

April is SWANA Heritage Month

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Allow me to address your first question: What is SWANA? Southwest Asia and North Africa is a term with growing adoption to reference what is generally understood by the term “Middle East”. Each year, more [universities](#), [city governments](#), [public libraries](#), [health organizations](#), [primary & secondary schools](#), and [international governance and scientific organizations](#) are recognizing the commonalities across this geographic region and commemorating the heritage month. So why develop a new term? What does SWANA say that Middle East doesn’t (and vice versa)?

SWANA is a descriptive term that can be understood independent of where you are on the globe. Continental masses (e.g., Africa and Asia) are universally recognized, and compass directions (i.e., north, east, west, south) are scientific absolutes; as a result, Southwest Asia and North Africa are recognizable on every map. SWANA is widely considered to be a reasonably well-defined, apolitical, and non-religious term that avoids a Eurocentric perspective. Though boundaries vary slightly, it usually includes the entire Arabian peninsula and African nations spanning from Morocco to Egypt, often also including nations with coastlines on the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea.

In contrast, “Middle East” is a term coined by British and United States colonial powers relative to their own centers of power (along with its deprecated companions “Near East” and “Far East”), and its definition has migrated and expanded over time. Just as the term “Orient” was used to other-ize large numbers of ethnic groups and cultures and to label them as foreign to European power groups, so its descendant “Middle East” has sunk deep into the English-language psyche to whitewash the idea of “lesser region where Muslims and Arabs live”. Consequently, the creation of Israel in this region via the [Nakba](#) in 1948 (i.e., the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians from their homes into concentration camps in Gaza and the West Bank) – with [European-descent Ashkenazi Jewish people historically occupying the upper class there](#) – has aligned U.S. and Israeli interests and further othered the darker-skinned, continuously Indigenous people of the region.

So what should we know about SWANA heritage? Having been continuously inhabited since the beginning of recorded history, this region is home to thousands of years of cultural, religious, agricultural, and scientific development. Due to its unique geography, the SWANA region has also been a crossroads of land and maritime travel, birthing, encountering, enduring, and mutually influencing communities and empires in every period. One month isn’t nearly enough time to explore the 5,000+ year heritage of a region 4,000+ miles long, but we can certainly recognize the deep contributions the peoples of SWANA have made to our species’ history and the ways we are enriched by better knowing people from SWANA in our daily lives.