

Chapter 7

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

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.



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).



Oil drill with fracking equipment

Oil pump ("walking mule")



Oil refinery and railroad tanker cars



Large ocean-going tanker ship



“It’s really weird, seeing old farmhouses sell for a quarter of a million dollars.”

Comments like this are common in places where people find new resources. Western North Dakota is a good example (in 2015). This state is on the border between the United States and Canada. North Dakota has cold winters like Mongolia, because both places are far from the equator. It is a dry grassland like Mongolia, because both places are far from any ocean.

Until recently, few people lived in western North Dakota. Then someone discovered *fracking*.

Definition: **Fracking** (hydraulic fracturing) is a way to get oil out of a rock called shale.

Oil companies started drilling wells and selling oil. 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, shampoo, boots, trucks, . . . even old farmhouses.

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

Chapter 1. Someone discovers a *natural resource* in a place.

Definition: A **natural resource** is something in nature that people can use.
Examples include tall trees, rocks that contain gold, a field of good soil, a sheltered harbor for boats, a plant that cures warts, or a nice view.

Chapter 2. Some people move to that place in order to find jobs. They can use the resource to make something. They can package the resource, transport it, or sell it.

Chapter 3. Other people move to that place because it is growing. They sell things and provide services like car repair, health care, music concerts, or classes in school.

This is all part of a process called *economic development*. It involves identifying resources, preparing them, transporting them, selling them, and supporting the people who do those jobs.

Definition: **economic development** is 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. Most people survived by hunting or gathering food. These people were using a very basic natural resource – wild animals and plants. They had a very simple kind of economic development.

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

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

Different places in the world have different natural resources.

It is possible to make a list of countries that have a lot of resources. You can also make a list of countries that are highly developed. When you do this, you discover an important fact:

Countries with a lot of resources are not always highly developed.

The process of economic development is very complex. In this chapter, we will look at just one small part of it. We will examine the role of natural resources in development.

Here is the big idea in this chapter:

Big idea: *Having natural resources is a good thing, as long as you know how to use them and you can avoid some typical problems.*

A place to investigate ideas about resources and development.

We will use Southwest Asia as a real-world laboratory to learn about resources. People have lived in this part of the world for thousands of years. They started as hunters, looking for wild animals to kill and eat.

Hunters could become farmers after they learned how to use two resources:

- **Plants** – grasses or shrubs that people could plant, harvest, cook, and eat.
- **Good ground** – soil that was easy to work and able to help plants grow well.

Later, people discovered other resources in Southwest Asia. For example, they learned how to control river floods and irrigate crops. They found a black tar in the ground. This tar could make bricks stronger, which helped people build cities. People also learned how to extract iron from rocks. They learned how to make iron tools and weapons. These discoveries helped people in Southwest Asia to make some of the first urban civilizations in the world.

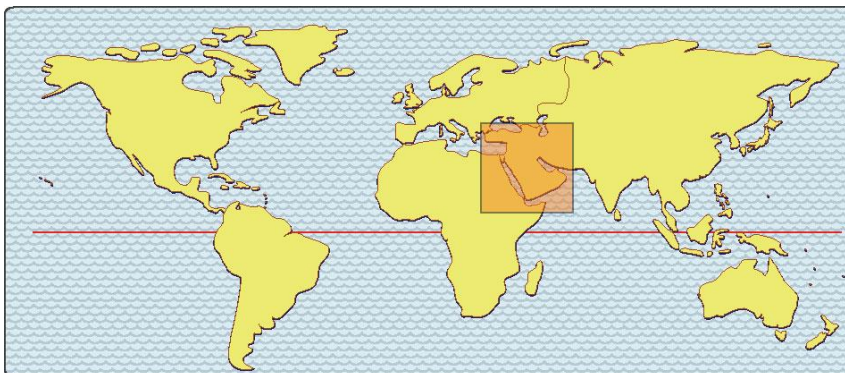
A quick six-point summary of the historical importance of Southwest Asia

- 1) In ancient times, river valleys in Southwest Asia were the core of several famous empires – Sumeria, Babylon, etc. People in those empires invented writing, astronomy, and written laws. (We'll say more about this later).
- 2) Later, another group of people in Southwest Asia – the Hittites – were the first people in the world to make iron tools and weapons.
- 3) Four of the most important religions in the world started in Southwest Asia.
- 4) After the fall of the Roman Empire, Southwest Asia and nearby North Africa became a global “core area” of science and education.
- 5) 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.
- 6) 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.

All of these historic facts are related to one basic idea:

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

In this chapter, we will explore some consequences of resource use. We will use Southwest Asia as an example. Early in human history, this part of the world had several key resources. Later, people discovered that it also had a strategic location 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.”

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 book of the Bible is called Exodus. It tells about the migration of a whole *nation*. These people were called the Children of Israel (also known as Israelites, Hebrews, or Jews.)

Definition: a **nation** is a group of people who have the same language and culture.

A leader called Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt and into Southwest Asia. Near the end of the journey, Moses looked down from a mountain. He said he saw “a land of milk and honey.” By this phrase, he meant it looked like a rich land, full of useful resources.

Actually, this is not quite true. It is not an unusually rich land.

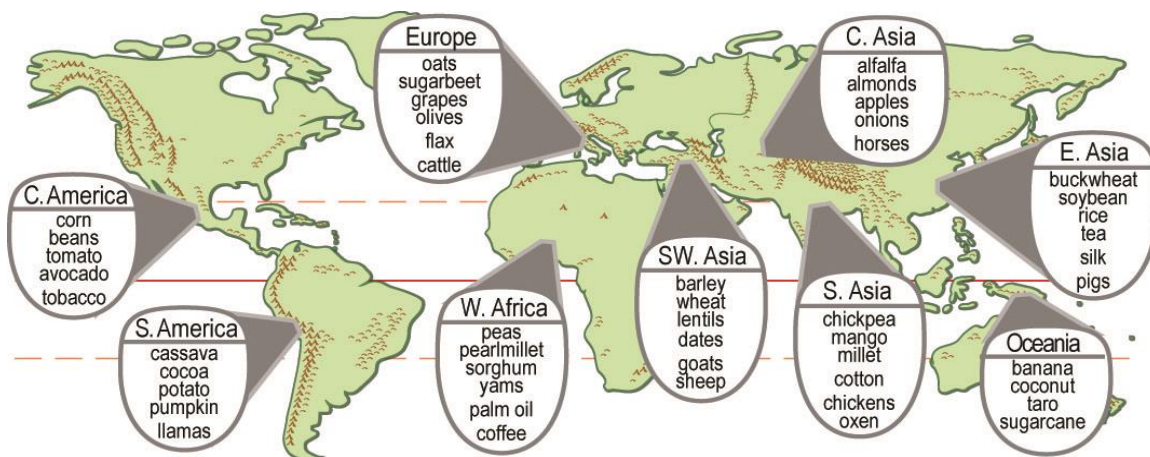
- Summers in this area are hot and very dry. Winters are cool, with a few rainy days.
- Most of the soil is rocky, because water is needed to help break rocks apart and make soil.
- The natural plant cover is a mix of low shrubs and thorny trees – NOT very good to eat!
- There were very few large, slow 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 would be boring. You 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.

Consequence #2: Flooding rivers can be resources, 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 the mountains. It melts and makes rivers in spring. The rivers often flood.

Definition: 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 modern people, floods are bad. In ancient times, however, floods were considered good (as explained in the chapters on Africa and South Asia). 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 and much easier to work. Floods also fill the ground with water. People can get this water later by digging wells.

All of this can help *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 their fields. Basically, they can make artificial floods when they want them. This is called **irrigation**.

Definition: **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.

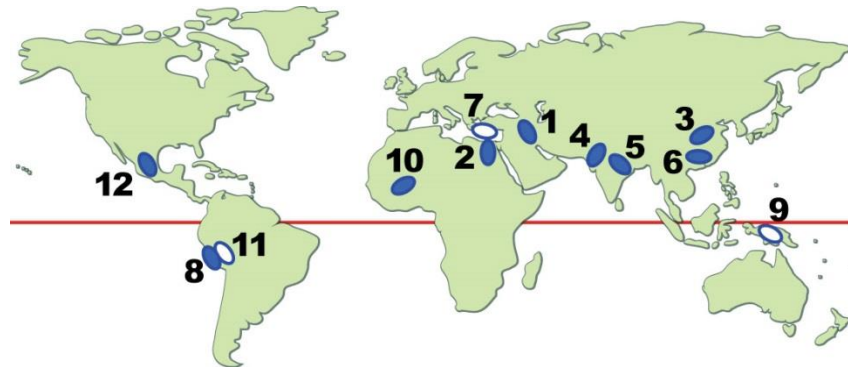
Building an irrigation system takes a lot of skill and effort. People have to be organized. The payoff, however, is huge – irrigation can really help food production. This fact is the reason why some people say that irrigation was the foundation for the first human civilizations.

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.

Early civilizations that relied on flooding rivers (modern names in parentheses):

1. Mesopotamia (Iraq)
2. Nile (Egypt)
3. Huang (China)
4. Indus (Pakistan)
5. Ganges (India)
6. Yangtze
8. Peru
10. Niger (West Africa)
12. Aztec (Mexico)



Ones that did not:

7. Minoan
9. New Guinea
11. Inca

The numbers go in order from oldest to most recent.

The soft soil on a floodplain was a resource. People could use it to grow a lot of food. In fact, a few farmers on a floodplain could grow enough food to support many other people.

Those people, in turn, could do other jobs. They could run stores, fight battles, teach in schools, build buildings, and form governments . . . even become religious leaders.

Before we look at these other jobs, however, 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.

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

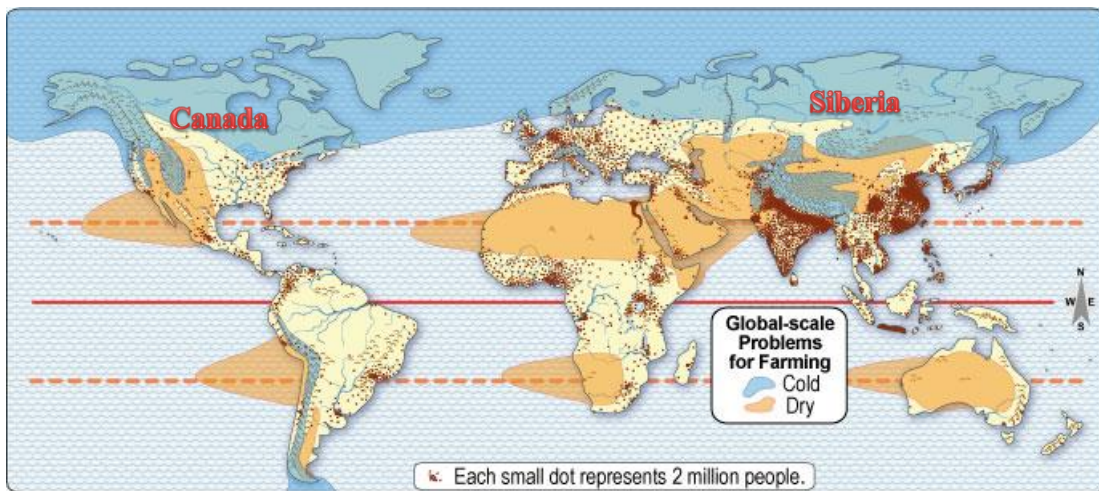
You just learned about some empires that grew up next to flooding rivers. Historians call these the “hydraulic” civilizations (“hydraulic” means “water-moving.”) All of the hydraulic civilizations had cities, governments, armies, religions, and writing systems. The civilizations were not exactly the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

- **Egyptians** wrote by carving pictures in stone. Each picture meant an idea.
- **Sumerians** wrote by poking sticks into wet 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 the Bible on “paper” made from animal skins.
- **Chinese** people wrote word-symbols with ink and a brush, on paper made from plants.

The main message we should get from this short list is this simple but really important geographic point:

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

Another message is equally simple: geographic conditions in some places are too tough (at least so far). For example, no one knows how to grow food in northern Canada or Siberia, without building something like a greenhouse. And no one can grow food in a desert if there is no river or other source of water. 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 buy food (and to pay to have the food sent to them).

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

Definition: A **strategic location** is a place that is easy to defend or important to attack.

Consequence #4: In places where farmers can grow enough food to feed many people, other 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, art, and so forth. 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 even 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, everyone knows what the rules are. One rule, for example, might be a sheet of paper that tells everyone that you own a piece of land. You can plant a crop there, or build a house, and no one can take it away. Another rule might make everyone use the same weights to measure things they sell in the market.

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

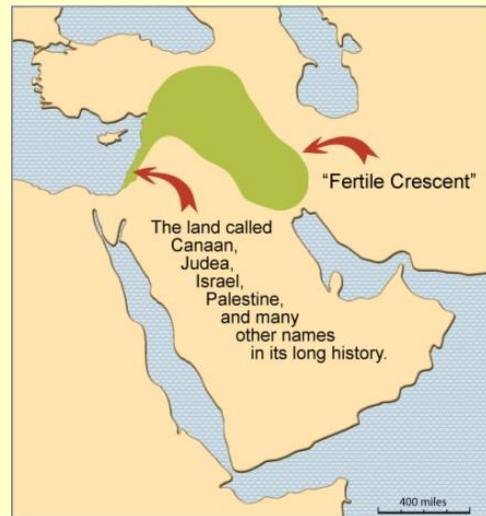
Written laws came out of places where people had already learned how to use resources.

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 FOOTNOTE ABOUT “THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY”

CAUTION: The writers of some history books describe Israel as part of 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 several 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 had invented a way to make a terrible weapon out of desert rocks? Desert countries like Israel or Syria might have been stronger than Rome, and history would certainly be different!

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 come from and how they spread. This fact leads us right back to the ancient river civilizations. They were 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 the Jewish land.
- **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 them spread out and eventually split into several 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.

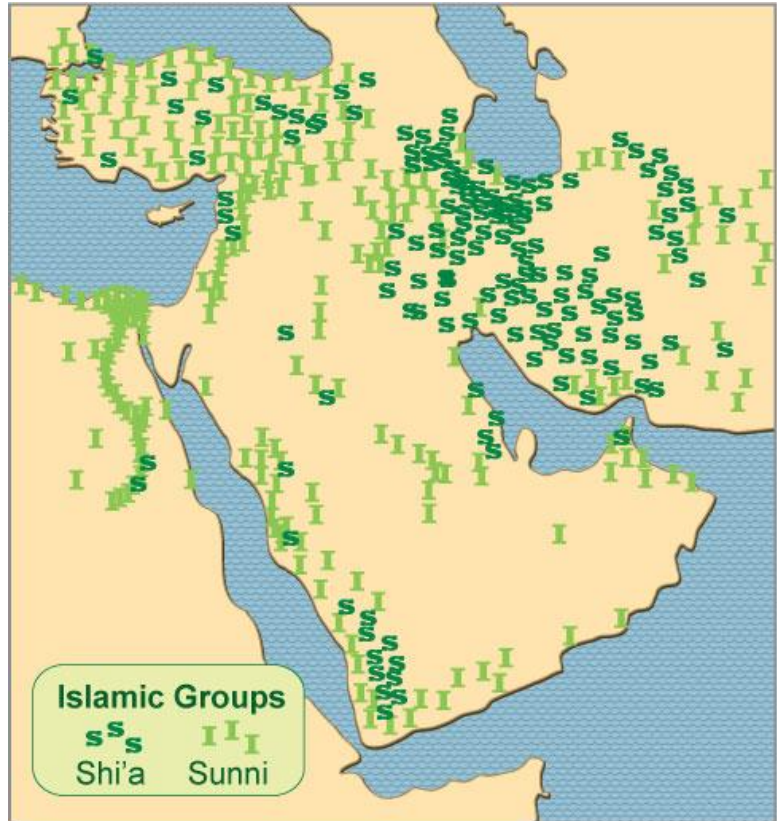
Shortly after it started, the followers of Islam split into two main groups. These two groups are now called *Sunni* and *Shi'a* (or *Shi'ite*) Islam.

The differences are important. They were part of the reason for several wars in the past.

Moreover, the differences continue to cause problems for people trying to govern countries in Southwest Asia today:

The rulers 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.



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

The two centuries after the year 400 were tough. The “barbarian” people who attacked Rome from the north 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.

Much farther east, the Han Dynasty in China had already collapsed. This led to “the time of three kingdoms” – several centuries of bloody civil war 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 its most powerful political 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?”

These trade networks were a resource that helped a new religion called Islam 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, in South Asia, Islamic armies 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 phase of resource development in Southwest Asia.

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 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 arch upward. It looks like an upside-down bowl of rock.)

Science fact: Thanks to the Soviet and American nuclear bomb tests, scientists know a lot about geologic faults and other rock structures. Every nuclear bomb explosion was like a geology experiment. It sent *seismic waves* (rock vibrations) in all directions through the earth's crust. Here is the important 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 geologic 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 “earn” money that can make people rich. It can also support dictators, train terrorists, and pay for weapons.

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.



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

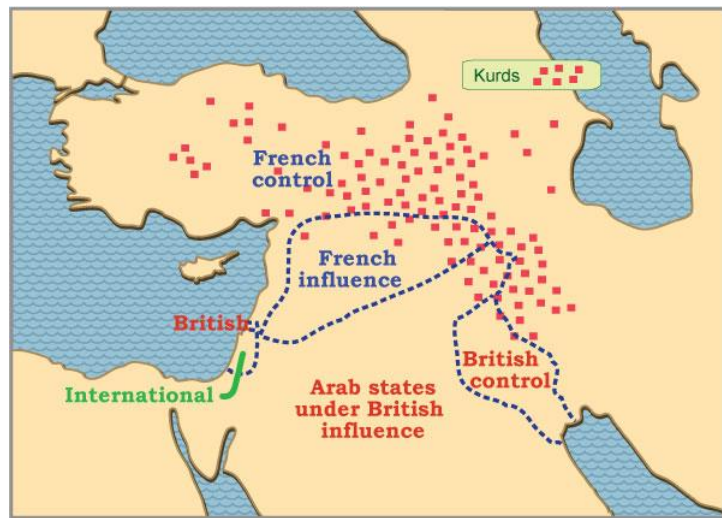
Like every ancient empire, the Islamic empires of the Middle Ages did not last. In the west, Spanish people started a long fight called the *Reconquista* (reconquest). They finally drove the last Islamic rulers out of Spain in 1492. (P.S. When that happened, the Spanish king and queen decided they could finally afford to send a sailor named Columbus to look for a new route to India. You probably wouldn't be living in America if that hadn't happened!)

About the same time, people in other places also fought back against Islamic rulers. People in South Asia revolted against the sultans. People in Persia started a long struggle against their rulers. People in the cold grasslands of Central Asia simply refused to pay taxes to distant rulers. In Europe, several countries sent armies to help defeat the Islamic armies at Vienna (an old Roman city that became the capital of the Habsburg Empire.) Slowly, they drove the Islamic armies out of Europe.

Partly to regain lost territory, the Ottoman Turks (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.” Much later, these protectorates became independent countries.



While drawing the borders between their protectorates, European rulers made big mistakes. For example, compare this map with the CIA map at the end of the chapter. Note that the two large rivers of ancient Mesopotamia – Tigris and Euphrates – both start in Turkey. That's a separate country now, but in the early 1900s France claimed it as a protectorate. Then the rivers flow through Syria (an old country that was put under French influence for several decades). The rivers come together in Iraq (which the British claimed as their protectorate).

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 (compare this map with the CIA map).

The agreement also had no land for 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.

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 sell the resource to other people and make a lot of money. Unfortunately, money from selling oil seems to make some places less democratic.

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

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

So far, so good . . . BUT

4. The government can also use the money to buy weapons and soldiers.
5. The rulers can control people by threatening to stop the gifts or send the army.
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?)

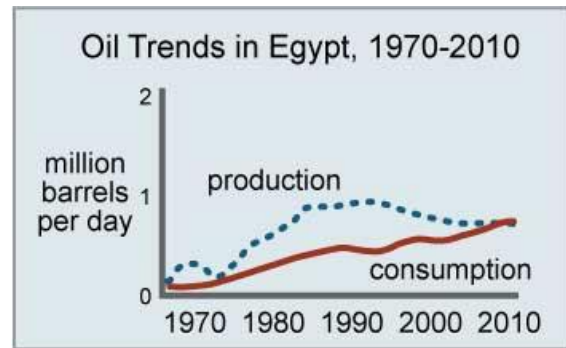
This list is a generalization, but it is often true. Careful studies clearly show that the amount of freedom for ordinary people in a country often goes down as oil income goes up. Moreover, dangerous terrorists can come from countries that have a lot of income from oil.

We will end this chapter with a simple 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. The government made a lot of money selling the extra oil to people in other countries.

Then oil production started to go down, while consumption continued to rise.



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

Soon, the government realized that it would have to raise taxes in order to pay for basic services like fixing roads and running schools. That made people angry. They started a revolution that drove the government out in 2011.

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

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?

Putting it all together. Money from oil has made it possible for some Southwest Asian rulers to run the least democratic governments in the world. Moreover, some terrorist groups get money by selling oil. They commit crimes all around the world.

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 Southwest Asia into 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 did not go where the people wanted them.

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 been trading for centuries, and had a common trading language over a large area. Finally, they had enormous reserves 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, the old colonial powers, after centuries of fighting with each other, 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 – Algeria and Libya in north Africa, and 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!

Conclusion – how can the big idea of resources help us understand Southwest Asia?

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

Definition: a **natural resource** is something people find in a place and know how to use to make life better. Examples include gold, oil, iron ore, tall trees, fertile soil, nice weather, a good location for a port, a good view, etc.

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

Study area: Southwest Asia is a good “lab” to investigate the consequences of resources.

Consequence #1: One early resource of Southwest Asia was the soft soil on floodplains.
This became a resource when people learned how to plant seeds.

Consequence #2: Flood-prone rivers can be resources if people know how to control water. This was the basis for early “hydraulic civilizations” in Egypt and Southwest Asia (and also in South Asia, northeast China, and a few other areas around the world).

Consequence #3: Even in places with similar environments, different people might identify different resources (or invent different ways of using the same resources).
Related point: Many parts of the world have low populations because people are not able to find resources there.

Consequence #4: Farmers in early Mesopotamia could grow enough food to feed many other people. These other people included rulers, professional soldiers, and religious leaders. They also included thinkers who invented astronomy, mathematics, standard weights, and written codes of law.

Consequence #5: Four of the main religions in the world started in Southwest Asia.

Consequence #6: After the fall of the Roman Empire, Islamic cities in Southwest Asia and North Africa became world centers of science and education. Science is one important key to developing resources.

Consequence #7: Southwest Asia has far more than its “fair share” of petroleum.
Oil is the most valuable natural resource in modern times.

Consequence #8: After World War I, oil resources helped to turn Southwest Asia into a kind of “prize” on a global power struggle. One result is that borders between countries in Southwest Asia were drawn by a secret agreement among European powers, not by the people who actually live in Southwest Asia.

Consequence #9: A valuable resource like oil can actually 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 allows some of them to run some of the least democratic governments in the world today. Moreover, several terrorist groups get money by selling oil. Using oil money, these terrorists are able to buy weapons and commit crimes all around the world.

When 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.

