

GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

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INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to provide some brief, interesting information about the countries and regions depicted in GeoToys' Africa & the Middle East GeoPuzzle®.

First, you'll find some fun facts, and discussion questions appropriate for grade schoolers. Then, you'll find some information in a little greater depth on each country for older children, parents, and teachers.

Africa is a huge and varied continent, and whole books have been written on the smallest aspects of particular countries, cultures, etc. We cannot hope to do justice to the incredible variety of peoples, languages, landscapes, wildlife, and religions that comprise Africa.

Because GeoToys' GeoPuzzles® are based on political maps, we have grouped countries as our organizational units and also concentrate on political and historical facts, though we try to mix in natural history, geography, economics, and other fields of nature.

We have grouped the countries roughly based on the United Nations' regional division of Africa, with a few changes for simplicity's sake.

These divisions rarely conform to absolute dividing lines in cultural, linguistic, or other senses, just as the United States' borders with Canada and Mexico frequently look very much the same from both sides.

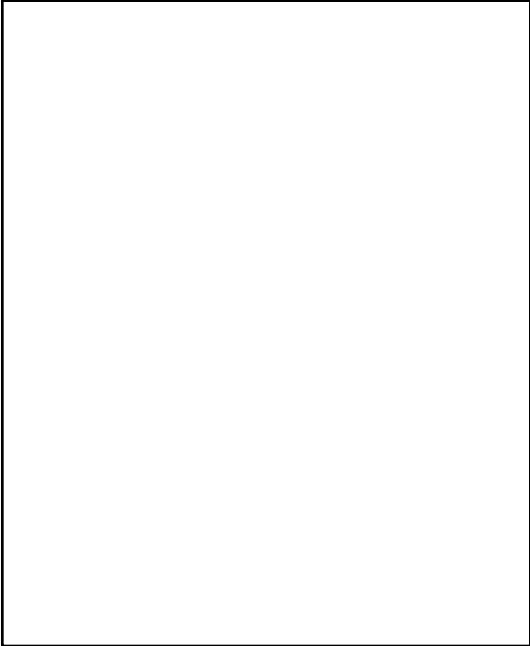
Some countries, moreover, could be classified in two or more regions. Egypt, for example, could easily be characterized as North African or Middle Eastern. We've assigned it to North Africa, despite the fact it has stronger ties to many of its neighbors to the east than to its west, primarily for reasons of space. A teacher using a GeoPuzzle® in the classroom should mention (though not belabor) the point that regional groupings are important, useful, and meaningful, but not without a bit of arbitrariness in certain borderline cases.

As recently as the nineteenth century, Africa was known as the "Dark Continent." This name reflected the fact that so much of the continent was *terra incognita*. The continent's lack of navigable rivers meant that the vast majority of the interior was accessible only by foot, and therefore unknown to anyone but local residents and occasional visitors.

Although we can only provide a few facts on each country and region, we hope that they rise above the level of trivia and shed a little light into the "darkness." If our GeoPuzzle® is a spur to learning more about Africa, or an effective introduction to that fascinating continent, we're very pleased.

Note to teachers: Some of the information in this guide was gathered from online reference sources including Wikipedia. While we are confident that these descriptions are accurate, we cannot rule out that that contain errors. If you are using this guide for classroom lessons

(rather than as a limited tool), you should do some additional reading.



GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

FUN FACTS ABOUT AFRICA

- Africa is the second-largest and second-most populous continent, after Asia.
- One in seven human beings is an African.
- Africa is considered the oldest inhabited place on earth, the birthplace of humanity, with people living there for almost four million years.
- The northern third of Africa is mostly desert. The southern two thirds have grasslands called savannas, and dense jungles (often called rainforests).
- Africa contains a whole variety of climates, from hot deserts, to subarctic mountain peaks.
- Africa contains more wild animals over more territory than any place in the world.
- In the nineteenth century, seven European powers ruled almost all of Africa. Ethiopia was the only large territory that was not a colony. This experience produced many problems for Africa, though it did introduce many modern practices in medicine, infrastructure, and government.
- Africa is the world's poorest continent.
- Africa's population is growing rapidly. In some countries, most people are under 25 years old.
- Africans speak over a thousand languages.
- There is no one African culture. Ethiopia is as different from Ghana as Japan is from Russia. This explains the remarkable diversity of art, music, crafts, and architecture the continent has produced.
- About 46% of Africans are Christians, about 40% are Muslim, and the remainder follow local traditions.
- Many black Americans prefer to be called "African-Americans" to honor their ancestors who came from Africa, mostly as slaves from Africa's west coast between 1600-1800.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GEOGRAPHY

1. North Africa is the part of Africa bordering the Mediterranean Sea. What countries are in North Africa? (*Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt.*)
2. Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama was the first to sail all the way around Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope at the continent's southern tip. What country is the Cape of Good Hope in today? (*South Africa.*)
3. Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti are often referred to as the Horn of Africa. Why do you think this is? (*They form a peninsula that looks like a horn.*)
4. Using the puzzle, what are some of the largest countries in Africa? (*Sudan, Algeria, D.R. of the Congo, Libya, Chad, Niger, Angola, Mali, South Africa, Ethiopia, etc.*)
5. Using the puzzle, what are some of the smallest countries in Africa? (*Various island countries, Gambia, Togo, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Swaziland, etc.*)

6. Which countries in Africa and the Middle East border the Red Sea? (*Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel.*)
7. Some ecologists jokingly call Madagascar "the eighth continent" because it has so many species of animals and plants found nowhere else. Why do you think that its wildlife is so unusual? (*It's an island. Furthermore, it's been isolated from the other continents for 70 million years.*)
8. The Nile River flows north into Egypt from what country? (*Sudan.*)
9. What countries on the mainland are the farthest north, south, east, and west? (*Tunisia, South Africa, Somalia, Senegal.*)
10. What are the four major bodies of water that surround Africa? (*The Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.*)
11. Lake Victoria is the second-largest freshwater lake in the world and the headwater of the White Nile. What countries border Lake Victoria? (*Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda.*) What is the largest lake near where you live? In your country? On your continent? (*Africa, L. Victoria; Asia, Caspian Sea; Australia, L. Eyre; Europe, L. Ladoga; North America, L. Superior; South America, L. Titicaca.*) In the world? (*The Caspian Sea.*)
12. Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania is Africa's highest mountain, at 19,340 feet. It is the fourth largest mountain in the world. What is the highest mountain on your continent? (*Asia, Mt. Everest [Nepal]; Europe, Mt. Elbrus [Russian Caucasus] or Mont Blanc [France/Switzerland]; N. America, Mt. McKinley/Mt. Denali [U.S.A.]; S. America, Mt. Aconcagua [Argentina].*) In the world? (*Mt. Everest.*)
13. The world's largest desert is in Africa. Do you know its name? (*The Sahara Desert.*)

POPULATION

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with 134 million people. Cairo, Egypt, is the most populous city in Africa, with almost 16 million people living in and around it. How many people live in your city? In your country?

WILDLIFE

What African animals can you name? What's your favorite animal? Does this animal come from Africa? If so, what country or countries in Africa is it found in? Can you draw your favorite animal?

FAMILIARITY WITH AFRICA

- Has anyone in the class ever been to Africa?
- Is anyone in the class from Africa?
- Have any African-American students' families traced their ancestors back to Africa? What current country did their ancestors come from?
- Do you know any famous people from Africa? (*Nelson Mandela, Bp. Desmond Tutu, Actress Charlize Theron [all South Africa], Hakeem Olajuwon [Nigeria], etc.*)

GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

FUN FACTS ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST

- The Middle East is known as the Cradle of Civilization. The oldest settled civilizations in the world emerged in the Fertile Crescent stretching from Egypt's Nile Valley through the Eastern Mediterranean coast, down through Mesopotamia between the Tigris & Euphrates rivers in today's Iraq and Kuwait. Sumer arose around 4000 B.C. in Mesopotamia, and Upper & Lower Egypt were unified around 3200 B.C.
- Many major world religions were founded in the Middle East: Judaism (c. 2000 B.C.), Zoroastrianism (c. 1500 B.C.), Christianity (c. 30 A.D.) and Islam (c. 632 A.D.).
- Much of the Middle East (and Southeastern Europe) was part of the Ottoman Empire until after World War One.
- The majority of the Middle East is Muslim by religion, though there are many different versions of Islam practiced there.
- The three major languages of the region are Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Kurdish is widely spoken in Turkey, Iran, and Syria. Modern Hebrew is the national language of Israel.
- The Middle East is mostly arid to semi-arid, with deserts and grasslands. Water is a major issue and many countries have disputes over sharing water in rivers.
- Mount Damāvand near Māzandarān, Iran, is the highest mountain in the Middle East at 18,405 feet, followed by Mount Ararat in Eastern Turkey, at 16,854 feet.
- The major bodies of water bordering the Middle East are the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean.
- The Middle East has the world's largest, most easily accessible deposits of oil, mostly in the countries bordering the Persian Gulf. This has made many of these countries very wealthy, although many lack economic development outside of the oil industry.
- The capital of Dubai, one of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates, is one of the largest and most important ports in the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GEOGRAPHY

1. The Arabian Peninsula is one of the major features of the Middle East. What countries comprise the Arabian Peninsula? (*Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, parts of Iraq and Jordan.*)
2. The Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa are often considered part of the Middle East. They are often called the Maghreb, which means "the West" in Arabic, since the Maghreb is all the countries west of Egypt. Name these countries. (*Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Western Sahara. [Mauritania is sometimes included.]*)
3. What is the largest country in the Middle East, not including the Maghreb? (*Saudi Arabia.*)

4. One country in the Middle East has Persian as its national language. Can you name it? (*Iran.*)
5. The capital of Syria is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. What is it called? (*Damascus.*)
6. The capital of Israel was the site of many of the most important events in Jewish and Christian Scripture. What is its name? (*Jerusalem.*)
7. This country was ruled by pharaohs in ancient times. These kings built huge pyramids and hidden, underground tombs for themselves. What country is this? (*Egypt.*)
8. The longest river in the world ends at the Mediterranean just north of Cairo, Egypt, having flowed through the Sudan from headwaters in Ethiopia and Lake Victoria. What is the name of this river? (*The Nile.*)
9. The holiest city in Islam is near the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia. Can you name this city? (*Mecca.*)
10. The United States deposed a dictator named Saddam Hussein in this centrally located country in 2003. What is its name? (*Iraq.*)

POPULATION

Egypt is the most populous country in the Middle East with almost 85 million people. Its capital, Cairo, has almost 16 million people living in and around it. How many people live in your city? In your country?

DESERTS

Much of the Middle East is covered by deserts. Are there any large deserts in your country? What kind of animals live in the desert? What is an oasis? Why did Middle Easterners use camels to travel across the desert?

FAMILIARITY WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

- Have you ever been to a country in the Middle East?
- Do you have any relatives in or from the Middle East?
- Why is the Middle East called the Holy Land?
- Why do events in the Middle East have such an effect on the price of gasoline?
- What do you know about Ancient Egypt?
- Where did Moses lead the Israelites out of?
- What peninsula did they travel through?
- Where was Jesus born?
- What present-day country was Muhammad born in?
- Have you ever eaten Middle Eastern food?

GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

MATCH THE COUNTRY WITH ITS CAPITAL

NORTH AFRICA

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------|
| 1. Algeria | a) Khartoum |
| 2. Egypt | b) Tripoli |
| 3. Libya | c) El Aaiún |
| 4. Morocco | d) Cairo |
| 5. Sudan | e) Tunis |
| 6. Tunisia | f) Rabat |
| 7. Western Sahara | g) Algiers |

WEST AFRICA

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Benin | a) Abidjan |
| 2. Burkina Faso | b) Abuja |
| 3. Cameroon | c) Accra |
| 4. Cape Verde | d) Bamako |
| 5. Côte d'Ivoire | e) Banjul |
| 6. Equatorial Guinea | f) Bissau |
| 7. Gabon | g) Conakry |
| 8. Gambia | h) Dakar |
| 9. Ghana | i) Freetown |
| 10. Guinea | j) Libreville |
| 11. Guinea-Bissau | k) Lomé |
| 12. Liberia | l) Malabo |
| 13. Mali | m) Monrovia |
| 14. Mauritania | n) Niamey |
| 15. Niger | o) Nouakchott |
| 16. Nigeria | p) Ouagadougou |
| 17. São Tomé & Príncipe | q) Porto-Novo |
| 18. Senegal | r) Praia |
| 19. Sierra Leone | s) São Tomé |
| 20. Togo | t) Yaoundé |

EAST AFRICA

- | | |
|---------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Burundi | a) Addis Ababa |
| 2. Comoros | b) Asmara |
| 3. Djibouti | c) Bujumbura |
| 4. Eritrea | d) Djibouti |
| 5. Ethiopia | e) Dar es Salaam (Dodoma) |
| 6. Kenya | f) Kampala |
| 7. Mauritius | g) Kigali |
| 8. Rwanda | j) Moroni |
| 9. Seychelles | k) Nairobi |
| 10. Somalia | l) Mogadishu |
| 11. Tanzania | m) Mamoudzou |

12. Uganda

n) Victoria

CENTRAL AFRICA

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|
| 1. Central African Republic | a) N'Djamena |
| 2. Chad | b) Lilongwe |
| 3. Congo | c) Lusaka |
| 4. Dem. Rep. of the Congo | d) Kinshasa |
| 5. Malawi | e) Brazzaville |
| 6. Zambia | f) Bangui |

SOUTHERN AFRICA

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. Angola | a) Harare |
| 2. Botswana | b) Maputo |
| 3. Lesotho | c) Windhoek |
| 4. Madagascar | d) Luanda |
| 5. Mozambique | e) Antananarivo |
| 6. Namibia | f) Maseru |
| 7. South Africa | g) Gaborone |
| 8. Swaziland | h) Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Pretoria (Tshwane) |
| 9. Zimbabwe | i) Mbabane |

THE MIDDLE EAST

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| 1. Egypt | a) Tehran |
| 2. Israel | b) Sana'a |
| 3. Jordan | c) Cairo |
| 4. Syria | d) Riyadh |
| 5. Lebanon | e) Muscat |
| 6. Iran | f) Jerusalem |
| 7. Saudi Arabia | g) Damascus |
| 8. Kuwait | h) Abu Dhabi |
| 9. Qatar | i) Amman |
| 10. Bahrain | j) Beirut |
| 11. The U.A.E. | k) Nicosia |
| 12. Oman | l) Kuwait City |
| 13. Yemen | m) Doha |
| 14. Cyprus | n) Manama |

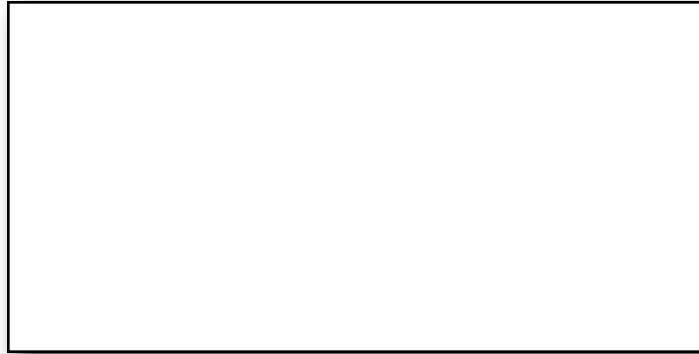
GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

NORTH AFRICA

North Africa consists of Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and the Western Sahara.

EGYPT

Egypt is richer in history than virtually any other country in the world. Home of the Ancient Egyptian civilization that dominated much of the Mediterranean world, Egyptians built the Pyramids and the Sphinx, created artifacts like those found in King Tut's tomb, invented hieroglyphics, one of the first successful writing systems, etc. The Nile Valley, with its rich black soil and annual floods, was a perfect locale for people to figure out how to cooperate and live by agriculture. The Nile also supports an enormous amount of animal life, from hippos to crocodiles, many varieties of birds, and hundreds of other species. Egypt became largely Christian in the years after Jesus's life, the local church becoming known as the Coptic Church. Armies from Arabia brought Islam to Egypt in 639 A.D., and Egypt is mostly Muslim today. Egypt, alone in the Arab world, has a peace treaty with Israel, though their relations remain distant. Internationally-known Egyptians include the actor Omar Sharif, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz, and former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.



LIBYA

Ruled by the extremely eccentric dictator Mu'ammr al-Qaddafi, what little economic success Libya has shown has been due to its substantial petroleum reserves. Libya is rich in archaeological sites, as it has been ruled or visited by various peoples since early antiquity. Libya is large, roughly the size of Alaska, and possesses the longest Mediterranean coast of any African country. Along the coast, the climate is mild, but it quickly gives way to hot desert as one travels south into the Sahara. Libya has fewer than six million inhabitants. The ancient Greek scholar Eratosthenes was born in what is now Libya.

ALGERIA

Algeria is the second-largest country in Africa. It was a colony of France until 1962 when, after putting down a brutal, eight-year guerilla war, the French allowed the Algerians to vote on their national status. They overwhelmingly voted for independence. In 1991, an Islamist party won a first round of parliamentary elections, causing the military to shut down the second round, and eventually embroiling the country in a bloody civil war which lasted for almost ten years. Recent years have seen political and social gains by the formerly

ignored or marginalized Berber minority (although virtually all Algerians are descended from Berber stock, the majority identify themselves as Arabs, and the Arabic language and culture have historically predominated). The country is generally recovering economically with the return of peace. Algeria has almost 33 million people, most of whom live in the more temperate, coastal regions in the north. Famous people from Algeria include St. Augustine,

French-Algerian novelist and philosopher Albert Camus, fashion designer Yves Saint-Laurent, deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, Marxist Louis Althusser, intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, and singer Cheb Mami. Zinedine Zidane, one of the greatest soccer players

ever, is of Algerian parentage.

TUNISIA

The smallest North African country, Tunisia is the location of ancient Carthage. Hannibal of Carthage is considered one of the finest military commanders and strategists in history for his battles with Rome c. 200 B.C. Like Algeria, Tunisia became a colony of France. During World War II, the battle of Kasserine Pass was a turning point in the war in North Africa. Tunisia is a popular site for filming desert scenes in movies, including *The English Patient*, *Life of Brian*, *Sabara*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the *Star Wars* series, in which Luke Skywalker's home planet Tatooine was actually named after Tataouine, a village near the filming location.

MOROCCO

Morocco has been inhabited since early antiquity. Today, as the Kingdom of Morocco under the Alaoui kings, it enjoys an enviable social stability and moderation, coming to terms with the past abuses of its government and steering a moderate course in world affairs. It is an ally of the U.S.A. Morocco is the fourth-most populous Arab country, and its cuisine is famous world-wide. Famous Moroccans include the philosopher Averroes, the great rabbi Isaac Alfasi, and middle-distance runner Hicham El Gherrouj.

WESTERN SAHARA

Western Sahara is a disputed arid, inhospitable desert territory that has been partitioned by Morocco and Mauritania since 1976. Periodic attempts to establish its status as independent or part of those countries have failed. Most inhabitants are nomadic Bedouin of the Sahrawi tribal group.

GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

WEST AFRICA

West Africa is roughly bounded by the Sahara Desert in the north, the Atlantic Ocean in the west, and an imaginary line between Lake Chad and Mount Cameroon in the East. The African ancestors of most black Americans, who were brought to the U.S. as slaves, came from West Africa, though some came from as far south as Angola. West Africans and their relatives in Europe and the New World are, by a large margin, the world's greatest sprinters, holding not only most records but almost all finalist positions in international meets in the men's 100-meter dash.

BENIN

Considered a model democracy, Benin, formerly the Kingdom of Dahomey, is named after the Bight of Benin on which it lies. Voodoo is believed to have originated in Benin. Actor Djimon Hounsou spent his childhood in Benin.

BURKINA FASO

Burkina Faso was formerly known as Upper Volta because of the three rivers, the Black Volta, the White Volta, and the Red Volta which cross it. (These rivers are now called the Mohoun, Nakambé, and Nazinon.) It is one of the poorest countries in the world.

CAMEROON

An exceptionally diverse mixture of peoples, climates, and geographic features, Cameroon has been called "Africa in Miniature." Cameroonian music is popular around the world, and the national soccer team, "The Indomitable Lions," is arguably Africa's greatest, regularly turning in international victories.

CÔTE D'IVOIRE (IVORY COAST)

Still unsettled since a civil war in 2002-4, the Ivory Coast prospered from 1960-93 under its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny ("oof-way bwa-nyee"), who built the enormous Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro basilica, rivaling St. Peter's as the Christian world's largest. The Ivory Coast is the world's largest exporter of cocoa.

EQUATORIAL GUINEA

Equatorial Guinea has the smallest population in Africa. It's composed of a mainland (Río Muni) and two islands, Bioko & Annobón. It has thriving oil and cocoa industries, but most of the population remains poor. The land's original inhabitants were Pygmies, some of whom remain in the northern mainland.

GABON

Prosperous because of its off-shore oil reserves, Gabon has set aside 10% of its territory for what may be the world's largest area of national parks and nature preserves, with a total area larger than Maryland or Vermont. Most Gabonese are Catholic Christians.

THE GAMBIA

The Gambia is the smallest country in continental Africa, less than 30 miles wide, its borders not far on each side of the Gambia river. Its total area is smaller than Connecticut's and it is essentially surrounded by Senegal.

GHANA

Richly endowed with natural resources, Ghana was the first Sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence after the European colonial period. Soccer star Freddy Adu spent his early childhood in Ghana.

GUINEA

A very troubled country, Guinea is in danger of becoming a "failed state," suffering from regular political strife, pervasive, massive corruption that has stolen most foreign aid, and a crumbling infrastructure.

GUINEA-BISSAU

A tiny, poor country whose main export is cashew nuts and which is a former Portuguese colony. It has been politically unstable since independence and suffered a civil war in 1998. The Bijagós archipelago (the only archipelago in Africa) has long been quite independent of the

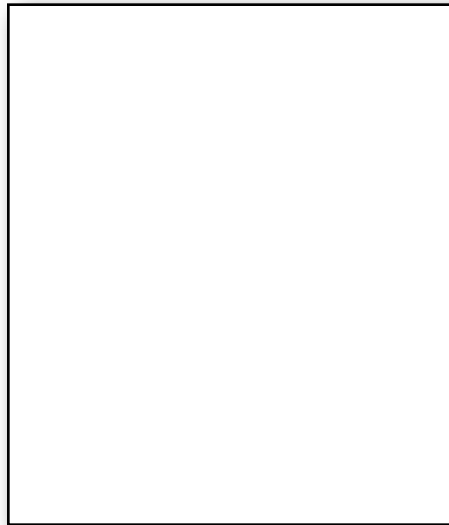
mainland and is home to a number of rare species of animals.

LIBERIA

Founded as a settlement for freed American slaves, Liberia named its capital Monrovia after U.S. President James Monroe. Tension between the Americo-Liberians and the natives of the interior is a theme of its history. It has been wracked by two civil wars since 1989, destroying its economy. NFL cornerback Bhawoh Jue was born in Monrovia.

MALI

"Mali" means "hippo" in the native Bambara, and its capital, Bamako, means "place of crocodiles." Mali is home to the ancient cities of Timbuktu and Djenné, which have spectacular architecture built of mud and are centers of learning and trade of great antiquity. Mali is poor, but enjoys excellent political and social stability.



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MAURITANIA

Mauritania has a "Moorish" majority descended from Arabs & Berbers (about half) and black Sudanese (about half). The rest are largely indigenous tribespeople. Unfortunately, slavery persists in Mauritania, with the majority of its victims black non-"Moors" of animist or Christian religions. In 2007, Mauritania held a peaceful, democratic election, its first and one of the few such transitions ever in the Arab world.

NIGER

Pronounced "NIGH-jur" or "nee-ZHAIR," Niger is the poorest country in the world, hot and dry with large deserts. Its principal export is uranium. It takes its name (as does Nigeria) from the Niger River which is West Africa's largest.

NIGERIA

Nigeria is the most populous country in all of Africa, and has been settled for over 11,000 years. Its three main ethnic groups are the Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba, who together comprise 2/3 of the population; another 250 groups comprise the other third. Nigeria has tremendous oil wealth, but its economy has suffered from long-standing persistent governmental corruption and mismanagement, as well as inter-ethnic and inter-religious disputes. Nevertheless, Nigerians ranked atop a survey of happiness by the *New Scientist* magazine in 2003. Nigeria's national soccer team, the Super Eagles, are an African power and competitive with the best in the world. Nigeria's film industry is a major player in African cinema. Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe are world-renowned Nigerian novelists. The famous pop and jazz singer Sade hails from Ibadan. Basketball great Hakeem Olajuwon is a Yoruba from Lagos. Former NFLer and world-class discus/shotput/hammer thrower Christian Okoye is Ibo and from Enugu. Hockey great Jarome Iginla's father is Nigerian, and his last name means "big tree" in Yorùbá.

SENEGAL

A Muslim country, Senegal has largely enjoyed enviable political and social stability, despite its extraordinarily diverse population. Its economy has been improving over the past few decades. A former French colony, its capital is the finish line for the famous Dakar Rally, an off-road endurance race for cars, trucks, and motorcycles. The current route of the race takes competitors from Lisbon, Portugal, to Dakar through Spain, Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, and Senegal. Famous Senegalese include the musician Youssou N'Dour, NBA player DeSagana Diop, and rapper Akon. The prominent

French Socialist politician Ségolène Royal was born in Dakar.

SIERRA LEONE

The name Sierra Leone comes from the Portuguese name for the country, *Sierra Leão*, "Lion Mountain." Rich in resources, Sierra Leone unfortunately remains poor. A horrible 1991-2002 civil war devastated the country's economy and reduced its life expectancy to 38 years. This war was fictionalized in the movie *Blood Diamond*. Soccer and cricket are the country's most popular sports.

SÃO TOMÉ & PRÍNCIPE

São Tomé and Príncipe are two islands united under one government. It is the smallest Portuguese-speaking country in the world. Both islands were uninhabited until the Portuguese settled São Tomé in 1493. São Tomé was discovered by Portuguese sailors on the feast of St. Thomas after whom they named it. The equator passes just south of São Tomé Island. Its government has been democratic, though not particularly stable, since 1991. Cocoa dominates its economy.

TOGO

Togo is a small nation, slightly smaller than West Virginia, on the Bight of Benin between Ghana and Benin. It is nominally democratic, but fragilely so. The Togolese were particularly proud of their country's soccer team qualifying for the 2006 World Cup. Like relatively few African countries, Togo was a colony of Germany, which colony was known as Togoland from 1884 to 1914, when it was divided into British Togoland (which eventually became part of Ghana) and French Togoland which became Togo.

GEO TOYS' AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

EAST AFRICA

SUDAN

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, and the tenth largest country in the world. It was known to the Ancient Egyptians as the Land of Kush. Later, Sudan was home to a number of Christian kingdoms, most of whom were displaced by Islamic rulers. A rebel religious leader calling himself the Mahdi led an uprising against the Egyptian-British government in 1885, which led to the establishment of a theocracy. Sudan returned to Anglo-Egyptian control in 1899. It became independent in 1956, and has suffered two major civil wars since. The Arab-Muslim population of the north and east, which controls the government, has frequently instigated or allowed violence against the animist and Christian black Africans of the south and west, including in the Darfur region bordering Chad. Sudan is generally considered an unstable state which destabilizes the region. NBA players Luol Deng and Manute Bol both belong to the Dinka tribe of Southern Sudan.

DJIBOUTI

A small mostly Muslim country around the Gulf of Tadjourah, Djibouti has fewer than 800,000 inhabitants, most of whom live in the capital, also called Djibouti. Historically a sea-trading city, Djibouti is today a significant transit port in East Africa. The country remains very poor, however.

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is one of the oldest nations in the world, and proudly claims to have been the only African nation never to have been colonized. It is the second-oldest Christian nation in the world (after Armenia), having become Christian in the 300s A.D. Ethiopia fell victim to a Soviet-backed Communist tyranny in 1974 after which ensued one of most murderous reigns in world history, now known as the Red Terror. Without Soviet protection, the Communists were driven out in 1991, and the current government is a vast improvement, though hardly a liberal democracy. Ethiopia is blessed with some exceptionally beautiful, dramatic, and diverse geographical features, which harbor some unusual species found nowhere else. Ethiopia's economy has been slowly improving, but the fact that private citizens cannot own land under the current constitution is likely to hinder it for some time. Ethiopia's national language is Amharic, which uses the Ge'ez alphabet indigenous to the country. Ethiopia still has a very strong Christian identity, though Islam may be more widely practiced (it is somewhat unclear). The Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims the Ark of the

Covenant is in the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Axum. Ethiopian restaurants are popular around the world, serving spiced stews on large flatbreads which are used as scoops. Like Kenyans and Moroccans, Ethiopians are exceptionally good distance runners. Some of the oldest primate fossils in the world, like "Lucy," have been found in Ethiopia.

ERITREA

A small country on the coast of the Red Sea, Eritrea has been known to history since Ancient Egyptian times when it was known as the land of Punt. An Italian, then British colony, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952, with some autonomy. However, beginning in 1961, the Eritreans began a thirty-year struggle for independence, finally realized in 1991. A border war with Ethiopia ensued in 1998–2000. The countries still disagree on the exact location of the border. Eritrea is about half Muslim and half Eritrean Orthodox Christian. As of 2007, Sami Cohen of Asmara was the sole remaining indigenous Jewish Eritrean.

SOMALIA

Somalia is a failed state. A military dictatorship since independence in 1969, civil war broke out in 1991. Civil war has alternated with short-lived factional dictatorships and warlordism since 1991. Even before the war, it was not a haven of freedom with, for example, the government's having abolished the practice of Christianity in the 1970s.

Somalia is desperately poor and ravaged by war. An UN attempt to establish some stability and humanitarian relief, backed by the U.S. military, founded in 1995, as portrayed in the book and movie *Black Hawk Down*. Somalia's future looks bleak for the foreseeable future, but it possesses a very resilient population. The famous model Iman is a Somali-American. Like Iman, Somali women are known for their beauty.

KENYA

Kenya's history is truly ancient. Both dinosaur and early-human fossils have been found throughout the country. Settlements existed in Kenya at least as early as 2000 B.C. Arab and Persian seafarers set up colonies in the eighth century, partially for slave trading. Vasco da Gama reached Mombasa in 1498, and the Portuguese were the dominant power for over two hundred years, until they were driven out by the Arabs of Oman, who colonized Kenya and Tanzania. Kenya became a protectorate of Britain in 1890, from which point most of its modern infrastructure dates, notably the Kenya-Uganda railway which allowed those countries to export significant amounts of coffee and tea as well as allowing the British to suppress the slave trade

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in the interior. From independence in 1963 until 2002, Kenya enjoyed stable, if undemocratic, government. In 2002, the country's first free and fair multiparty elections took place, and political liberty appears to be on the rise. Economically, Kenya is one of the most successful agricultural producers in Africa, with tea, coffee, and sugar leading the sector. Kenya is an enormously diverse country in terms of language and ethnicities. Historically, Swahili has been the country's *lingua franca*, in which role it's been joined by English over the last century. Most Kenyans are Christians. Kenyans are enthusiastic and excellent athletes. They, particularly members of the Kalenjin tribe, are the world's best long-distance runners. Kenya has also had success at the world level in cricket and volleyball, and regionally in rugby and soccer. Kenya is richly blessed with beautiful scenery and wildlife, including lions, rhinos, leopards, buffalo, giraffes, and elephants, and the country has many national parks to attempt to preserve them. Famous Kenyans include the paleontologist Louis B. Leakey, cricketer Steve Tikolo, and runner Wilson Kipketer (an adopted citizen of Denmark). The Danish writer Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* was her memoir of living in Kenya.

TANZANIA

The Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania is known as "the cradle of humanity" because the oldest early-human remains yet found have been discovered there. The mainland of Tanzania was originally known as Tanganyika and was an Omani Arab colony and later a German one. Zanzibar off the coast was the center of the Arab East African slave trade under Omani rule. The British took over Germany's possessions after World War I, and Tanganyika became independent in 1961 and Zanzibar in 1963. In 1964, the two merged into "Tanzania," combining their names into a new national name. Africa's highest mountain, Mount Kilimanjaro, is in its northeast, and the Serengeti Plain is in the north. Other famous features include the Ngorongoro Craters and Lakes Victoria and Tanganyika. Tanzania is one of the world's very poorest countries. Formerly the granary of East Africa, massive, forcible socialist restructuring under first president Julius Nyerere, backed by international lending institutions and foreign governments, completely destroyed Tanzania's economy. Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen, was born on Zanzibar.

UGANDA

A British protectorate from 1894 until 1962, Uganda fell under the evil sway of Idi Amin in a military coup in 1971. His murderous rule scarred the country. Uganda is stable, though not particularly democratic. Ugandans are mostly

Christian. English is the country's official language, and Luganda is the most widely-spoken of many local languages. Uganda's "ABC" program has been, by far, the most successful AIDS prevention program in Africa, a continent where the disease is unfortunately widespread. Entebbe, Uganda, was the site of a famous Israeli commando raid on a hijacked jetliner. Uganda has become relatively peaceful, stable, and increasingly prosperous, though its government has been accused of meddling in conflicts around the region.

BURUNDI

Burundi, like its neighbor Rwanda, has been scarred by genocidal conflict between its Hutu and Tutsi tribes. In 1972 over 250,000 Hutus and moderate Tutsis were slaughtered by Tutsi extremists. As recently as the 1990s, there were large massacres of both groups. The country also has a Pygmy minority. Most Burundians are Catholic Christians. Without much in the way of economic resources and riven by ethnic conflicts, Burundi is one of the poorest, most bloodied countries in the world.

RWANDA

Rwanda unhappily came to the world's attention when, in 1994, its civil war turned genocidal, with extremist Hutu groups slaughtering at least half a million Tutsis and moderate Hutus (and maybe as many as 800,000 or a million). Rwanda is very poor, not least because of the lingering effects of

the 1990-94 civil war. Though set in Uganda, *Gorillas in the Mist*, the film biography of Dian Fossey, was filmed in Rwanda. *Hotel Rwanda*, a story of one man's heroic attempt to save as many lives as he could during the genocide, was also filmed partially in Kigali.

COMOROS

The Comoros are four islands at the north end of the Mozambique Channel. Originally settled by Polynesians, they later became home to various seafaring Arab, Persian, African, Malagasy, and Indonesian groups. The Comoros became a French colony, and then became independent in 1975, since which there have been more than 20 coups. Comorian is the most widely-spoken language; it is akin to Swahili. Arabic and French are the other two national languages. Virtually all Comorians are Muslim. The four islands are home to less than a million people, but they are so small that the Comoros has one of the highest population densities in the world. Comoros is one of the world's poorest countries.

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SEYCHELLES

Seychelles is an archipelago of 158 islands northeast of Madagascar. A pirate haven until the French took over in 1756, the Seychelles were turned over to the British in 1814. They became independent in 1976. Tourism is a major industry, and Seychelles are one of the richest countries, per capita, in Africa, although its policy of propping up its currency artificially will likely lead to a dramatic impoverishment in real terms at some point. There is no indigenous Seychellois population, so its people are a mix of immigrants from all over the world. Seychelles' isolated location means it possesses many unique animal species.

CENTRAL AFRICA

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

One of Africa's and the world's poorest countries, the Central African Republic, then *Ubangi-Shari*, was extremely remote and isolated until the 1800s.

Unfortunately, one of the first groups to reach the area were well-armed Arab slavers who removed most of the population of the eastern part of today's C.A.R. after about 1850. When the French reached the area, they managed to suppress the slave trade, but introduced forced labor to build the Congo-Ocean railway and other improvements. French colonialism in Central Africa was particularly cruel (though Catholic missionaries set up many schools and hospitals), and led to the 1928–31 Kongo-Wara Rebellion or the "War of the Hoe Handle." The C.A.R. became independent in 1960, then suffered the rule of the lunatic cannibal dictator "Emperor" Bokassa from 1966–79. Other than agriculture, the country's main source of revenue is foreign aid, which has made it quite dependent on NGOs.

CHAD

Chad is a large, remote country sometimes called "The Dead Heart of Africa." Chad became a French colony very late, in 1920. The French had little regard for Chad except as a source for cotton, and it was administered very poorly. Chad became independent in 1960, but a civil war broke out by 1965. In 1979, the rebels took N'Djamena, and the government collapsed. Between 1978 and 1987, Libya and Chad fought a sporadic border war, often called the Toyota War, because of the Chadians' use of small Toyota pickup trucks to move troops. A second civil war broke out 1985, partially precipitated by the refugee crisis in eastern Chad brought on by people fleeing Darfur, across the border with Sudan. Chad is a large basin around Lake

Chad bounded by mountains in the north, south, and east. Its north is desert, but its south is a marshy steppe with much animal life. Chad is one of the world's poorest countries. The civil wars in Chad have devastated its economy and infrastructure. The entire country, thrice as large as California, boasts less than twenty miles of paved road. Most of the north is Arabic-speaking and Muslim, most of the south is Christian and animist; but, like many large African countries, Chad encompasses an enormously diverse population, with two-hundred-odd ethnic groups speaking over 120 languages. The largest ethnic group at about 20% of the population, are the Sara of the south. The Sara are black Africans with a reputation for being tall, well-built, and good-looking. The French nicknamed them *la belle race*, "the beautiful race." In addition, they're known for their toughness. The French heavily recruited Sara soldiers, and indeed, more Sara fought in World War II than any other African group.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

The D.R.C. is the third-largest country in Africa and the second-largest French-speaking country in the world. From 1876 to 1908, King Leopold II of Belgium essentially owned the *Congo Free State*, a horrific terror state aimed at making money off of rubber and ivory. In 1908, exposed by the British press—and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—Leopold gave the Congo Free State to Belgium. Life in the *Belgian Congo* improved dramatically. In the 1950s,

its GNP was the largest in Africa. After independence in 1960, the D.R.C.'s politics were extremely unsettled until a 1965 coup brought Joseph-Désiré Mobutu to power. Mobutu ruled dictatorially with an African-nationalist ideology, renaming cities, people, and eventually the country itself, which became *Zaire*. Mobutu was deposed in 1997. The new government changed the name back to the D.R.C. A Rwandan-Ugandan-backed rebellion tried to depose the new government, with Angola, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Sudan, and Chad sending troops to back the government. The First and Second Congo Wars ensued, sometimes called "the African World War," the bloodiest conflict since World War II. The D.R.C. has vast swaths of jungle with enormous amounts of wildlife and the highest frequency of thunderstorms on earth. It contains the Great Rift Valley, active volcanos, and the mighty Congo River. War has impoverished the country despite its vast natural resources. Most Congolese are Anglican Christians. The D.R.C. is home to at least 250 ethnic groups speaking 242 identified languages.

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CONGO

Like much of the area, the original inhabitants of Congo were Pygmies, but most were displaced centuries ago. Congo became independent from France in 1960 and has had a fairly turbulent political history, including a long interlude as a Communist "people's republic" from 1970–92. From 1992–7, Congo was democratic, but a civil war with an Angolan incursion derailed its progress. Congo's population is heavily concentrated in the south, with the north empty jungle. Its capital, Brazzaville, is mentioned in the last lines of the film *Casablanca*.

ZAMBIA

Zambia, formerly Northern Rhodesia, is a very poor country, overly dependent on its copper industry, and hampered by socialist planning in the 1970s. Attempts at reform began in the 1990s. Zambia is ravaged by AIDS, with over a million people HIV-positive. Famous Zambians include actress Thandie Newton and author Wilbur Smith.

MALAWI

Malawi, formerly Nyasaland, became independent of Britain in 1964. It was a dictatorship until holding free elections in 1994 and 2004. The country runs along Lake Nyasa, the third largest lake in Africa. Epidemic AIDS is an enormous problem. Malawi's landscape and wildlife are famous.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

ANGOLA

The Portuguese built a fort on the Angolan coast in 1483 at the mouth of the river Congo. Thereafter they were a continual presence, eventually colonizing the area, until 1975 when they granted Angola's request for independence. Perhaps predictably, their rapid departure led to a civil war, which drew in not only South African troops but Cuban troops airlifted by the Soviets. A ceasefire was only reached in 2002. Angola has over 100 ethnic groups and as many languages. Although fairly poor, Angola has economic potential in oil, diamonds, and other natural resources in abundance. Angola's national basketball team is one of the best in Africa and has consistently competed in the Olympics since 1992.

BOTSWANA

Botswana's major geographic feature is the Kalahari Desert, though the country is not all desert. The Okavango Delta in the northwest is the world's largest inland river delta. This geographic diversity supports a wide variety of wildlife. Botswana has had the most

successful, stable multi-party democratic government in Africa, abiding by a single constitution since independence in 1965. Much of this may be credited to its first president, Sir Seretse Khama, elected president for three terms (1965–1980, when he died in office). Khama oversaw the fastest-growing economy in the world, building Botswana into a major exporter of cattle, copper, and diamonds—of which it is now the world's largest exporter—while suppressing corruption. Khama also played a major role in ending the Rhodesian Civil War and the subsequent founding of Zimbabwe. Although Botswana is wealthy by African standards, epidemic AIDS has devastated the country, with almost 40% of adults being infected. Botswana's natural beauty and abundant wildlife supports a major tourist industry. Botswana is the setting for a series of novels by Alexander McCall Smith as well as the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*.

LESOTHO

Lesotho, unusual for Africa, is a constitutional monarchy, though its king has no executive authority. Its politics, however, have been roiled by the same coups and countercoups that have plagued many countries on the continent. Lesotho is an enclave surrounded by South Africa. The entire country is highlands of over a half-mile altitude. Its two major exports are water and hydroelectric power. Its economy is completely linked to that of South Africa. Lesotho, like a number of southern African countries, suffers from epidemic

AIDS.

MADAGASCAR

Madagascar is the fourth-largest island in the world, lying some three hundred miles east of Mozambique. Its geographic isolation has made it one of the most unusual places on earth. Its indigenous culture contains African and Asian influences but is distinct and unique. Its history contains some fascinating, oversized characters like Queen Ravanalona the Cruel, and the Slovak adventurer Moric Beňovský, elected Emperor of Madagascar in 1776. The French invaded and colonized Madagascar in 1895, and the island became independent only in 1960. An oddity of history is during 1940–2, while the Nazis ruled France, they investigated the possibility deporting the Jews of Europe to Madagascar. Madagascar's geography is quite varied, from lowlands to volcanic mountains, from desert to rainforest. This diversity and its isolation makes it home to an enormous number of unique species; zoologists sometimes call Madagascar "the eighth continent" because of the richness and uniqueness of its native species. The adjective for the language and people of Madagascar is *Malagasy*. A bit less than half of

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Malagasies are Christians, about ten percent are Muslim, and the rest mostly follow indigenous tribal religions with some unusual customs. The opening sequence in 2005's James Bond film, *Casino Royale*, was set in Madagascar's capital, Antananarivo (though filmed in the Bahamas). Antananarivo means "City of the Thousand" because its founder assigned a thousand soldiers to guard it (c. 1625). Locals call it "Tana."

MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique is a former Portuguese colony with a very turbulent political history, including some bloody conflicts with its neighbors. Since 1990, however, it has been a functional multiparty democracy, attracting much foreign investment. Although still poor, and set back by floods in 2000-1 and a drought in 2002, Mozambique has made large economic strides. Portuguese remains the most widely spoken language, as it functions as a *lingua franca* between the many languages of indigenous tribes and various peoples who've settled there as traders (e.g., Arabs, Chinese, Indians). Famous Mozambicans include the great soccer player Eusebio, painter Malangatana Velenta Ngwenya, Maria de Lurdes Mutola who is considered the greatest women's 800m runner of all time, and the wife of U.S. senators John Heinz (deceased) and John Kerry, Teresa Heinz, *née* Maria Teresa Thierstein Simões-Ferreira.

NAMIBIA

Namibia is the second-most sparsely populated country in the world (after Mongolia), with only two million people living in an area slightly larger than half the size of Alaska. Namibia was originally home to Bushmen and other groups until the great Bantu expansions of the fourteenth century. In the nineteenth century, this territory was demarcated and colonized by the Germans and became known as German Southwest Africa. British South Africa occupied it during World War I, then independent South Africa annexed it after World War II, in a move of questionable legality. South Africa officially granted Namibia independence only in 1990. Minerals and tourism are two of Namibia's largest industries. Afrikaans and English are Namibia's two *linguae francae*. The local language Oshivambo is spoken by about half the population. AIDS is epidemic in Namibia, as in much of Southern Africa. Famous Namibians include Olympic sprinter Frankie Fredericks and painter Adolph Jentsch.

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has a long, rich history, preceding its colonization by the Dutch in the 1600s and the British around 1800. It was the location of the Boer War (1899-

1902), and received independence as a Dominion in 1930. In 1948, it instituted a comprehensive system of racial segregation known as *apartheid* (literally, "separateness") designed to keep white South Africans (particularly Dutch-descended Afrikaners) in political power in perpetuity. This system earned worldwide opprobrium and was dismantled only in 1990-4 under F.W. de Klerk. Former regime opponent and guerilla Nelson Mandela was voted in as president on behalf of the African National Congress party which has held power since. Mandela's greatest achievement was shepherding this epochal transfer of power without violence. South Africa's geography is quite varied, and its climate temperate. It is home to a "megadiverse" array of plants and animals, perhaps only third to Brazil and Indonesia in this regard.

South Africa has historically had Africa's richest, most advanced economy, though the country combines great wealth with extreme poverty. The largest indigenous language groups (and tribes) are the Zulu and Xhosa though the country has 11 official languages. Like its neighbors, South Africa suffers from endemic AIDS. Serious crime is also a persistent problem. Famous South Africans include musical group Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Dr. Christiaan Barnard, who invented the heart transplant, playwright Athol Fugard, actor Basil Rathbone, actress Charlize Theron, Nobel Prize-winning novelist Nadine Gordimer, novelist Alan Paton, scholar and author J.R.R. Tolkien, Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu,

runner Zola Budd, golfers Gary Player, Ernie Els, and Retief Goosen, tennis player Amanda Coetzer, and business magnate Cecil Rhodes. NBA star Steve Nash and NHL star Olaf Kolzig were both born in South Africa but raised in Canada. M.K. "Mahatma" Gandhi spent much of his early life in South Africa, where he first formulated and tried out his ideas of civil disobedience. Shaka, the founder of the Zulu nation, was not only a formidable political leader, but a military genius who successfully defeated the British on the battlefield in at least two major engagements.

SWAZILAND

A tiny, beautiful country between South Africa and Mozambique, Swaziland is Africa's last absolute monarchy. King Mswati III, second of his father's 210 sons, is king and his mother, Queen Ntombi, is the *Indlovukazi* (Queen Mother, lit. "She-Elephant"), who rule jointly as is traditional. Mswati has 13 wives and 27 children; when he dies, one of his sons' mothers will be chosen as *Indlovukazi* and her son will become king. Swaziland is wealthy by African standards, but has the world's worst AIDS

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problem. Swazi, English, and Zulu are the country's three official languages.

ZIMBABWE

Colonized by the British South Africa Company, this country (along with Zambia) formed part of the territory named Rhodesia after BSAC head Cecil Rhodes in 1895. Rhodesia was divided in 1911. The government of Southern Rhodesia unilaterally declared independence from Britain in 1965 when it became clear that Britain was decolonizing in favor of majority-rule systems, and white Rhodesians (less than 5% of the population) wished to maintain their privileged status. No country but *apartheid*-era South Africa recognized this declaration of independence, and black Rhodesian guerrilla movements began trying to depose the government. In 1980, Robert Mugabe was elected prime minister and has ruled the country as a nominally elected dictator ever since. Mugabe has been credibly accused of using his police and the North Korean-trained military for repression, and he has devastated the country's economy by mismanagement and, among other things, seizing the land of 4,000 white farmers in 2002, plunging Zimbabwean agriculture into crisis. English is Zimbabwe's official language. AIDS is epidemic, pushing down life expectancies. Famous Zimbabweans include opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, Olympic gold-medal swimmer Kirsty Coventry, golfer Nick Price, human-rights champion Archbishop Pius Ncube, and Canaan Banana, Zimbabwe's ignominious first ceremonial president who was later jailed for drugging and raping scores of young men. Zimbabwe is named for the Great Zimbabwe Ruins, an ancient capital of the Munhumutapa Empire which once ruled much of Southern Africa. These ruins are an archaeological treasure and are evidence of a formidable civilization which once had trade with lands as far afield as China. The city was eventually abandoned for reasons lost to history.

THE MIDDLE EAST

CYPRUS

Cyprus is an island in the Eastern Mediterranean with a history that stretches back into early antiquity. Christian for its early history, it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1571 and remained under their rule until 1878 when it passed to the British. Cyprus became independent in 1960. Strife between the Greek and Turkish communities led to the former trying to join Greece, and the Turkish military occupying part of the

island to stop it. Cyprus has been partitioned ever since. The Republic of Cyprus government has since joined the European Union, and the status of the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" remains open. Cyprus is quite prosperous, though the northern, Turkish part somewhat less so than the Republic.

EGYPT

See **North Africa** above.

ISRAEL

Founded in 1948 along with Jordan in a UN partition of "British Mandate Palestine," the tiny Jewish state of Israel (slightly smaller than New Jersey) has never been accepted by its Arab neighbors and has fought three major wars to guarantee its existence. It enjoys a cold peace with Egypt, and a *modus vivendi* with Jordan. Most other Arab countries are hostile. Turkey and pre-1979 Iran have been its best friends in the region. A democracy in which citizens of all races and religions enjoy equal rights, Israel has nevertheless suffered tremendous international criticism over its administration of territories conquered in the Six Day War of 1967. Israel contains the holiest sites in Judaism and Christianity, and Islam accords Jerusalem a high place. Israel has, by far, the most advanced and developed economy in the Middle East, one which has grown rapidly in recent years due to an influx of highly-educated former-Soviet Jews as well as loosening of its founders' socialist regulations. Famous Israelis include KISS guitarist Gene Simmons (*né* Chaim Witz), conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim, pianist Yefim Bronfman, violinist Itzhak Perlman, Nobel Prize-winning novelist S.Y. Agnon, novelist Amos Oz, novelist

A.B. Yehoshua, Nobel-winning economist Robert Aumann, Nobel-winning economist Daniel Kahneman, Nobel-winning chemists Ciechanover & Herschko, philosopher Martin Buber, and tennis player Anna Smashnova. Actress Natalie Portman was born in Israel and maintains close ties to the country.

JORDAN

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan came to be when the British appointed King Abdullah I head of "Transjordan," the 80% of British Mandate Palestine east of the Jordan river in 1921. The Hashemites were the traditional rulers of the Hijaz, the west coast of Arabia where the holy cities of Mecca & Medina are located. They were driven out by the House of Sa'ud, who incorporated the Hijaz into what became Saudi Arabia. In 1946, the Transjordan mandate became the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan with Abdullah its king until 1951 when he was assassinated by a former

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Palestinian terrorist worried that, because of Abdullah's good relations with the West and moderation relative to Israel, Jordan might make a separate peace with the Jewish state. Abdullah's son Talal succeeded him but resigned after a year due to mental illness. His son Hussein became king at seventeen and ruled Jordan ably from 1952–1999. Hussein had been present and almost killed with his grandfather in 1951. He survived several assassination attempts during his reign which was greatly complicated by a large influx of Palestinian refugees from the 1967 Six Day War. After King Hussein's death, his son Abdullah II took the throne and, like his father and grandfather, has been a leading voice for moderation in the region. He has travelled extensively in Western capitals, met with the Pope, and has greatly liberalized Jordan's economy with good results. Politics in Jordan, however, remain circumscribed, though Abdullah has discussed making Jordan a democracy instead of a constitutional monarchy. King Abdullah II is, perhaps unusually, a big *Star Trek* fan, even appearing as an extra on *Star Trek: Voyager* while still a prince. The city of Petra, carved into a mountain, is one of the world's archaeological treasures. The ending of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* was filmed in Petra.

SYRIA

Colonized by the French after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, modern Syria became independent in 1946 and suffered political instability until the 1963 takeover of the Ba'ath Party, an Arab nationalist party inspired by European fascism. Hafez al-Assad came to power in an intra-Ba'ath coup in 1966 and ruled as a dictator until his death in 2000, when he was succeeded as a dictator by his son Bashar. The al-Assads are from the minority Alawi sect, and have historically been resented by the Sunni Muslims of the majority. The most serious challenge to their rule, by the Muslim Brotherhood, was met by the massacre and complete destruction of the city of Hama in 1982, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. Damascus, Syria's capital, is the longest continually occupied city in the world, possibly founded as early as 10,000 B.C. In the early Muslim era, Damascus was the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate.

IRAQ

Created from the Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra, modern Iraq followed much the same trajectory as Syria. A British-administered territory after World War I, it became an independent monarchy under the Hashemite King Faisal in 1932. After Faisal's death, Rashid Ali became the country's leader. Due to his pro-Nazi sympathies, Britain invaded Iraq in 1941 and occupied it until 1948, restoring the Hashemites to power. They were deposed in 1958, and three military coups later, the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1968. Saddam Hussein al-Tikriti eventually proved the most ruthless member of the ruling clique and managed to murder his way to the top by 1979. Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, setting off a decade-long war in which he used chemical weapons not only against the Iranians but on his own population,

particularly in the Kurdish north. In 1990, Hussein invaded Kuwait, only to be repelled by an international force under U.S. leadership. In 2003, after more than a decade of economic sanctions and fresh worries that Iraq might provide aid to international terrorists, the U.S. invaded Iraq and deposed Hussein. Although a freely elected government exists, Iraq's future is extremely unsettled. Iraq contains historic Mesopotamia, the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in which the world's first civilizations of Sumer and Babylon arose. Baghdad was a splendid capital under the early-Muslim Abbasid Caliphate until the Mongols sacked it in 1258. Iraq today is populated by three large Muslim groups: Sunni Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the west, and Shi'ite Arabs in the south. The great marshlands of the south have begun to be restored after Hussein's government intentionally dried them up in an attempt to starve the population there for their resistance to him. Iraq is home to some of the most important shrines and schools in the Shi'ite world. Many Iraqi Jews and Christians now live abroad.

IRAN

Iran has been settled since prehistoric times. In antiquity, the Median Empire (c. 800–550 B.C.) and the Achaemenid Empire (c. 650–330 B.C.) were great states which became known as Persia. The latter was ruled by, among others, the famous Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes. At its height, Achaemenid Persia ruled most of the known world between India and Europe. The Parthian and Sassanian Empires were later Persian rivals to Rome and the Byzantine Empire, respectively. When the Sassanian Empire began to collapse in the seventh century, Arab armies took advantage and conquered much of it, bringing Islam and subjugating indigenous Persian culture and religion (particularly Zoroastrianism, the major religion of ancient Persia). By the twelfth century, the Persians adopted the creed of Twelver Shi'ism and made it into a vehicle for Persian opposition to Arabian domination of the Islamic world. Traditional Persian arts and poetry began to return with an Islamic flavor. The Mongol invasion in the 13th century devastated Persia, with perhaps half its population being killed at the Mongols' hands. No unitary Persian state existed from approximately 651 to 1501, when the Safavid dynasty emerged from Azerbaijan and reestablished the foundations of something that could be called "Iran." A series of dynasties followed until the last, the Qajars, were subjected to a constitutional revolution in 1906, which resulted in a parliament and constitution checking their powers. The Qajars were overthrown in a coup in 1921 by Reza Shah who became an autocratic modernizer who was succeeded by his son, who in turn was overthrown by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which ushered in a religiously-based despotism. The Islamic Revolution almost did not survive its infancy, but Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion caused the increasingly dissatisfied public to rally around the government. Since 1979, Iran has lost much of its traditional cultural dynamism. Even under the illiberal

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Shah, Iranian literature and poetry were world-class. Only Iranian cinema remains globally well-regarded. The Islamic Republic's pursuit of nuclear weapons is the subject of tremendous controversy, as is its backing of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere abroad. Iran has one of the youngest populations in the world, with two-thirds of its people under 25, and the regime is generally unpopular among the young. What the future holds for this large, important country is anyone's guess. Iran is the world's second-largest producer of natural gas, and third-largest exporter of oil. Iran, like most former empires, has an extremely diverse population, with about half the population considered Persians, a quarter Azeris (speaking a Turkic language unrelated to Persian), and dozens of smaller groups. Persian, also known as Farsi, is an Indo-European language with similarities to English, German, etc. Some familiar vocabulary might be *mādar*, *barādar*, and *bad*, meaning "mother," "brother," and "bad." Iran has a tremendous cultural patrimony in poetry, literature, architecture, painting, textiles, and other arts. Famous contemporary Iranians and Iranian-Americans include poets Ahmad Shamlu and Forugh Farrokhzad, director Abbas Kiarostami, actress Shohreh Aghdashloo, classical guitarist Lily Afshar, and TV reporter Christiane Amanpour. World-class figures from Persian history include the poet Sa'di, the philosopher al-Farabi, and the polymath Omar Khayyam. Tennis great Andre Agassi is an American of Iranian parentage, as is actress Catherine Bell.

KUWAIT

Kuwait emerged as an enclave in the Ottoman Empire, and eventually became an independent emirate under the al-Sabah dynasty as a British protectorate. By the 1950s, Kuwait was the largest exporter of oil in the Persian Gulf and became one of the richest countries in the world, per capita. Kuwait's wealth attracted the attention of Saddam Hussein who, having effectively lost the Iran-Iraq War, was looking for easier prey. In 1990, Iraq invaded, annexed, and laid waste to much of Kuwait. A U.S.-led coalition under UN sponsorship liberated Kuwait in 1991. Kuwait's wealth helped them rapidly rebuild the billions of dollars in infrastructural damage left from the occupation and war, especially the oil-well fires set by the retreating Iraqis. (These fires were the subject of the spectacular IMAX documentary *The Fires of Kuwait*.) Since its liberation, Kuwait has become a more representative constitutional monarchy, expanding the franchise to women. Its political culture is still circumscribed, but it has moved in a more liberal direction.

LEBANON

Lebanon is a small coastal country on the Eastern Mediterranean. It has very high, snow-capped mountains, including Mount Lebanon from which the country takes its name, within driving distance of sunny beaches. The slopes of these mountains were once covered by massive

cedar forests, hence the famous "Cedars of Lebanon" mentioned in the Bible and elsewhere. Byblos in Lebanon is considered one of the oldest continuously occupied cities in the world, some 7,000 years old. The seafaring empire of the Phoenicians was based in Lebanon until it was destroyed by Alexander the Great. An Ottoman province, Lebanon went to the French after World War I. It became independent in 1943, since which several foreign wars and the awful 1975-1990 civil war have done tremendous damage to Lebanon, considered the Eastern Mediterranean's Riviera, and Beirut, once called the Paris of the Middle East. Lebanon is one of the few Arab countries to have a sizable Christian population, though many Lebanese Christians have emigrated to the U.S. and elsewhere. Prominent North Americans of Lebanese descent include consumer advocate Ralph Nader, singer Paul Anka, actor Jaime Farr, actress Salma Hayek, actor Casey Kasem, actor Tony Shalhoub, actor Danny Thomas, actress Amy Yasbeck, four-star general John Abizaid, guitarist Dick Dale, singer Sammy Hagar, composer Frank Zappa, politicians Spencer Abraham, George Mitchell, Donna Shalala, and John Sununu, quarterbacks Doug Flutie and Jeff George, basketballer Rony Seikaly, and racer Bobby Rahal. NBA star Steve Kerr was born in Beirut, where his father, Malcolm Kerr (an American also born in Beirut) was a scholar of the Middle East until he was assassinated by the terrorist group Islamic Jihad in 1984.

SAUDI ARABIA

The Sa'ud clan began to establish dominance in central Arabia in the 1740s through an alliance between Muhammad ibn Sa'ud and fundamentalist cleric Muhammad ibn 'Abd-al-Wahhab. Fueled by religious fervor and Sa'ud's clever leadership, his troops conquered much of Arabia. The Saudi house's fortunes waxed and waned until 'Abd-al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud subjugated much of the Arabian peninsula in the first two decades of the twentieth century, eventually winning recognition from the British, who tried to reestablish the Hashemites the Saudis had expelled from the Hijaz Red Sea territory in Jordan and Iraq. Huge oil reserves were discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1938, and it is the world's largest producer of oil to this day. The Saudi government remains much a family affair, peopled by the huge House of Sa'ud. Politically, Saudi Arabia is extremely repressive. It admits no freedom of religion, and its state religion is a variety of Islam often called Wahhabism after its founder. Wahhabism is one of the most reactionary schools of Islam and its export around the world has been subsidized by massive amounts of oil wealth. The Saudis also destroyed many historic monuments in Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz in the name of religious purity. Most of Saudi Arabia is desert. Saudi Arabia is a long standing rival to Iran for domination of the Persian Gulf and, despite its export of radical religious ideology, it remains a formal ally of the United States and other Western nations.

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YEMEN

Yemen is an ancient land, possibly the Biblical land of Sheba. It was known to the Romans as *Arabia Felix*, or "Fortunate Arabia," due to its wealth derived from the spice trade. Modern Yemen is not so fortunate; it is one of the poorest countries in the Middle East. It is home to one of the world's fastest-growing populations, with the average Yemeni woman bearing seven children. Yemeni society is unusual to the degree it remains clannish and subject to blood feuds. Kidnapping has been a common means to pursue quarrels. English comedian Eddie Izzard was born in Yemen.

OMAN

Oman was converted to Islam during Muhammad's lifetime, though over the centuries, it has evolved its own characteristic form of the faith, called Ibadism. Muscat, the capital, was founded in the second century A.D., making it one of the older cities in the Middle East. It was occupied by the Portuguese for 140 years until they were expelled by the Ottomans in 1648. A Yemeni tribal leader kicked out the Ottomans in 1741 and founded the line of sultans that still rules today. British influence became predominant in the area until it became a formal protectorate. A substantial rebellion broke out in the 1950s, which was put down by the British. However, the sultan at the time, Sa'id, was extremely capricious and oppressive. He was overthrown in 1970, probably with British connivance, by his son Qaboos who remains sultan today. Qaboos was immediately faced with the problem of the Dhofar War (1965-75) which was a Communist insurgency sponsored by South Yemen. Qaboos, with the aid of forces on loan from the Shah of Iran and the British Royal Air Force, defeated the rebellion. Oman has an absolute monarchy, but a fairly tolerant, if very traditional, society. Oman's orchestra, a 120-seat group mixing men and women, is one of the Middle East's few quality classical-music ensembles. Scottish-Australian actress Isla Fisher was born in Muscat, Oman.

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

The UAE, formerly known as the Pirate Coast and the Trucial States, are comprised of seven emirates, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwayn, on a peninsula on the Persian Gulf. The UAE is extremely wealthy, not only exporting oil, but having become a global center for banking, finance, and shipping. Like Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and possibly Oman, the UAE were not swallowed up by the forces of 'Abd-al-'Aziz ibn Sa'ud in the 1920s because of their alliance with the British. The UAE has a very diverse population, as most of the inhabitants are not native Emiratis, but foreigners drawn by the Emirates' prosperity. There is a particularly large community of South Asians from India and Pakistan. Although not particularly politically liberal, the UAE are religiously tolerant, somewhat unusually for Arabia. Camel racing is the most popular sport in the Emirates, followed by horse racing, soccer, tennis, and golf. Dubai is the economic

center of the Emirates, with the largest man-made port in the world. Dubai is home to the world's tallest hotel, the Burj al-Arab ("Arabs' Tower"), and is expected to have the world's tallest structure in the Burj Dubai ("Dubai Tower").

QATAR

Qatar (preferred English pronunciation "kah-TAR"; though "cutter" or "gutter" in crude imitation of Arabic is common) is another very wealthy Persian Gulf monarchy. It sits on a peninsula about the size of Connecticut. It is mostly a sandy plain, but the "Inland Sea" of sand dunes in the southeast is a striking geographical feature. Qatar, like Saudi Arabia, professes Wahhabi Islam, though in practice they are more liberal, particularly in the area of religious tolerance, though their culture remains much more traditional than, e.g., that of the UAE. Doha, Qatar's capital, is home to both al-Jazeera, the Arab-language television network, and the U.S. military's regional headquarters.

BAHRAIN

A tiny, oil-rich island northwest of Qatar, Bahrain is the smallest Arab country. (It is actually an archipelago of 33 islands, but only one is sizable. The country's total area is smaller than a single airport in Saudi Arabia.) It has an ancient history, going back as far as the Assyrians. Bahrain historically was an object of contention between various powers, but became independent as a British protectorate. Bahrain has liberalized considerably since the ascension of the current ruler in 1999. This has, seemingly paradoxically, both allowed women's rights as well as Islamist parties to advance. Bahrain is extremely prosperous, and its economy is growing rapidly. Unlike its Saudi neighbor, Bahrain is generally religiously tolerant, and unusual for a Gulf country, it possesses a genuine middle class. Tourism is a major industry in Bahrain. The singer Michael Jackson briefly relocated to Bahrain in the wake of legal troubles. Scottish painter Jack Vettriano began his painting career while employed as a management consultant in Bahrain.