation of Egypt lasted only three years, but left a lasting mark – even today, Egypt’s legal system is based on a French model.

The British, protecting their own Indian interests, forced the French out of Egypt in 1801. Four years later, Mohammed Ali, an Albanian soldier in the Ottoman army, emerged as the country’s strongman and he set about modernising the country. As time passed, it became increasingly obvious that Constantinople was becoming ever more dependent on Egypt for military backing rather than the reverse. Mohammed Ali’s ambitions grew. In the 1830s he invaded and conquered Syria, and by 1839 he had effective control of most of the Ottoman Empire. The European powers, alarmed by the idea of the Ottoman government collapsing, forced him to withdraw to Egypt. In exchange, the Ottoman sultan gave long-overdue acknowledgment of Mohammed Ali’s status as ruler of a virtually independent Egypt and bestowed the right of hereditary rule on his heirs (who continued to rule Egypt until 1952).

Süleyman the Magnificent was responsible for achievements as diverse as building the gates of Jerusalem and introducing to Europe, via Constantinople, the joys of coffee.

Ottoman Centuries, by Lord Kinross, is perhaps the definitive history of the Ottoman Empire, covering everything from the key events of Ottoman rule to the extravagances of its royal court.

Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire, by Jason Goodwin, is anecdotal and picaresque but still manages to illuminate the grand themes of Ottoman history.

In 1869 Mohammed Ali's grandson Ismail opened the Suez Canal. But within a few years his government was so deeply in debt that in 1882 the British, who already played a large role in Egyptian affairs, occupied the country.

At the same time, the Ottoman Empire was becoming increasingly dependent on the goodwill of the European powers. In 1860 the French sent troops to Lebanon after a massacre of Christians by the local Druze. Before withdrawing, the French forced the Ottomans to set up a new administrative system for the area guaranteeing the appointment of Christian governors, over whom the French came to have great influence. In 1911, after a short struggle between Rome and the Turks, Tripoli and Cyrenaica (Libya) went to the Italians.

THE COLONIAL MIDDLE EAST

With the outbreak of WWI in 1914, the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany, and Sultan Mohammed V declared a jihad (holy war), calling on Muslims everywhere to rise up against Britain, France and Russia.

World War II signalled the end of the Ottoman dynasty. Stripped of its Arab provinces, the Ottoman monarchy was overthrown and a Turkish Republic was declared under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk' (p557), a soldier who became Turkey's first president in 1923.

His drive toward secularism (which he saw as synonymous with the modernisation necessary to drag Turkey into the 20th century) found an echo in Persia, where, in 1923, Reza Khan, the commander of a Cossack brigade who had risen to become war minister, overthrew the decrepit Ghajar dynasty. After changing his name from Khan to the more Persian-sounding Pahlavi (the language spoken in pre-Islamic Persia), he moved to set up a secular republic on the Turkish model. Protests from the country's religious establishment caused a change of heart and he had himself crowned shah instead. In 1934 he changed the country's name from Persia to Iran.

PROMISES ARE MADE TO BE BROKEN

When the British heard the Ottoman call to jihad, they performed a masterstroke – they negotiated an alliance with Hussein bin Ali, the grand shah of Mecca who agreed to lead an Arab revolt against the Turks in return for a British promise to make him 'King of the Arabs' once the conflict was over. This alliance worked well in defeating the Ottomans, but it would plant the seeds for decades of conflict in the Middle East.

The British never had any serious intention of keeping their promise. Even as they were negotiating with Sherif Hussein, the British were talking with the French on how to carve up the Ottoman Empire. These talks yielded the Sykes-Picot Agreement – the secret Anglo-French accord that divided the Ottoman Empire into British and French spheres of influence. Britain had also given the Zionist movement a promise, known as the Balfour Declaration (named after the then-British foreign secretary), that it would 'view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people' after the war. (For more on the background to Zionism and the Arab-Israeli conflict, see p271).

In the closing year of the war, the British occupied Palestine and Damascus. After the war, France took control of Syria and Lebanon. Britain retained Egypt and was given control of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq, all of which bore the rubber-stamp approval of the newly created League of Nations.

The Arabs, who'd done so much to free themselves from Ottoman rule, suddenly found themselves under British or French colonial administration with the prospect of a Jewish state in their midst not far over the horizon.

A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914–1922, by David Fromkin, is an intriguing account of how the map of the modern Middle East was drawn arbitrarily by European colonial governments.

Lawrence of Arabia may overstate the role played by TE Lawrence (Peter O'Toole), but it's an epic that captures the atmosphere of Arab hope and colonial duplicity set against the stirring backdrop of Wadi Rum.

GAMAL ABDEL NASSER: HERO OF THE ARAB STREET

Nasser's dreams weren't imperial, but his vision and pursuit of the ideal of a united Arab nation make him arguably the most important Arab world figure of the 20th century. The first president of the newly independent republic of Egypt was likened to a pharaoh with the self-confident swagger of Che Guevara. He stood defiantly against the old regional rulers of Britain and France, while playing the new superpowers – the Soviet Union and the USA – against each other.

Under Nasser, Egypt became a beacon for all those countries in Africa and Asia that had recently thrown off European colonial rule. His rousing pan-Arab speeches gave the people of the Middle East and North Africa the belief that together they might not only free themselves of Western dominance, but even achieve political and economic parity. From Libya to Iraq, Nasser was a bona fide hero.

But real attempts at any kind of political union failed and the brave new Egypt came crashing down on 5 June 1967 when Israel wiped out the Egyptian air force in a surprise attack. With it went the confidence and credibility of Nasser. He never recovered and died of heart failure three years later.

INDEPENDENCE & PAN-ARABISM

Although the Middle East was a persistent theatre of war throughout WWII – Egyptian and Libyan territory hosted decisive battles at Tobruk and El Alamein respectively – the region's problems began in earnest soon after the war was over.

Since taking control of Palestine in 1918, the British had been under pressure to allow unrestricted Jewish immigration to the territory. With tension rising between Palestine's Arab and Jewish residents, they had refused to do this and, in the late 1930s, had placed strict limits on the number of new Jewish immigrants.

Several plans to partition Palestine were proposed during the 1930s and '40s, but WWII (briefly) put an end to all such discussion. When the war ended, Britain again found itself under pressure to allow large-scale Jewish immigration, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust.

In early 1947 the British announced that they were turning the entire problem over to the newly created UN. The UN voted to partition Palestine, but this was rejected by the Arabs. Britain pulled out and the very next day the Jews declared the founding of the State of Israel. War broke out immediately, with Egypt, Jordan and Syria weighing in on the side of the Palestinian Arabs.

The disastrous performance of the combined Arab armies in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War had far-reaching consequences for the region. Recriminations over the humiliating defeat and the refugee problem it created laid the groundwork for the 1951 assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan. Syria, which had gained its independence from France in 1946, became the field for a seemingly endless series of military coups in which disputes over how to handle the Palestine problem often played a large part. In Egypt, the army blamed the loss of the war on the country's corrupt and ineffective politicians. In July 1952 a group of young officers toppled the monarchy, with the real power residing with one of the coup plotters: Gamal Abdel Nasser. After facing down the combined powers of Israel, Britain and France over the Suez Crisis of 1956, Nasser also emerged as the preeminent figure in the Arab world. He was a central player in the politics of nationalism, socialism and decolonisation that gripped much of the developing world throughout the 1950s and '60s.

When Zionist and British policy makers were looking for a homeland for the Jewish people, sites they considered included northeastern Australia and the Jebel Akhdar in the Cyrenaica region of Libya.

Middle East History & Resources (www.mideastweb.org/history) is a balanced examination of many of the region's thorniest political issues with a rare commitment to fairness and accuracy.

THE ARAB-ISRAELI WARS

Arab opposition to the creation of the State of Israel again came to a head (helped along by Nasser's fiery speeches) in 1967, with the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) taking place around the same time. In May of that year the Egyptian army moved into key points in Sinai and announced a blockade of the Straits of Tiran, effectively closing the southern Israeli port of Eilat. The Egyptian army was mobilised and the country put on a war footing.

Israel responded on 5 June 1967 with a preemptive strike that wiped out virtually the entire Egyptian air force. The war lasted only six days (hence the 'Six Day War'), and when it was over Israel controlled all of the Sinai peninsula and the Gaza Strip. The West Bank, including Jerusalem's Old City, had been seized from Jordan and the Golan Heights from Syria. For the Arabs, it was an unmitigated disaster that sent shockwaves across the region.

The year 1970 saw the ascension of new leaders in both Egypt (Anwar Sadat) and Syria (Hafez al-Assad). Preparations were also well under way for the next Middle Eastern war, with these radical new leaders under constant pressure from their citizens to reclaim the land lost in 1967. On 6 October 1973, Egyptian troops crossed the Suez Canal, taking Israel (at a standstill, observing the holy day of Yom Kippur) almost entirely by surprise. After advancing a short distance into Sinai, however, the Egyptian army stopped, giving Israel the opportunity to concentrate its forces against the Syrians on the Golan Heights and then turn back towards Egypt.

When the war ended in late 1973, months of shuttle diplomacy by the US secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, followed. Pressure on the USA to broker a deal was fuelled when the Gulf States embargoed oil supplies to the West 10 days after the war began. The embargo was relatively short-lived but if the goal was to get the West's attention, it succeeded.

All of this shifted the balance of power in the Middle East. The oil states, rich but underpopulated and militarily weak, gained at the expense of poorer, more populous countries. Huge shifts of population followed the two oil booms of the 1970s as millions of Egyptians, Syrians, Jordanians, Palestinians and Yemenis went off to seek their fortunes in the oil states.

PEACE & REVOLUTION

Anwar Sadat's dramatic visit to Jerusalem in 1977 opened the way for an Egyptian-Israeli peace process, which culminated, in March 1979, with the signing of a peace treaty between the two countries at Camp David in the USA. In response, Arab leaders meeting in Baghdad voted to expel Egypt from the Arab League.

Meanwhile, one of the few friends Sadat had left in the region had troubles of his own. Discontent with the shah of Iran's autocratic rule and his personal disregard for the country's Shiite Muslim religious traditions had been simmering for years. Political violence slowly increased throughout 1978. The turning point came in September of that year, when Iranian police fired on anti-shah demonstrators in Tehran, killing at least 300. The momentum of the protests quickly became unstoppable.

On 16 January 1979 the shah left Iran, never to return (he died in Egypt in 1980). The interim government set up after his departure was swept aside the following month when the revolution's leader, the hitherto obscure Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, returned to Tehran from his exile in France. For more on Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution, see p182.

The Arab World: Forty Years of Change, by Elizabeth Fernea and Robert Warnock, is hard to beat as an accessible and balanced overview of the Israel-Palestine issue.

Although the 1973 war is painted as a victory and reassertion of Arab pride by many historians, by the time the war ended the Israelis actually occupied more land than they had when it began.

Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War, by Robert Fisk, ranges far beyond Lebanon's borders and is a classic account of the issues that resonate throughout the region.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Iran's Islamic Revolution seemed to change everything in the Middle East, ushering in a period of instability that lasted until the end of the 1980s.

In 1979 militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca – Islam's holiest site – and were only ejected several weeks later after bloody gun battles inside the mosque itself. In November of that year student militants in Tehran overran the US embassy, taking the staff hostage. In 1980 Turkey's government was overthrown in a military coup, capping weeks of violence between left- and right-wing extremists. Further east, Iraq invaded Iran, launching what would become the longest, bloodiest and, arguably, most pointless war in modern history.

Tensions were further cranked up in 1981 when President Sadat of Egypt was assassinated by Muslim militants. The following year Israel invaded Lebanon, further exacerbating the cycle of chaos and destruction that had engulfed that country since 1975. In 1986 clashes between the USA and Libya, led by Colonel Mu'ammarr Gaddafi, came to a head with the American air strikes on Tripoli. The following year saw an escalation in violence in Israel and the Palestinian Territories with the beginning of the intifada (the grass roots Palestinian uprising).

There were a few bright spots. Turkey returned to democratic rule in 1983, albeit with a new constitution barring from public office anyone who had been involved in politics prior to the 1980 coup. In 1988 Iran and Iraq grudgingly agreed to a cease-fire. The year after, Egypt was readmitted to the Arab League and Jordan held its first elections in more than 20 years.

THE PEACE DEFICIT

In August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia requested help from the USA. The result was a US-led coalition whose air and ground offensive drove Iraq out of Kuwait. In the process Iraqi president Saddam Hussein (previously supported by the West in his war against Iran) became world public enemy number one.

While attempting to solicit Arab support for the anti-Iraq coalition, then-US president George Bush promised to make a new effort to achieve Arab-Israeli peace once the Iraqis were out of Kuwait. Endless shuttling between Middle Eastern capitals culminated in a US-sponsored peace conference in Madrid in October 1991. It achieved little, but by late summer 1993 it was revealed that Israel and the Palestinians had been holding secret talks in Norway for 18 months. The 'Oslo Accord' was cemented with a handshake between Yasser Arafat and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn in September 1993.

A new era of hope for peace in the Middle East seemed on the horizon. Lebanon had just held its first democratic elections for 20 years and the mutually destructive fighting seemed at an end. In 1994 Jordan became the second Arab country to sign a formal peace treaty with Israel.

Tragically the nascent Arab-Israeli peace process was derailed by the November 1995 assassination of Rabin and the subsequent election to power of hardline candidate Binyamin Netanyahu. A blip of hope reemerged when Netanyahu lost office to Ehud Barak, a prime minister who pulled his troops out of occupied south Lebanon and promised to open negotiations with the Syrians and the Palestinians. When these talks came to nothing, the Palestinians launched an intifada that still continues and Israeli voters ousted Barak for the more hard-line (and, to many, frightening) figure of Ariel Sharon. Although the death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004 offered some signs for hope, the violent occupation of Palestinian land and bloody suicide bombings targeting Israeli citizens continues.

Libya's Colonel Gaddafi is the world's third-longest-serving leader, having come to power in 1969; only Fidel Castro (Cuba) and Omar Bongo (Gabon) have presided over their countries for longer.

Orientalism, by Edward Said, is dense and academic but is the seminal work on the history of Western misconceptions and stereotypes about the Middle East from colonial times to the present.

Mezzaterra, by the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, is an eloquent series of essays on the modern Middle East, challenging Western stereotypes about the region while being rooted in the lives of ordinary people.

People

The combined population of the Middle East is around 285 million, with Egypt (approximately 74 million), Iran (72 million) and Turkey (68 million) the most populous countries. Contrary to what you read in the media, the ethnic make-up of the Middle East is more than just Arabian and Jewish and is surprisingly diverse. Even within the two dominant ethnic groups, you'll find more Palestinians living beyond the borders of the Palestinian Territories than you will within. A significant proportion of Israeli Jews are quite recent immigrants from across the world, especially Eastern Europe and Africa. Other major groups include the Persians, Turks, Kurds, Berbers and Druze.

While these disparate groups now largely live at peace with each other, the ethnic dimension of Lebanon's civil war and the morass that is Iraq suggest that ethnic identity remains an important subject for peoples in the region.

Zones of aridity and fertility ensure that the Middle East is home both to clamorous cities and vast (usually desert) regions of emptiness. The country with the highest proportion of people living in urban areas is Israel and the Palestinian Territories (92%) while Lebanon has the highest population density (353.6 people per square kilometre), followed by Israel and the Palestinian Territories (290.3). By contrast, Libya has a population density of just 3.1 people per square kilometre.

ARABS

The question of who exactly the Arabs are is still widely debated. Are they all the people who speak Arabic, or only the residents of the Arabian Peninsula? Fourteen centuries ago, only the nomadic tribes wandering between the Euphrates River and the central Arabian Peninsula were considered Arabs, distinguished by their language. However, with the rapid expansion of Islam, the language of the Quran spread to vast areas.

Although the Arabs were relatively few in number in most of the countries they conquered, their culture quickly became established through language and intermarriage. The term 'Arab' came to apply to two groups: in addition to the original nomadic Arabs, the settled inhabitants of these newly conquered provinces also became known as Arabs.

In the 20th century rising Arab nationalism legitimised the current blanket usage of the term to apply to all the peoples of the Middle East – except the Persians, Israelis and Turks.

Bedouin

The most romanticised group of Arabs is no doubt the Bedouin (Bedu in Arabic). While not an ethnic group, they are the archetypal Arabs – the camel-herding nomads who roam all over the deserts and semideserts in search of food for their cattle. From among their ranks came the warriors who spread Islam to North Africa and Persia 14 centuries ago.

Today, the Bedouin are found mainly in Jordan, Iraq, Egypt's Sinai peninsula, and the Gulf States. Their numbers are unknown due to their habit of wandering in regions where no census-takers venture.

While some have settled down to enjoy the facilities of modern life, many maintain semitransitional lifestyles. Their customs derive from the days of early Islam, and the hospitality towards strangers and love of

There is no finer work in English on the history of the Arabs from the Prophet Mohammed to modern times than *A History of the Arab Peoples*, by Albert Hourani, which is definitive, encyclopedic and highly readable.

The mass migration of two Arab tribes from the Arabian Peninsula – the Bani Hilal and Bani Salim – across North Africa in the 10th century cemented the Arabisation of the region, most notably in Libya.

poetry that Arabs are so famous for (and proud of) certainly takes its most genuine form among the Bedouin.

For more information see the boxed text on p394.

PERSIANS

The Persians are descendants of the Elamite and Aryan races (from southern Russia) who first settled in the central plateau of what is now Iran in the 2nd century BC. The Persians (Farsis), retained their own language even though they were among the first to adopt the new religion of Islam and welcomed the Arabic script for writing Persian.

TURKS

The Turkish peoples originated in Central Asia where they ruled several empires before being pushed westwards by the Mongols. At first they were shamanist nomads, but at times these early Turks followed each of the great religions of the region including Buddhism, Christianity and Judaism. During their western migrations they became familiar with Islam and it stuck. The Turks kept their own language even after conversion. During the 600-year Ottoman Empire, when Turks ruled most of the Middle East, they became known as Shimaliyya (Northerners) throughout the Arab world.

KURDS

The Kurds are spread across a large area of the Middle East, including a good part of eastern Turkey (with a Kurdish population of maybe 12 million), Iran, northeastern Iraq and Syria. Although they have been around longer than any other people in the region (since at least the 2nd century BC), the Kurds have never had a nation of their own. For more information on the Kurds see p265.

ARMENIANS

Another small group badly treated by history are the Armenians. They have lived in eastern Anatolia for millennia, almost always as subjects of some greater state such as the Byzantines, Persians, Seljuks or Ottomans. In the early 20th century the Orthodox Christian Armenian minority made the error of siding with the Russians against the Muslim Turk majority. The Armenians were massacred. Hundreds of thousands died and they were almost wiped out in Turkey. Elsewhere in the Middle East there are significant Armenian communities in Syria, Iran and Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

JEWS

The most high-profile non-Arab ethnic group in the Middle East are of course the Jewish people. Following their exile from Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, the Jews spread far and wide, many settling in neighbouring countries. Until the middle of the 20th century and the creation of the Jewish home-state, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iran and Iraq were all home to significant Jewish populations. For more background on the Jewish people in the Middle East see p276.

BERBERS

Believed to be the region's original inhabitants, the Berbers are North Africa's largest minority group and are spread from Libya to Morocco. When the Arab armies of Islam marched across the Maghreb, the Berbers retreated into the hills and desert oases keeping their culture intact.

A Modern History of the Kurds, by David McDowall, has been updated to 2004 (although the body of the work finishes in 1996) and it remains an excellent primer on the social and political history of the Kurds, focusing on Turkey and Iraq.

The key touchstones of Berber identity are language and culture. While almost all of Libya's Berbers speak Arabic and many have intermarried with Arabs over the centuries, most continue to speak Berber at home. 'Berber' is used as a loose term for native speakers of the various Berber dialects. In fact, many Berbers do not even use a word that unites them as a community, preferring instead to define themselves according to their tribe.

TUAREG

The Tuareg are the indigenous people of the Sahara. There are believed to be 1.5 million Tuareg across Africa. In Libya, this once-nomadic people are concentrated in the southwestern desert with a total population of 17,000. Although their origins are not fully understood, they are widely believed to be an offshoot of the Berbers. The name 'Tuareg' is a designation given to the community by outsiders and it's only recently that the Tuareg have called themselves by this name. The Tuareg previously defined themselves as 'Kel Tamashék' (speakers of the Tamashék language). Another name which the Tuareg sometimes call themselves is 'Imashaghen' – 'the noble and the free'.

DRUZE

The Druze have no homeland or language of their own and their nation is defined by their religion, an off-shoot of Islam. Like Muslims, the Druze believe in Allah and his prophets but they believe that Mohammed was succeeded by a further divine messenger, Al-Darazi – from whose name the term Druze is derived. The Druze also hold the non-Islamic belief of reincarnation.

Most of the Druze nation live in Lebanon and Syria and a few villages in the Galilee and Golan regions of Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The Druze people tend to give allegiance to whatever country they live in.

OTHER PEOPLES

At its southernmost fringes, the Middle East also includes various African peoples. Most notable of these are the dark-skinned people of Nubia, the region between Aswan in the south of Egypt and Khartoum in Sudan, which was known in ancient times as Kush. Since the creation of Egypt's High Dam, which caused the drowning of their homelands, many Nubians have migrated north to the cities of Cairo and Alexandria in search of a livelihood.

In southern Libya, the Muslim Toubou are, like the more numerous Tuareg, seminomadic. Although they display considerable cultural and linguistic similarities, many communities of Toubou speak related but mutually incomprehensible dialects of Tebu. One 19th-century explorer described Toubou society as 'the principle of freedom raised almost to the level of anarchy'. The Toubous' homeland is the Tibesti Mountains, a desert mountain range that straddles the Libya–Chad border.

DAILY LIFE

The Middle East is a region in transition, at once deeply traditional and experiencing newfound freedoms (eg the Internet and satellite TV) of which a previous generation never dared dream. High birth rates and, in the case of Israel, large-scale immigration have meant a population boom. An overwhelmingly youthful population has little memory of the causes for which their parents fought (eg Iran's Islamic Revolution, Libya's hostility to the West or Lebanon's civil war). Nor do they have sufficient

The name 'Tuareg' is thought to be an adaptation of the Arabic word *tawarek* (abandoned by God), a reference to their free-wheeling independence, inhospitable surrounds and less-than-orthodox adherence to Islamic tenets.

The Druze, by Robert Betts, only covers up to 1990 but this is otherwise the most comprehensive work on this little-known people and essential to understanding their reputation for fierce independence.

TIPS ON MEETING LOCALS

Etiquette plays a very important part in Arab culture. If you can follow a few simple rules (see also Responsible Travel on p26 for more advice) and play your part in a few set rituals, your path throughout the region is likely to be a lot smoother. That said, people are generally very forgiving of foreigners' social errors, but also very appreciative of any efforts you make towards complying with local etiquette. If you do make a faux pas, Arab etiquette is such that you will not even be permitted to know about it! Many of the following suggestions do not apply in Israel (other than in some Orthodox Jewish homes), nor many Western areas of Turkey.

- When entering a room, try to shake hands with everyone, even if you haven't been formally introduced. Touch your heart with the palm of your right hand after each handshake. This applies to both male and female visitors, although men finding themselves in the presence of Arab women should not offer to shake hands unless the woman extends her hand first. A devout Muslim man may prefer not to shake a woman's hand and will touch his heart instead.
- When meeting someone, greet them properly and inquire in detail about their health. If you know them a little, ask after their family (even if you've never met them). If you're a man, however, never inquire after another man's wife or daughters or any other female members of the family.
- Never eat, offer or accept anything with your left hand (which in the Middle East is reserved for ablutions only).
- Avoid displays of affection for your partner in public. Although it's OK for men to hold hands, it's taboo for couples to do so, and kissing and hugging is a definite no-no.
- Don't approach a woman or look at her until you've been introduced (though educated or 'Westernised' women may be more relaxed about this).
- Always stand up when someone enters the room.
- Never sit in a way that causes the soles of your feet to point at anyone else as the soles are considered unclean; shoes are usually removed before entering someone's house.
- Never beckon someone with your finger, as this is considered impolite.
- Avoid the subjects of politics, sex, women and religion (unless you're in private with trusted, long-standing friends or you're genuinely interested about Islam).

Dress

Wear long, loose clothing if you're a woman travelling in the Middle East. Dress should never be tight-fitting, transparent or low cut. Try always to cover the legs, cleavage and shoulders. Locals consider exposing the skin to the blistering sun at best odd and at worst silly or even offensive. No-one is going to stop a tourist for walking around in shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt, but it's about as appropriate as walking around wintry London in a thong. On the beach (apart from in Israel, the coastal Sinai region of Egypt, and Turkey) you will cause less of a local sensation if you wear shorts and a t-shirt rather than a swimming costume. Unless skirts are long, trousers are preferable. Men should avoid shorts and never appear bare-chested in public, except at the beach or swimming pool.

Men should choose their own dress over the local robes. Lawrence of Arabia aspirants should note that traditional dress has, in many places, acquired complex nationalist or cultural connotations. Women, by contrast, are welcome to wear local dress and it may even be appreciated. Bear in mind that in some countries locals tend to dress smartly if they can afford to. Scruffy clothes are often seen by locals as the mark of a traveller; look around you: the only people wearing shorts or tatty clothes are kids, labourers or the poor. Well-dressed travellers may also find that they are better received by Middle Eastern officialdom – from border police to the man who will decide whether you receive a visa extension.

jobs despite, in many cases, a university education, ensuring that old-style politicians are finding the formulae of the past simply doesn't work in appeasing their citizens.

For all such changes, families (immediate and extended) remain the bedrock of social life for most Middle Easterners, the one certainty in a changing world. Traditionally, the division of society into various, often competing tribes meant that the network of family members within a tribe were often the individual's only source of protection and hence loyalty. Although tribes remain significant (especially, for example, in Libya), the rise of nation-states in the region has ensured that family closeness is as much attributable to the fact that many, perhaps even most Middle Easterners live with their families until they are married. Often this is for purely economic reasons or because many simply wouldn't think of living any other way. The concept of independence from one's family is a Western idea that has yet to catch on. That said, the increasing trend towards university studies or military service away from a student's home town mean that more Middle Easterners than ever before are living away from home.

Even as women increasingly occupy positions of public responsibility and are entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers (most notably in the more traditional societies such as Iran and Libya), the division of the world into public (male) and private (female) realms remains largely intact. If you visit all but the most Westernised Middle Eastern homes, you may not even meet the women of the family although Western women have an advantage over men in this regard. Men and often Western women who seem to have the status of honorary men will eat with guests separately from the women. The situation is by no means monolithic but tradition retains a powerful hold and can appear in the most unlikely family settings.

In Islam, a guest – whether Muslim or not – has a position of honour not very well understood in the West. Even if you visit a home where the inhabitants don't have much to offer, the Muslim code of hospitality – with its deep roots in desert societies where hospitality ensured survival among nomadic communities – demands that your host give to his or her guest all that they possess. Indeed, being treated with grace, generosity and absolute selflessness is likely to be one of your most treasured memories from your visit to the Middle East.

Nine Parts of Desire, by Geraldine Brooks, is one of most balanced investigations of the lives of women under Islam, with interviews with everyone from village women to Queen Noor of Jordan.

The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World, by Egyptian psychiatrist Nawal el-Sadaawi, is packed with insight and controlled anger in equal measure as she explores the role of women in Arab history and literature.

Religion

The Middle East is the birthplace of the three big monotheistic world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The followers of these religions worship the same God, the main difference between them being their understanding of when God's revelations ceased. While Judaism adheres to the Old Testament, Christianity adds on the teachings of the New Testament, and the Muslims claim that their holy book, the Quran, contains the final revelations of God, clearing up the points not made clear by earlier prophets.

For more information on the relationship between Islam and other monotheistic faiths, see p58.

ISLAM The Birth of Islam

Abdul Qasim Mohammed ibn Abdullah ibn Abd al-Muttalib ibn Hashim (the Prophet Mohammed) was born in AD 570. Mohammed's family belonged to the Quraysh tribe, a trading family with links to Syria and Yemen. By the age of six, Mohammed's parents had both died and he came into the care of his grandfather, the custodian of the Kaaba in Mecca. When he was around 25 years old, Mohammed married Khadija, a widow and a merchant, and he worked in running her business.

At the age of 40, in AD 610, Mohammed retreated into the desert and began to receive divine revelations from Allah via the voice of the archangel Gabriel – the revelations would continue for the rest of Mohammed's life. Three years later, Mohammed began imparting Allah's message to the Meccans. Mohammed soon gathered a significant following in his campaign against Meccan idolaters and his movement appealed especially to the poorer, disenfranchised sections of society.

Islam provided a simpler alternative to the established faiths, which had become complicated by hierarchical orders, sects and complex rituals, offering instead a direct relationship with God based only on the believer's submission to God (Islam means 'submission').

Among Mecca's ruling families, however, there was a dawning recognition of the new faith's potential to sweep aside the old order. By AD 622 these families had forced Mohammed and his followers to flee north to the oasis town of Medina. There, Mohammed's supporters rapidly grew in number. By AD 630 Mohammed returned triumphantly to Mecca at the head of a 10,000-strong army to seize control of the city. Many of the surrounding tribes quickly swore allegiance to him and the new faith.

When Mohammed died in AD 632, the Arab tribes spread quickly across the Middle East with missionary zeal, conquering all of what now constitutes Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Persia and India soon found themselves confronted by the new army of believers and the unrelenting conquest also swept across North Africa. By the end of the 7th century, the Muslims had reached the Atlantic and marched on Spain in AD 710, an astonishing achievement given the religion's humble desert roots.

Shiite & Sunni

Despite Mohammed's original intentions, Islam did not remain simple. The Prophet died leaving no sons, which led to a major dispute over the line of succession. Competing for power were Abu Bakr, the father

Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths, by Karen Armstrong, is a comprehensive history of a city believed to be holy by the three monotheistic religions; even better, she writes without prejudice.

Muhammad: a Biography of the Prophet, by Karen Armstrong, is a sensitive, well-researched and highly readable biography of the Prophet Mohammed set against the backdrop of modern misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam.

The flight of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina (the Hijra) marks the birth of Islam and the first year of the Islamic calendar – 1 AH (AD 622).



of Mohammed's second wife Aisha, and Ali, Mohammed's cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima. Initially, the power was transferred to Abu Bakr, who became the first caliph (ruler), with Ali reluctantly agreeing.

Abu Bakr's lineage came to an abrupt halt when his successor was murdered. Ali reasserted his right to power and emerged victorious in the ensuing power struggle, moving his capital to Kufa (later renamed Najaf, in Iraq), only to be assassinated himself in AD 661. After defeating Ali's successor, Hussein, in AD 680 at Karbala, the Umayyad dynasty rose to rule the vast majority of the Muslim world, marking the start of the Sunni sect. Those who continued to support the claims of the descendants of Ali became known as Shiites.

Beyond this early dynastic rivalry, there is little difference between Shiite Islam and Sunni Islam, but the division remains to this day. Sunnis comprise some 90% of the world's more than 800 million Muslims, but Shiites are believed to form a majority of the population in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran. There are also Shiite minorities in almost all Arab countries.

The Quran

For Muslims the Quran is the word of God, directly communicated to the Prophet Mohammed; unlike the Torah and Bible, which are the interpretive work of many individuals, the Quran is believed by Muslims to be the direct word of Allah. It comprises 114 suras (chapters), which govern all aspects of a Muslim's life from a Muslim's relationship to God to minute details about daily living.

In addition to drawing on moral ideas prevalent in 7th-century Arabia, some of the Quran's laws closely resemble those of the other monotheistic faiths, particularly the doctrinal elements of Judaism and the piety of early eastern Christianity. The suras contain many references to the earlier prophets – Adam, Abraham (Ibrahim), Noah, Moses (Moussa) and Jesus (although Muslims strictly deny his divinity) are all recognised as prophets in a line that ends definitively with the greatest of them all, the Prophet Mohammed. Muslims traditionally attribute a place of great respect to Christians and Jews as *ahl al-kitab* (the people of the book; sura 2:100–15). However, Muslims believe that the Quran is the final

The Quran is not only the sacred text for Muslims, but is also a classic of poetic Arabic literature – reading it is essential to understanding the Middle East's dominant faith.

expression of Allah's will and the ultimate and definitive guide to his intentions for humankind.

It's not known whether the revelations were written down during Mohammed's lifetime. The third caliph, Uthman (644–56), gathered together everything written by the scribes (parchments, stone tablets, the memories of Mohammed's followers) and gave them to a panel of editors under the caliph's aegis. A Quran printed today is identical to that agreed upon by Uthman's compilers 14 centuries ago.

Another important aspect of the Quran is the language in which it is written. Some Muslims believe that the Quran must be studied in its original classical Arabic form ('an Arabic Quran, wherein there is no crookedness'; sura 39:25) and that translations dilute the holiness of its sacred texts. For Muslims, the language of the Quran is known as *sihr halal* (lawful magic). Apart from its religious significance, the Quran, lyrical and poetic, is also considered one of the finest literary masterpieces in history.

Five Pillars of Islam

In order to live a devout life, Muslims are expected to observe, as a minimum, the Five Pillars of Islam.

Shahada This is the profession of faith, Islam's basic tenet; 'There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah'. This phrase forms an integral part of the call to prayer and is used at all important events in a Muslim's life.

Sala (sura 11:115) This is the obligation of prayer, ideally five times a day: at sunrise, noon, midafternoon, sunset and night. It's acceptable to pray at home or elsewhere, except for Friday noon prayers, which are performed at a mosque.

Zakat (sura 107) Muslims must give alms to the poor to the value of one-fortieth of a believer's annual income. This used to be the responsibility of the individual, but zakat now usually exists as a state-imposed welfare tax administered by a ministry of religious affairs.

Sawm (sura 2:180–5) Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, commemorates the revelation of the Quran to Mohammed. As Ramadan represents a Muslim's renewal of faith, nothing may pass their lips (food, cigarettes, drinks) and they must refrain from sex from dawn until dusk. For more details on Ramadan see p647.

Haj (sura 2:190–200) Every Muslim capable of affording it should perform the haj (pilgrimage) to the holiest of cities, Mecca, at least once in his or her lifetime. The reward is considerable: the forgiving of all past sins.

The Call to Prayer

Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar
 Ashhadu an la ilah ila Allah
 Ashhadu an Mohammed rasul Allah
 Haya ala as-sala
 Haya ala as-sala

This haunting invocation will soon become the soundtrack to your visit to the Middle East, a ritual whose essential meaning and power remain largely unchanged in 14 centuries.

Five times a day, Muslims are called, if not actually to enter a mosque to pray, at least to take the time to do so where they are. The midday prayers on Friday, when the imam of the mosque delivers his weekly *khuṭba* (sermon), are considered the most important. For Muslims, prayer is less a petition to Allah (in the Christian sense) than a ritual reaffirmation of Allah's power and a reassertion of the brotherhood and equality of all believers.

The act of praying consists of a series of predefined movements of the body and recitals of prayers and passages of the Quran, all designed to express the believer's absolute humility and Allah's sovereignty.

If Muslims wish to pray but are not in a mosque and there's no water available, clean sand ('wholesome dust' according to the Quran) suffices; where there's no sand, they must go through the motions of washing (sura 5:5).

Islamic Customs

In everyday life, Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol (sura 5:90–5) and eating carrion, blood products or pork, which are considered unclean (sura 2:165), the meat of animals not killed in the prescribed manner (sura 5:1–5) and food over which the name of Allah has not been said (sura 6:115). Adultery (sura 18:30–5), theft (sura 5:40–5) and gambling (sura 5:90–5) are also prohibited.

Islam is not just about prohibitions but also marks the important events of a Muslim's life. When a baby is born, the first words uttered to it are the call to prayer. A week later follows a ceremony in which the baby's head is shaved and an animal sacrificed in remembrance of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to Allah. The major event of a boy's childhood is circumcision, which normally takes place between the ages of seven and 12. When a person dies, a burial service is held at the mosque and the body is buried with the feet facing Mecca.

JUDAISM

The foundation of the Jewish religion is the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah contains the revelation from God via Moses from more than 3000 years ago, including, most importantly, God's commandments (of which there are 613 in all). The Torah is supplemented by the rest of the books of the Old Testament, of which the most important are the prophetic books, giving much of the substance to the religion.

These books are complemented by the Talmud, a collection of another 63 books, written in the early centuries AD and containing most of what separates Judaism from other religions. Included are plenty of rabbinical interpretations of the earlier scriptures, with a wealth of instructions and rulings for the daily life of a Jew.

The Talmud was written when the Jewish Diaspora began. After the Romans crushed the Jewish state and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, many Jews were either exiled or sold into slavery abroad. The Jewish religion was kept intact, however, within families who passed the teachings from generation to generation. Until the foundation of the State of Israel and the subsequent backlash by many Arabs, Jewish communities lived peacefully alongside their Muslim neighbours in all countries of the Middle East covered by this book; Iraq was home to a particularly large Jewish community.

Unlike Christians or Muslims, Jews have never actively sought converts from the followers of other religions.

CHRISTIANITY

Jesus preached in what is present-day Israel and the Palestinian Territories, but Christians form only minority groups in all Middle Eastern countries, with Christians accounting for about 13% of the population of Egypt and Syria.

Lebanon and Jordan have sizable Christian populations too, and the former's one million Maronites also have followers all over the world. By far the biggest Christian sect in the region is formed by the Copts of Egypt, who make up most of that country's Christian population. Originally it was the apostle Mark who established Christianity in Egypt, and by the 4th century it had become the state religion. The Coptic Church split from the Byzantine Orthodox Church in the 5th century after a dispute about the human nature of Jesus, with Dioscurus, the patriarch of Alexandria, declaring Jesus to be totally divine. Internation-

Depending upon your interpretation, the charging of interest is prohibited by the Quran (sura 2: 275–80).

Essential Judaism: a Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs & Rituals, by George Robinson, is aimed more at Jews seeking to rediscover their traditions, but it covers everything from festivals and rituals to Jewish philosophy – the religion stripped of its political connotations.

THE BIBLE AS HISTORY

Unlike Egypt, where the wealth of tomb and temple texts and papyri has enabled historians to work out a detailed historical framework, the 'Holy Lands', where the earliest events as related in the Old Testament of the Bible are said to have taken place, have yielded little in the way of written archives. Historians cannot say for sure whether characters such as Abraham, Moses or even Solomon existed. The Old Testament was compiled from a variety of sources, and probably set down in script no earlier than the 6th century BC. The stories it contains might have some grain of truth in them, but then again they may have been no more than folk tales.

When it comes to the New Testament and episodes related in the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we do have some means of corroboration. This was the Roman era and there are plenty of other sources in the form of written accounts, inscriptions and works of art so that we can say with certainty that figures such as Herod, Pontius Pilot and a man called Jesus, from Nazareth, did exist. Where history moves into the realm of conjecture again is in associating particular places with biblical events. Many sites commonly held to be of biblical significance were only fixed in the 4th century AD by the Empress Helena, some 300 years after the death of Christ. They owe their status more to tradition than historical veracity.

ally the most famous Egyptian Copt today is the former UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

Otherwise, the Arab Christians of the Middle East belong to many churches in all main branches of the religion – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. This richness reflects the region's location on major routes along which the religion spread to Europe and Asia, and by which people and ideas have flowed into the area for centuries.

However, the number of Christians in the Middle East is definitely in decline. The reasons are predominantly demographic. Over the centuries Christians, in Egypt and Syria in particular, have moved from the country to the city and this urbanisation has led to a fall in birth rates. Also traditionally Christian church schools have provided a better education than Muslim state schools, which again has had the effect of lowering the birth rate. The professional qualifications resulting from the better education and subsequent wealth have also meant that Middle East Christians are far more able to emigrate. Syrian and Egyptian churches have found it impossible to stem the flow of parishioners to Australia and the USA.

Islam & the West

Will Gourlay

As the dust settled in Manhattan after 11 September 2001, an image emerged of the malevolent wagging finger of Osama bin Laden and his threats against the ‘infidels’. Western puzzlement was replaced by dread. It was as if the West was suddenly aware of a restive element living in the modern world, biding its time and seeking an opportunity to bring it down.

Here, for some, was the realisation of American historian Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’, a theory first propounded in the 1990s. And here, conveniently after the fizzling out of the Cold War, was a new enemy that the West could focus on. Gone was the stony-faced Soviet agent; neatly substituted was the Arab youth, reciting from the Quran and cradling a package of Semtex.

It was a seductive hypothesis that was supported by countless precedents: Palestinian terrorists at the Munich Olympics; Lebanon’s internecine civil war; Saddam Hussein’s ruthless invasion of Kuwait; Iranian mullahs berating the ‘great Satan’; numerous hijackings and suicide bombings.

Hoary old clichés about the Middle East added weight: downtrodden women, erratic despots, public beheadings, massive oil wealth.

And through it all remained a perception that Islam was monolithic and all pervasive, not just a religion but a way of life, rigidly dictating all aspects of its adherents’ existences. Such a philosophy and strictures were archaic to Western observers, for many of whom religion plays a negligible role.

For those who chose to subscribe to the ‘clash of civilisations’ theory, Islam and the West, with its inherently Judeo-Christian roots, were mutually irreconcilable and diametrically opposed antagonists – set to slog it out until only one victor emerged, eternally vindicated.

Western travellers, upon arriving in the Middle East, undoubtedly note a culture that feels different to the West. The fact that religion plays a more prominent role in the Middle East is undeniable. The call to prayer, five times a day, is the most noticeable indicator that the traveller is in a different milieu.

Nonetheless, travellers finding themselves in this milieu will not necessarily find it alien or confronting. The repeat visitor to the region will also know that there is no such thing as a single Muslim monolithic culture – daily life is played out to very different tunes across the region.

However, many of the shared aspects of a broader Muslim culture are immediately appealing to the traveller: the generosity of everyday people; the immediate acceptance of visitors; great spontaneity and *joie de vivre* despite material hardship; and a willingness to take things easy, described rather patronisingly by the 19th-century traveller AW Kinglake as an ‘Asiatic contentment’. Beyond which, any perceptive traveller will identify aspects of the symbiosis that exists between the Muslim world and the West and will discern the intricacy with which their histories are linked.

It may be that Islam and the West don’t make for ideal bedfellows, but they have common concerns and shared interests, and to characterise them as sworn enemies is taking too simplistic an approach.

MONOTHEISM – SHARED FOUNDATIONS

In 2003 US general William Boykin, referring to a Muslim soldier, said, ‘I knew that my God was real, and his was an idol,’ provoking an outcry from the Muslim world. The protest wasn’t a matter of an inferiority complex; it was because Muslims decried the statement as heretical.

The Muslim credo makes a nonsense of any such allusion to a pecking order of deities; it states categorically and unambiguously: ‘There is no God but God’. The existence of a unique God is the central and defining tenet of the three great monotheistic religions.

As any Muslim will attest, the God who is invoked in Friday prayers across the Middle East is the selfsame God who is worshipped in synagogues and churches around the globe, albeit under different monikers. Muslims readily acknowledge that their faith is built on the foundations of Judaism and Christianity. They see their religion as the refinement – indeed the ultimate and perfect manifestation – of the monotheistic religions that preceded it. They believe that the Quran (from the Arabic for ‘recitation’) was the final word from God, delivered through the medium of Mohammed, the final prophet. But far from denouncing Christians and Jews, the Quran anoints them as *ahl al-kitab*, people of the book, and forbids their enslavement or persecution.

Beyond a shared foundation, Islam, Christianity and Judaism share rituals, traditions, parallels, interconnections and characteristics too many to mention. It is as if Christianity and Islam, as each has arisen, has adopted and adapted from its antecedents to establish its own structures and define its own identity. Islam, as the last of the three to arise, is flush with markers that are immediately identifiable to Jews and Christians.

The Quran never attempts to deny the debt it owes to the holy books that came before it. It is replete with characters, tales, anecdotes, terminology and symbolism that would be immediately recognisable to Jewish and Christian readers. Indeed the Quran itself was revealed to Mohammed by the archangel Gabriel.

Muslims look upon the font of Jewish and Christian religious learning and tradition as a heritage to which they too are privy. Islam venerates Jesus, but does not consider him the son of God. Eid al-Adha, the Muslim festival that marks the end of the haj, is based on the biblical tale of Abraham offering up his son for sacrifice. It is clear that the Muslim prohibition on the consumption of pork is based on the Jewish ruling. The Muslim month-long fast of Ramadan bears similarities to Lent. Osman, the Turkish founder of the Ottoman Empire, claimed descent from Noah.

The modern travel writer and historian William Dalrymple observed Syrian Orthodox Christians at prayer in the 1990s. He remarked that the series of genuflections and prostrations that these Eastern Christians performed was uncannily similar to the *salaat* (prayer) that Muslims perform, and he wondered aloud if the Muslim ritual could be based on the Christian.

It is here, in the Middle East, that the parallels between Islam and Christianity are most readily observed. When the Prophet’s armies in the 7th century AD first engaged Byzantine armies in the Levant, the Byzantines believed that Islam was merely a newly arisen Christian sect. Similarly, the great theologian of the 8th century, St John of Damascus, contended that Islam was not a separate religion but a new offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Where early Islam did depart from its precursors was in simplifying the relationship with God. With no priesthood, Islam allowed the individual to maintain a dialogue with God – a system ideal for nomads and merchants, perhaps explaining the speed with which the new faith spread. In doing so it allowed even the isolated individual to become part of a community, all members of which could communicate with God directly.

But Islam also had a peculiarly Arabic bent and the alacrity with which it moved and the realm into which it first spread are perhaps what brought it into confrontation with Christianity and the West.

All of the countries in this book, bar Libya, still have indigenous Christian populations. Most retained Jewish communities until the 1950s and mass emigration to Israel. There are still sizable Jewish communities in Turkey and Iran.

Much of the region covered in this book had sizable Christian populations before the coming of Islam in the 7th century.

As well as professing faith in the same God, Arabs and Jews, as fellow Semites, are said to share a common ancestry. Legend has it that both peoples are descended from Isaac, Ishmael and Abraham.

Cultural Cross-Pollination

While Islam arose from the wellspring of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the interplay of the three monotheistic religions was not limited to matters theological. From the outset there has been a symbiosis and a two-way cultural exchange between Muslim cultures and Western Judeo-Christian cultures.

In the field of architecture, certain apparently archetypal characteristics of places of worship, both Christian and Muslim, owe much to the 'other'. The first Muslims prayed in mosques modelled on the house of the Prophet Mohammed, until the early Arabic armies encountered the domes of Byzantine churches. Thereupon the dome entered the repertoire of the Muslim architect, and the voluptuous skylines of the archetypal Islamic city were born – quintessentially Muslim, yet intrinsically European. Conversely, the pointed arch, beloved of European Gothic architects, was introduced to Europe by travellers returning from the Levant. The squared minaret, too, was a Muslim borrowing from the bell towers of the churches of Byzantine Syria. Centuries later St Francis of Assisi travelled through the Muslim realm and recognised the minaret and cry of the muezzin as a way of drumming up piety. On his return to Europe he instituted the practice of ringing church bells morning, noon and evening.

Earlier, the stalled engine of European intellectual thought was kick-started by Muslim catalysts. The heritage of classical Greek civilisation had been lost to Europe as the Roman Empire subsided. However, at the end of the first millennium, the intellectuals of Muslim Spain translated the classical works of medicine, astronomy, chemistry, philosophy and architecture, thus eventually bringing them to the attention of Christian Europe, and in turn laying the groundwork for the Renaissance. Words such as zenith, nadir, azimuth, algebra, algorithm – all of which have Arabic roots – are evidence of the legacy of Arabic scientists.

Undoubtedly the greatest contribution that the Arabs made to Europe was in mathematics. Until the 11th century Europe laboured under the strictures of Latin numerals. Europe was well aware of the wellspring of learning that existed in the Muslim realm, and what amounted to intellectuals' study tours from Europe to Muslim Spain were common. It was after one such foray that the 'Arabic' numeral system – the system still in use today – was introduced to Europe. Most crucial among this system was 'zero', a concept that had thus far eluded Europe's imagination. Without 'zero' the binary system – central to much modern technology – would never have been devised. Imagine trying to run a computer based on the Latin numeral system!

Some contend that it was first in the Muslim world that monarchs encouraged the learned to gather together and study a range of disciplines in one space, and it is from here that the concept of the university was conceived and spread to the West.

Hedonism has also benefited from East–West interaction. When the Turks poured into Anatolia in the 11th century they discovered the bathhouses of Byzantium. The Turks, hardy nomads of the steppes, took to steamy ablutions with glee, making it part of the Turkish regimen, to the extent that a bathhouse experience is virtually mandatory for travellers to Turkey today. European caffeine junkies, too, owe much to the ebb and flow of Ottoman armies in Europe. Legend says that when the Turks abandoned the siege of Vienna in 1683 they left behind sacks of coffee beans, which were discovered by the relieved Viennese who promptly introduced the coffeehouse to Europe. Silk, spices, papermaking and chess also reached Europe from Asia, via the Middle East and Muslim middlemen.

Indeed, some historians argue that far from being mutually antagonistic, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, when given the opportunity, create a unique symbiosis. The greatest Muslim cultures arose where all three religions comingled and cross-pollinated – the Caliphate of Cordoba in Al-Andalus (the name given to the Iberian Peninsula by its Muslim conquerors; 756–1009), the Ottoman Empire under Süleyman (1520–66), and the Persian Safavid empire under Abbas I (1587–1629). The architectural legacies of these three are still to be seen in southern Spain, İstanbul and Esfahan. The cultural legacies of each are less tangible, but it may be argued that they are no less potent.

A HISTORY OF CONFLICT?

In the confrontation between Islam and Christianity there has always been a frontline that has shifted as the balance of power has shifted.

Within only a few years of the death of Mohammed, the Umayyads moved their capital to Damascus, marking a shift in vision. Islam was no longer a religion of the Arabian Peninsula, but a world religion. In making this shift Islam encountered Christianity. Islam expanded, absorbing and assimilating, but also extending Christian and Jewish communities the respect that the Quran specified the 'people of the book' should be accorded. The early Muslim armies also encountered other nations and civilisations – Hindu, Chinese, Persian – but in Christianity they recognised a rival. Christianity, like Islam a proselytising religion, also had an agenda.

Islam's First European Foray – Al-Andalus

The first successful Muslim expedition into Europe was launched from North Africa into Spain in 711. By 732 Muslim armies had taken the Iberian Peninsula and advanced as far north as Poitiers in France, before being pushed back across the Pyrenees. Muslim armies then consolidated in Spain, whereupon Christian and Muslim communities flirted, sized each other up and interacted productively for over seven centuries, only occasionally spilling into open conflict. This dalliance came to an end when the knights of the Spanish Reconquista expelled the last Muslim monarch from Spain in 1492, the very year that Columbus reached the Americas, setting in course a pendulum swing that would see the Christian West in the ascendant for centuries to come.

The Crusaders Capture the Holy Land

Europe had earlier attempted to foil the Muslim advance and reclaim the Holy Land for Christendom. The monarchs and clerics of Europe attempted to portray the Crusades as 'just war', uncannily prefiguring advocates of the Iraq war in 2003. In the late 11th century such a battle cry attracted zealous support, and by 1099 the crusading rabble had taken Jerusalem, a victory marked by wanton and indiscriminate blood-letting, in significant contrast to the Muslim conquest of the region centuries earlier.

Curiously even after the gratuitous violence of the Crusades, Christians and Muslims assimilated in the Holy Land. European visitors to Palestine recorded with dismay that the original Crusaders who remained in the Holy Land had abandoned their European ways. They had become Arabised, taking on eastern habits and dress – perhaps it was not an unwise move to abandon chain mail and jerkins for flowing robes in the Levantine heat. It was at this time that what is thought of as the quintessentially Roman Catholic garment, the nun's habit, was adopted and adapted from the veils that Muslim women wore in Palestine.

The Middle Eastern influence on Western culture is clearly seen in words such as yogurt, saffron, sugar, caravan, bazaar and carafe, all of which come from Arabic, Persian or Turkish.

The Ornament of the World, by Rosa Maria Menocal, is a vivid and inspiring portrait detailing the interaction of Muslims, Christians and Jews in medieval Spain and the heady cultural heights they achieved in concert.

Infidels, by Andrew Wheatcroft, is a study of Islam and Christianity's troubled relationship from the birth of Islam to the 21st century.

In *The Birth of Europe*, modern historian Jacques Le Goff comments that the First Crusade was an unredeemed act of villainy that brought Europe only one benefit: the apricot.

In 1204 the armies of the Fourth Crusade sacked Constantinople, then the capital of the Byzantine Empire, and a fellow Christian power. The invaders visited more destruction on the city than any army before or since.

Ridley Scott's 2005 movie, *The Kingdom of Heaven*, which depicts the 12th-century battle for Jerusalem between Muslims and Crusaders, has been commended by Arab cinemagoers for challenging the stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists.

Mark Mazower's *Salonica, City of Ghosts* is a lively social history of Salonica (modern-day Thessaloniki in Greece). Mazower poignantly evokes the last great multicultural Ottoman city wholly in Europe.

All the Shah's Men, by Stephen Kinzer, vividly details the CIA's 1953 coup to overthrow Iran's popularly elected leader, Mohammed Mossadegh. Gripping and insightful.

A series of Crusader 'statelets' arose through the Middle East during this period. Contemporary Arab observers noted these regimes were relatively stable in contrast to Muslim political entities, where matters of succession were always occasions of bloodshed and armed conflict. They described it as an inherent failing in the Muslim societies. Stable political institutions were very rarely created: a problem that continues in much of the Arab world to the modern day.

The Ottomans Push into Europe

Horse-borne, firing arrows from the saddle, the Ottoman Turks emerged from the Anatolian steppe in the 14th century and put Europe on the back foot again. The Ottomans advanced so swiftly – so seemingly miraculously – into Eastern Europe that Martin Luther wondered whether they should be opposed at all. The Ottoman Empire, at its greatest extent, reached from Ghadames in Libya to the steppes of Hungary and the shores of the Red Sea. Again, however, Christian and Jewish communities were accorded the respect the Quran outlines for them and were given special status. The Ottoman state was a truly multicultural and multilingual one and Christians and Muslims rose to positions of great power within the Ottoman hierarchy.

The end of Ottoman expansion is variously pinpointed to the failed Vienna campaign in 1683, or the treaty of Karlowitz in 1699 when the Ottomans sued for peace for the first time. Thereafter the Ottoman Empire went into a slow and enervating decline, making attempts to redefine itself along European lines. By the 19th century, however, a new Western concept, nationalism, rather than Muslim-Western aggression, spelt the ultimate undoing of the Ottoman state as Greeks and Balkan Slavs agitated for and achieved independence. Meanwhile in Arabia's arid Najd district in the 1760s, Abd al-Wahhab preached revolt against the Ottomans and a return to the core values of Islam. Wahhab's influence would, much later, prove to be of singular import.

The Era of Colonialism

In 1798 Napoleon arrived in Egypt. Europe, by now industrialised and fresh from colonising the Americas and much of Asia, enjoyed economic and technological superiority over Muslim states. Napoleon's jaunt to the Pyramids marked the start of European meddling and interference in the Middle East that continues to the present. This was colonialism without grand conquest but rather colonialism by stealth. The Great Powers (largely Britain and France) apportioned much of the Middle East among themselves. And where there wasn't direct control there was behind-the-scenes manipulation. This was particularly the case in Iran, where Britain peddled influence but never came to colonise. Some Iranians lament this to this day, saying that because they were never 'really' colonised they were never 'really' liberated either – not until the revolution of 1979.

This era saw a wholly different dynamic to what had happened in earlier interactions between Islam and Western Christendom. Here was the haughty colonial administrator and the obsequious local Muslim: overlord and underling. This struck at the Muslim psyche – not only were they being technologically outstripped by the West, but resentment grew at foreign control and influence. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 further fanned the flames of Muslim rancour. And a process that had earlier begun among the Wahhabis of Arabia gained momentum. Islam turned in on itself and looked to an idealised version of the past for inspiration.

Yet even at this time there was an exchange of ideas. At the end of the 19th century the concept of the 'desert-loving Englishman' arose, not least among them Lawrence of Arabia. And for the first time wealthy Muslims went to Europe to be educated. They returned to the Middle East bearing Western ideas, among them democracy.

European control of the Middle East diminished with the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Algerian war of the 1960s. The 1950s and '60s became the decades of pan-Arabism as Nasser came to power in Egypt. Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian radical, capitalised on resentments that had long simmered. He espoused a return to grassroots Islam, as Wahhab had almost 200 years earlier. But Qutb took it further. He prompted the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood, who would withdraw from society and prepare for violence and martyrdom in pursuit of a universal Muslim society. The meeting of Islam and the West was set to take another path entirely.

THE WAR ON TERROR

With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to remark that the War on Terror is the culmination of events that have been smouldering for years. Oil, particularly since the 1970s, has proved the lubricant for much of the interaction between the West and the Arab world. Ironically it is the West's appetite for oil that has provided Saudi Arabia, in particular, with immense wealth, with which it has attempted to spread its ascetic and puritan form of Islam, Wahhabism. Alongside this has voyaged the more apocalyptic, anti-Western vision of Sayyid Qutb.

Add to this Muslim resentment at the plight of the Palestinians and perceived Western bias towards Israel, the West's inability or unwillingness to protect Bosnian Muslims from Serbian ethnic cleansing, and Western support of various unsavoury regimes in the Middle East. Counterpoise this with Western alarm at the reign of terror of Saddam Hussein, the continuing anti-Western rants of Iranian hardliners and a succession of Palestinian suicide bombers. And all that was required was an apocalyptic event like 9/11 to get the conflagration started.

Nonetheless, portraying the War on Terror as a 'clash of civilisations' is overstating things markedly. Some on both sides (not least politicians) seek to portray it as such, and elements within both civilisations consider themselves besieged. The Lebanese writer and historian Amin Maalouf argues that the Crusades created within the Arab world a juxtaposed fear of and fascination with the West that persists to the modern day, such that many Muslims feel that their world is under constant threat of attack. At the same time many residents of Western cities find themselves understandably jittery at the prospect of terror attacks.

Yet, it remains that relatively small groups are spruiking for and prosecuting the war. The terrorists who seek to bring down the West are few, and the initial American enthusiasm for the invasion of Iraq appears to be waning. There is no doubt, in the light of the terror attacks on London in July 2005, that the West remains intent on removing the terrorist threat, but there appears to be a gradual but increasing recognition from many commentators that any war on terror must be a war of ideas rather than a war in the conventional sense.

Cynicism remains about the motivation for the US-led invasion of Iraq. Many see it as an abstraction little related to the campaign against terrorism and wholly related to the Bush family vendetta against Saddam Hussein. The degree to which the Saudi ruling family and the US oil lobby are in each others' pockets also raises eyebrows. Related to this is the alleged evacuation of members of the Bin Laden family from the US immediately

Director Youssef Chahine's *Destiny* (1997) is a lavishly shot allegorical tale about the struggle within Islam against fundamentalism set in Al-Andalus, but it clearly resonates in the modern Middle East.

after the terror attacks in Manhattan – this relationship is little understood but much speculated upon – much to the delight of conspiracy theorists.

But it is not only US interests that have used the War on Terror to push their own barrows. Uzbekistan and China have taken to branding much civilian unrest as Islamic extremism in order to shore up their own autocratic regimes. Meanwhile, Muslim radicals, in a ploy to enlist more jihadists, cite the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as evidence of a new crusade.

In fact, President Bush's use of the term 'crusade' in the early days of the campaign to combat terror was a fundamental tactical error. His decision to include Iran in his infamous 'Axis of Evil' speech only a short time after the Iranian government sent its condolences to the American people in the wake of 9/11 does not seem like a masterstroke either.

The Pentagon has since realised that the US is losing the battle for hearts and minds in the Middle East. A report by the Defence Science Board says that US claims to bring democracy to the region are viewed by many Muslims as self-serving and hypocritical. The report says that Muslims see the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as resulting in chaos and misery rather than much-vaunted democracy. Not deigning to compile a toll of civilian dead in either conflict, the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the appalling treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib jail have not helped the US cause. Meanwhile, the West's continued indulgence of unsavoury regimes throughout the Muslim world when it is politically expedient does little to make its championing of democracy appear heartfelt.

To bring an end to terror and to solve the interconnected problems of the Middle East is a monumental task. It need not involve the obliteration of one civilisation by another. And there may be signs for optimism – Arab journalists' anguished recognition that most terrorists come from the Muslim world indicates that Muslims too are asking hard questions of themselves. And ever-larger numbers of Americans are demonstrating a desire to learn more about Islam and the Middle East; US universities report that since October 2001 demand for and enrolments in a range of courses from Arabic language to Persian mysticism have grown significantly. Recent elections in Iraq and Lebanon illustrate that the will of Muslim nations can be harnessed and their opinions canvassed in order to determine how they want to be ruled.

WHITHER THE CROSS & THE CRESCENT?

The frontline of the confrontation between Islam and the West continues to shift. Today that frontline may be in London, Madrid or New York...or Kabul or Baghdad. And misunderstandings and injustices continue on both sides. From the outset Islam and Christianity recognised in each other a rival for global hegemony. There has always been mutual wariness and scant attempt to engage in dialogue with the other side, but only rarely did that rivalry result in open conflict. That remains true in the era of the War on Terror.

History shows us that in the places where East and West have mingled, elements combine, retaining their intrinsic qualities while also creating a distinctive melange – as it was in Al-Andalus under the Cordoban caliphs and in Süleyman's Ottoman capital. It is happening again now: in glitzy Dubai, in Istanbul's hip Beyoğlu neighbourhood, in renascent Beirut, in the Moorish-styled cafés of Granada and in the in-vogue Lebanese restaurants of Melbourne. They stand as living proof that the fusion of Muslim and Western cultures brings about great things.

A Middle East Mosaic, by Bernard Lewis, is a fascinating miscellany compiled from many and varied sources, a grab bag of impressions of the 'other' by Muslim, Christian and Jewish observers through the ages.

Arts

ARCHITECTURE

The journey through Middle Eastern architecture is an extraordinarily rich one. It ranges from the enduring wonder of the towering monoliths raised to the glory of Egypt's pharaohs to the enchanting simplicity of Saharan mud-brick oasis towns in the Libyan Sahara, and from the lavish Islamic legacy of Esfahan in Iran to the buildings that have served many faiths in Istanbul and Jerusalem. Then there's the traditional indigenous architecture perfectly adapted to local conditions, which is astonishing in its childlike forms, most notably in Cappadocia (Kapadokya) in Turkey and the Jebel Nafusa of northwestern Libya. When these are added to the Phoenician, Roman, Greek and Nabataean cities of antiquity, it's hard not to get excited about what's on offer.

Architectural Highlights

It's in the Middle East that you see the first transitions from the classical column-and-lintel way of building (employed by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans) to a more fluid architecture based on arches, vaults and domes. This new style of construction, facilitated by the supplanting of stone with the smaller and far more malleable unit of the brick, developed under the Byzantines based in Constantinople. Their legacy is best illustrated by Justinian's great cathedral of Aya Sofya (p567) in Istanbul, and a scattering of more-modest structures dotted throughout Syria, most notably the 5th-century Qala'at Samaan (p544) north of Aleppo.

Byzantine forms carried through into the early Islamic period, and some of the earliest Muslim monuments – the Dome of the Rock (p289) in Jerusalem and the Umayyad Mosque (p514) in Damascus – owe their form to eastern Christianity. Over time, Islam developed its own building vocabulary; for the best of the Middle Eastern mosques, see p67. An egalitarian religion, its mosques simply required a single large, open space with as little clutter as possible. A domed central chamber proved to be the best way of achieving this. Slender minarets provided a platform for the daily call to prayer.

In addition, a subsidiary set of buildings evolved including the madrasa (Quranic school), *khanqah* (monastery), *sabil* (fountain), *turba* (mausoleum) and *hammam* (public bathhouse).

The Middle East's medieval architectural glory of accumulated great mosques, palaces and old quarters is one of the region's greatest draws and is best seen in the old cities of Aleppo, Cairo, Damascus and Jerusalem. For the most part, the finest structures were built before the 16th or 17th centuries, including the Turkish architect Mimar Sinan's great masterpieces in Edirne (p576) and Istanbul (see p570, p570 and p571), and the shimmering complexes of Esfahan (p211).

From the 17th century, as the political clout of the Ottomans – the overlords of much of the Middle East – declined, their buildings became more modest. European influence also began to make itself felt. Europe had flirted with baroque, so the simplicity of Arab and Turkish architecture was wedded to the decorative excesses of imported stylings. Istanbul's palaces, the grand houses of Damascus and Aleppo, and numerous gaudy Ottoman monuments in Cairo reflected the European trends.

European influence increased in the 19th century. Most Middle Eastern cities bear evidence of this with an assortment of churches, embassies

Architecture & Polyphony: Building in the Islamic World Today, is an exciting work stemming from the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. It's brimful of the innovations of modern Middle Eastern architecture and an antidote to the dominance of mosques in the aesthetics of Middle Eastern cities.

Dictionary of Islamic Architecture, by Andrew Petersen, is for those who can't quite distinguish a *sahn* (courtyard of a mosque) from a *riwaq* (arcade) and is useful primarily if your journey has whet your appetite to learn more.

Islam: Art & Architecture, edited by Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius, is comprehensive, lavishly illustrated and one of those coffee-table books that you'll treasure and dip into time and again.

and public buildings fashioned in Gothic or Florentine or Slavic or some other such imported style, all examples of (rival) foreign powers asserting their presence in the region through architecture. Nowhere is this more evident than in Tripoli where Italianate architecture surrounds the earlier Ottoman medina. It was only in the mid-20th century that anything like a movement towards regional identity in architecture was to reemerge. And it was only at the close of the millennium that domes, courtyards, adobe and whitewash (all traditional elements of centuries past) once again returned to vogue.

Mosque Architecture HISTORY

Embodying the Islamic faith, and representing its most predominant architectural feature is the masjid (mosque, also called a *jamaa*). The building, developed in the very early days of the religion, takes its form from the simple, private houses where the first believers gathered to worship.

The house belonging to the Prophet Mohammed is said to have provided the prototype for the mosque. It had an enclosed oblong courtyard with huts (housing Mohammed's wives) along one wall and a rough portico providing shade. This plan developed with the courtyard becoming the *sahn*, the portico the arcaded *riwaq* and the house the *haram* (prayer hall).

The prayer hall is typically divided into a series of aisles. The centre aisle is wider than the rest and leads to a vaulted niche in the wall called the mihrab; this indicates the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslims must face when they pray.

Before entering the prayer hall and participating in communal worship, Muslims must perform a ritual washing of the hands, forearms, neck and face (by washing themselves before prayer, the believer indicates a willingness to be purified). For this purpose mosques have traditionally had a large ablutions fountain at the centre of the courtyard, often fashioned from marble and worn by centuries of use. These days, modern mosques just have rows of taps.

The mosque also frequently serves the community in other ways: often you will find groups of small children or even adults receiving lessons (usually in the Quran), people in quiet prayer and others simply enjoying a peaceful nap – mosques provide wonderfully tranquil havens from the hustle and bustle of the streets outside.

STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENTS

The earliest of the grand mosques inherited much from Byzantine models (the Dome of the Rock is a converted basilica), but with the spread of the Muslim domain various styles soon developed, each influenced by local artistic traditions. The Umayyads of Damascus favoured square minarets, the Abbasids of Iraq built spiral minarets echoing the ziggurats of the Babylonians, and the Fatimid dynasty of North Africa made much use of decorative stucco work.

The vocabulary of mosque-building quickly became highly sophisticated and expressive, reaching its apotheosis under the Mamluks (1250–1517). A military dynasty of former slaves ruling out of Egypt, the Mamluks were great patrons of the arts. Their buildings are characterised by the banding of different coloured stone (a technique known as *ablaq*) and by the elaborate carvings and patterning around windows and in the recessed portals. The best examples of their patronage are found in Cairo, but impressive Mamluk monuments also grace the old cities of Damascus and Jerusalem.

Islamic Art in Context: Art, Architecture and the Literary World, by Robert Irwin, one of the premier scholars on the Arab world, traces the development of Islamic arts from the 5th to the 17th centuries against the backdrop of prevailing social and political upheaval.

MOSQUES NOT TO BE MISSED

With the exception of the Gulf countries, non-Muslims are generally quite welcome to visit mosques at any time other than during Friday prayers.

You must dress modestly. For men that means no shorts; for women that means no shorts, tight pants, shirts that aren't done up, or anything else that might be considered immodest. Some of the more frequently visited mosques provide wrap-around cloaks for anyone who is improperly dressed. Shoes have to be removed although some mosques will provide slip-on shoe covers for a small fee.

Azim-e Gohar Shad Mosque

This mosque (p240), in Mashhad in Iran, is the jewel at the heart of this pilgrimage city's holy shrine complex. It was built by the wife of the son of the Central Asian warlord Tamerlane in 1418. It shows a clear kinship with the Mongol-dynasty mosques of Samarkand and Bukhara (in modern-day Uzbekistan).

Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock (p289), in Jerusalem in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, is one of the earliest-built mosques (691) and, with its octagonal plan and mosaic-encrusted exterior, one of the most unique of all Islamic structures.

Gurgi Mosque

The most recent of Tripoli's Ottoman mosques, the 19th-century Gurgi Mosque (p474) is compact but boasts a glorious interior incorporating marble pillars from Italy, ceramic tilework from Tunisia and stone carvings from Morocco.

Imam Mosque

The grandest and most ornate of the extravagant Persian mosques, almost every surface covered by shimmering turquoise-blue tiles and the whole thing topped by a great 51m-high dome, is the Imam Mosque (p213), in Esfahan in Iran, built in 1638.

Mosque of Ibn Tulun

The Mosque of Ibn Tulun (p105), built in 879 in Cairo, may be the first building to ever employ the pointed arch that has since come to typify Islamic architecture. It also has a wonderful spiral minaret based on the Iraqi model.

Mosque of Qaitbey

Built in 1474, the Mosque of Qaitbey (p105) is in Cairo. It's the most exquisite of the region's vast legacy of Mamluk buildings with perhaps the best carved-stone dome to be seen anywhere.

Selimiye Mosque

More modest and not as well known as his Istanbul mosques, but architectural historians rightly regard this, the most harmonious and elegant of Sinan's works, as his masterpiece. The Selimiye Mosque (p576) was built in 1575 in Edirne, Turkey.

Süleymaniye Camii

Sinan was the master builder of the Ottoman Empire and his work is found throughout the region. Fittingly, the grandest of his mosques, the Süleymaniye Camii (p570), built in 1557, dominates the skyline of the former Imperial capital of Istanbul.

Umayyad Mosque

An adaptation of a Christian cathedral (itself erected on the site of a Roman temple), the Umayyad Mosque (p514), built in 705, is notable for its age, size and the stunning Byzantine-style golden mosaics that cover the courtyard walls. It's in Damascus, Syria.

The Mamluks were eventually defeated by the Ottoman Turks, who followed up their military gains with an equally expansive campaign of construction. Designed on the basic principle of a dome on a square, and instantly recognisable by their slim pencil-shaped minarets, Ottoman mosques can be found throughout Egypt, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. The most impressive monuments of this era, however, were built at the heart of the empire – the Süleymaniye Camii (p570) in Istanbul and the Selimiye Mosque (p576) in Edirne, both the work of the Turkish master architect Sinan.

Of all the non-Gulf regions of the Middle East, Persia was the one area that did not fall to the Turks. The Persian Safavid dynasty proved strong enough to hold the Ottomans at bay and thus Iran, and neighbouring Afghanistan, have a very different architectural tradition from elsewhere in the Middle East. Persian architecture has its roots not in Arab or Turkish forms, but in those of the eastern lands occupied by the Mongols who swept down from Central Asia. Their grand buildings are very simple in form but made startling by the sumptuous use of cobalt-blue and turquoise tiling, which often covers every available surface.

JUST LOOK, NO BUY

However averse you may be to the idea, you're likely at some stage to find yourself in a carpet shop. Resistance is futile. The secret is to accept the hospitality, enjoy the ceremony and not feel in the least obliged to buy – easier said than done if you're in Turkey and Egypt.

The process starts with a passing glance as you walk through one of the souq's lanes. You're invited inside and offered sweet tea or an adrenaline surge of coffee while you sit around and discuss the fact that the salesman (they're all men and all very charming) has a brother or uncle living in your country and indeed, what providence, sold a carpet, a very beautiful carpet, from his private collection, to one of your countrymen just last week.

While you wait for your drinks, why not look, looking is free, just for the pleasure of your eyes. Choices are unfurled by a boy, while another brings tea and coffee too hot to drink quickly. You ask a price and are told in a conspiratorial whisper that, because you have not come as part of a group, you will be offered a 30% discount. You're an honoured guest in their country and hospitality demands such things.

The carpets you don't like are rolled up and stacked against a wall. The designs are explained and more young men arrive to hold the carpets at viewing level. Suddenly the room is filled with young men at your service. Carpets are expertly rolled into tiny bundles to show how easily they will fit in your bag for carrying home.

This is the point at which you may decide that carpet buying is not for you. You say that you want to think about it. The salesman, possibly now casting furtive glances in the direction of the shop owner, is suddenly serious, knowing full well that the vast majority of tourists never return despite promises to do so. Prices drop. They may even do so dramatically. Looks of sadness will be exchanged that such beautiful carpets must be let go for such a price. As you walk out the door – you may be left to find your own way out as hospitality evaporates – you may hear dark mutterings and grim curses directed towards you. More likely, you'll look over your shoulder and see the salesman deflated on a chair, like a child who has lost his toy.

If you do decide to stay, bargain and buy, most of what the salesmen say about their carpets is true (apart from the price) – they are a wonderful keepsake to remember your journey. Your carpet is wrapped before you can reconsider. You hand over your credit card. The salesman looks aggrieved one last time. Cash is not possible, madam? Credit cards involve too much paperwork, sir.

You leave with your carpet under your arm and walk past all the other carpet dealers who'll tell you that you paid too much. You can't help but smile at the whole performance. Rest assured, the man who sold you the carpet is smiling too.

CARPETS

Although carpets can be admired and bought across the region, and Turkish carpets and kilims (double-sided flat-woven mats without knots) are highly regarded, there's no disputing the fact that Persian carpets are king.

Persian carpets are more than just a floor covering to an Iranian: they are a display of wealth, an investment, an integral part of religious and cultural festivals, and used in everyday life (eg as prayer mats). Most handmade carpets are made from wool and are distinguishable by the fact that the pattern is easily distinct on the underside. The wool is spun, and then rinsed, washed and dried. It's then dyed, either with natural dye or chemicals. Nomadic carpet weavers often use high-grade wool and create unique designs, but they use unsophisticated horizontal looms so the carpets are often less refined. In villages, small workshops use upright looms, which create carpets with more variety, but the designs are often uninspiring. City factories usually mass-produce carpets of monotonous design and variable quality.

Carpets are made with Persian knots, which loop around one horizontal thread and under the next; or Turkish knots, looped around two horizontal threads, with the yarn lifted between them. The higher the number of knots per square centimetre, the better the quality – and, of course, the higher the price. A normal carpet has up to 30 knots per square centimetre; a medium-grade piece 30 to 50 knots; and a fine one, 50 knots or more. A nomadic weaver can tie around 8000 knots each day; a weaver in a factory about 12,000 knots.

For information on taking your Persian carpet(s) home, see p243.

CINEMA

Egypt, Lebanon, Iran, Turkey and Israel and the Palestinian Territories have strong film-making traditions and the films from these countries are increasingly being distributed internationally to widespread acclaim. The fact remains, however, that many of the region's best films appeal more to an international audience (or are restricted from being shown in their own countries) and you're more likely to see the better work back home than in the Middle East itself.

Egypt

Egypt was once the Bollywood of the Middle East, but its film industry is widely perceived to be in serious decline. In its halcyon years, Cairo's film studios would be turning out more than 100 movies annually and filling cinemas throughout the Arab world. These days the average number of films made is around 20 per year. Most of these are genre movies relying on moronic slapstick humour and hysterics rather than acting, and usually a little belly-dancing thrown in for spice.

The one director of note is Yousef Chahine, a staple of international film festivals (which are virtually the only places you'll get to see his work) and recipient of a lifetime achievement award at Cannes in 1997. The Alexandria-born Chahine has directed over 40 films, the most notable of which have been the 1960s classic *The Choice* (the result of a collaboration with distinguished Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz), *Sparrow* (1972), *An Egyptian Story* (1982) and the politically charged *Destiny* (1998).

Lebanon

Lebanon's small film industry is showcased each year at the Mid East Film Festival Beirut. Some of the well-known film makers include Maroun Baghdadi (who won an award at the Cannes Film Festival), Samir

The Root of Wild Madder: Chasing the History, Mystery and Lore of the Persian Carpet, by Brian Murphy, is a travelogue through the countries of finest carpet production and a buyer's guide to quality, interwoven with stories told by individual designers.

Kilim: The Complete Guide: History, Pattern, Technique, Identification, by Alastair Hull et al, is for the would-be collector, this is the best book of its kind.

The Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers, by Rebecca Hillauer, is one of few works to challenge the male dominance in Middle Eastern film making.

Randa Chahal-Sabbagh has won the Lebanese government's highest civilian honour, the Order of the Cedar, but her 1998 film *Civilised*, about the Lebanese civil war, was censored (47 out of 90 minutes were cut) and Chahal-Sabbagh refused to show the film in her country.

Makhmalbaf Film House (www.makhmalbaf.com), the website of Iran's premier film family, hosts a full list of films, independent reviews and essays by the directors themselves.

Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future, by Hamid Dabashi, is the definitive guide to the Middle East's most sophisticated film industry, surveying the major directors and the social context of the Islamic Revolution under which they operate.

Nasri, Mohammed Sweid, and Paris-based Jocelyn Saab, who made *Sweet Adolescent Love* and the popular *Once Upon a Time in Beirut*. The critically acclaimed Randa Chahal-Sabbagh won the Venice Festival's Silver Lion award for her 2002 film *The Kite*. If you get a chance, see *West Beyrouth* (1998), the story of three teenagers. The film begins on 13 April 1975, the first day of the Lebanese civil war; the cinematography is supremely slick, which is not surprising given that first-time director Ziad Doueirim was formerly Quentin Tarantino's cameraman.

Iran

The real success story of the region is Iranian cinema. Despite serious straitjacketing by the authorities regarding content, Iranian directors have been turning out some extremely sophisticated and beautifully made films that have won tremendous plaudits on an international level. Their accent on character and story stands in refreshing contrast to much of modern cinema, particularly that of Hollywood. Such is the standing of Iranian cinema in Europe and America that new films by Iranian directors are regularly given first-run screenings in cities such as London, Paris and San Francisco.

Abbas Kiarostami is widely regarded as Iran's preeminent film maker. His *The Taste of Cherry* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1997 and his other works include *Close-Up* (1990), *Life and Nothing More* (1991), *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999). The internationally acclaimed Mohsen Makhmalbaf is the best known of a prolific family of highly talented directors, among whom is his outstandingly talented, award-winning daughter Samira. Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (2000), a brave and powerful account of the way women are oppressed in present-day Iran, and *Crimson Gold* (2003), a depressing tale of disillusionment with Iran's Islamic Revolution, are the most recent additions to an extraordinary body of work. A young documentary film maker of note is Nikki Karimi whose searing *To Have or Not to Have* explores the double standards applied to men and women when it comes to an inability to have children. Director Bahman Ghabadi was honoured at Cannes in 2000 and Babak Paymi's *Secret Ballot* (2001) is another outstanding work.

Israel & the Palestinian Territories

The conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians not surprisingly weighs heavily upon films from this troubled land, but some outstanding movies have emerged from both sides of the divide. There is rarely conflict between the directors from these two cultures, as most tend to belong to the liberal, more-moderate strands of Israeli and Palestinian society.

Amos Gitai has won plaudits for his sensitive and balanced portrayal of the conflict, while Avi Mograbi goes a step further with no-holds-barred depictions of the difficulties of life for the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Savi Gabizon's multidimensional black comedy, *Nina's Tragedies*, has won numerous awards at home and abroad. Yeal Kipper Zaretzky's documentary study of the Holocaust, *Permission to Remember* (1993), is a fine work, as is anything by another documentary film maker Yoav Shamir. Daniel Wachsmann and Ilan Yagoda are two bright stars of Israeli cinema.

One Palestinian director who has made an international impact is the Hebron-born Michael Khalifa whose excellent *Images from Rich Memories*, *The Anthem of the Stone* and *Wedding in Galilee* (1998) were shot

MIDDLE EASTERN FILM FESTIVALS

The Middle East isn't overly blessed with major international film festivals and some are devoted to Western cinema. However, there are a few worth seeking out:

Docaviv Documentary Film Festival (www.docaviv.co.il) March in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Eilat International Film Festival (www.eilatfilmfest.com) April in Israel.

Jerusalem Film Festival (www.jfff.org.il) In July.

Alexandria International Film Festival (www.alexandriafilmfestival.com) September in Egypt.

Haifa International Film Festival (www.haifaff.co.il) September in Israel.

Antalya Golden Orange Film Festival (www.tursak.org.tr) September to October in Turkey.

Mid East Film Festival Beirut (www.beirutfilmfoundation.org) In October.

Cairo International Film Festival In December.

covertly inside the Palestinian Territories. Rasheed Masharawi has been rejected in some Palestinian circles for working with Israeli production companies, but the quality of his work is undeniable. Elie Suleiman's work – which includes *Cyber Palestine*, *Divine Intervention* and the notable *Chronicle of a Disappearance* – is a wonderful corpus of quietly angry and intensely powerful films. Azza al-Hassan is one of the finest Palestinian documentary film makers.

Turkey

Turkey is a shining light of the Middle Eastern film scene. Yilmaz Güney's Palme d'Or-winning *Yol* (The Road) was not initially shown in Turkish cinemas; its portrait of what happens to five prisoners on a week's release was too grim for the authorities to take. Güney's *The Herd* has also been shown in the West. More recently, Reis Çelik's *Hoşça Kal Yarin* (Good-bye Tomorrow) tells the story of the three student leaders of Turkey's revolutionary left in the 1970s.

Other Countries

Although none of the other countries in the Middle East have major film industries, some outstanding directors have emerged from within their ranks. Syrian directors are little known beyond their own borders, with Nabil Maleh (*The Leopard and Mr Progressive*), Omar Amiralay (*Daily Life in a Syrian Village*), Mohammed Malass (*City Dreams*) and the up-and-coming Ziad Doueri (*West Beirut*) the most recognisable names.

At the 2005 Cannes Film Festival, Hiner Saleem marked the tentative resurgence of Iraqi cinema with the stirring *Kilometre Zero*.

TELEVISION

Middle Eastern TV has been transformed in recent years with the near-universal availability of satellite channels, although, it must be said, the quality of most drama and comedy is quite – how shall we put it? – lame to Western tastes. The only exception is Israel and, to a lesser extent Turkey and Lebanon. Maybe that's why so many TVs you'll encounter across the region are permanently tuned to 24-hour Gulf-based news or Lebanese music channels.

For information on the Al-Jazeera network, see p36.

DECORATIVE ARTS

The arts of the Middle East are largely the arts of Islam, typified in the minds of the non-Muslim by exotic curves and arabesques, and by intricate geometric patterning. The long-standing figurative art

The Companion Encyclopedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film, edited by Oliver Leaman, opens a window on the film industries in, among other countries, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Turkey.

ARAB BIG BROTHER

For the briefest of moments in 2004, Middle Eastern TV had an alternative to the standard fare of overwrought Egyptian soap operas, religious scholars arguing the merits of Quranic minutiae and government news broadcasts that celebrate diplomatic niceties as news. Indeed, few shows have captured the imagination of the Arab world quite like the Arab version of the worldwide *Big Brother* phenomenon.

For two weeks, the show *Al-Ra'is* (The Boss) – which was based in the Gulf emirate of Bahrain and offered prize money of US\$100,000 – had viewers across the region glued to their TV sets agonising over how the Jordanian salsa-dancing jeweller would cope with the karate teacher from Kuwait, or whether romance would flourish between the Bahraini actress and the Iraqi musician. And few could quite understand why the Lebanese contestant thought that he would need 20 pairs of trousers to see him through his period of seclusion.

The show's producers made every effort to avoid controversy, including segregated sleeping areas for the show's 12 male and female contestants and providing a prayer room for the devout among them.

It didn't last long. During the first episode, only one of the female inhabitants wore a traditional black *abaya* (full-length robe). By the second instalment, protesters were on the streets and conservative clerics were condemning the show as un-Islamic. For the first time since the reality-TV-show juggernaut was born, *Big Brother*, or rather *The Boss*, was tamed. The show went off the air, never to return.

traditions in Asia Minor, Persia and areas further east were never completely extinguished by Islam, which restricts the portrayal of living figures. The Turks and Iraqis continued to produce beautiful illuminated manuscripts, while the Persians retained their art of miniature painting, which is still practised today in places such as Esfahan in present-day Iran.

In the areas of calligraphy, metalwork, ceramics, glass, carpets and textiles, however, Islamic art has a cultural heritage of unsurpassable richness – one that in turn has had great influence on the West. Middle Eastern artisans and craftspeople (Armenians, Christians and Jews as well as Muslims) have for more than 1200 years applied complex and sumptuous decorations to often very practical objects to create items of extraordinary beauty. Plenty such items are on view in the region's museums, including the Topkapı Palace (p566) in İstanbul. However, to appreciate the achievements of Islamic art, just visit one of the older mosques in which tiling, wood carving, inlaid panelling and calligraphy are often combined in exaltation of Allah. Islamic art is, for a Muslim, foremost an expression of faith.

Perhaps the most sophisticated of these decorative arts is calligraphy, a style of writing elevated to an art form of astonishing intricacy to accommodate Islam's restriction on portraying living figures. Early calligraphers used an angular script called Kufic that was perfect for stone carving. Modern calligraphy uses a flowing cursive style, more suited to working with pen and ink.

Another of the region's signature art forms is the mosaic, traditionally made from tiny squares called tesserae, chipped from larger rocks. The tesserae are naturally coloured, and carefully laid on a thick coating of wet lime. Mosaics depicting hunting, deities and scenes from daily life once adorned the floors and palaces of the Byzantine Middle East. The art of mosaic making continues in places such as Madaba in Jordan, while some of the finest ancient works are on display in the Jamahiriya Museum (p473) in Tripoli, Libya.

Calligraphy is an expression of the belief that Arabic is a holy language revealed by Allah to the Prophet Mohammed in the Quran. Derived from the Greek words *kala* (beautiful) and *graphos* (writing), calligraphy was a way of glorifying the word of God.

Artistic tradition in the Western sense of painting and sculpture has historically been largely absent in Islamic countries because Islam has always regarded the depiction of living beings as idolatrous.

LITERATURE Poetry

Poetry has traditionally been the preeminent literary form in the Middle East and all the best-known figures of classical Arabic and Persian literature are poets – men regarded as possessing knowledge forbidden to ordinary people, supposedly acquired from demons. The favourite demon seems to have been alcohol. Abu Nuwas, faithful companion to the 8th-century Baghdadi caliph Harun ar-Rashid, and a rather debauched fellow, left behind countless odes to the wonders of wine, as did the Persian Omar Khayyam, famed 11th-century composer of *rub'ai* (quatrains). The current Iranian regime prefers to celebrate Khayyam for his work as a mathematician.

The tradition continues today, maintained by figures of international standing such as Syrian-born Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. Darwish is the Arab world's bestselling poet and his public readings attract huge crowds. He has been translated into more than 20 languages and is the bestselling poet in France.

Novels & Short Stories

Arab literature in the form of novels and short stories is only as old as the 20th century. An increased exposure to European influences, combined with nascent Arab nationalism in the wake of the Ottoman Empire's decline, led to the first stirrings. The Egyptians and Lebanese have been the most active in the field, but much of the credit for the maturing of Arabic literature can be credited to one single author, Naguib Mahfouz, who was unquestionably the single most important writer of fiction in Arab in the 20th century.

A life-long native of Cairo, Mahfouz began writing in the 1930s. From Western-copyist origins he went on to develop a voice that is uniquely of the Arab world and that draws its inspiration from storytelling in the coffeehouses and the dialect and slang of the streets. His achievements were recognised internationally when he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1988. Much of his work has since been made available in English-language translations.

MIDDLE EASTERN SUPERHEROES

The Middle East has adapted many icons of Western culture to suit its own purposes, ranging from the novel to 24-hour news channels and McDonald's restaurants. Now it's the turn of the comic book.

Middle East Heroes is the brainchild of the Egypt-based AK Comics, which, instead of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, created Zein, the time-travelling pharaoh, Aya, who is turned into a Princess of Darkness after she is orphaned and adopted by an underground fighting group, and Rakan, a heroic warrior armed with a magic sword from ancient Arabia.

The age-old comic book formula of good struggling against evil is given a uniquely Middle Eastern twist as the comic entrusts the superheroes with the task of saving the region from evil after 55 years of war between two unnamed superpowers. Among those whom Zein and Rakan battle for control over the 'City of All Faiths' are shadowy forces that go by the name of the 'Zios Army' who are 'still clinging to their extreme views'. Nor do the cartoonists shirk from taking on the big issues of the day: they depict a female character, Jalila, who developed unrivalled superhuman powers as a result of a nuclear explosion, in full superhero equality with her male counterparts. The comic has thus far evaded the region's rigorous censors, save for the decision in some countries to black out Jalila's stomach. The comic is published in Arabic and English.

Modern Arabic Poetry, by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, can be a bit dense for the uninitiated, but there's no more comprehensive work about the Middle East's most enduring and popular literary form.

Nights and Horses and the Desert: An Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature, edited by Robert Irwin, traces the roots of Arabic poetry from the Quran to the modern day.

After Cairo, the other beacon for Arab literature is Beirut. As well as being the focus of Lebanese literary life, Beirut has been the refuge of Syrian writers escaping their own repressive regime and of refugee Palestinians. Of the latter category Liana Badr, who fled after the Israelis captured her home town of Jericho in 1967, has two books available in English: *The Eye of the Mirror* and the short-story collection *A Balcony over the Fakihani*. Both draw heavily on her first-hand experiences of upheaval.

Of the native Lebanese writers, the most famous is Hanan al-Shaykh, who writes extremely poignant but humorous novels (*Beirut Blues*, *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*) that resonate beyond the bounds of the Middle East.

THE BEST OF MIDDLE EASTERN LITERATURE

Given that the Arabic novel is largely a 20th-century phenomenon, most Middle Eastern novels are a fantastic companion to any journey through the region, charting as they do so many of the grand themes of the Middle East's recent political and social history. Here are our favourites:

- *Arabic Short Stories*, translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, is an excellent primer with tales from all over the Middle East gathered by the world's foremost translator of Arabic literature.
- *Beirut Blues*, by Hanan al-Shaykh, deals with the fallout from the Lebanese civil war, as seen through the eyes of a young woman trying to decide whether to stay or flee abroad following in the steps of friends and family.
- *The Black Book*, by Orhan Pamuk, is a Kafkaesque tale of an abandoned husband's search for his wife in Istanbul, written by Turkey's most outstanding writer.
- *The Harafish*, by Naguib Mahfouz, would be the desert-island choice if we were allowed only one work by Mahfouz, but everything he's written is worth reading.
- *The Map of Love*, by Ahdaf Soueif, is the Booker-nominated historical novel about love and clashing cultures by the London-based Anglo-Egyptian writer; any book by Soueif is epic and finely wrought.
- *Mehmet My Hawk*, by Yaşar Kemal, is the Nobel laureate's most famous (and very readable) work, which deals with near-feudal life in the villages of eastern Mediterranean Turkey.
- Although written in the 11th century and translated into English in the 19th century, the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam became a sensation throughout Europe and America, and a major influence on Western poetry ever since.
- Although Lebanese by birth, Amin Maalouf lives in Paris and writes in French. He's the author of several excellent historical novels, including *Samarkand*, a highly romantic tale that begins with Omar Khayyam and ends on the *Titanic*.
- *The Thousand and One Nights* is an anonymously written, mixed bag of colourful and fantastic tales that are widely regarded as the high point of historical storytelling, as appealing to adults as to children (see opposite).
- The Quran, Islam's holy book, is considered to be the highlight of classical Arabic literature.
- *Pillars of Salt*, by Fadia Faqir, is a skilfully conceived work exploring social divisions and the vulnerability of women against the backdrop of the British Mandate in Jordan.
- Amos Oz' fans will no doubt have their favourites but *My Michael* captures the turmoil of Jerusalem during the Suez Crisis of 1956 as reflected in the private torment of a woman in an unhappy marriage.
- *The Stone of Laughter*, by Hoda Barakat, is a lyrical work by a young Lebanese writer that beautifully charts Lebanon's civil war as seen through the eyes of a character torn apart by the issues of identity and sexuality.

THE THOUSAND & ONE NIGHTS

After the Bible, *The Thousand and One Nights* (in Arabic, 'Alf Layla w'Layla', also known as *The Arabian Nights*) must be one of the most familiar yet unread books in the English language. It owes its existence in the popular consciousness almost entirely to the Disneyfied tales of *Aladdin*, *Sinbad* and *Ali Baba & the 40 Thieves* that appear in children's books, animated films and Christmas pantomimes.

That the actual text itself is largely ignored is unsurprising considering that in its most famous English-language edition (translated by the Victorian adventurer Sir Richard Burton), it runs to 16 volumes. In fact, an old Middle Eastern superstition has it that nobody can read the entire text of *The Thousand and One Nights* without dying.

But what constitutes the entire text is a matter of academic debate. *The Thousand and One Nights* is a portmanteau title for a mixed bag of colourful and fantastic tales, and the many historical manuscripts that carry the famed title collectively contain many thousands of stories, sharing a core of exactly 271 common tales. They all, however, employ the same framing device – that of a succession of stories related nightly by the wily Sheherezade to save her neck from the misogynistic King Shahriyar.

Sheherezade and her tales have their origins in pre-Islamic Persia, but over the ages (and in endless retellings and rewritings) they were adapted, expanded and updated, drawing on sources as far flung as Greece and India. As they're known to us now, the stories are mainly set in the semifabled Baghdad of Haroun ar-Rashid (r AD 786–809), and in Mamluk-era (1250–1517) Cairo and Damascus. In particular regarding the last two cities, *The Thousand and One Nights* provides a wealth of rich period detail, from shopping lists and prices of slaves, through to vivid descriptions of types and practices of assorted conjurers, harlots, thieves and mystics. *The Thousand and One Nights* is revered as much by medieval scholars as it is by Walt Disney's animators.

Turkey's best-known writer is probably Yaşar Kemal, winner of the 1998 Nobel prize for literature. Author of the moment is Orhan Pamuk whose books are walking out of bookshops in record numbers. He is widely published in a great number of languages, including English.

The most widely translated Israeli writer is the Jerusalem-born Amos Oz, whose name regularly appears as a candidate for the Nobel prize for literature. His work includes essays and award-winning novels with themes that go to the heart of the pride and angst at the centre of modern Israeli life.

The Libyan writer most widely read throughout the Arab world is Ibrahim al-Kouni, a native of Ghadames. His often disturbing depictions of life in the Sahara are particularly powerful, most notably *The Bleeding of the Stone*.

For the best literature from each country of the Middle East, see the Arts section of each individual country chapter.

MUSIC

If you're a music-lover, you'll adore the Middle East. Music is all pervasive, filling the narrow lanes of the souqs, with crooners and pop divas blasting out of seemingly every shop doorway and every taxi driver's cassette player.

The diversity of music is huge as in the West, and it's impossible to do it justice in such a brief space. Although we make the division here into three broad musical types – Arabic classical, pop and traditional music – there are many, many artists who fail to fit neatly under any of these headings or conversely cross over into all three.

An Introduction to Arabic Literature, by Roger Allen, is a worthy addition to the canon of literary criticism with extensive translations of seminal texts and lively analysis; it's especially good on *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Arabic Classical

Tonality and instrumentation aside, classical Arabic music differs from that of the West in one important respect: in the Middle East the orchestra is always there primarily to back the singer.

The kind of orchestra that backs such a singer is a curious cross-fertilisation of East and West. Western-style instruments, such as violins and many of the wind and percussion instruments, predominate, next to such local species as the oud (lute) and tabla (drum). The sounds that emanate from them are anything but Western – all the mellifluous seduction of Asia in the backing melodies alongside the vaguely melancholic, languid tones you would expect from a sun-drenched Middle Eastern summer.

The all-time favourite voice of classical Arabic music is Egyptian-born songstress Umm Kolthum (see the boxed text below). The 1950s were the golden age of Arabic music and gave rise to a lesser pantheon of stars, although they never achieved the heights scaled by Umm Kolthum. Two male crooners who owed much of their popularity to their omnipresence on cinema screens in countless Cairo-produced romantic movies were Abdel Halim Hafez and Syrian-born Farid al-Atrache. As with Umm Kolthum, both of these male artists remain loved and widely listened to.

Of all these golden-era singers, only one is still active and that's Fairouz (see opposite).

Pop

Middle Eastern pop music is like its Western counterpart in that fashions change almost as regularly as the stars change hairstyles. Watch Arab MTV and you'll soon learn what's hot, although that doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be around tomorrow.

ARABIC

Characterised by a clattering, hand-clapping rhythm overlaid with synthesised twirlings and a catchy, repetitive vocal, the first true Arabic pop came out of Cairo in the 1970s. As the Arab nations experienced a population boom and the mean age decreased, a gap in popular culture had developed that the memory of the greats couldn't fill. Enter Arabic pop.

UMM KOLTHUM

The Egyptian singer Umm Kolthum was one of the towering figures of world 20th-century music and it's impossible to overestimate the breadth of her influence and popularity. A favourite of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Umm Kolthum had the ability to stop a nation whenever she performed. From the 1940s through to the '70s, her voice was that of the Arab world, a region that has never really fallen out of love with her voice nor with the fervour and hope of those tumultuous times that she represented. To the uninitiated she can sound rough and raucous, but the passion of her protracted love songs and *qasa'id* (long poems) was the very expression of the Arab world's collective identity. Egypt's love affair with Umm Kolthum (where she's known as Kawkab ash-Sharq, meaning 'Nightingale of the East') was such that on the afternoon of the first Thursday of each month, streets would become deserted as the whole country sat beside its radios to listen to her regular live-broadcast performance. When she died in 1975 her death caused havoc, with millions of mourners pouring out onto the streets of Cairo. Her appeal hasn't been purely confined to the Arab world either – former Led Zeppelin vocalist Robert Plant was reported as saying that one of his lifetime ambitions was to re-form the Middle Eastern Orchestra, Umm Kolthum's group of backing musicians.

Rumour has it that the coup that brought Libyan leader Colonel Mu'ammarr Gaddafi to power on 1 September 1969 was delayed so as not to clash with an Umm Kolthum concert, thereby avoiding a public backlash against the coup leaders.

FAIROUZ

A Lebanese torch singer with a voice memorably described as 'silk and flame in one', Fairouz has enjoyed star status throughout the Arab world since recording her first performances in Damascus in the 1950s. Along with her writers, the Rahbani brothers, Fairouz embraced a wide range of musical forms, blending Lebanese folk tales with flamenco and jazz. For all her experimentation, her lyrics embodied the recurring themes of love, loss, Lebanon and religious praise. During the 1960s and '70s her music – and three starring roles in Lebanese films – made her the embodiment of freewheeling Beirut, then referred to as the 'Paris of the Middle East'. During the Lebanese civil war she became a symbol of hope and an icon for Lebanese identity, resolutely refusing to sing inside Lebanon while her countrymen continued to kill each other.

After the war, and after a series of performances at church services, Fairouz returned to the Lebanese stage. In 1995 her concert in downtown Beirut drew a crowd of 40,000 newly hopeful Lebanese – surely one of the great concerts of all time. The fact that the concert took place in what was once a no-man's-land in formerly divided Beirut merely confirmed her iconic status and became a symbol of Lebanon's return to peace. Across the Arab world, 125 million tuned in and her record sales have now topped 80 million. Her appearance at the 1998 Baalbek Festival was also a landmark and confirmed her stunning return to form, while a 1999 concert in Las Vegas drew the biggest crowd since Frank Sinatra. Now in her seventies, Fairouz has shown that she remains a powerful figure in the life of the nation. After the former prime minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated in 2005, she refused to perform at Easter Mass, saying 'I will not sing to a divided people'.

The blueprint for the new youth sound (which became known as *al-jeel*, from the word for generation) was set by Egyptian Ahmed Adawiyya, the Arab world's first 'pop star'.

During the 1990s there was a calculated attempt to create a more up-market sound, with many musicians mimicking Western dance music. Tacky electronics were replaced with moody pianos, Spanish guitars and thunderous drums. Check out Amr Diab, whose heavily produced songs have made him the bestselling artist ever in the Arab world (achieved with his 1996 album *Nour al-Ain*).

Diab is Egyptian but in recent years the Egyptians have been beaten at their own game and many of the biggest-selling artists come from elsewhere. Heading the current crop of megastar singers (the Arabic music scene is totally dominated by solo vocalists, there are no groups) are Majida al-Rumi of Lebanon and Iraqi-born Kazem al-Saher. Unfortunately, in the largely shrink-wrapped world of pop, regional influences are minimised and most artists have a tendency to sound the same, no matter where they come from.

TURKISH

In Turkey there is a thriving indigenous pop culture, with some of the leading artists breaking out from the Turkish ghetto and making a splash in countries such as France as well. Tarkan, for example, first recorded 'Sımarik', a track better known to Western audiences as 'Kiss Kiss', courtesy of a cover by chart popper Holly Valance. Other superpopular pop stars include 'arabesque' luminary Ibrahim Tatlıses (also a constant fixture on Turkish TV) and the more versatile female singer Sezen Aksu (writer of 'Sımarik').

Turkish folk music has also undergone a revival in recent years, as 'Türkü' – an updated, modern version often using electronic instruments coupled with traditional songs.

Amr Diab World (www.amrdiabworld.com) is the glitzy homepage of the Arab world's most famous modern pop star; it ranges across all the vacuousness and strangely compelling kitsch that is modern Arab celebrity.

Arab Gateway – Music (www.al-bab.com/Arab/music/music.htm) has everything from clear explanations of the basics for the uninitiated to links and downloads of contemporary Arab music.

Traditional Music

Each of the Arabic countries of the Middle East has its own minority groups – ethnic, regional or religious – and most of these groups have their own musical traditions. The most high profile is the Nubian music of southern Egypt.

Unlike much Arabic music, with its jarring use of quarter tones, the Nubian sound is extremely accessible, mixing simple melodies and soulful vocals, and having a rhythmical quality that's almost African and a brass sound that could be from New Orleans. Probably the biggest name is Ali Hassan Kuban, who has toured all over Europe as well as in Japan, Canada and the US. He has several CDs out on the German Piranha label, including *From Nubia to Cairo* and *Walk Like a Nubian*. There's also a loose grouping of musicians and vocalists recording under the name Salamat who have several CDs out, also on Piranha, including the highly recommended, explosively brassy *Mambo al-Soudani*.

Although not as high profile as the Nubians, other notable Arabic folk music comes from the Bedouin. Whether produced by the Bedouin of Egypt, Jordan or Syria, the music is raw and traditional with little or no use of electronic instruments. The sound is dominated by the *mismar*, a twin-pipe clarinet, and the *rabab*, a twin-stringed prototype cello.

Much more refined than the Bedouin sound, but equally dominated by traditional instrumentation, is what's known as Sufi music. Sufis are religious mystics who use music and dance to attain a trancelike state of divine ecstasy. The music is bewitchingly hypnotic – a simple repeated melody usually played on the *nai* (reed pipe) accompanied by recitations of Sufi poetry. Sufi music and dance can be experienced in Konya, Turkey.

Also worth mentioning is the Libyan music style of *malouf*, which draws strongly on the old songs of Andalusia and is performed publicly during religious holidays and at weddings.

One form of traditional music undergoing a major revival and taking the world music scene by storm is *klezmer*, which has its roots among the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Its fast-paced, vocal-free form was ideally suited to Jewish celebrations and it has sometimes been branded as the Jewish jazz in recognition of its divergence from established musical styles. The modern genre has added vocals – almost always in Yiddish.

ARAB POP IDOL

Big Brother may not have taken off in the Arab world (see p72), but *Superstar* – think *Pop Idol* or the Eurovision Song Contest beamed out of Beirut – certainly has. This 21-week epic, shown annually in August on the Lebanese satellite TV channel Future TV and voted for by a nationwide television audience, has rapidly become compulsory viewing. In Lebanon, the show captured 98% of the TV audience during the finals. Undaunted by Muslim clerics' condemnation of the show as an un-Islamic pandering to Western culture, contestants quickly become national celebrities in their home countries. It's safe to say that when Ayman al-Aathar of Libya won the 2004 competition, Tripoli had never seen anything like it with rock-star-like adulation showered upon the winner on his return to the country: he even scored an audience with Colonel Gaddafi, who was not, incidentally, a fan of such frivolities. Similar celebrations occurred in Amman when Jordan's Diana Karzon won in 2003. The flipside is, of course, disappointment when a newfound national hero loses. When the Lebanese contestant lost in 2003, the Beirut audience rioted and when the Palestinian finalist failed to win as expected in 2004 there were street demonstrations in the Palestinian Territories.

Stems World Music (www.stemsmusic.com) is a reputable and independent London-based seller of world music CDs that allows you to search by country, artist or even region.

Al-Mashriq – Music (www.wlmashriq.hiof.no/base/music.html) offers more links to Arabic music than you can poke a stick at, from Umm Kolthum to traditional folk music with plenty of detours into Arabic pop along the way.

THE TOP 20 OF MIDDLE EASTERN MUSIC

You'll surely disagree with some of our selections, but these are the recordings that we think could provide a memorable soundtrack to your journey and that you're most likely to hear while there. Our selection takes in some of the best of the old as well as some visions of the future of Middle Eastern music.

Umm Kolthum, Al-Atlaal (Egypt) The epic Egyptian-born songstress at the height of her powers.

Abdel Halim Hafez, Banaat al-Yom (Egypt) Part of a superb series showcasing original soundtracks to Abdel Halim's films from the 1950s and '60s.

Amr Diab, Awedony (Egypt) As good as it gets in Arab pop with loads of chic.

Mohammed Munir, Al-Malek (Egypt) Nubian music sung in Arabic with a jazzy twist.

Hakim, Talakim (Egypt) Streetwise musicians that you'll find yourself dancing to.

Yeir Dalal, Asmar (Israel) A stunning blend of powerful voice, oud and violin by an Israeli artist keen to reclaim his Iraqi heritage; his *Silan* album is also outstanding.

Habrera Hatveet, Barefoot (Israel) Avant-garde group that's not afraid to look beyond Israel's borders for inspiration.

Chehade Brothers, Bridge over the Mediterranean (Palestinian Territories) Multidimensional and thoroughly modern take on Arabic, Ottoman, Christian and Jewish fusion.

Sabreen, Death of the Prophet (Palestinian Territories) Traditional instruments with an upbeat tempo.

El Funoun, Zaghareed (Palestinian Territories) The finest recording of traditional Palestinian music.

Abdullah Chhadeh & Nara, Seven Gates (Syria) At once groovy and melancholy.

Fairouz, The Lady and the Legend (Lebanon) A recent compilation that sends chills down your spine.

Mercan Dede, Nar with Secret Tribe (Turkey) Pioneering fusion between Turkish Sufi music and Western electronica.

Omar Faruk Tekbilek, Alif (Turkey) Another fusion of the contemporary with folk and Sufi music.

Ensemble Kudsi Erguner, The Ottoman Heritage (Turkey) Classical Ottoman music.

Kazem al-Sahir, Bare Footed (Iraq) Award-winning offering from one of the Arab world's most popular singers and one who's a touch classier than most in the genre.

Nasseer Shamma, Le Luth de Baghdad (Iraq) The oud has never sounded so good.

Googosh, Pol (Iran) A reminder of the talents of Iran's premier pop diva from the prerevolution days.

Camelspotting Excellent compilation of contemporary Arab pop.

Les Plus Grands Classiques de la Musique Arabe The best of Arabic music's heyday from the 1950s and '60s.

The Music Scene

Sadly, it's very difficult to see live music almost anywhere in the Middle East. Artists don't generally perform gigs and there are no live music clubs as such.

Other than the odd festival (see Festivals & Events in the Directory section of each individual country chapter for details), your best chance of catching a performance is at a wedding or party, which is the stage on which nearly all Arab singers and musicians get their start. Thursday night is the big wedding night and favoured venues are open-air restaurants or hotels. The exception to this is Istanbul, which has a vibrant live music scene centred on the backstreets of the Beyoğlu district.

In any event, when it comes to Arabic pop, its true home is not the stage but the cassette. Although the situation is changing as Middle Eastern music attracts a wider audience, artists traditionally had little regard for production values and the music was slapped down in the studio and mass produced on cheap tapes in their thousands. Every town and city has numerous kiosks and shops selling tapes of whoever's the flavour of the moment, plus a selection of the classics. Shopkeepers are usually only too happy to play cassettes (or, in some stores in larger cities, CDs) before you buy, although at only a dollar or two a pop you can afford to take risks.

Songlines (www.songlines.co.uk) is the premier world music magazine that features interviews with stars, extensive CD reviews and a host of other tidbits that will broaden your horizons and prompt many additions to your CD collection.

Environment

The Middle East is geographically far more diverse than the reputation of its desert heartland would suggest. The region is also home to some of the most pressing environmental issues of our time, most notably the shortage of water and the ability of Middle Eastern countries to share meagre resources without going to war.

For more information on travelling responsibly in the region, see p26.

THE LAND

The Middle East is where the three continents of the Old World – Europe, Africa and Asia – coincide. Indeed, so vast is the region that most of İstanbul is geographically part of Europe, eastern Iran is decidedly Central Asian, while southern Libya and Egypt are unmistakably African. Although there are some geographical features that define the limits of what can be called the Middle East – for example, the natural boundaries of the Black and Caspian Seas, the Caucasus Mountains and the Sahara – what unifies this diverse region and preserves it as a discrete entity is cultural. The area springs from the heartland of Islamic and/or Arabic culture, the boundaries of which are generally held to be Iran's border with Afghanistan, the Bosphorus, which divides İstanbul, and the mountains of northeastern Libya.

On hearing the term Middle East, many people immediately imagine vast deserts of sand dunes and arid plains. However, the reality is that sand deserts form only a tiny percentage of the whole area – mainly in Egypt and Libya. Mountains and high plateaus abound in many countries: in Turkey, Iran and parts of Lebanon much of the area rises above 1000m. The highest mountains in the Middle East include the 5671m-high Mt Damavand in Iran and the 5137m-high Ağrı Dağı (Mt Ararat) in Turkey.

The biggest rivers in the area include the Nile, the world's longest at 6695km bringing African waters through Egypt, and the Euphrates and Tigris, flowing from the Anatolian highlands through Syria and Iraq to the Gulf. Otherwise, with the exception of those in Turkey and northwest Iran, rivers flowing year-round and reaching the sea are a rarity in the region, due to the arid climate.

WILDLIFE Animals

Due to its position at the junction of three natural zones, the Middle East was once a sanctuary for an amazing variety of mammals, including leopards, cheetahs, oryxes (see opposite), aardwolves, striped hyenas and caracals. Crocodiles used to inhabit the Nile River, and lions roamed the Iran of old. Unfortunately, all of these are either now extinct in the region or on the brink of extinction due to intense hunting and the spread of human settlement. These days you'll be lucky to see any mammals other than domesticated camels, donkeys and water buffaloes, although in Sinai, the southern desert regions of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and southern Libya there are ibexes, gazelles, wolves and rock hyraxes.

Turkey and Iran have similar animal life to that in the Balkans and much of Europe (bears, deer, jackals, lynxes, wild boars and wolves). In Iran there is a small population of cheetahs that is considered highly endangered.

Desert regions are home to small rodents such as desert foxes, sand rats, hares and jerboas, but most of these are nocturnal. You may well spot lizards, possibly scorpions and the occasional snake.

The Nile, by Michael Polard, is aimed at children in its examination of the great river's history, geography, environmental future and the impact of tourism, but chances are that most adults will end up learning plenty about this grand old river.

The countries of the Middle East are home to 4.5% of the world's population and up to half of the world's oil supplies, but they only receive 2% of the world's rainfall and possess just 0.4% of the world's recoverable water supplies.

Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (www.rscn.org.jo) is the website of Jordan's impressive environmental watchdog and an example to the other countries in the region where such organisations are sadly lacking.

SAVING THE ARABIAN ORYX

For many in the Middle East, the Arabian oryx is more than 'just' an endangered species. Thought by some to be the unicorn of historical legend, the herbivorous oryx is a remarkable creature.

Adapted well to their desert environment, wild oryxes once had an uncanny ability to sense rain on the wind. One herd is recorded as having travelled up to 155km, led by a dominant female, to rain. In times of drought, oryxes have been known to survive 22 months without water, obtaining moisture from plants and leaves.

Although their white coats traditionally offered camouflage in the searing heat of the desert, the oryxes and their long curved horns were highly prized by hunters. By 1972 the Arabian oryx – which once roamed across much of Jordan, Syria and the Arabian Peninsula – was declared extinct in the wild. Nine lonely oryxes left in captivity around the world were pooled and taken to the Arizona Zoo for a breeding programme. They became known as the 'World Oryx Herd'.

In 1978 four male and four female oryxes were transported to Jordan and three more were sent from Qatar the following year. In 1979 the first calf, Dusha, was born and the oryx began the precarious road to recovery. By 1983 there were 31 oryxes in Shumari Wildlife Reserve in eastern Jordan, where large enclosures and their treatment as wild animals served to facilitate their eventual release into the wild. In a significant landmark for environmentalists the world over, five oryxes were released into the Wadi Rum Protected Area in 2002 – a small, tentative step in what is hoped will be the recovery of wild oryxes in Jordan and further afield.

Birds

In contrast to the region's paucity of high-profile wildlife, the variety of bird life in the Middle East is exceptionally rich. As well as being home to indigenous species, the Middle East serves as a way station on migration routes between Asia, Europe and Africa. Israel claims to be the world's second-largest fly way (after South America) for migratory birds and the **Society for the Protection of the Nature of Israel** (SPNI; Map p298; ☎ 03-638 8653; tourism@spni.org.il; 4 Hasfela St, Tel Aviv 66183) has an excellent map and guide, the *Bird Trails of Israel*, detailing 14 bird-watching centres.

Other organisations worth contacting:

International Birding & Research Centre (☎ 08-633 5319; ibrce@eilatcity.co.il; PO Box 774, Eilat 88106, Israel)

International Birdwatching Center of the Jordan Valley (☎ 04-606 8396; www.birdwatching.org.il)

Egypt's Sinai peninsula and Al-Fayoum Oasis, and Wadi Araba in Jordan also receive an enormous and varied amount of ornithological traffic. Egypt alone has recorded sightings of over 400 different species.

Marine Life

Coral exists in both hard and soft forms, their common denominator being they are made of polyps – tiny cylinders ringed by waving tentacles that sting their prey and draw it into the stomach. During the day corals retract into their tube and only at night do they display their real colours.

There are about 1000 fish species in the Red Sea, many of them endemic, living and breeding in the coral reefs or nearby beds of seagrass. These include groper, wrasses, parrotfish and snapper. Others, such as sharks and barracuda, live in open waters and usually only venture into the reefs to feed or breed.

When snorkelling or diving, the sharks you are most likely to encounter include white- or black-tipped reef sharks. Tiger sharks and the huge plankton-eating whale sharks are generally found in deeper waters only. No divers or snorkellers have ever been killed by sharks in the Red Sea.

Iranian Cheetah Society (ICS; www.irianicheetah.org) opens a window on Iran's most endangered species and the programmes underway to ensure the cheetah's survival in Iran.

Birdlife International Middle East (www.birdlifemediterranean.org) has the lowdown on major issues facing the region's bird species and the best places to view the Middle East's rich bird life.

Plants

Middle Eastern flora tends to be at its lushest and most varied in the north, where the climate is less arid, although after millennia of wood-cutting much of Turkey and Syria are now largely denuded. Only the Mediterranean coast west of Antalya, the Black Sea area and northeast Anatolia and, to a lesser extent, the Jebel Akhdar (Green Mountains) of northeastern Libya still have forests of considerable size. Yew, lime and fir trees predominate in areas where vegetation has not been reduced to scrub. The Iranian landscape is far more pristine and large areas – especially the Alborz Mountains region – remain densely forested with broad-leaved deciduous trees.

In Lebanon the Horsh Ehdén Forest Nature Reserve is the last archetype of the ancient natural forests of Lebanon and is home to several species of rare orchids and other flowering plants. The cedars that Lebanon is famous for are now confined to a few mountain-top sites, most notably at Bcharré and near Barouk in the Chouf Mountains. For more information on the cedars of Lebanon, see p415.

In the Jordan Valley cedar, olives and eucalyptus are dominant. South towards the Dead Sea the vegetation gives way to mud and salt flats. South and west of the Dead Sea the only other spread of greenery is Egypt's Nile Delta, a fertile agricultural region.

NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE RESERVES

Your best chance of spotting something lies in visiting a reserve, although in the Middle East these are few and far between. It's possible to see gazelles and oryxes, once common features of the desert landscape, at the Shaumari Wildlife Reserve (p384) in the east of Jordan.

In Lebanon there are about 30 different species of mammals at the **Al-Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve** (☎ 05-311 230; www.shoufcedar.org), including mountain gazelles, striped hyenas, lynxes and hyraxes. One of the best reserves to visit for wildlife in Israel is Ein Gedi (p328), on the shores of the Dead Sea.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

In relation to the environment, the Middle East has an ever-increasing litany of woes, but the greatest of these is water. Indeed it is often said that the next great Middle Eastern war will be fought not over land but over water. It's a problem that has great political ramifications: Syria and Iraq have protested to Turkey over that country's building of dams at the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, while Egypt has threatened military action against Sudan or any other upstream country endangering its access to

Climate Change: Environment and Civilization in the Middle East, by Arie Issar and Zohar Mattanyah, is a sobering study of how the rise and fall of civilisations in the Middle East has always been intricately tied to environmental issues.

Africa & the Middle East: a Continental Overview of Environmental Issues, by Kevin Hillstrom, contains an excellent exploration of the Middle East's environmental past and future, with a special focus on how human populations impact upon the environment.

TOURISM & THE ENVIRONMENT

As one of the Middle East's largest industries, tourism itself is a major environmental issue. **Greenpeace Mediterranean** (☎ 961 1 755 665; supporters@greenpeace.org.lb; PO Box 13-6590, 1102 2140, Beirut, Lebanon) considers tourism to be one of the major causes of coastal destruction in Lebanon, and that's certainly also the case in Egypt and Turkey. It cites the dozens of yacht ports, 'land reclamation' projects and hotels that have been established illegally along the coast.

Problems also arise when destinations cannot cope with the number of tourists they attract, so that natural and social environments quickly become damaged. The prime example of this is the Red Sea coral reefs, which are under enormous threat from irresponsible tourism and opportunistic development. Also sites such as Petra are now having to consider limiting the number of visitors to lessen the human wear and tear on the monuments and surrounding landscape.

For information on how to reduce your environmental impact, see p26.

LIBYA'S GREAT MAN-MADE RIVER

In a region where water is fast becoming as precious as oil, Libya's Colonel Gaddafi has come up with a typically novel and grandiose solution. The idea behind the An-Nahr Sinai (Great Man-Made River; GMR) is simple: to tap the Sahara's underground water and pipe it from hundreds of desert wells to Libya's thirsty coastal cities. It is one of the world's most ambitious (and expensive) development projects. Colonel Gaddafi has dubbed the GMR 'the eighth wonder of the world'.

The sheer scale of the project defies belief. Two wells in the Tazerbo and Sarir Basins of south-eastern Libya alone have a storage capacity of 10,000 cu km, from which two million cubic metres of water per day are piped to Benghazi and Sirt. The Murzuq Basin (over 450,000 sq km in size, with a storage capacity of 4800 cu km) provides the Sahel al-Jefara of northwestern Libya and Tripoli with 2.5 million cu metres a day. The massive Al-Kufra Basin (capacity 20,000 cu km) is another source of water for Libya's coastal cities. By the time the project is completed, there will be over 4000km of prestressed concrete pipes crisscrossing the country, with a daily capacity of six million cubic metres.

Away from the impressive scale of the project, there are fears that the GMR is wholly unsustainable. Recent radiocarbon dating suggests that the water currently stored beneath the Saharan sands dates from periods of greater rainfall 14,000 and 38,000 years ago, with smaller deposits from 7000 years ago. It is estimated that these water sources, which took thousands of years to fill, could be emptied within 50 years. Already there is evidence to suggest that the GMR has begun to lower the ground-water table in northwestern Libya with potentially disastrous consequences for agriculture. The amount of money spent on the first stage of the project alone could have been used to fund five desalination plants. Neighbouring Sudan and Egypt have also weighed in, concerned over the threat to their own underground water supplies.

If the GMR succeeds, it will be hailed as one of the most visionary feats of modern engineering. If it fails, the GMR promises to leave Libya without any freshwater supply at about the same time as its other underground resource, oil, runs out – a prospect that doesn't bear thinking about.

the waters of the Nile. Israel and the Palestinian Territories has outstanding water disputes with all of its neighbours. Demand far exceeds supply, and wastage on the land and in the cities exacerbates the situation.

In Jordan the virtual disappearance of water from the wetlands of the Azraq oasis (p383) has seen more than 20 species of fauna disappear from the country in the last two decades with even more threatened with extinction. Meanwhile Saddam Hussein's draining of the marshes (p263) in southern Iraq has been devastating for the region's bird life and people alike.

Beyond the water-shortage problem, air pollution (already critical in Cairo and Tehran), water pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, habitat and wildlife destruction, and conservation of natural resources are all becoming increasingly pertinent.

None of these issues can be viewed in isolation from the wider economic, social and political situations that prevail in the Middle East. Nor are the solutions simple. For example, in Egypt an ever-increasing human population puts great demands on the land and other natural resources. One possible solution would be to lower the rate of population growth. And yet, because such growth is closely linked to poor living conditions and issues such as a lack of education and health care, many conservationists argue that it is not reasonable to expect people with little money or food to worry about conservation in its widest sense. The root of the problem – poverty – desperately needs to be addressed. The problem is that few governments in the region have demonstrated the political will to tackle either problem. At the same time, Israel, which is by no means a poor country, has been criticised by Greenpeace for fouling the Jordan River with industrial sewage.

The Middle East Water Question: Hydropolitics and the Global Economy, by Tony Allan, can be hard to track down, but it's well worth it for the insight into the coming conflicts over water in the Middle East and beyond.

Water in the Middle East (www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/mideast/cuwlw/water.html) hosts numerous links to articles on the Middle East's most pressing environmental issue.

Food & Drink

The countries of the Middle East may have their political and cultural differences, but there's one thing they have in common: an emphatic belief in the importance of good food. Travelling through the region you'll quickly realise that the regional cuisine is about celebrating friends, family, conversation and life itself. When travelling here, make sure you throw yourself wholeheartedly into the celebration.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Mezze

Mezze isn't just a type of dish: it's a whole performance. The headline act when it comes to Levantine cuisine, it's the understudy to kebabs in Turkey and the trusted warm-up act to the region's other cuisines, guaranteed to get the audience enthusiastic for what's next on the culinary bill. Largely vegetable-based and bursting with colour and flavour, it's the region's most compelling culinary flourish.

It's usually perfectly acceptable for diners to construct an entire meal from the mezza list and forego the mains on offer. You will probably encounter the following dishes throughout the region (spellings on menus differ from country to country).

baba ghanooj – purée of grilled aubergines (eggplants) with tahini and olive oil

basturma – a cold, sliced meat cured with fenugreek

borek – pastry stuffed with salty white cheese or spicy minced meat with pine nuts; also known as *sambousek*

fatayer – triangular deep-fried pastries stuffed with spinach, meat or cheese

hummus bi tahina – cooked chickpeas ground into a paste and mixed with tahini, lemon and garlic; sometimes served with meat on top

kibbeh – minced lamb, burghul wheat and pine nuts made into a lemon-shaped patty and deep-fried

labneh – thick yogurt flavoured with garlic and sometimes with mint

loobieh – French bean salad with tomatoes, onions and garlic

mouhamarra – walnut and pomegranate syrup dip

muttabal – purée of aubergine mixed with tahini, yogurt and olive oil; similar to but creamier than *baba ghanooj*

shanklish – tangy, eye-wateringly strong goat's cheese served with onions, oil and tomatoes

tahini – paste made of sesame seeds and served as a dip

wara ainab – stuffed vine leaves, served both hot and cold; in Egypt also called *mahshi*

Bread

Bread (*khobz* or *'aish*) appears in a multiplicity of forms. Often unleavened and cooked over an open flame, it's used in lieu of cutlery to scoop up dips and ripped into pieces to wrap around morsels of meat. Depending on where you are, your day may start with a French-style croissant filled with zaatar (a fragrant mix of sun-dried thyme and sesame seeds with olive oil) or a crusty white loaf to accompany white cheese, tomatoes, cucumbers and olives. In Iran you'll be served thin and crisp *lavash* straight from the oven, and in Turkey, Egypt and Jordan you'll encounter a chewy, sesame-encrusted bread ring known respectively as a *simit*, *semit* or *ka'ik*. Lunch could be a felafel or shwarma stuffed into a freshly baked bread pocket (*shammy*), or a zaatar-smear type of pizza known as a *manaesh*. Other lunch or snack dishes include the Turkish *gözleme* (a thin pancake baked on a concave griddle over an open fire

and filled with cheese, potato, spinach or mushrooms) or the Levantine equivalent, *saj*. Dinner is always served with baskets of bread to mop up mezza, and kebabs are often served with a tasty canopy of *lavash*. In all, bread is considered a gift from God and the essential accompaniment to any Middle Eastern meal.

Salads

Simplicity is the key to Middle Eastern salads, with crunchy fresh ingredients (including herbs) often being caressed by a shake of oil and vinegar at the table and eaten with relish as a mezza or as an accompaniment to a meat or fish main course. Three salads are found throughout the region and form an integral part of the local diet: *fattoosh* (toasted *khobz*, tomatoes, onions and mint leaves, sometimes served with a smattering of tangy pomegranate syrup); shepherd's salad (also known as oriental salad, a colourful mix of chopped tomatoes, cucumber, onion and pepper; extremely popular in Turkey, where it's known as *çoban salatası*); and the region's signature salad, *tabbouleh* (burghul wheat, parsley and tomato, with a tangy sprinkling of sesame seeds, lemon and garlic).

Snack Food

Forget the bland international snack food served up by the global chains; once you've sampled the joys of Middle Eastern street food you'll never again be able to face dining under the golden arches or with the colonel.

The regional stars of the snack food line-up are shwarma and felafel, and they are both things of joy when served and eaten fresh. Shwarma is the Arabic equivalent of the Greek *gyros* sandwich or the Turkish döner kebab – strips are sliced from a vertical spit of compressed lamb or chicken, sizzled on a hot plate with chopped tomatoes and garnish, and then stuffed into a pocket of bread. Felafel is mashed chickpeas and spices formed into balls and deep-fried; a variation known as *ta'amiyya*, made with dried fava beans, is served in Egypt. The felafel balls are stuffed into a pocket of bread that's been smeared with tahini and then the whole thing is topped with some fresh salad, or sometimes with pickled vegetables. Delicious!

Of course, each country has its particular snack food speciality. In Egypt look out for shops sporting large metal tureens in the window: these specialise in the vegetarian delight *kushari*, a delicate mix of noodles, rice, black lentils and dried onions, served with an accompanying tomato sauce that's sometimes fiery with chilli. In neighbouring Libya, the local version is called *rishda*.

In Lebanon, nothing beats grabbing a freshly baked *fatayer bi sbanikh* (spinach pastry) from one of the hole-in-the-wall bakeries that dot city streets. In Turkey, visitors inevitably fall deeply in love with melt-in-the-mouth *su böreği*, a noodle-like pastry oozing cheese and butter. Variations of the pizza abound, one of the most delicious being Egypt's *fiteer*, featuring a base of thin, filo-style pastry. Try it topped with salty haloumi cheese, or even with a mixture of sugar-dusted fruit.

The most unassuming of all Middle Eastern fast foods is also one of the most popular. *Fuul* (a peasant dish of long-cooked fava beans cooked with garlic and garnished with parsley, olive oil, lemon, salt, black pepper and cumin) is mopped up by bread for breakfast and ladled into a pocket of bread for a snack on the run. You'll find it in Egypt (where it's the national dish), Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq.

The Spice Routes, by Chris and Carolyn Caldicott, is a fascinating overview of the history of the international spice trade and includes a number of recipes from the Middle East region.

Parsley was mentioned by Homer in the *Odyssey*. It's now the main ingredient in the region's most famous salad, *tabbouleh*.

The earliest physical evidence of an international spice trade is found in the wall reliefs of the Funerary Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor, Egypt.

Duqqa (Arabic for 'to pound') is an ancient mixture of spices used as a condiment in Egyptian kitchens. It combines dry roasted cumin, coriander, sesame and nigella seeds, as well as salt, pepper, nuts and mint.

A New Book of Middle Eastern Food, by Claudia Roden, brought the cuisines of the region to the attention of Western cooks when it was released in 1968. It's still an essential reference, as fascinating for its cultural insights as for its great recipes.

In the 17th century 1300 workers slaved away in the kitchens of Istanbul's Topkapı Palace, producing food for around 10,000 people every day.

The Complete Middle East Cookbook, by Tess Mallos, is full of easy-to-follow recipes and devotes individual chapters to national cuisines including those of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Israel.

Kebabs

There are more variations on the kebab in this part of the world than you could poke a skewer at. Every country has its specialities – Syria has the delicious *kebab Halebi* (Aleppan kebab, served with a spicy tomato sauce), Turkey is understandably proud of its luscious *İskender kebab* and Lebanon has an unwavering devotion to *shish tawooq* (grilled chicken kebab, often served with a garlic sauce) – but if you're serious about the skewered stuff you need to make your way to Iran, where the kebab is the national dish. When there, make sure you try *chelow kebab*, a succulent lamb shish served on a fluffy mound of buttery *chelow* (rice).

Other Meats

The kebab might be king, but when it comes to meat dishes there are a number of courtiers waiting in the wings. *Kibbeh*-lovers will be in seventh heaven when they taste the examples on offer in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, some of which are raw (*kibbeh nayye*) and others cooked. *Kofta* (spiced ground meat formed into balls) is served in innumerable ways in Turkey, and are the signature element of the Egyptian favourite *daood basha* (meat balls cooked in a *tagen* pot with pine nuts and tomato sauce). In Syria and Egypt *fatta* (an oven-baked dish of bread soaked in tahini, chickpeas and minced meat or chicken) is a favourite breakfast dish. Even more common than these dishes is one simple but delicious meal that you'll find throughout the region: roast chicken accompanied by salad, bread and hummus or tahini.

Regional differences abound when it comes to meat dishes, and are far too numerous to be listed here. Of particular note is the Bedouin dish *mensaf* (lamb served on a bed of rice and pine nuts and accompanied by a tangy yogurt sauce), which, in its true Bedouin form, comes complete with a gaping sheep's head. You can find this in the Palestinian Territories, Jordan and Syria (around Palmyra).

Seafood

When on the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts (particularly in İstanbul, Alexandria and both Tripolis), you'll undoubtedly join the locals in falling hook, line and sinker for the marvellous array of fresh seafood on offer. Local favourites are calamari, red mullet, sea bass and sole. Oddly enough, it's difficult to access good seafood in other parts of the region.

Vegetables

If it weren't for the regional obsession with the kebab, the locals would probably all be vegetarian. There's none of the silly Western fixation with preparing vegetables that are out of season; here tomatoes are eaten when they're almost bursting out of their skins with sweet juices, corn is picked when it's golden and plentiful, and cucumbers are munched when they're crispy and sweet. There are a number of vegetables that are particular to Middle Eastern cuisine, including *molokhiyya* (aka *moolookhiye* or *melokhia*), a slimy but surprisingly sexy green leafy vegetable known in the West as mallow. In Egypt it's made into an earthy garlic-flavoured soup that has a glutinous texture and inspires an almost religious devotion among the locals. In Syria and Lebanon *molokhiyya* is used to make highly spiced lamb and chicken stews.

The region also has a particularly distinctive way of serving vegetables, known as *dolma* (stuffed with rice or meat and slow cooked in olive oil; also called *dolmeh* or *mahshi*). The most famous example of this style of

cooking is the Turkish dish *imam bayıldı* (literally 'the imam fainted'). A simple dish of aubergine stuffed with onion and garlic, slow cooked in olive oil and served cold, it is so named because legend has it that an imam fainted with pleasure on first tasting it.

Desserts & Sweets

If you have a sweet tooth, be prepared to put it to good use on your travels in this part of the world. The prince of the regional puds is undoubtedly *muhlabiyya* (also known as *mahallabiye*), a blanchmange-like concoction made of ground rice, milk, sugar and rose or orange water and topped with chopped pistachios and almonds. Almost as popular is *ruz bi laban* (rice pudding, also known as *fırın sütlaç* in Turkey). Seasonal fresh fruit is just as commonly served, and provides a refreshing light finale to a mezze-and-kebab-laden feast.

Best of all are the pastries, including *kunafa*, a vermicelli-like pastry over a vanilla base soaked in syrup; and the famous *baklava*, made from delicate filo drenched in honey or syrup. Variations on *baklava* are flavoured with fresh nuts or stuffed with wickedly rich clotted cream (called *kaymak* in Turkey, *eishta* elsewhere).

DRINKS

Alcoholic Drinks

Though the region is predominantly Muslim, and thus abstemious, most of its countries have a local beer. The best are Turkey's Efes; Egypt's Stella and Sakkara; Jordan's Amstel; and Lebanon's famous Almaza. Less impressive are Syria's Barada and Al-Charq and Israel's Maccabee, Gold Star and Nesher. The most interesting ale is Taybeh, the product of the Arab world's first microbrewery, which comes from Ramallah.

Good wine is harder to access, with the one exception being the excellent vintages produced in Lebanon. Try the products of its Chateaux Musar, Ksara and Kefraya – we particularly recommend Ksara's Reserve du Couvent. In Egypt, there's a growing viticulture industry but the product is pretty unimpressive – Grand de Marquise is the best of a lacklustre bunch. In Turkey, the two largest producers are Doluca and Kavaklıdere. Doluca's best wines are its Özel Kav (Special Reserve) red and white; its Antik red and white are its second-string wines (but are still quite drinkable). Kavaklıdere's most popular wines are the quaffable Yakut red and Çankaya white. Syrian wine is diabolically bad, and most of the local tipplers stick to the Lebanese drops, which are locally available. Israeli wine is improving, and Carmel, Golan, Barchan, Tishbi and Tzora all have reasonable reputations.

If there is a regional drink, it would have to be the aniseed firewater known as *raki* in Turkey and as *arak* in the rest of the region. The aniseed taste of these two powerful tipples perfectly complements *mezze*.

Alcohol is banned in Libya and Iran.

Nonalcoholic drinks

Juice stalls selling cheap and delicious freshly squeezed *asiir* (juices) are common throughout the region. Popular juices include lemon (which is often blended with sugar syrup and ice, and sometimes with mint), orange, pomegranate, mango, carrot and sugar cane, and you can order combinations of any or all of these. For health reasons, steer clear of stalls that add milk to their drinks.

Other traditional drinks include *aryan*, a refreshing yogurt drink made by whipping yogurt with water and salt to the consistency of pouring

The popular Egyptian dessert of *umm ali* is said to have been introduced into the country by Miss O'Malley, an Irish mistress of Khedive Ismail, the viceroy of Egypt.

Shiraz (aka Syrah) was first produced in Iran more than 1000 years ago, and is believed to have been taken to France by the Crusaders. Needless to say, it's no longer produced in its namesake city.

You can drink *arak* neat, but most devotees first pour about two fingers of *arak*, then add water and finish off with one ice cube.

The Turks love *boza*, a viscous mucus-coloured beverage made from fermented burghul with water and sugar that has a reputation for building up strength and virility.

cream. This is widely available throughout the region and is a ubiquitous accompaniment to kebabs. It's known as *dugh* in Iran. Another favourite is the delicious and unusual sahlab (sahlep in Turkey), a drink made from crushed tapioca-root extract and served with milk, coconut, sugar, raisins, chopped nuts and rosewater. Famed for its aphrodisiacal properties, it is served hot in winter and cold in summer.

WATER

Many locals don't drink the tap water and we recommend that you follow their lead. If you do decide to risk the local stuff, the safest places to do this are in Iran, Israel and Syria. Don't even *think* of drinking from the tap in Egypt, Iraq or Lebanon. Cheap bottled water is readily available throughout the region.

Tea & Coffee

Drinking tea (*shai*, *chai* or *çay*) is the signature pastime of the region and it is seen as strange and decidedly antisocial not to swig the tannin-laden beverage at regular intervals throughout the day. The tea will either come in the form of a tea bag plonked in a cup or glass of hot water (Lipton is the usual brand) or a strong brew of the local leaves. Sometimes it's served with mint (*na'ama*) and it always comes with sugar. Be warned that you'll risk severe embarrassment if you ask for milk if you're anywhere other than a tourist hotel or restaurant.

Surprisingly, Turkish or Arabic coffee (*qahwa*) is not widely consumed in the region, with instant coffee (always called Nescafé) being far more common. If you do find the real stuff, it's likely to be a thick and powerful Turkish-style brew that's served in small cups and drunk in a couple of short sips. It is usually served very sweet; if you want less sugar ask for it to be served *wassat* (medium sweet) or *sada* (without sugar).

CELEBRATIONS

The people of this region love nothing more than a celebration, and food plays an important role when it comes to giving thanks for a birth, bringing in a harvest or marking a significant religious holiday.

Many dishes owe their derivation and popularity to the celebration of particular religious events or stories. One of these is Turkey's *aşure Bayramı*. The story goes that when the flood waters were subsiding, Noah asked his wife to cook up all the food left in the pantry. She formulated a bizarre 40-ingredient pudding that included beans, barley, chickpeas, cinnamon, sultanas and burghul, and called it *aşure*. These days Turks

QUALITY QAHWAS

There's absolutely nothing more satisfying than spending an hour or so soaking up the ambience and fragrant nargileh smoke at a *qahwa* (coffeehouse; *ahwa* in Egypt). Most serve up more tea than coffee – in Turkey they're called *çay bahçesis* (tea gardens) and in Iran they're known as *chaykhana* (teahouses) – and all have loyal, predominantly male, clients who enjoy nothing more than a daily natter and a game of dominoes. Some of our favourites:

Fishawi's (p113) Khan al-Khalili, Cairo, Egypt.

An-Nafura (p520) Old City, Damascus, Syria.

Al-Kahwa (p426) Beirut, Lebanon.

Leale-al Sultan (p315) Akko, Israel.

Papirüs Cafeteria (p629) Gaziantep, Turkey.

Qeysarieh Tea Shop (p216) Esfahan, Iran.

When drinking Turkish-style coffee, you should never drink the grounds in the bottom of your cup. You may want to read your fortune in them, though – check out the website of Istanbul's longest-established purveyor of coffee, Kuru-kahveci Mehmet Efendi (www.mehmetefendi.com) for a guide.

OUTSTANDING DINING EXPERIENCES

Our favourite restaurants in the region:

Sabaya (p112) Cairo, Egypt. World-class Lebanese restaurant.

Yord Restaurant (p224) Shiraz, Iran. Fabulous Iranian cuisine served in a colourful tent.

Ticho House (p294) Jerusalem, Israel. Bohemian eatery set in a 19th-century home.

Fakhr el-Din (p374) Amman, Jordan. Delicious Lebanese cuisine.

Kasr Fakhredine (p431) Broummana, Lebanon. Possibly the best classic Lebanese food in the country.

Mat'am Obaya (p475) Tripoli, Libya. Wonderful home-cooked seafood.

Beit Wakil (p542) Aleppo, Syria. Aleppo's best restaurant set in a glorious building.

Sofyali 9 (p573) Istanbul, Turkey. The best tavern food in Istanbul.

eat *aşure* on the 10th day of Muharram (the first month of the Muslim calendar) to celebrate Noah, his ark and the great glory of God.

A staple that owes its name to another story from religious history is the bread known as *challah* (Sabbath bread). This bread is baked each week by Jewish householders in Israel and the Palestinian Territories to commemorate the Israelites being given a double portion of manna on the sixth day that they were in the wilderness to provide for the succeeding seventh day.

The region's most important religious feasts occur during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month. There are two substantial meals a day during this period. The first, *imsak* (or *sahur*), is a breakfast eaten before daylight. Tea, bread, dates, olives and pastries are scoffed to give energy for the day ahead. *Iftar*, the evening meal prepared to break the fast, is a special feast calling for substantial soups, rice dishes topped with almond-scattered grilled meats and other delicacies. It's often enjoyed communally in the street or in large, specially erected tents. The end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr) is also celebrated in great culinary style. In Turkey, locals mark this important time with Şeker Bayramı (Sugar Festival), a three-day feast in which sweet foods occupy centre stage. Varieties of baklava turn up at many religious feasts; in Iran the delicious local version uses a greater proportion of nuts to pastry than most of its regional equivalents, and is widely prepared to celebrate No Ruz (the Iranian New Year).

Family milestones are also celebrated with food. Egyptians mark the birth of a son by serving an aromatic rice pudding with aniseed called *meghlie*; in Syria and Lebanon a pudding also celebrates the same event, but this is called *mighlay* and is made of rice flour and cinnamon.

WHERE & WHEN TO EAT & DRINK

Eating patterns and styles differ throughout the region, but one rule stands firm in each and every country: the best food is always served in private homes. If you are fortunate enough to be invited to share a home-cooked meal, make sure you take up the offer.

The quality of food served in restaurants differs greatly from country to country. While it can be disappointing in Egypt, Israel, Iran and Jordan, it can soar to the culinary heavens in Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, particularly in the big cities. See above for a list of some of region's best restaurants.

Though there are restaurants in every country serving up a variety of international cuisines (and even the dreaded fusion), it's a much safer bet to eat the local cuisine. The only times we'd recommend travelling your tastebuds out of the region's indigenous cuisines are in Istanbul

Syrians believe that seeing in the New Year with white dishes brings good luck; *labanieh* (chicken and lamb cooked in yogurt) is a favourite.

The common name of the famous Spice Bazaar in Istanbul is the Mısır Çarşısı (Egyptian Market), commemorating the fact that Egypt was once the centre of the world's spice trade.

Seductive Flavours of the Levant, by Nada Daleh, is a lavishly illustrated guide to the regional specialities of Syria and Lebanon.

(at the likes of the world-class Vogue in Beşiktaş); in Beirut (where the food is uniformly excellent whatever its geographical derivation); and in Cairo (where we have no hesitation in highly recommending eateries such as the excellent Thai and Lebanese restaurants at the Semiramis Intercontinental, see p112). When you do eat out, you'll find that the locals usually dine at a later hour than is the norm in the West (it's usual to see diners arrive at a restaurant at 10pm or even later in the big cities, particularly in summer). They also dine as large family groups, order up big, smoke like chimneys and linger over their meals. The main meal of the day is usually lunch, which is enjoyed at around 2pm. See under Business Hours in each country Directory section for the usual opening hours for restaurants.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Though it's quite usual for the people of the Middle East to eat a vegetarian meal, the concept of vegetarianism is quite foreign. Say you're a vegan and they will either look mystified or assume that you're 'fessing up to some strain of socially aberrant behaviour. There is a sprinkling of vegetarian restaurants in big cities such as Beirut and İstanbul, but the travelling vegetarian certainly can't rely on finding them in most cities and towns.

Fortunately, it's not difficult to find vegetable-based dishes. You'll find that you eat loads of meze and salads, fuul, tasty cheese and spinach pastries, the occasional omelette or oven-baked vegetable *tagens* (stews baked in a terracotta pot) featuring okra (ladies' fingers) and aubergine.

The main source of inadvertent meat-eating is meat stock, which is often used to make otherwise vegetarian pilafs, soups and vegetable dishes. Your hosts may not even consider such stock to be meat, so they will reassure you that the dish is vegetarian. Chicken and mutton are the biggest hide-and-seekers in the region's food, often lurking in vegetable dishes and meze. Be careful.

The best country for vegetarians is Israel, where kosher laws don't permit the mixing of meat and dairy products, resulting in a lot of 'dairy' restaurants where no meat in any form is served. The most challenging destination is Iran, where kebabs dominate the menus and meat stock is often used to cook rice.

EATING WITH KIDS

It's usual to eat out as a family group in the region, and you'll often see young children dining with their parents and friends in restaurants until the early hours. Waiters are uniformly accepting of children and will

To ask 'Do you have any vegetarian dishes?' in Egypt say '*andak akla nabateeyya?*'. In Iran, ask '*in ghaza gusht dare?*' (Does this dish have meat?) and in Turkey ask '*Etsiz yemekler var mı?*' (Is there something to eat that has no meat?). In other countries ask for dishes that are '*bidoon lahem*' (without meat).

THAT HUBBLY-BUBBLY FEELING

Called a nargileh in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, a *sheesha* in Egypt, and a *qalyan* in Iran, the water pipe is a tradition, an indulgence and a slightly naughty habit all wrapped into the one gloriously fragrant and relaxing package. A feature of coffeehouses from Ankara to Aswan, it's a pastime that's as addictive as it is magical. Consider yourselves warned.

When you order a water pipe you'll need to specify the type of tobacco and molasses mix you would like. Most people opt for tobacco soaked in apple juice (known as *elma* in Turkey and *tufah* in Egypt), but it's also possible to order strawberry, melon, cherry or mixed-fruit flavours. Some purists order their tobacco unadulterated, but in doing this they miss out on the wonderfully sweet and fragrant aroma that makes the experience so memorable. Once you've specified your flavour, a decorated bulbous glass pipe filled with water will be brought to your table, hot coals will be placed in it to get it started and you will be given a disposable plastic mouthpiece to slip over the pipe's stem. Just draw back and you're off. The only secret to a good smoke is to take a puff every now and again to keep the coals hot; when they start to lose their heat the waiter (or dedicated water-pipe minder) will replace them. Bliss!

usually go out of their way to make them feel welcome (offerings of fried potato chips being a tried and true method). Best of all, the cuisine of the region is very child-friendly, being simple and varied.

Some places have high chairs, but they're in the minority. Kids' menus are usually only seen at Western-style hotel restaurants.

For more information on travelling with children, see p643.

DOS & DON'TS

- Remember to always remove your shoes before sitting down on a rug to eat or drink tea.
- Always avoid putting your left hand into a communal dish if you're eating Bedouin style.
- Be sure to leave the dining area and go outside or to the toilet before blowing your nose in a restaurant.
- Make sure you refrain from eating, drinking or smoking in public during the daytime in the holy month of Ramadan (international hotels are an exception to this rule).
- Always sit at the dinner table next to a person of the same sex unless your host(ess) suggests otherwise.

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