

---

# Chapter 3

## West Asia

---

The landmass of West Asia, also referred to as the Middle East or South-west Asia, has a unique geographic position as a nexus joining Asia, Europe, and Africa. The region is composed of three major physiographic divisions: (1) the mountains and plateaus of the north, (2) a central depression aligned to the Persian Gulf, and (3) a peninsular mass with ranges along the south-west margin. The northern high ranges are recently folded segments of the great alpine system of Eurasia. The main ranges diverge from the central nucleus represented by the Armenian knot. Those in the peninsula are fragments of ancient stable block marked by fracture and rifting. The highlands of West Asia have been grouped into the Iran plateau, Trans-Caucasus, Anatolia, and Arabia and are described in an anti-clockwise sequence (Figure 2 and Annex B).

### 3.1 The Iran Plateau

The plateau of Iran is fully encircled by a series of mountain ranges. The eastern rampart, almost athwart the boundary of Iran, is made up of parallel but broken ranges. The high point of the range, Kuh-e-Taftan (4,042m), lies south of the Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan tri-junction. The scanty population is composed of semi-nomadic tribespeople who graze animals on the higher slopes above 1,500m. Some areas support agri-

culture based on irrigation by means of underground channels known as *qanat*. The plateau is bounded on the north by a range system with three sections. The eastern section includes the parallel ranges of Aladagh and Kapet Dag which define the Iran-Turkmenistan boundary. In the central section lies the Elburz Range, rising sharply from the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. Its main peak, Damavend (5,604m), is the highest summit in West Asia. It is a volcanic cone that towers just north-east of Teheran. Large areas of these highlands are used for grazing sheep and goats. The lower slopes below 1,200m with sufficient rain produce a large variety of crops. The western section, the Tavalish Range, turns north-west towards Azerbaijan and its highest peak is the Sabalan (4,814m). A series of fault-block ranges enclose valleys that grow wheat as the major crop.

The south-western part of Iran is dominated by the Zagros Mountains that diverge south-east from Kurdistan as far as the Strait of Hormuz. The mountains consist of parallel ranges that are high and rugged. This highland complex has an average width of 300 km. The northern part, which receives over 400mm mean annual precipitation is better developed agriculturally. The highest peak, Zard Kuh (4,547m), is in the central part of the range, west of Esfahan. In northern Zagros,

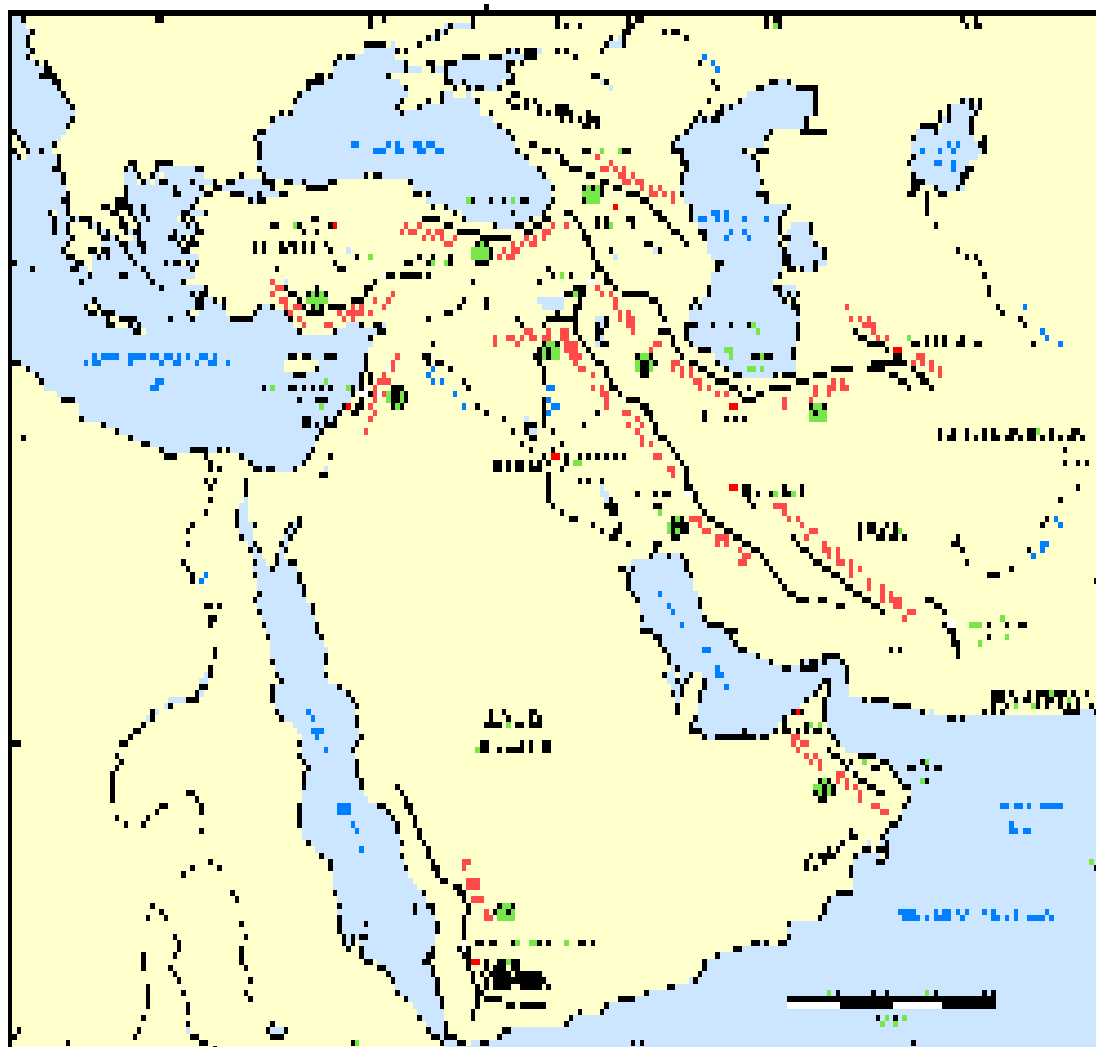


Figure 2: West Asia

pastoral and semi-nomadic Kurd tribes are found. Central and Southern Zagros have numerous tribes who practise transhumance. Their migration with sheep and goats is basically vertical from permanent winter bases (800m) to summer pastures higher up (1,800 to 2,200m). East of Esfahan, the Jebel Barez Range trends south-east, parallel to the Zagros alignment.

### 3.2 Trans-Caucasia

This mountain area is distinguished by two parallel ranges running from the Caspian Sea in

the east to the Black Sea in the west. The northern one, the Greater Caucasus, extends about 1,200 km along the southern boundary of Russia. It is a young mountain range of great height with many glaciers. Although folded ridges are predominant, the highest peak, Mount Elbrus (5,642m), is an extinct volcano; evidence of intrusion. The range acts as a climatic barrier between the wet west and arid east sides. Grasslands on upper slopes support sheep grazing as the main economic activity. Reconstruction of climatic change over the last 100 years showed the equilibrium line of glaciers to have

retreated 300-500m higher due to a decrease in precipitation over the period in the nival-glacial zone (Krenke et al. 1991). In the lower zone (500-12,000m), the forested area has decreased significantly due to human impact. The southern range, the Little Caucasus, is a part of the faulted Armenian plateau extending into Iran and Anatolia. It is connected to the Greater Caucasus by the low (c. 500m) Suram Range. Elsewhere, the two are separated by the Kura and Rioni valleys. The Little Caucasus has numerous extinct volcanoes and is subject to frequent earthquakes. Mount Ararat (5,161m) is found in its south-western section which intrudes into Turkey. The Trans-Caucasia presently includes four political units: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Russia. However, the area has been a natural refuge for various peoples over the centuries. It is an area of immense ethnic diversity where over 40 different languages are spoken.

### 3.3 Anatolia

The Armenian plateau is an important nodal point from where ranges diverge east to Iran, south to Kurdistan, and west to Anatolia. They enclose high plateaus, of which interior Anatolia is the most extensive. It is confined by Tatos Daglari in the north and Toros Daglari in the south. The Tatos range, also called the Pontic mountains, commences at the Armenia-Turkey border and continues due west south of the Black Sea. It has numerous high peaks, including the Kacker Dag (3,937m), along its 400 km stretch from north of Erzurum to Sivas. Its western extension, Ilgaz Daglari, reaches 2,600m north of Ankara. The northern slope facing the Black Sea is important agriculturally for both crop and livestock production. In contrast, the south slope is mostly treeless steppe and more suited to grazing.

The western part of Inner Anatolia is largely a treeless steppe. It has hot, dry summers and cold winters. Much of the precipitation occurs during the spring. The area is a major producer of grains, with wheat and barley being the main crops. It is

also important for livestock raising. The eastern part, the Armenian plateau, is extremely dissected with steep slopes. Summers are short and dry, and the main crop is spring wheat. Cattle and sheep are the main livestock.

The Toros Mountains stretch along the southern rim of the Anatolian plateau in an arcuate form, parallel to the Mediterranean coast. The sea-facing slopes have steep terrain, although the highest peak, Erciyes Dag (3,916m), lies far inland. West of Egridir Lake, the range splays out in a north-south direction to complete the confinement of the Anatolian plateau. The area is under the influence of a Mediterranean climate. Tree crops and vineyards abound on lower (below 1,200m) slopes, while upper (above 1,500m) slopes are used for livestock raising.

### 3.4 Arabia

The Arabian peninsula is ringed by mountains along the western and southern side. The first ranges trending north-south, parallel to the Mediterranean coast, commence in Lebanon (Plate 8). They are aligned on either side of the rift valley as far south as the Gulf of Aqaba. In Lebanon, the highest point is Qurnot-as-Sawda (3,086m) in the western range, while the Lebanon-Syria boundary is marked by another range, Anti-Lebanon, further east. The western range, approaching an elevation of 3,000 m, is the highest in the area. Its eastern slope drops sharply into the fault valley of Bekka. The eastern ranges are the Anti-Lebanon (c. 2,100m) in the north and Herman (c. 2,800m) to the south. Towards the south, these ranges confine the River Jordan and the Dead Sea across Israel and Jordan. They are composed of largely massive beds of folded limestone with rugged relief. The western side of the ranges has a Mediterranean climate favourable for orchards, vineyards, and winter crops. Precipitation decreases from north to south. Like the area's compartmentalisation into mountain ranges and structural valleys, the economy is a contrast of intensive horticulture westwards and nomadic herding in the arid east.



8. Desert ranges, Lebanon. Snow ranges of Lebanon steeply sloping towards the fault valley of Bekka. The low ranges to the right are Herman (lower) and Ani-Lebanon (upper) traversed by a river.

The nomads include various Bedouin tribes with flocks of sheep, goats, and camels.

In Saudi Arabia, the western highlands form a rocky upland carved from ancient crystalline complex. They form a linear plateau capped by mountains with scarp face towards the Red Sea. The rugged topography is the making of diastrophism, vulcanism, and mass wasting. Their elevation varies from 900m in the north to 3,700m in the south. The range reaches its maximum elevation in Yemen, on Jabal an-Nabi (3,760m), west of Sana. The range then makes a sharp, north-easterly turn through Hadhramaut to Dhufar in South Oman. Despite their proximity to a vast desert, the highlands receive some rain. Precipitation varies from about 130 mm during winter in Arabia to over 1,000 mm during summer in Yemen. Jabal Akhdar (Green Mountain) is at the eastern end of the Arabian peninsula beyond the depression of Rab-al-Khali (Empty Quarter). Structurally, these uplands in Oman are an extension of the fold mountains of Zagros in Iran. The main range is fairly high with Jabal-ask-Sham (3,035m) as the pinnacle. Despite topographic features of upthrusts and graben-like depressions due to faulting, much of it has plateau-like topography and is cut off from all sides, by either sand or water. The highlands of Yemen and Hadhramaut have terrace cultivation facilitated by heavy precipitation. They grow sub-tropical fruits and cereals such as wheat and barley. Elsewhere, nomadic tribes with sheep and goats shift seasonably to find pastures. With the expansion of the petroleum economy, tribal warfare and pillaging of oases by the Bedouin have become a thing of the past.

(see Figure 2)

<b>Annex B: Ranges of West Asia</b>			
No.	Range (Subsidiary)	Prominent Peak (metres)	Location
1.	Al-Akhdar, Jabal	Jabal ash-sham (3,035)	Oman
2.	Asir	Jabal an-Nabi (3,760)	Yemen
3.	Caucasus	El'brus (5,642)	Georgia/Russia
4.	Elburz Mountains (Kapet Dag)	Damavand (5,604)	Iran
5.	Hakkari Daglari	Mt. Ararat (5,122)	Turkey
6.	Lubnan Jabal	Qurnot as-Sawada (3,083)	Lebanon
7.	Tatos Daglari	Kackar Dagi (3,937)	Turkey
8.	Tavalish, Kuhha-ye	Kuye Sabalan (4,814)	Iran
9.	Toros Daglari	Erciyes Dagi (3,916)	Turkey
10.	Zagros, Kuhhayeh	Zard Kuh (4,547)	Iran

