

› Understand the Middle East

THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY546

The Middle East is in turmoil, caught between hope and helplessness like never before. We tell you how and why.

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Join us on a journey at this crossroads of cultures, from ancient civilisations to the early days of the Arab Spring.

RELIGION 578

We explore the three great monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – which were all born in the Middle East.

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Pyramids, mosques and everything in between – we give you the lowdown on the region's man-made structures.

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We cover the signature Middle Eastern landforms and the region's most pressing environmental issues.



population per sq km



The Middle East Today

Arab Spring

When a young, unemployed man named Mohammed Bouazizi set fire to himself in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, few imagined the firestorm of change his desperate suicide would ignite across the region. Within months, the 30-year dictatorship of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak had been overthrown in a popular uprising. A year later, leaders of similarly long standing had been swept from power in Libya and Yemen. And in Syria, a peaceful uprising had become a full-scale armed insurrection when faced with the brutality and intransigence of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

The hope that these changes engendered swept through the Middle East like a cooling breeze. For decades, travellers to the region had encountered locals who grumbled about the governments who ruled over them. But they did so in fear of being overheard and knowing full well that they were powerless to effect change. With the Arab Spring, opposition to governments suddenly took centre stage in political debate. An entire people from Tripoli to Damascus had found their voice and anything seemed possible.

Arab Winter

And then, reality took over. In Egypt, the heady aspirations of a people for democracy, freedom and prosperity would become mired in complications – the army remained in control as the grand arbiter of Egypt's future while Islamist parties swept the board in parliamentary elections. At the time of writing, ordinary Egyptians were beginning to wonder what had happened to their revolution, and whether their lives would actually be any better as a result.

People

- » **Population**
236.13 million
- » **Highest/lowest life expectancy (years)** 81 (Israel)/73 (Turkey)
- » **Highest/lowest adult literacy rate (%)** 97 (Israel)/71 (Egypt)

Top Books

From the Holy Mountain (William Dalrymple) Well-told journey through the region's landscape of sacred and profane

The Innocents Abroad (Mark Twain) Still many people's favourite travel book about the region, 140 years later

The Thousand and One Nights Resonates with all the allure and magic of the Middle East

Nine Parts of Desire (Geraldine Brooks) Fascinating look at the lives of Middle Eastern women

The Great War for Civilisation (Robert Fisk) A recent account

Middle East Myths

- » Middle Easterners are hostile to Westerners
- » Middle Eastern women are universally oppressed
- » Religion divides