March 16, 1988 Kurdish town of Halabja, Iraq, as Iraqi Air Force planes released mustard gas and other poisonous gases into the air 5,000 [**Kurds**](javascript:openFootnoteWindow('http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/footnotes/wg03_k.html');)**,** an ethnic group in Southwestern Asia,

More than 10,000 were injured, and some still suffer from serious diseases

have occupied the lands they call Kurdistan for thousands of years located in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. For most of the 20th century, these three nations have disagreed with the Kurds over control of these lands.

**A Blend of Cultures**  
location of some of the oldest cultures in the world.

include Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. mostly Muslim

only Iraq is Arabic in cultural life. All influenced by early civilizations and empires in the region.

**EARLY CIVILISATIONS** Several of the ancient world's great civilizations were based in the river valleys, basins, and plateaus

Part of the cultural hearth Fertile Crescent

developed in Iraq along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, and Chaldea all built empires in [**Mesopotamia**](javascript:openFootnoteWindow('http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/footnotes/wg03_m.html');)**,** the 'land between the rivers.' The fertile soil made raising crops easy, and the rivers served as highways to transport goods.  
   The Hittites, in Turkey brought innovations such as the use of iron weapons.

Persians developed in Iran. Other empires copied Persian innovations in government, such as dividing a huge empire into smaller regions for better control.

**ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS**

speak Turkish and Farsi, which are different from the Arabic that is spoken in the rest of the region.  
  Though most of the different ethnic groups follow Islam, tensions exist. After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims divided into two main branches—the [**Sunni**](javascript:openFootnoteWindow('http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/footnotes/wg03_s.html');)and the **[Shi’ite](javascript:openFootnoteWindow('http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/footnotes/wg03_s.html');) .** About 83 percent of all Muslims are Sunni, including those in Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Most Iranians are Shi’ite, and populations of Shi’ites also live in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Clashes Over Land**   
Clashes over land in this region increased after World War I. Some were disagreements over homelands claimed by ethnic groups whose demands for land were ignored or control of valuable oil fields.  
  
**HOMELANDS AND REFUGEES** The Kurds have been called a stateless nation.

claim a homeland in parts of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. At the end of World War I, they were promised a homeland but never received it. Clashes between the Kurds and the governments of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq have prevented the Kurds from becoming a nation-state.

Because of its location, Iran has become home to refugees fleeing oppressive governments in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

Iran has the largest refugee population of any nation in the world. Iraqi Shi’ites persecuted by their government have sought refuge with fellow Shi’ites in Iran. Many of the Afghan refugees staying in Iran have been there for 20 years or more. Afghanistan has suffered through a long, brutal civil war.   
  
**CONTROL OF OIL FIELDS** Discoveries of oil in 1908 made Iran a center of conflict. Powerful nations sought to gain control of the oil fields to supply their own economies with oil. The British and the Russians clashed over control of parts of Iran. Later, between 1980 and 1990, Iran and Iraq fought a war over control of oil fields.  
   Access to the oil-rich regions on the Persian Gulf is strategically important for all nations that import oil. In 1990–1991, Iraq invaded Kuwait, starting the Persian Gulf War. The United States and 32 other nations fought to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait and keep oil fields open.

**eforming Economies**   
All of them have limited agricultural land. Production must become more efficient in order to produce surplus crops to sell elsewhere. Most of these nations have oil or natural gas resources that can generate revenue needed to update and expand transportation systems, communication systems, power generation plants, and water and sanitation systems.

**MAKING PROGRESS**  Turkey is developing its water resources and hydroelectric plants to supply energy and to boost production of cotton and other agricultural products. It is the only nation in this subregion that produces significant amounts of steel. Turkey straddles two continents—Europe and Asia—which makes it ideally located for trade. In fact, Turkey very much wants to be a part of the European Union, but has been unable to join because of its human rights record and fights with Greece over territory. http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/images/bullettriangleB.gif

Iran Government attitudes have swung between strong support for economic growth to no plans for change. The current government is supporting growth. Oil money fuels most of the plans for developing a diversified economy. But Iran is still recovering from a war with Iraq (1980–1990) that severely harmed its economy.

**PROGRESS INTERRUPTED**  Political problems in Iraq and Afghanistan have prevented these countries from improving their economies. Iraq fought a ten year war with Iran. Then it invaded Kuwait and fought the Persian Gulf War. After the war, the United Nations placed Iraq under economic restrictions. The economic embargo on oil sales limited much of Iraq's foreign trade, reducing the amount of money available. As a result, the Iraqi people have lacked basic goods such as food and medicine and other medical supplies.  
   Afghanistan is one of the poorest nations on earth. Most of its people are engaged in subsistence agriculture and animal herding. A landlocked nation, it lacks an efficient transportation system to get products to market. Afghanistan has great mineral resources but does not haveworkers with management and technical skills to develop them. A massive civil war has interrupted any steps underway to bring progress to the area. The government in control has rejected efforts to modernize the nation.  
  
**Modern and Traditional Life**   
Nowhere was this division more apparent than in Afghanistan. There, a fundamentalist Muslim political group called the **[Taliban](javascript:openFootnoteWindow('http://images.classwell.com/mcd_xhtml_ebooks/2002_world_geo/footnotes/wg03_t.html');)**imposed strict rules on people's behavior. In 2002, troops led by the United States toppled the Taliban regime because it was strongly suspected of supporting the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on September 11, 2001. In Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, similar groups exist but have not been able to gain control of the governments there. These groups have very different ideas from each other about the way people should behave. It has led to conflicts within the societies that have sometimes flared into serious political problems.