CLASSIFYING AND COMPARING REGIONS
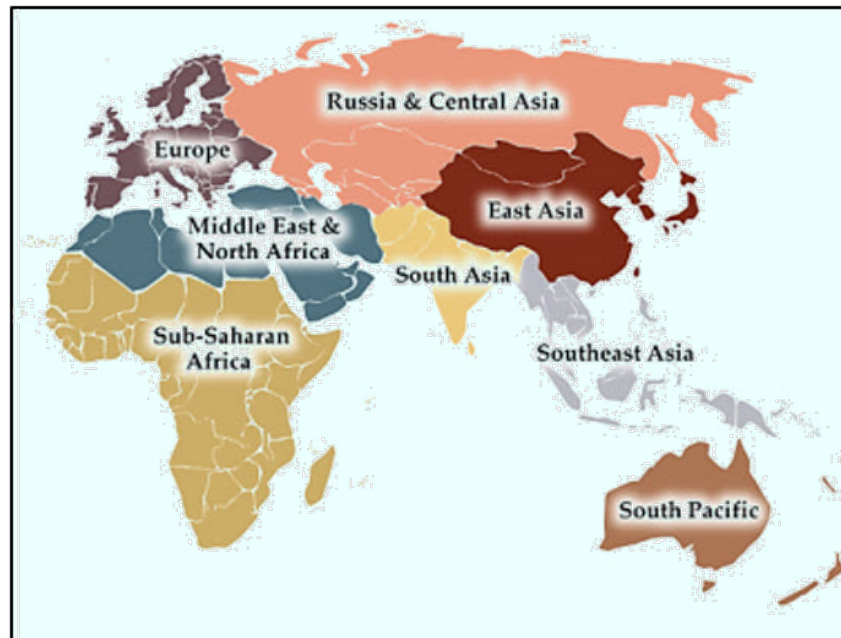

A Temple on the Tibetan Plateau

Unit Overview

To help us identify and organize the world in which we live, geographers divide the Earth's surface into various regions. They define some regions by physical characteristics, such as landforms or climate. Others are based on cultural or economic similarities. In this unit, you will see how geographers use certain criteria to classify and compare places and people. Let's get started!

What Makes a Region a Region?

Since so many places occupy the Earth's surface, geographers divide and organize the world into regions. A **region** is made up of several areas that have at least one thing in common or something that sets them apart from other places. It can be as small as a neighborhood or span several continents. For example, a group countries that make up a region may share a common **landform**, such as a plain a plateau, a mountain range, a valley, or a desert. Another area may be considered a region because the people who live there have similar religious beliefs and traditions. The map below shows one way in which geographers have divided the Eastern Hemisphere into major regions.

Major Regions of the Eastern Hemisphere

Map Courtesy of the University of Michigan Library Research Guides

Geographers create regions to help us manage and interpret the Earth's surface. This enables us to organize information about places, people, and environments. For this reason, a region is a **human construct**, a tool designed by humans to improve our understanding of the world in which we live. The table pictured here names some of the countries located within the major regions of the Eastern Hemisphere. However, it is important to remember that not all geographers agree on the best way to make these divisions.

Major Regions of the Eastern Hemisphere	
Regions	**Some Countries Included**
Europe	Norway, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland, Ukraine, Switzerland, Serbia
North Africa and the Middle East	Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa, Chad, Kenya, Somalia, Republic of the Congo, Ghana
Russia and Central Asia	Russia, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan
East Asia	China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan
South Asia	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka
Southeast Asia	Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Laos, Thailand
South Pacific/Oceania	Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Fiji

Physical Regions

Picture the Earth with no buildings, cities, or other structures made by humans. What would you use to organize the world into areas that share common characteristics? One way is to rely on **physical features**, such as landforms, climate, plants and wildlife. The **Tibetan Plateau**, located in western China, is one example of a physical region based on a landform. A **plateau** is a large, mostly flat area that is higher than the land surrounding it. It is bordered on one or more sides by steep cliffs or slopes. The Tibetan Plateau lies north of the Himalayan Mountains and is the world's highest plateau. It is the central, unifying feature of the Tibetan Region. The topographic map below shows the region shaded in light brown.

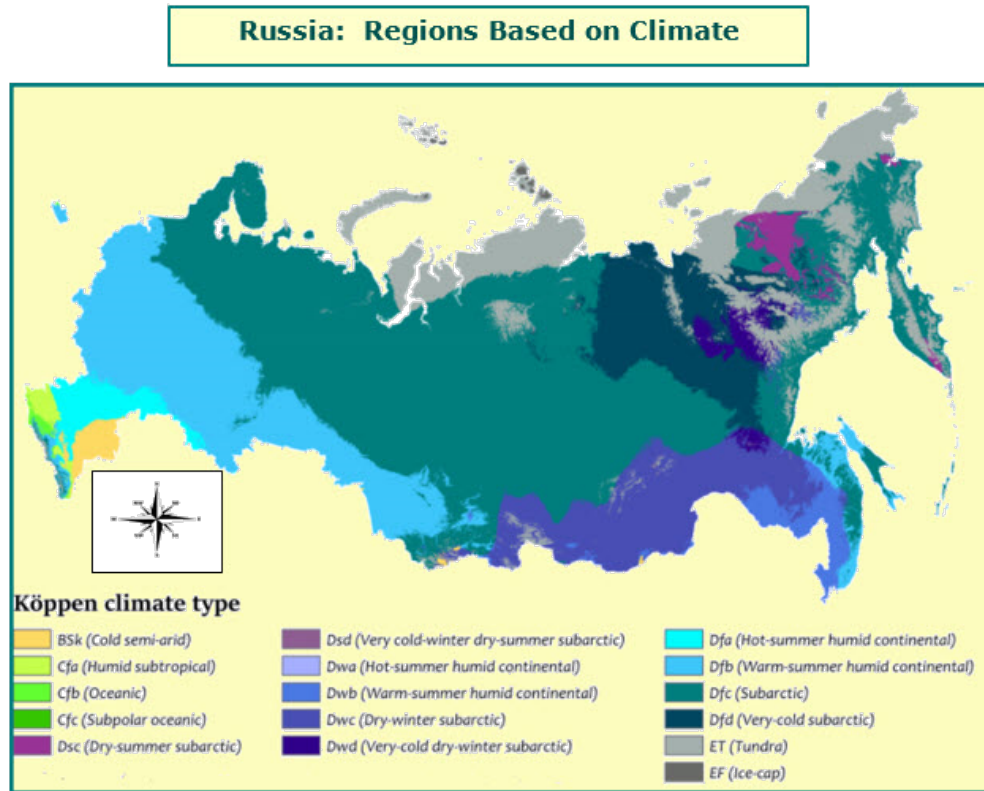### The Tibetan Plateau: A Region based on a Landform

Just as the Tibetan Plateau is classified as a region because of its uniquely high elevation, an area in Western Europe is considered a region because of its uniquely low elevation. The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg are often referred to as the **Low Countries** for this reason. Much of the land, which lies just off the North Sea, is either below or at sea level. Because this is a feature that sets this area apart from other places, the Low Countries are classified as a region. The topographic map below shows these areas shaded in dark green.

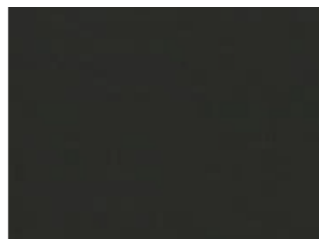### The Low Countries: A Region Based on Elevation

Geographers also use physical aspects to compare conditions within specific countries. The map below, for example, shows the **climatic regions** of **Russia**.
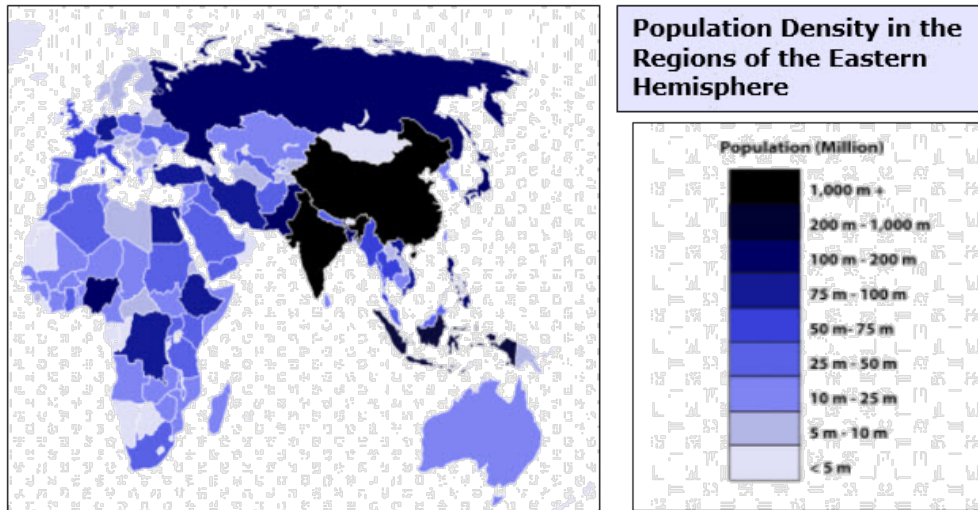

Map Courtesy of Adam Peterson

The video listed below shows how geographers have divided the continent of Africa into several regions based on unique physical features, such as the world's largest deserts, a major rainforest, coastlines and climate.

Other Types of Regions Based on Population, Culture, and Economies

Today's geographers separate the world into various regions to help us understand other populations, cultures, and economies. Regions based on **populations** provide information to compare and analyze **birth rates** (the number of live births each year per 1,000 people), **death rates** (the number of deaths each year per 1,000 people), the size of families and other factors concerning how people live. This data helps regions to plan for

the future and anticipate the needs of the population. The map below shows the population density of the regions in the Eastern Hemisphere.

Population Density in the Regions of the Eastern Hemisphere

Population (Million)

- 1,000 m +
- 200 m - 1,000 m
- 100 m - 200 m
- 75 m - 100 m
- 50 m - 75 m
- 25 m - 50 m
- 10 m - 25 m
- 5 m - 10 m
- < 5 m

Cultural regions are based on a wide variety of characteristics. Some areas are classified as cultural regions because the people who live there share the same ideas about government or speak a common language. Others are considered cultural regions because their inhabitants dress the same way, cook the same foods, or live in the same style of homes. The **Islamic World**, displayed on the map below, is a cultural region in which people share the similar religious beliefs.

The Islamic World: A Region Based on Religious Beliefs

Estimated percentage of the population practicing Islam

- 95–100
- 75–94
- 50–74
- 25–49
- Less than 25

Scale by latitude

0   1,000   2,000 miles
0   1,610   3,220 km

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Because it defines how people produce and distribute goods and services, the **economy** of a certain area is another basis for creating a region. The **European Union** is one example. Countries that are members of this
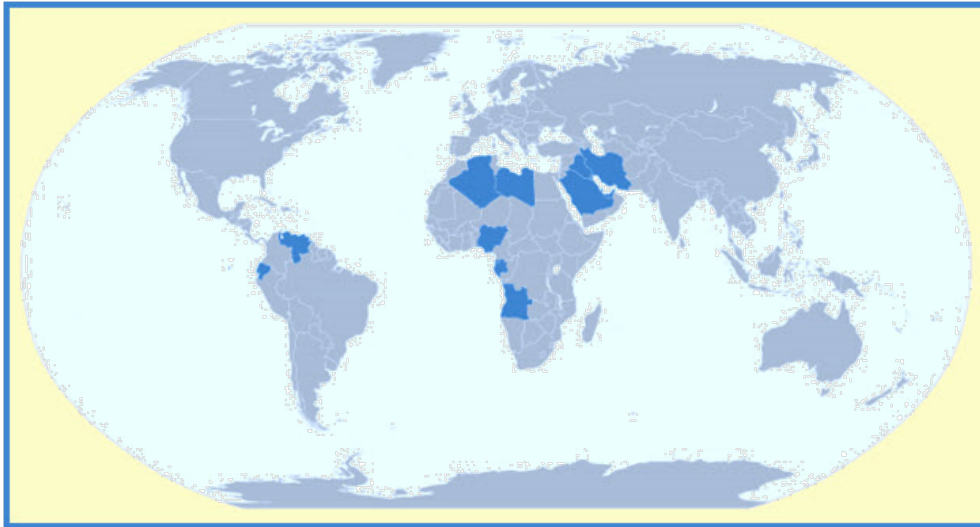
organization use the same money, agree to charge the same taxes on products, and make it easy to cross borders. Since this group of nations shares the same economic concerns, the European Union is not only classified as an organization but also as a region. You can see this region displayed on the map below.

The European Union: A Region based on a Shared Economy

THE EUROPEAN UNION

- Original members, 1993
- Joined in 1995
- Joined in 2004
- Joined in 2007
- Joined in 2013
- Candidate countries

ICELAND
FINLAND
SWEDEN
ESTONIA
LATVIA
IRELAND UNITED KINGDOM DENMARK LITHUANIA
NETH. POLAND
BELGIUM GERMANY
LUX. CZECH REPUBLIC
FRANCE SLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA HUNGARY
SLOVENIA CROATIA ROMANIA
PORTUGAL ITALY SERBIA
SPAIN MONTENEGRO BULGARIA
MACEDONIA
GREECE TURKEY
MALTA CYPRUS

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The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, or OPEC, is another organization that some geographers classify as an economic region. OPEC members depend on petroleum exports to support their economies. For this reason, they try to keep the price of oil on the world market stable by regulating the amount that they ship to other countries. If oil-exporting countries offer too much of their product for sale, there is less competition. Buyers pay less, and profits decrease. On the other hand, if oil-exporting countries offer a much smaller amount of oil for sale, competition increases, and buyers are forced to pay higher prices. Although this increases profits in the short-term, it encourages buyers to look for ways to purchase less from OPEC nations in the long-term. The map below displays in blue the economic region based on OPEC.

Comparing Regions

Geographers use certain **criteria**, or standards, to establish regions. They also use these same guidelines when they contrast or compare one region to another. The table below shows similarities and differences between the regions of Central Asia and Western Asia/North Africa. In this case, the criteria are location, landforms, government, language, and climate.

Comparing Middle East/North Africa and Central Asia		
Criteria	**Middle East/North Africa**	**Central Asia**
Landforms	Deserts make up much of this region.	This region includes deserts and plateaus.
Location	This region is found at the crossroads of Africa, Asia and Europe	This region is found at the crossroads of India, China, the Middle East and Europe
Government	Most of the countries here are ruled by kings.	Most of the countries here were once part of the Soviet Union but are now independent.
Religious beliefs	The major religion of this region is Islam.	The major religion of this region is Islam.
Language	Arabic is the major language spoken in this region.	Most people in this region speak a language related to Turkish.
Climate	This region is hot and dry with mild winters.	Here the climate is dry with very little rainfall.

Time for a Quick Review

Before moving on to Unit 4, take a few minutes to review the terms found in Unit 3. Be sure that you can answer the "Can I" questions listed below with a loud "yes".

Can I

...identify certain criteria used to define a region?

...explain how landforms and climate are used to define a region?

...explain how population and culture are used to define a region?

...explain how economic conditions are used to define a region?

...compare and contrast regions based on specific criteria?

Additional Activities and Resources

Unit 3 Organizer

Unit 3 Defining Regions