

6

Resources

a geographic “big idea”
and some consequences
in Southwest Asia.



Satellite image showing an artificial island in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (Image from NASA). Even in a small country, people can afford to build things like this if they have a lot of income from oil. Do an internet search for other pictures from Dubai (including the world’s tallest building in 2015).

Contents:

Scroll down to read this
like a book, or, click on a
topic below to jump to a
section.

Southwest Asia as a GeoLab about resources

Are resources always good?

Resources and consequences:

- 1: Soft soil for farming**
- 2: Flooding rivers**
- 3: Different uses**
- 4: Specialization**
- 5: Major religions**
- 6: Trade and science**
- 7: Petroleum**
- 8: Country borders**
- 9: Democracy & terrorism**

Putting it all together

Interactive 6.1:
Clickable South West
Asia



*A clickable, interactive
version of the South
West Asia Map*



Introduction: Are resources always good?

Natural resources are important, because they can provide income and support jobs. Unequal access to resources, however, can also cause problems.

These facts have consequences that you can see when you look at many maps of Southwest Asia - e.g., maps that show rainfall, land use, oil deposits, population density, religion, and political control.

Our goal in this chapter is to learn how to interpret maps like these.



Oil drill with fracking equipment



Oil pump ("walking mule")



Oil refinery and railroad tanker cars



Large ocean-going tanker ship

"It's really weird. That old farmhouse is now worth half a million dollars."

Comments like this are common in places where people find new resources. Western North Dakota is a good example (in 2019).

North Dakota is on the border between the United States and Canada. It is like Mongolia, a country in central Asia, north of China. Both areas have cold winters, because they are far from the equator. Both places are dry grasslands, because they are far from any ocean. Both places have small populations, because few people want to live in cold, dry places.

Then someone discovered fracking. **Fracking** (hydraulic fracturing) is a way to get oil out of a rock called shale.

Oil companies started drilling wells. They made a lot of money. Other people soon discovered another way to make money. They could get rich by selling things to oil workers – bread, toothpaste, boots, trucks, . . . even old farmhouses.

This basic story has happened in many places. The story has three parts:

1. Someone discovers a natural resource in a place. A **natural resource** is something in nature that people can use. Examples include tall trees, fields of good soil, rocks that contain gold, a sheltered harbor for boats, a plant that cures warts, a nice view, . . .
2. People move to that place to use the resource.
3. Other people move to that place because the population is growing. They sell things or provide services like car repair, health care, music concerts, or classes in school.

This is all part of a process called economic development. **Economic development** is a way of describing the success of people in a place.

In more developed countries (MDCs) -- more money, education, good health, long lives.

In less developed countries (LDCs) -- less money, less education, sickness, short lives.

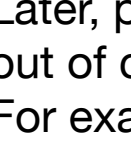
Think back to the beginning of human history.

People survived by hunting or gathering food. They had to live in places that had a lot of wild animals and plants. They had a very simple kind of economic development.

Later, people learned how to cut trees, dig for metals, or make pots out of clay. These new ideas and skills made different places valuable. For example, they made forests and some rocks into resources.

The process of economic development is very complex. You can read more about it in an economics book or website. Here, we want to explore one key geographic fact.

Different places in the world have different natural resources.



Big Idea: Having natural resources is a good thing, if you know how to use them and you can avoid some typical problems.

Investigating ideas about resources and development.

Southwest Asia is a good "laboratory" for us to learn about resources. People have lived there for thousands of years. They started as hunters, looking for wild animals to kill and eat.

Later, people discovered other resources in Southwest Asia.

For example, they learned how to plant seeds and herd animals. They learned how to control river floods and irrigate crops. Still later, they learned how to make metal tools and weapons. Discoveries like these helped people make some of the first urban civilizations in the world.

A quick eight-point summary of the historical importance of Southwest Asia

- 1) 9000 years ago, people learned how to plant seeds and grow food in this region.
- 2) 7000 years ago, people began irrigating crops in the river valleys of this region.
- 3) 3000-5000 years ago, these river valleys were the core of several famous empires – Sumeria, Babylon, Assyria, etc. People in those empires invented writing, astronomy, and written laws. (We'll say more about this later).
- 4) 2500 years ago, another group of people in Southwest Asia – the Hittites – were the first people in the world to make iron tools and weapons.
- 5) Four of the most important religions in the world started in Southwest Asia.
- 6) 1500 years ago, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Southwest Asia and nearby North Africa became a global "core area" of science and education.
- 7) Starting in the 20th century, Southwest Asia has produced a lot of petroleum. This oil is sold for use in cars, trucks, and factories in many parts of the world.
- 8) In the 21st century, Southwest Asia has several of the least democratic governments in the world. This region is also the home of some really bad terrorist groups.



Idea: Resource development is an important part of economic growth and political power.

In this chapter, we will explore some consequences of resource use in Southwest Asia.

Note: one of the most important "resources" of Southwest Asia is its location in the world.

It has a strategic position near the middle of the world's largest landmass – an area that some historians called "the crossroads of history."



This map shows Southwest Asia's strategic location where Africa, Europe, and Asia come together. The area is also called the Middle East, the Near East, or just "the Middle."

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #1 When people learned how to plant seeds, soft dirt became a resource

The Old Testament of the Bible is a sacred text for three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. One part of the Old Testament is called Exodus. This “book” tells about the migration of a group of people called the Children of Israel (also known as Israelites, Hebrews, or Jews.) A **nation** is a group of people who have the same language and culture.

Near the end of the journey, their leader, Moses, looked down from a mountain. He said he saw “a land of milk and honey.” He meant it looked like rich land, full of useful resources.

Compared to the Sinai desert, this is true. But Southwest Asia is not really a rich land.

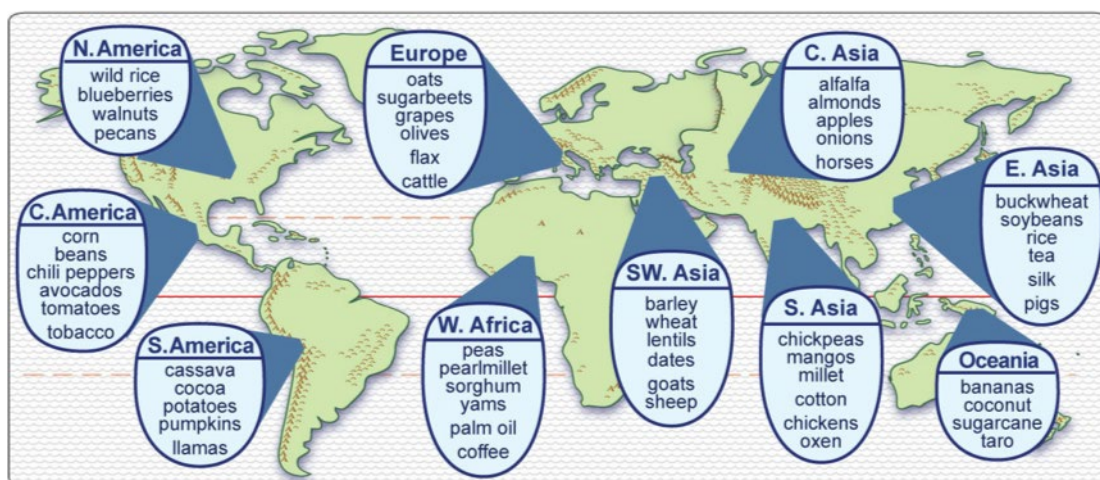
- Summers are hot and very dry. Winters are cool, with only a few rainy days.
- Most of the soil is rocky, because water is needed to help break rocks apart and make soil.
- The natural plant cover is a mix of low shrubs and thorny trees – NOT very good to eat!
- There were very few large, slow animals that people could easily hunt for food.

All in all, this was a hard place to be a hunter. As a result, people kept looking for different ways to get food. They tried herding sheep and goats. These animals could provide meat, milk, and skins for clothing. People also tried gathering seeds to make into bread or cereal.

Eventually, some people made a big discovery. They learned how to plant seeds and grow their own food. Farming was hard work, but it was better than trying to make a living by hunting in a place where animals were scarce, small, and fast.

The Bible has a story about a farmer spreading seed in different places – on stony soil, on a path, among weeds, and on good ground. If you “read between the lines,” this story tells you about life in ancient Southwest Asia. Only the good ground made a good yield!

The process of planting seed and harvesting crops is called agriculture. People actually learned how to do this in several different places in the ancient world. The plants that people used as resources, however, were different in different parts of the world (see map).



If the story ended here, it wouldn't be very interesting. You probably wouldn't be reading it (because writing would not have been invented, cars and TVs wouldn't exist, and so forth). To understand how humans learned how to be more than just hunters and farmers, we need to look at other resources and their consequences.

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #2: Flooding rivers can be a resource, if you know how to control water.

Southwest Asia is a dry place. It has just a short rainy season in winter. Fortunately, some snow falls on nearby mountains. It melts and causes rivers to flood in spring. A **flood** is what happens when a river has more water than it can carry in its channel. The extra water spreads over any low land close to the river.

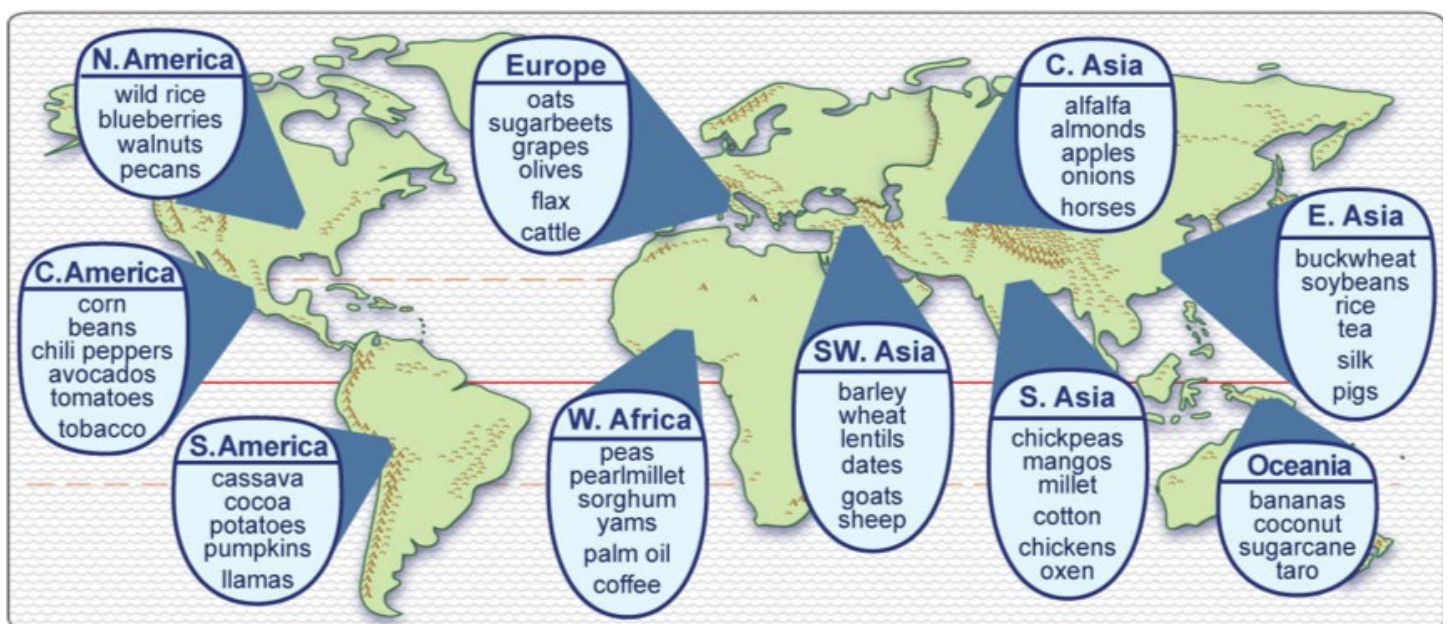
To most people today, floods are bad. In ancient times, however, people thought floods were good. Over time, a flooding river makes a floodplain by depositing mud on low land near the river. Even more important, floods make the soil softer, easier to dig or plow. Floods also fill the ground with water. People can get this groundwater later by digging wells.

This is good for subsistence farmers (people who grow food just for themselves). If people get organized, however, they can build canals or pipes to carry water from wells and rivers to fields. Basically, they make artificial floods when they want them. This is called irrigation. **Irrigation** is the process of adding water to fields. It can improve yields by keeping crops from drying out during times when it does not rain.

Building an irrigation system takes a lot of skill and effort. The payoff, however, is huge – irrigation can really increase food production. This fact is the reason why some people say that irrigation was the foundation for the first civilizations.

You can look up the definition and characteristics of civilization in a history book or website. Here, we just want to underline one geographic fact:

Many early civilizations started near rivers that made floods.



The soft soil on a floodplain was a great resource. A farmer on a floodplain could grow enough food to feed many other people. Those people, in turn, could do other jobs. They could run stores, build buildings, form governments, and fight battles.

Before we look at these other jobs, we should make one thing clear. Economic development does not always look the same in every place. This is the next consequence we will consider.

Interactive 6.2: Water in Mesopotamia



Analyze a water budget in this activity.

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #3: Even in places with similar environmental conditions, people can choose to use different resources and/or do different things with them.

You just learned about some empires that grew up next to flooding rivers. Historians call these the “hydraulic” civilizations (“hydraulic” means “water-moving.”) All of the hydraulic civilizations had cities, governments, armies, religions, and writing systems. The civilizations were not exactly the same, however. Look, for example, at the process of writing:

- **Egyptians** wrote by carving pictures in stone. Each picture meant an idea.
- **Sumerians** wrote by poking sticks into clay. Each group of marks was like a letter.
- **Indus Valley people** made small seals (carved symbols) out of clay, stone, or bone.
- **Hebrew people** used an alphabet to write on “paper” made from animal skins.
- **Chinese people** wrote word-symbols with ink and a brush, on paper made from plants.

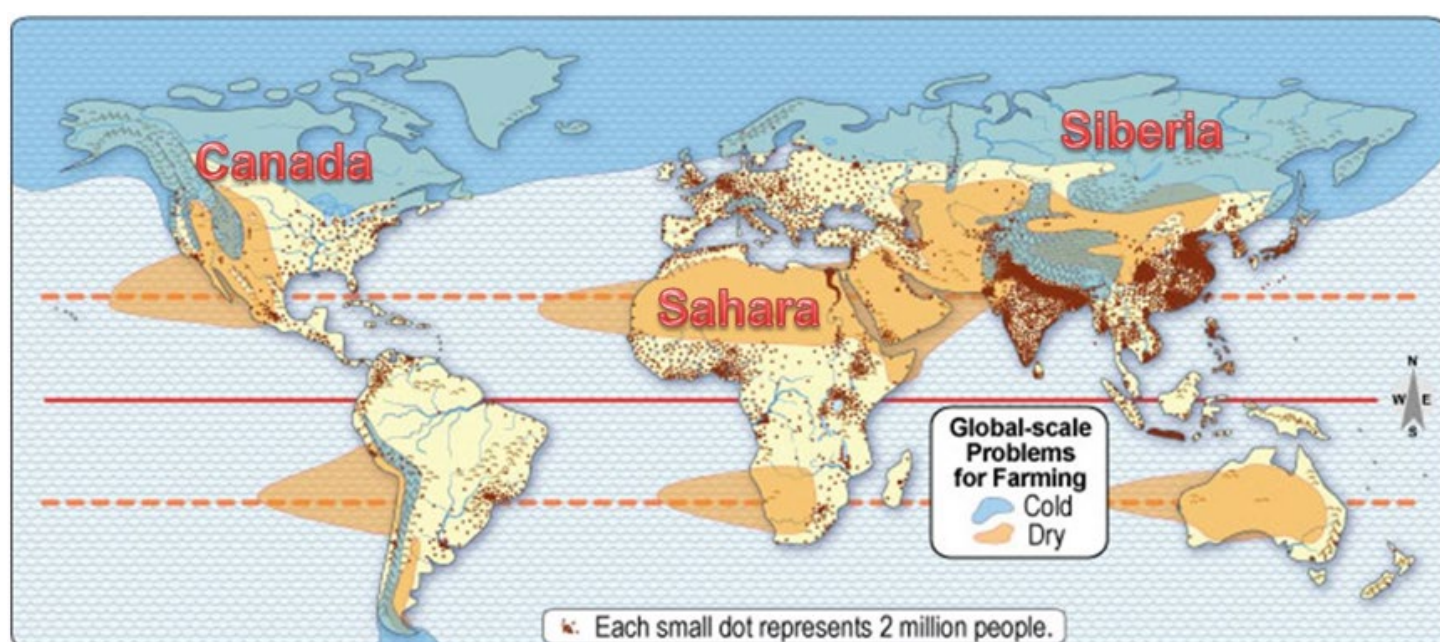
You can find out more about ancient civilizations in a history book or website. Here, the main message we should get from this short list is a simple but important generalization:

People in different places can have different ideas and invent different tools, even in places that have similar conditions.

A good look at a world map of farming gives us another important message:

Geographic conditions in some places are too tough (at least so far).

For example, it’s very hard to grow food in cold places like northern Canada or Siberia (unless you build something like a greenhouse!) And no one can grow food in a desert if there is no river or groundwater. As a result, few people live in really cold or dry places.



True, many people now live in cities. Most people are not farmers. But everyone has to eat! As a result, very few cities are located far from good farmland.

Like any generalization, this statement has some exceptions. A few cities are located close to another valuable resource, like a deposit of gold or iron. People can sell that resource in order to get money to pay someone to send food to them.

Other cities are built in strategic locations. Examples include good harbors or easy places to cross a river or go through mountains. A strategic location is also a kind of resource! A **strategic location** is a place that is easy to defend or important to attack.

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #4: In some places, farmers can grow enough food to feed many people. Those people can do other things, like art, astronomy, mathematics, and government.

Using irrigation, farmers on floodplains were able to feed many people. Those people could then do other things. Some could try to invent things, like mathematics, science, or art. Other people could be teachers or religious leaders. Still others wrote codes of law.



Important principle of history: Written laws are very important for the growth of civilization.

Without written laws, people are likely to solve problems by arguing or fighting. Suppose you decide to build a house. Tomorrow, someone else could move into your house. If you object, they might beat you, or even kill you. Who would want to build a house, plant a field, or start a factory if someone else can just take it from you?

With written laws, there is a record of the rules. One rule, for example, might be a tablet, seal, or sheet of paper that tells everyone that you own a piece of land. If you plant a crop there, or build a house, no one can take it away. Another rule might make everyone use the same weights to measure things they sell.

You can learn more about the development of legal systems in a civics book or website. Here, we want to underline a geographic fact:

Written laws came out of places where people had already learned how to use resources.

The resource users could support other people whose job was to think of new ideas.

In the next consequence, we see how this basic idea applies even to religion.

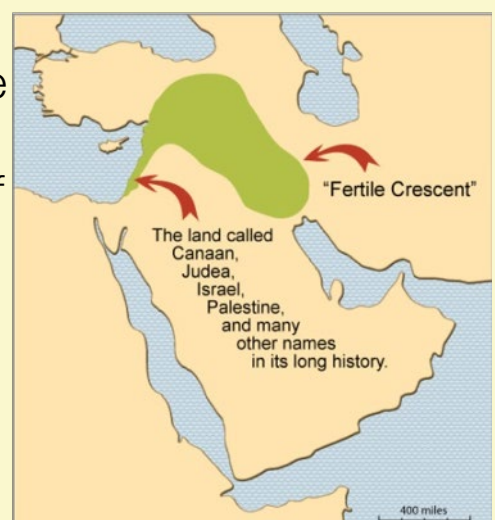
A NOTE ABOUT “THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY”

CAUTION: The writers of some history books describe something that they call “the Fertile Crescent.” This is an arc of land that includes Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), part of Syria, and Israel. (Israel is an area that was also called Canaan, Judea, Palestine, and other names by different people at different times).

We think these writers are really stretching the idea of “fertile.” The land called Canaan was important historically, but not because it is especially fertile. It was important because of what it was between – powerful empires like Egypt and Babylon, Persia and Rome, Sultans and Crusaders, and, today, Zionists and Palestinians (both supported by outsiders).

This area was important because of its connections, not its conditions.

Another caution: Remember, a resource is something people have learned how to use. At the time of the Bible, Israel was part of the Roman Empire. The Romans ruled over many small countries like Israel. But what if someone in Israel had invented a way to make a terrible weapon out of desert sand? Dry countries like Israel or Syria might have been stronger than Rome, and history would certainly be different! Think about it.



[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #5: Four major religions started in Southwest Asia.

Over the centuries, people have created beautiful art and music to express religious ideas. People have also tortured and killed other people because of their religion. All through history, religion has been a powerful influence on human behavior – both good and bad.

If we want to understand the modern world, therefore, we need to know where religious ideas came from and how they spread. This fact leads us right back to the ancient river civilizations and the area called the Fertile Crescent. This was the original home of many world religions:

- **Zoroastrianism** started in Southwest Asia, in the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent.
- **Hinduism** started in Central Asia and spread south into the Indus and Ganges valleys.
- **Judaism** started in Southwest Asia, in the land called Canaan, Israel, Palestine, etc.
- **Buddhism** started in South Asia near the Ganges River (in the area now called India).
- **Confucianism** started near the Huang He (Yellow River) near the east coast of China.
- **Christianity** began in Southwest Asia, near the Jordan River in Canaan/Israel.
- **Islam** began in Southwest Asia, in a trading center called Mecca, in western Arabia.

Looking at this list, you can see that Southwest Asia was the starting point for four major religions. Most of these religions spread out and eventually split into different groups.

For example, the Christian religion split into Byzantine Catholic, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some smaller groups. Later, people broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. This split is called the Protestant Reformation. You can find details in history books or websites.

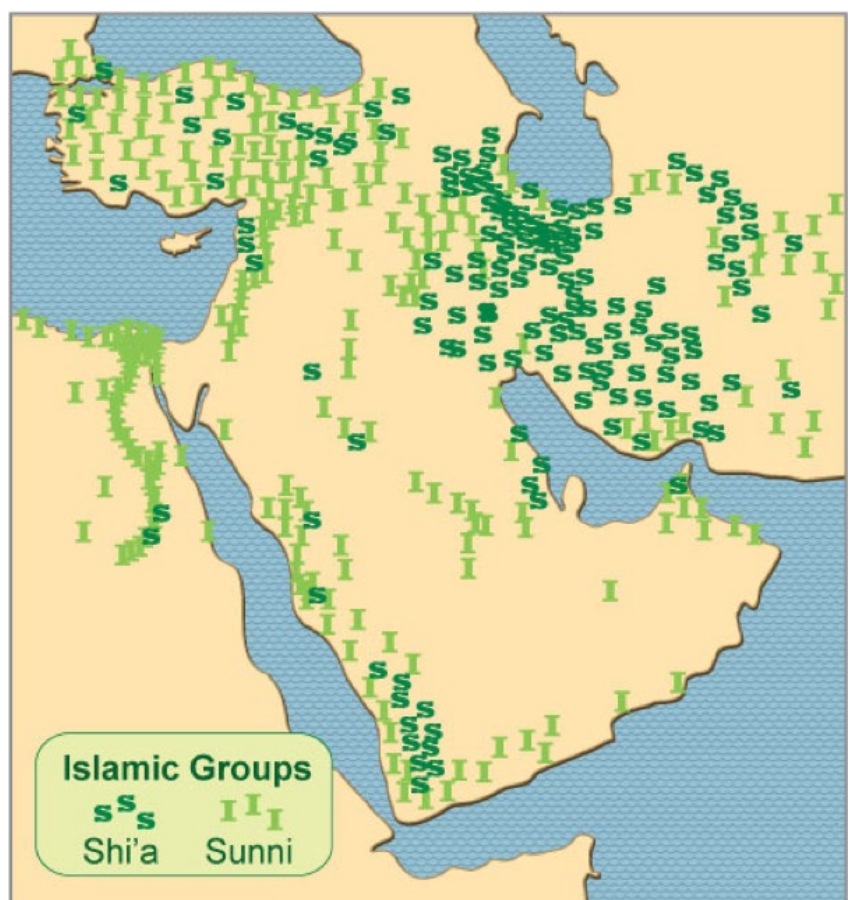
In order to understand Southwest Asia, we have to know about another key religious division.

Shortly after it started, the followers of Islam split into two main groups. These two branches of Islam are now called Sunni and Shi'a (or Shi'ite) Islam.

The differences are important. They were part of the reason for several wars in the past. They continue to cause problems for people trying to govern in Southwest Asia today:

The rulers of a country might be Sunni, while most of the people are Shi'ite, or vice versa.

Major resources – like water and oil – may be controlled by a different group than the rulers or the majority in a country.



[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)

Interactive 6.3:
Spread of Islam



Look at the spread of Islam over South West Asia and beyond.



Consequence #6: After Rome fell, Islamic cities became centers of science and education. (Science is the key to identifying and developing resources.)

The centuries after about 400 CE were tough. “Barbarian” people attacked Rome from the north. They lived in tents or small villages. They were glad to steal Roman weapons and gold, but they did not want to live like Romans! The attackers destroyed Roman statues and burned Roman books. They killed Romans and used their houses as cattle barns. Between 400 and 500 CE, the city of Rome lost nine-tenths of its people. Schools, theaters, stadiums, and libraries were abandoned. Most features of urban civilization disappeared.

Far to the east, the Han Dynasty in China also collapsed. This led to “the time of three kingdoms” – several centuries of bloody wars in East Asia.

In 541, a different disaster hit the city of Constantinople (see map). A plague (disease) came and killed more than half the people. This led to the collapse of the Byzantine empire.

By the year 600, the world had lost most of its powerful rulers. Fortunately, some of the old trade connections survived. Traders from Arabia took advantage of their central location. They took control of the trade networks that linked China with Europe and West Africa.

It was like: “how much Chinese silk can you buy with a pound of African gold?”

When a new religion called Islam started in Arabia, these trade networks helped it to spread much faster and farther than any religion before it. Cities in Arabia and North Africa became centers of learning and culture. Arab scholars translated books from Greek and Latin. They learned and then improved Greek and Roman ideas of mathematics, navigation, and medicine.



Still later, the power center moved north. Turkish sultans captured Constantinople. Recognizing its strategic value, they made it the capital of their empire (which became known as the Ottoman Empire). They renamed the city Istanbul, the name it still has today.

Meanwhile, Islamic armies also invaded India. They set up a government called the Delhi Sultanates. One sultan built the Taj Mahal, one of the most famous buildings in India. Still farther east, nomadic Mongols were conquering China and invading Central Asia. Later, several Mongol Khans (rulers) converted to Islam. This helped Islam spread into central Asia and western China. The chapters on South Asia and China have more about these invasions.

The Arab trade networks and the global spread of Islam are important background for the next story about the consequences of resources in Southwest Asia.

Jump to Table of Contents	Previous Page	Next Page	Jump to Putting it All Together
---	-------------------------------	---------------------------	---



Consequence #7: Southwest Asia has a key resource for modern times: petroleum.

To find oil, you must look in the right kind of rocks. Basically, you want rocks that were formed in shallow seas, way back when giant trees and dinosaurs lived on earth. You also need an earthquake fault or a structural dome of rock to trap the oil. (A structural dome is a place where the rocks form a kind of arch. It looks like an upside-down bowl of rock.)

Science fact: Thanks to Soviet and American nuclear bomb tests, scientists know a lot about rock structures. Every explosion was like a geology experiment. It sent seismic waves (rock vibrations) in all directions. Here is the key science fact:

Seismic waves travel at different speeds through different kinds of rock. Using sensitive monitors, scientists can “read” these waves and map the rock structure underground. As a result, scientists know where most of the domes and earthquake faults are in the world. In fact, they even know roughly how many barrels of oil are ever likely to be found in each major rock structure.

When someone talks about a new oil “discovery” today, this is what it means:

People have drilled a hole and proved that there is oil there.

In other words, people rarely find “new” oil. They drill in a place where scientists already thought (often since the 1950s) there might be some oil.

Only about one tenth of the land area of the Earth has the right kind of rock to contain oil. Undersea oil-bearing areas are an even smaller fraction of the total area of the oceans.

You can drill anywhere you want in the other 95% of the world, but you are not likely to find oil.



Question: Why is this important?

Answer: because Southwest Asia has a lot of the right kind of rock.

Selling oil can make people rich. It can also support dictators, buy weapons, and train terrorists. To understand how this situation came about, it is not enough just to know about the geology and geography of petroleum. We also need to look at another way in which petroleum fits into the history of Southwest Asia.

That leads us to the next consequence of the big idea about natural resources.

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #8: After World War I, oil resources made Southwest Asia into a kind of “prize” in a global power struggle.

Like every ancient empire, the Islamic empires of the Middle Ages did not last. In the west, people in Spain started a long fight called the Reconquista (reconquest). They finally drove the last Islamic rulers out in 1492.

(P.S. When that happened, the Spanish king and queen decided they could finally afford to send a sailor named Columbus to look for a new route to India. He then “discovered” America and started the era of European expansion!)

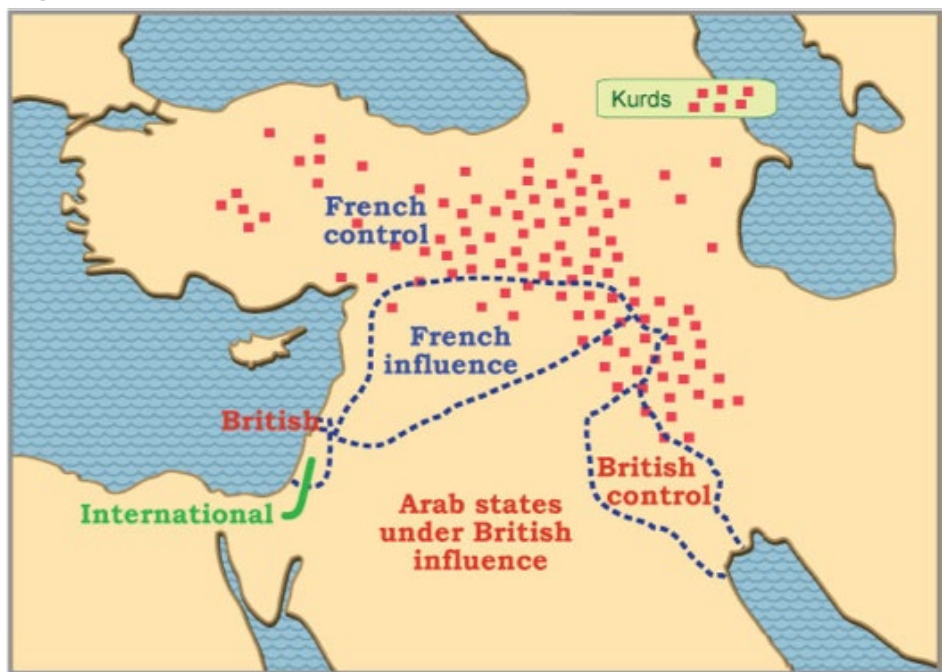
About the same time, people in other places also fought back against Islamic rulers. People in South Asia revolted against the Delhi sultans. People in Central Asia refused to pay taxes to distant rulers. Armies from several countries in Europe went to help defeat Islamic armies at Vienna (an old Roman city that was the capital of the Habsburg Empire.) Slowly, they drove Islamic forces out of Europe.

Partly to regain lost territory, the Ottoman Turks (Islamic rulers of Southwest Asia) chose to fight on the German side in World War I.

That was not a smart decision!

The alliance of France, Britain, and other countries won the war.

Then they divided the Ottoman Empire. They gave different areas to France and Britain. They called these areas “protectorates.”



While drawing the borders between protectorates, European rulers made big mistakes.

For example, the large rivers of ancient Mesopotamia – Tigris and Euphrates – both start in the French protectorate (the area that is now called Turkey). Then the rivers flow through Syria (an Arab country today that was under French influence in 1920). The rivers come together in the British protectorate, in the area that is now called Iraq.

What happens if people in Turkey or Syria build a dam or take water out of the river? People downstream in Iraq depend on the rivers for water, because their land gets very little rain.

To make matters even worse, the people drawing the borders between countries did not make a country for every important group of people. For example, a large group called the Kurds were divided and put in different protectorates. When these areas became independent, the Kurds found themselves in different countries – Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

At first, the protectorate agreement also ignored the Jewish people. Later, the Europeans made a new country and called it Israel. A history book or website can tell you more about the history of Israel and the Palestinian people who already lived there. Here, we just want to note one fact: Many of today’s conflicts in Southwest Asia have their roots in a basic geographic question:

How should people draw borders and divide resources?

This leads to our final consequence – a link between resources and terrorism.

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)



Consequence #9: A valuable resource like oil can actually make an underdeveloped country less democratic and more likely to support terrorism.

You might think that having a valuable resource would make people happy. After all, they can make money by selling the resource to other people. Unfortunately, money from selling oil can also make a place less democratic.

Here is how things work, according to scholars who have studied the process:

1. Someone discovers oil in a less-developed country (LDC).
2. International companies pay the LDC rulers for the right to drill wells and pump oil.
3. The LDC rulers can use the money for many purposes. For example, they can choose to give their people cheap gas or food, free health care, free college, and so forth.

So far, so good . . . BUT

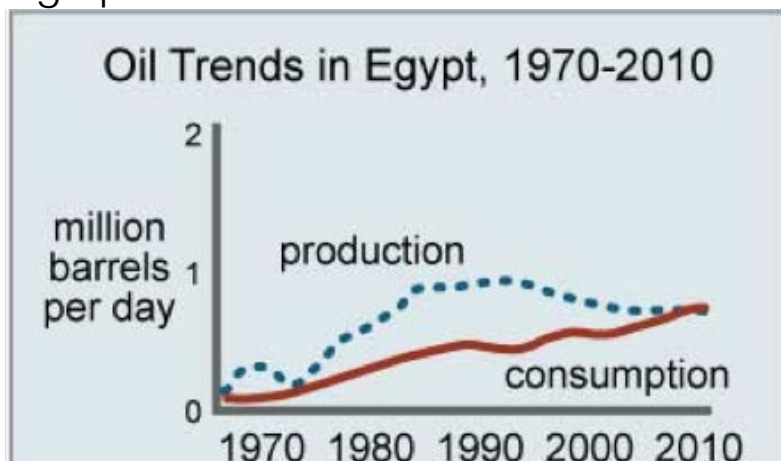
4. The rulers can also use the money to buy weapons and soldiers.
5. The rulers can control people by threatening to stop the gifts or put people in jail.
6. The rulers may not care what people think, because the money they get from oil gives them a lot of power. They may become wasteful and corrupt. For example, they might buy fancy buildings, big yachts, or houses in foreign countries. (Remember the picture of a man-made island in the beginning of this chapter?)

This list is a generalization, but it is often true. Careful studies show that the freedom of ordinary people in a country often goes down when oil income goes up. Moreover, dangerous riots and even terrorists can come from countries that have a lot of income from oil.

We can summarize this idea with a graph.

The graph shows the history of oil in Egypt:

- The dotted line shows oil production.
- The solid line shows oil consumption.



The graph shows that the 1980s were “the good times.” Oil production was high and consumption in Egypt was low. There was a lot of extra oil, which made a lot of money when it was sold to people in other countries. Then in the 1990s oil production started to go down, while consumption continued to rise.

By 2010, the people of Egypt were using all of the oil they could produce. With no oil to sell to other countries, the government had less money to give things to people. That made many people unhappy – they had gotten used to low-cost food and gasoline!

Soon, the government started to raise taxes in order to pay for basic services like fixing roads and running schools. That made people even more angry.

They started a revolution that drove the government out in 2011.

Here is a “little” question: how can people in Egypt solve problems, if the country has run out of oil to sell? What other resources can they develop?

This little question is just a hint of the “big” question that is coming: what will happen when other countries in Southwest Asia start to run out of oil to sell?

In this chapter, you learned several things about Southwest Asia.

- 1) Some of the world’s first civilizations began in Southwest Asia.
- 2) Four of the world’s great religions started in Southwest Asia.
- 3) Later, people discovered a lot of oil in Southwest Asia.
- 4) After the World Wars, European powers divided the Ottoman Empire of Southwest Asia into many smaller countries. Unfortunately, they based their decisions on things like resources and trade, not on religion, language, or culture. In other words, they drew borders that often did not go where the people wanted them.
- 5) Today, money from selling oil has made it possible for some Southwest Asian rulers to run governments that are among the least democratic in the world. Some terrorist groups also get money by selling oil. They commit crimes all around the world.

A GEOGRAPHIC PUZZLE.

Imagine two large groups of people, each living in a large territory.

One group has a long history of wars between neighbors, who speak many different languages. The last two wars (the “World Wars”) killed or wounded millions of people. They destroyed farms and factories, and left cities bombed and ruined.

The other group had a long history of scientific progress. They had a common trading language over a large area, because they had been trading for centuries. Finally, they had a lot of oil, the most valuable resource in the world.

Here is the puzzle – which group would become a united group of democratic countries with a high standard of living? Which part of the world would become an area with widespread poverty, many undemocratic governments, and terrorists?

You may have already guessed – the first group is Europe, and the second is Southwest Asia and North Africa.

In Europe, after centuries of fighting with each other, many countries have joined to form the European Union.

(You can read more about that in history books and websites.)

Meanwhile, the old Arabic and Turkic empires are now split into many small countries. Some of them have civil wars. Others are fighting with each other.

Many of these countries have oil to sell – including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and some smaller countries in Southwest Asia.

The borders around many countries, however, were drawn by outsiders. Many countries have serious internal divisions. Some of those divisions are based on the ancient split between Sunni and Shi’ite Islam. Others are based on family rivalries.

Problems like this become worse when huge amounts of money allow dictators to rule without paying much attention to what people need or want. This is a bad situation. Unfortunately, it could get even worse when the oil runs out.

There are some bright spots in Southwest Asia. The small country of Bahrain, for example, has already run out of oil. Fortunately, the people have learned how to use other resources, like education, solar power, and the nice beaches in their country!

[Jump to Table of Contents](#)

[Previous Page](#)

[Next Page](#)

[Jump to Putting it All Together](#)

Interactive 6.4: Oil in the World Activity



Petroleum. Who produces it? Who uses it? Learn more in this activity.

Summary: How the big idea of resources can help us understand Southwest Asia

Ultimate cause: Different parts of the world have different natural resources.



Big idea: Having resources is a good thing, IF you know how to use them (and how to avoid some well-known problems).



Study area: Southwest Asia is a good “lab” to investigate the consequences of resources. This area had more than its share of a key resource in ancient times – soft, fertile soil – and a key resource in modern times – petroleum.

Resources and consequences

1. Soft soil for farming

One early resource of Southwest Asia was the soft soil on floodplains. This became a resource when people learned how to plant seeds.

2. Flooding rivers

Flooding rivers can be resources if people know how to control water. This was the basis for early “hydraulic civilizations” in Egypt, Southwest Asia, and other places, like South Asia and China.

3. Different uses

Even in places with similar environments, different people might identify different resources or invent different ways to use the same resources.

Related point: Many parts of the world have low populations because people are not able to find resources they can use there.

4. Specialization

Farmers in early Mesopotamia could grow enough food to feed many other people. These people could then do other jobs, as soldiers, politicians, religious leaders, and thinkers who invented astronomy, mathematics, and written laws.

5. Major religions

Four of the main religions in the world started in Southwest Asia.

6. Trade and science

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Islamic cities in Southwest Asia and North Africa became world centers of trade, science, and education.

7. Petroleum

Southwest Asia has the world’s largest deposits of petroleum. Oil is the most valuable natural resource in modern times.

8. Country borders

After World War I, oil resources helped to turn Southwest Asia into a kind of “prize” in a global power struggle. Borders between countries were drawn by secret agreement among European powers, not by the people who actually live in Southwest Asia.

9. Democracy & terrorism

A valuable resource like oil can actually help make an underdeveloped country less democratic. Oil can even make an area more likely to support terrorism.



Putting it all together: Rulers in Southwest Asia control vast amounts of money from oil. This money has paid for some interesting building projects and scientific research, but it also supports some very undemocratic governments and even some terrorist groups. When oil-dependent countries run out of oil, their governments may collapse. Other countries in the same part of the world, however, have used their oil money wisely. They have figured out ways to keep growing even after their oil runs out.

Interactive 6.5: Big Ideas Review



Review the Big Idea of Chapter 6 with the accompanying presentation.

Fracking

a way to get oil out of a rock called shale.

BACK

Natural Resource

something in nature that
people can use

BACK

Economic Development

a way of describing the
success of people in a
place.

BACK

Nation

a group of people who have
the same language and
culture

BACK

Flood

what happens when a river has more water than it can carry in its channel.

BACK

Irrigation

the process of adding water to fields.

BACK

Strategic Location

a place that is easy to defend or important to attack.

BACK