

HOTBED

The Middle East, one of the most diverse and dangerous areas in the world, is an alien land to most Americans

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Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians waited with bated breath for the announcement in mid-February 2011.

Hosni Mubarak, the brutal Egyptian president, announced Feb. 11 that he would step down from his 30-year post. He resigned his power to the military.

It was a sign of the times. In the following year, the citizens of Syria, Libya, Morocco and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa followed Egypt's lead.

This mass uprising against the powers-that-be has been spectated through most of the world.

In some instances, revolt has led to revolution, as in Tunisia. In other cases, however, it has led to extended periods of military retribution against its own citizens. Hundreds of protesters in Homs, Syria, have been killed by national forces.

But this isn't the first time this part of the world has made headlines — this is the birthplace of man, of the great religions, of vast wars.

It would appear, though, that some Americans aren't familiar with the Middle East and couldn't identify most of the countries on a world map.

But this is an area that Westerners would do well to familiarize themselves with. Here are a few things most Americans might find interesting:

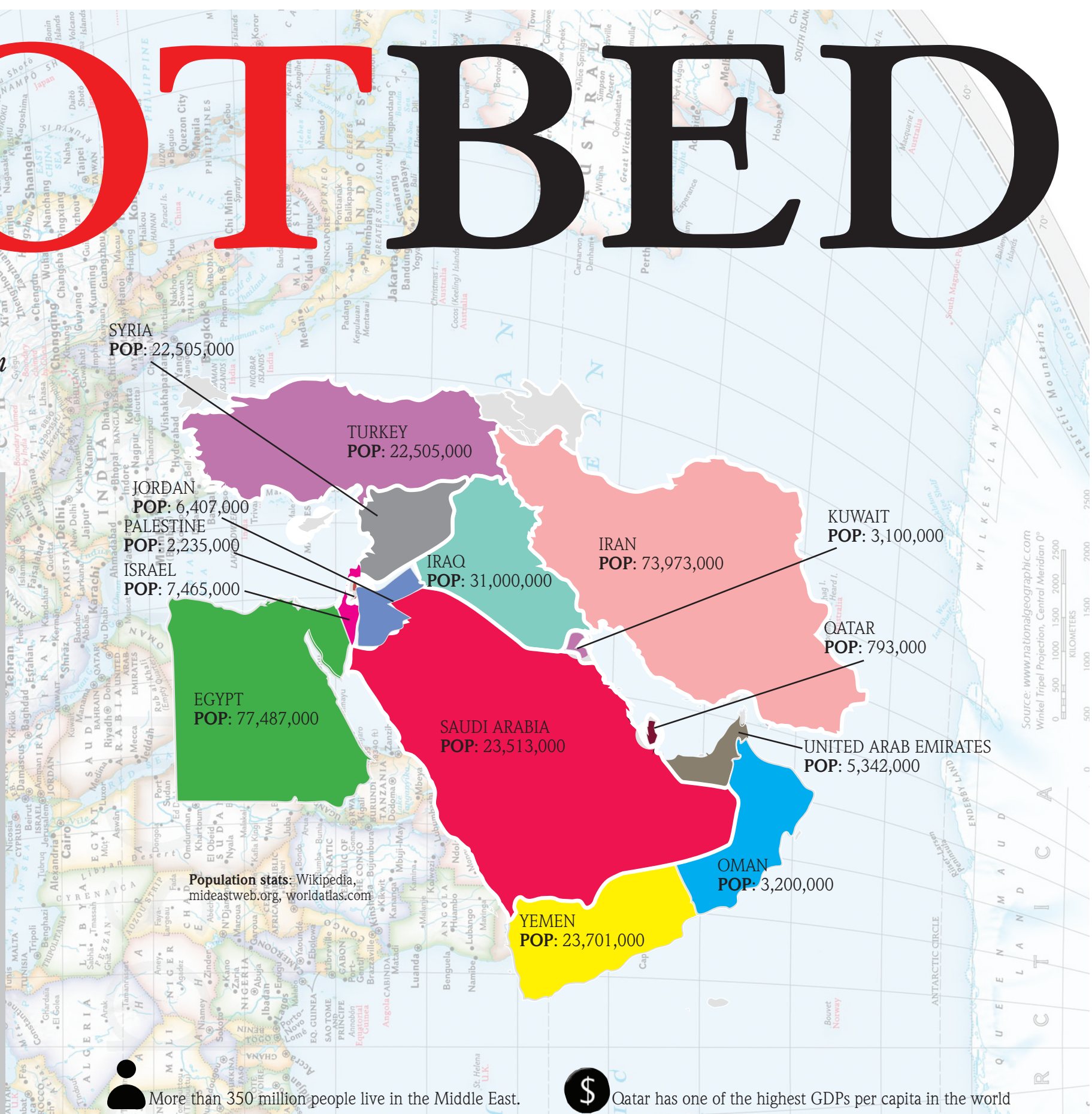
1. Iran recently has been accused by the United States, Israel and other countries of attempting to produce nuclear weapons.
2. The Middle East is in control of most of the world's proven oil reserves (about 61%).
3. Oil-rich Qatar is one of the richest countries in the world per capita.

American media has turned its gaze, for now, on Syria. The U.N. last week was unable to agree on how to deal with the Syrian uprising, with China and Russia going voting against condemning the Syrian military's actions.

Violence and uprisings aside, Middle Eastern countries have a rich and diverse culture. Though Islam is the dominant religion of the area, Arab Christians also live in parts of Lebanon, Syria and other countries.

The region is home to a multitude of different languages, from Arabic, Greek, Turkish, Persian and others.

One thing is certain — the Middle East is sure to remain an interesting place through the ages. And hopefully Westerners can continue to pay attention to it.



Population stats: Wikipedia, mideastweb.org, worldatlas.com

More than 350 million people live in the Middle East. Qatar has one of the highest GDPs per capita in the world

A brief timeline of Middle Eastern events

- 8000 B.C.** Domestication of sheep begins in Western Asia
- 7000 A.D.** Pottery emerges in Mesopotamia
- 3500 B.C.** Israelites conquer Canaan
- 330 B.C.** Alexander the Great conquers Persia
- 1041 B.C.** King David overtakes Jerusalem
- 1 A.D.** Jesus of Nazareth is born in Jerusalem
- c. 600 A.D.** Islamic faith emerges
- c. 1200 A.D.** Mongol invaders destroy Islamic civilization
- 1932 A.D.** Israel enters into Six Day War with Egypt, Syria, Jordan
- 2010 A.D.** Egyptian citizens overthrow dictator Hosni Mubarak

IN THE NEWS

The Middle East has made big headlines this year with sweeping political protests in Syria, Libya and Egypt.

Bashar al-Assad, president of Syria, told his citizens Wednesday he was dedicated to ending military violence in the country.

The **Iran Parliament** has summoned President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad for questioning, the first time it has done so since 1979.

Bahrain released two jailed human rights activists Wednesday. They were jailed for supporting

democracy.

German authorities arrested two men, one from Syria and one from Lebanon. They have been accused of spying on opponents of Syria's president.

Photos courtesy Graph, photo illustration, design by Chris Collins