

Middle East




- Arabic (Modern Standard)
- Egyptian Arabic
- Gulf Arabic
- Levantine Arabic
- Tunisian Arabic



 Farsi

 Hebrew

 Turkish

Note: Language areas are approximate only. For more details see the relevant introduction.



middle east – at a glance

The use of the term 'Middle East' is almost as complex as the history of the region itself. The expression first appeared in English at the start of the 20th century and had replaced the term 'Near East' by the middle of the century. In some languages, such as German or Russian, the region is still referred to as the 'Near East'. In a cultural sense, the name 'Middle East' can be used only in relation to the Arab world, but it's generally also applied to the non-Arabic lands of Israel, Turkey and Iran. In terms of geography, 'Middle East' means primarily the Levant (the eastern shore of the Mediterranean) and the Persian Gulf States (the Arabian Peninsula, Iran and Iraq). Broader geographical definitions, however, also include the Maghreb (North Africa) and even parts of Central Asia.

Along with a wealth of religions and cultures, the Middle East boasts great linguistic diversity. Its languages belong to three large families – Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European and Ural-Altaic. Arabic is truly the lingua franca of the region, with official status in all Middle Eastern countries except for Iran and Turkey. Many of these countries have several minority languages as well – the Berber dialects in North Africa, or Kurdish and Armenian in Iraq and Turkey, for example. European languages are often widely used too – English throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, and French in North Africa and the Levant.

In this book, we present Modern Standard Arabic and the four main colloquial Arabic varieties in one section, followed by the Farsi, Hebrew and Turkish languages.

did you know?

- The League of Arab States (more informally called the Arab League) was formed by seven Arab states on 22 March 1945 with the Alexandria Protocol. Today, it has 22 member states from the Middle East and Africa. Its headquarters are in Cairo, Egypt. The official language of the League is Modern Standard Arabic.
- The Middle Eastern countries use an array of currencies. The main ones are: dinar, dirham, lira, pound, riyal, shekel and shilling. Their official names always include the country name (eg 'Egyptian pound', 'Saudi riyal').
- Al-Jazeera, the famous satellite television network, is headquartered in Doha, Qatar. It was launched in 1996 with a news and current affairs program in Arabic. Since then, several other specialty channels have been founded within the network, including an English-language current affairs channel.
- Five of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World belong to the Middle East: Pharos of Alexandria and the Pyramids of Giza (Egypt); the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (Iraq); the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and the Temple of Artemis (Turkey). The two exceptions are the Colossus of Rhodes and the Statue of Zeus (both in Greece).

introduction to arabic

The Arabic language is characterised by a number of colloquial varieties. Here, we introduce you to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) – the lingua franca of all Arabic countries – alongside the four most common Arabic varieties spoken across the Middle East: Egyptian, Gulf, Levantine and Tunisian.

Muslims say that Arabic is the most perfect language of all, as it's the language in which the Quran was revealed. Religious beliefs aside, the international status of Arabic is impressive: it's one of the world's 10 most widely spoken languages, with over 200 million speakers. Arabic is spoken as the first language across the Middle East and North Africa and is widely used as a second language throughout the Islamic world. It has official status in 25 countries, the Arab League and the African Union, and it's one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

As a member of the Afro-Asiatic language family's Semitic branch, Arabic is related to Hebrew and Amharic, and to the ancient Aramaic and Phoenician languages. It's a bit misleading to speak just of 'Arabic', however, as there are many varieties of this language. It's often given as an example of 'diglossia' – two varieties of the same language used in different contexts. Classical Arabic (اللغة العربية الفصحى *al-lu-gha-tul 'a-ra-bee-ya-tul fus-ha*), the highly respected language of the Quran and classical literature, is used mainly for literary and religious purposes. Modern Standard Arabic or MSA (اللغة العربية الحديثة *al-lu-gha-tul 'a-ra-bee-ya-tul ha-dee-tha*) is the modernised version of Classical Arabic, used in schools, administration and the media – the official lingua franca of the Arab world. The colloquial language, ie everyday spoken version of modern Arabic (اللغة العامية *al-lu-gha-tul 'aa-mee-ya*), has many regional dialects, sometimes mutually unintelligible and with no official written form. Each dialect is strongly influenced by the indigenous or colonial languages of the area in which it's spoken (eg Berber or French in North Africa). Of all the dialects, Egyptian Arabic (اللهجة المصرية *al-lah-ja-tul mis-ree-ya*) is probably the most familiar to all Arabic speakers, thanks to the popularity of Egyptian television and cinema. Gulf, Levantine and Tunisian Arabic are other spoken varieties that cover broad parts of the Middle East.

Take one look at the elegant Arabic script and it's obvious why calligraphy is an art form in the Arab world. The Arabic alphabet evolved from the Aramaic script in the 4th century, and its earliest written record dates from AD 512. Arabic is written from right to left and the form of each letter changes depending on whether it's at the start, in the middle or at the end of a word or whether it stands alone.

The huge impact of Arabic on English and many other languages is easily visible, although it often came by way of other languages, for example Spanish or Hindi. It's the source of many common English words – *alcohol*, *candle*, *coffee*, *cotton*, *jar*, *mattress* and *syrup*, to name only a few – and is also responsible for a few more esoteric terms like *assassin*, *elixir*, *genie*, *harem*, *zenith* ...

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'