9. The Middle East

The Middle East is the intercontinental region bounded by Europe, Asia and Africa. With an area of 6,504,965 sq. km, the Middle East is equivalent to 75 per cent of the Australian continent. In 2000 the population of the fourteen states was 227,603,000.

Dewdney (1987, 7-9) notes that there are two prime physiographic zones in the Middle East. To the north there is a region of folded mountains and plateaus; to the south there is an ancient crystalline block of Arabia. The border between the two zones corresponds closely to the southern boundaries of Iran and Turkey. The mountains were created, during the period of the Cretaceous to the Pliocene, from the thick sediments that underlay the ancient Tethys Sea. The adjoining continents of Eurasia formed the anvil against which the hammer of the Afro-Arabian plate fashioned the folded mountains that were subsequently lowered by erosion.

The Arabian Peninsula was tilted downwards towards the north and northeast so that the highest elevations are found in Yemen. The northern part of this stable block was overlain by considerable thicknesses of more recent sandstones and limestones. Thick sediments have filled the depression that previously existed along the line of the present Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and they have recreated a flat surface with low gradients. In the vicinity of the Persian Gulf and its structural continuation along the lowlands associated with the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, geological conditions favoured the formation of oil and gas fields. The thick porous strata that had been significantly deformed and tilted created traps, within which hydrocarbons could accumulate from the rich deposits of remains of creatures that once lived in the warm Tethys Sea.

The physiographic regions coincide with political regions. The northern region consists of only two states, Iran and Turkey, both with populations of about 66 millions, that represent about 57 per cent of the total population in the Middle East. The main languages spoken in the northern region are Baluchi, Kurdish, Persian and Turkish. Both these states, at different times in their history, had been the seats of empires. Although both negotiated boundaries, at a disadvantage, with the powerful British and Russian governments, they secured lines that have proved permanent and well defended.

In the southern region Arabic is the principal language for eleven of the twelve states. The size of the populations in these states varies from 579,000 in Qatar to
20,181,000 in Saudi Arabia. Throughout the southern region Britain and France played influential roles in boundary construction, after the Ottoman Empire’s domination in Arabia was ended (Figure 9.1), during and after World War I. Before and after World War I there had been various unsuccessful attempts to consolidate the extensive territory of Saudi Arabia into a single state. That was accomplished by Ibn Saud in 1932. Yemen became independent in 1918. The only other independent state in the southern region at that time was Oman, that had dislodged the Portuguese in 1650. France governed Lebanon and Syria while Britain played a similar role in the other territories, within boundaries that the colonial powers decided. All these entities became independent in the period from 1932 to 1971.

Throughout the Middle East all states are disadvantaged when claims to maritime zones are considered. Although no state is landlocked, Jordan and Iraq only have coastlines 15 km long. Jordan’s only access is to the narrow Gulf of Aqaba. Iraq’s maritime claims are constricted, by its neighbours Kuwait and Iran, at the head of the Persian Gulf. Although Turkey can secure a significant proportion of the Black Sea it is restricted to negligible claims in the Mediterranean by Greek islands, close to the Turkish coast, and the presence of Cyprus and Syria. Only Oman and Yemen can claim exclusive economic zones 200 nautical miles wide. Yemen is favoured by possessing sovereignty over Socotra Island and the adjoining small islands called Abd-al-Kuri, Jazirat Samha and Jazirat Darsa. Socotra Island is located about 200 nautical miles from the coast of Yemen and has an area of 3,500 sq. km. The Persian Gulf is the only maritime area adjoining the Middle East that has yielded great wealth. For this reason it is understandable that claims to islands in the Gulf are made and defended vigorously.

**Boundaries in the Northern Region**

Proceeding from east to west the boundaries defining the northern limit of the northern region were negotiated between Britain and Persia, Russia and Persia, Russia and Turkey, and Turkey with Bulgaria and Greece.

In the 1860s Britain was searching for a western limit to its Indian Dominions at the same time that the Shah of Persia’s army was moving eastwards to threaten Kalat, a British protected state. Britain had laid a submarine cable through the Persian Gulf to improve communications, and, as a precaution, had been given permission by the Shah to construct a land-line westwards from Gwatar Bay to the vicinity of Bandar Abbas. When General Goldsmid began to construct this line he was hampered by minor chieftains of Tump, Mand and Boleda. These minor political units, of fifteen, twelve and five villages respectively, had been raiding into Persian territory, and reprisals by the Shah’s forces were impinging on the Kalat border (Prescott, 1975, 212-3). When the Shah suggested that a