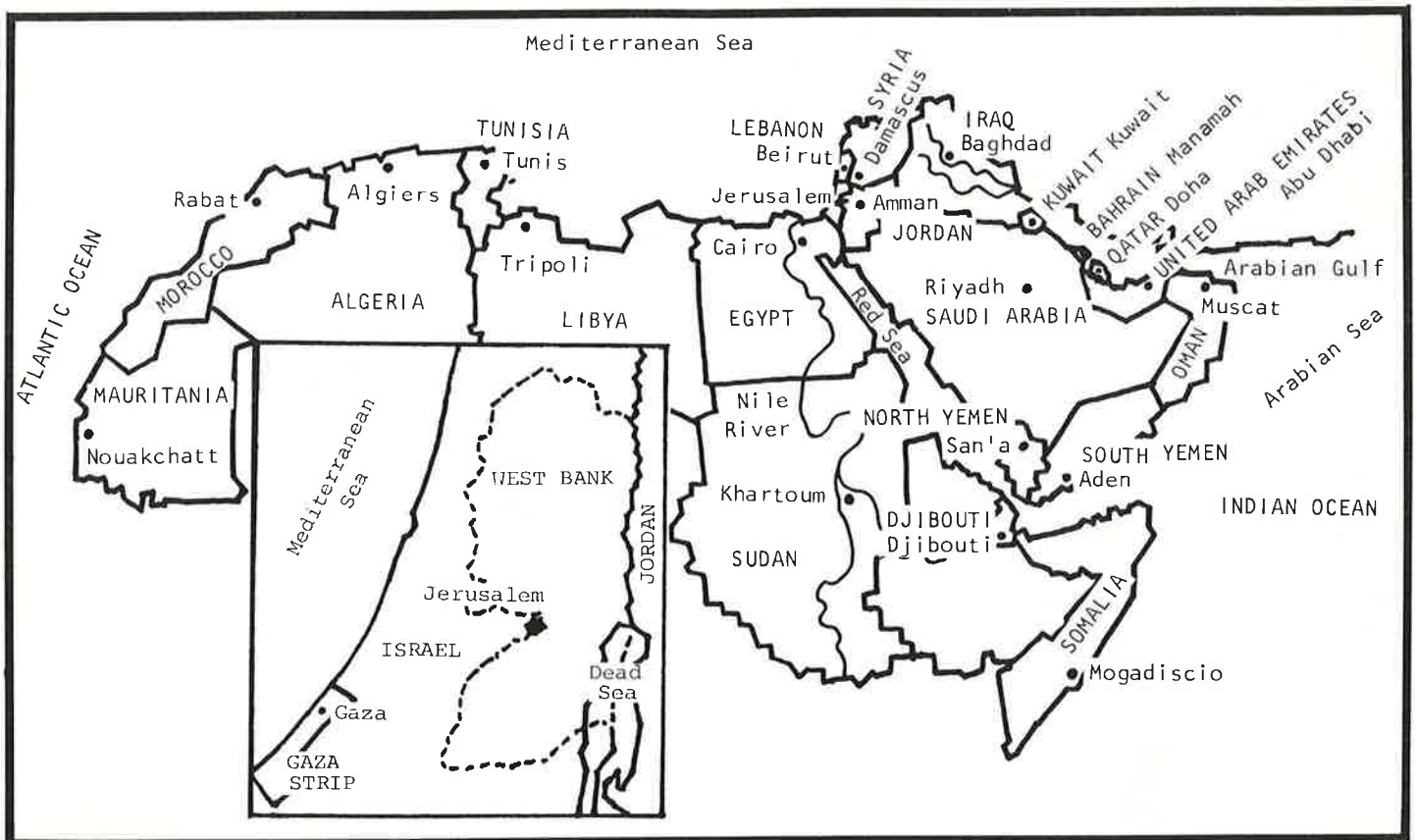


THE ARAB WORLD



The Arab World is much like a mosaic. On the surface it presents a seemingly homogenous picture, but a closer look reveals a rich diversity of people, cultural achievements, countries, landscapes, and various degrees of economic and political development. The Palestinians are an integral part of this world, and share with their fellow Arabs a common heritage and language.

GEOGRAPHY

Stretching from the Atlantic coast of northern Africa in the west to beyond the Arabian (Persian) Gulf in the east, the Arab World today spans nearly 5,000 miles of vast deserts and fertile valleys, covering an area almost twice the size of the United States. Dry conditions prevail throughout much of the world of the Arabs, yet their lands are bound by eight bodies of water: two oceans, the Atlantic and Indian; three seas, the Mediterranean, Red and Arabian; and three gulfs, the Arabian, Omani and Adeni. This being so, no Arab country is landlocked. Two major river basins, formed by the Nile and the Tigris and Euphrates, have been the ancient sites of great civilizations from the Egyptian to the Babylonian, and today, remain centers of agricultural and urban activity.

Deserts including the Sahara, Syrian and Arabian, touch

every Arab state except Lebanon. In Egypt and the Levant a hot southerly wind, called *khamsin*, blows off the desert filling the air with sand and dust. Several mountain ranges are found in the Arab World such as the Atlas, Lebanon and Riffian. With the exception of Kuwait, every Arab country has mountains. Only one country, Bahrain, is entirely an island, although many other Arab states have small islands within their domain.

The land and its access to water dictate the various lifestyles found in the Arab World. A few scattered bedouin (nomads) make their livelihood on the marginal lands bordering the deserts, moving their flocks from place to place in a pattern dictated by the seasons and rainfall. The majority of Arabs, nearly 140 million, live in either villages or cities on land that is gen-

(Continued on next page)

GEOGRAPHY (continued)

erally well-watered and can support both agriculture and domestic needs. A great deal of the land in the Arab World is unfit for human habitation on any basis. The Empty Quarter in Saudi Arabia is such a place. Comprising almost a third of Saudi land, it is the world's largest sand region covering a quarter million square miles and contains 800-foot sand mountains. Only a few bedouin and adventurers have ever successfully traversed this yet to be accurately mapped area.

HISTORY

The Arabian peninsula is viewed as the ancient homeland of a Semitic people whose descendants are believed to have migrated north to the Fertile Crescent of modern-day Iraq. The Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians and the Hebrews of history all have ancestral ties to the Semites of Arabia. Today's Arabs can also trace their origins back to this early people. In the Old Testament there is a reference in Genesis to these ancient people of Arabia which claims them as the descendants of Noah. The oldest son of Noah, Shem, is regarded as the common ancestor of the Jews and Arabs—both speakers of Semitic languages.

In the middle of the seventh century A.D., there arose from the sandy soil of Arabia a force that was to change the face of the civilized world. Strangely enough, it was not initially a military force. Rather, it was the third monotheistic religion to arise in the Middle East—Islam. This religion took its shape and strength through a man known as Mohammad, who is considered by Muslims to be the Messenger of God. In the beginning, the converts were few in an area where strong polytheistic religious practices still prevailed, alongside Christian and Jewish sects. In less than two decades, however, Mohammad and his followers brought most of the Arabian peninsula under Islamic and Arab control.

Following the death of Mohammad, the Arabs in the name of Islam continued to conquer and convert virtually the entire Middle East from Syria to Egypt. By the year 715, the Arabs had gained control of most of North Africa and Spain. At the same time, they expanded their empire to the east in Persia and Islam reached all the way to China and Indonesia. By the middle of the eighth century, the Arab Empire girdled almost a fifth of the globe. During Arab rule, Arabic was the *lingua franca* throughout the conquered territories—the language of kings and commoners, poets and princes, scholars and scientists.

The Arab Empire was greater in scope than that of Rome at its zenith. The Arabs assimilated more people to their way of life than any other conquering power was able to do before or since, including the Hellenic, the Anglo-Saxon and the Russian.

Under Arab rule, Christians and Jews were allowed religious freedom. Although subject to more taxation than the Muslims, they were allowed to choose their own occupations and to pursue their own interests. This *laissez faire* attitude and considerable interaction among the religious groups led to cultural enrichment for members of all three faiths—leading ultimately to the Golden Age of the Arab Empire.

This great empire lasted several hundred years, but began to decline in the twelfth century as a result of inter-Arab and inter-Muslim disputes. After the end of Arab rule, the Turks invaded and conquered much of the Arab World, and established their own empire, the Ottoman. Turkish rule lasted nearly four centuries and ended less than seventy years ago. Beginning in the 1920s, the Arab World of today emerged into separate states, some achieving independence as recently as the 1960s.

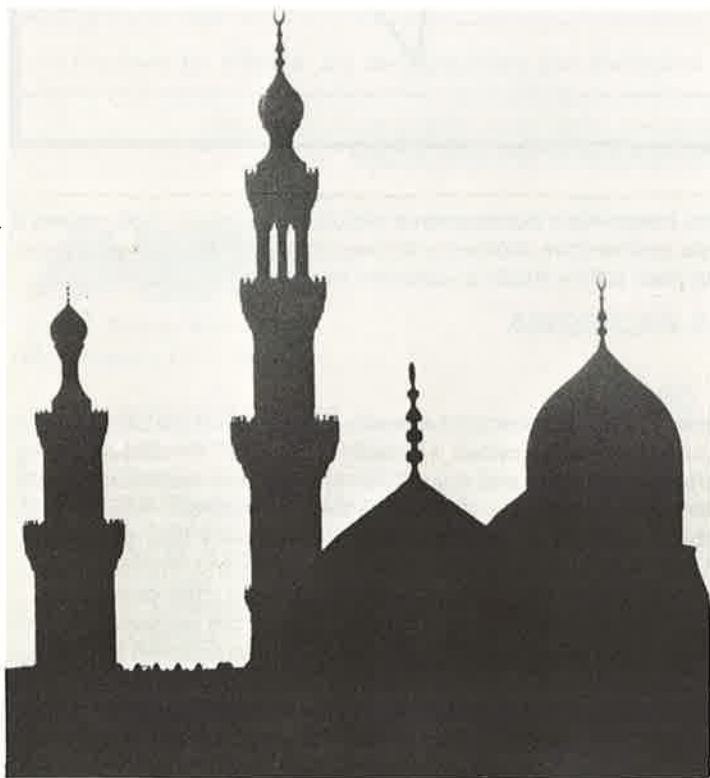
CULTURE

At a time when Europe was suffering through the darkness of the Middle Ages, the Arabs were busy making significant contributions to the arts and sciences. It was not only an empire that the Arabs built, but a culture as well. Heirs of the ancient civilizations that flourished on the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates, in the Nile Valley and on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, the Arabs absorbed, assimilated and embellished in their turn the main features of the Greco-Roman culture, and subsequently acted as a medium for transmitting to medieval and renaissance Europe many of those intellectual influences. No people in the Middle Ages contributed to human progress as did the people of the Arab Empire.

At the end of the seventh century, Baghdad became the capital of the Arab World, a city in which cultural and intellectual activity blossomed. Contributing significantly to this intellectual revival was the House of Wisdom or *Beit al-Hikmah* which was an academy, library, museum, observatory, and translation center all rolled into one. Founded in 830 A.D., the *Beit al-Hikmah* was the most important educational institution to be established since the Alexandrian Library in Egypt in the third century B.C. Before any existed in northern Europe, many great universities and libraries were founded throughout the Arab Empire in such cities as Cairo, Damascus, Al-Kairoun (Tunisia), Fez and Cordoba. Between the eighth and twelfth centuries, the Arab world made major advancements in such areas as philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and mathematics to name a few.

"The philosopher of the Arabs," was an Iraqi called Al-Kindi. He is credited with synthesizing Greek philosophy and Islamic theology. Like other Renaissance scholars, Al-Kindi was also an accomplished astrologer and musician. Another Arab philosopher, Ibn-Rushd (Averros), strongly influenced European thought from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries. His work

Arab Perspectives



Minarets, Cairo

affected the thought of medieval Christian theologians and scholars including St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Aristotelian, who attributed Ibn-Rushd with significantly advancing Aristotle's thought.

Wounded Crusaders in the eleventh and twelfth centuries brought back tales of how Arab wisemen had saved their lives with their medical treatments. The Arab Empire had attained a level of sophistication in medicine unknown in Europe. The Arabs had developed licensing procedures requiring physicians to pass qualifying exams before they could practice. An elaborate public health care system was devised to serve the sick not only in hospitals, but also at home, in prisons, and in rural areas. Special institutions were endowed for lepers, the lame and the blind. Surgery was refined to a specialty, made possible by anesthesia.

As Europeans worried about whether or not their ships would sail off the edge of the earth, Arab astronomers were busy calculating the earth's diameter and circumference—almost exactly. They developed astronomical tables which surpassed earlier Greek and Indian attempts. Vast improvements in navigation were made possible due to the development of the compass, quadrant, sextant, and astrolabe—all developed by Arabs.

Without Arabic numerals, the decimal system, and the concept of zero, all adopted and refined by the Arabs from the Hindus, Western science could never have advanced. The Arab mathematicians developed the concept of irrational numbers, made algebra an exact science, founded analytical geometry and incorporated into mathematics the concept of time.

The Arab Empire endured and succeeded largely because of the universal use of Arabic. The form of the language as it is known today is traced back to the bedouin poets who performed before the tribes of northern Arabia in the sixth century. These pre-Islamic Arabs were a desert people with little formal education, but they created a poetic language of amazing richness and classical exactitude. These early Arab poets found a natural rhythm in the structure of their language, which was built upon a three-consonant root for nouns and verbs. By the juxtaposition of consonants and vowels in a basic root, many words with exact shades of meaning could be created. It is this great flexibility that enabled the Arabic language to adapt and develop new words which the emerging empire required to handle their administrative as well as intellectual needs.

Not only was Arabic the language of the empire, but its written form became the basis of their art. The art of fine writing or calligraphy was described by the Alexandrian philosopher Euclid as a "spiritual technique". Calligraphy was used to decorate buildings and pottery as well as manuscripts. Today it survives as a principal artistic expression of the Arabs.

TODAY

As much as the Arab World is a diverse collection of physical settings, cultural achievements, and historical origins, the modern Arabs live in many countries which are all at different stages of economic and political development. All, however, share a common heritage and language that remains a legacy of the once great Arab Empire.

Today's Arab World includes over twenty countries which all belong to a joint, voluntary organization, the Arab League. This organization seeks to coordinate the cultural, economic and political policies of the Arab states. While quite successful in coordinating efforts in the first two areas, the political aspect is another matter. Arab unity, on the political front, is hindered in part by the many different types of governments which range from traditional, patriarchal forms, to limited monarchy and liberal democracy, to regimes in which the state closely directs



the major social, economic, and political processes. Also contributing to Arab disunity are the various levels of economic development which are dependent on a given country's available natural resources and the size and educational level of their respective populations.

The discovery of oil in 1932 in Saudi Arabia marked the beginning of a new era for the Arab World. Agriculture and commerce were traditionally the bases of Arab economies as they are today for many countries. However, huge oil reserves significantly changed the economic picture for several Arab states including the Gulf countries and Libya. While these countries have large deposits of oil, they have very small populations. The other oil-producing countries, such as Iraq and Algeria, have many people. The most populous country, Egypt, which has over 40 million people, has limited oil resources, only recently discovered. The majority of the Arab states have no oil including the two Yemens, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. These countries must depend on a few resources ranging from mostly agricultural products to minerals. With the exception of the first group of states, all have large populations whose average per capita income puts them in an economic class characteristic of Third World countries.

Of all countries which give aid to the Third World (including the United States), the Arab oil-producing states donate the highest percentage of their gross national products to such countries for development purposes. The U.S. gives only .27 percent of its total GNP, while Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Qatar give an average of 3.4 percent—the highest in the world. Arab aid goes predominantly to the poorer Arab countries to assist community and economic development projects.

Modern cities, wide streets, automobiles, airports, industry, compulsory education, rural electrification, irrigation, Western clothing are all found in the Arab World today. Many times, the old and the new exist side-by-side. For example, one is likely to see donkey carts in busy downtown streets filled with American and European cars in many Arab cities. Another typical sight in Arab cities is the bazaar, *sوق*, which line the older parts of the cities. Here, craftsmen still inlay wood with mother-of-pearl and glaze pottery much as their ancestors did centuries ago.

THE PALESTINIANS

For literally centuries, the Palestinians have cultivated and lived in a land referred to in the Bible as *Philistine* (Palestine). Some Palestinians can trace their ancestry directly back to the Canaanites who lived in the rocky hills and coastal plains of Palestine 2,000 years ago. Palestinians were among the early converts to Christianity in Jerusalem. 700 years later, the majority, but not all, Palestinians converted to Islam when the Arab Muslim armies conquered the area. The last Arab mayor of East Jerusalem, until he was deported after the military occupation of the West Bank in 1967, regularly conducted services in the al-Aqsa mosque in the 800-year-old tradition of his family. With this ancient heritage of the Palestinians in mind, it is no wonder that they view Palestine as their homeland.

Over a million Palestinians live under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, while another two and half million live in involuntary exile. Those living under occupation are denied their own government and must cope on their own

with the crises and problems that are normally handled by such an institution. Exacerbating these difficulties are severe restrictions placed on them by their occupiers making economic and commercial development difficult at best.

These are the conditions under which ANERA works, helping the Palestinians develop basic services including adequate health care, rural electrification, sewer systems, and education. In addition, ANERA assists indigenous Palestinian institutions to continue their work in such areas as agricultural development and light industry. While many Arab countries provide vital funding for basic welfare and development, ANERA's assistance, made possible by American public and private support, provides not only tangible financial aid but also gives the Palestinians hope and encouragement. In the isolation of a military occupation, separating them from the rest of the Arab World, the Palestinians deeply appreciate outside concern and aid, especially American. They continue working for a better future secure in the knowledge that belief in their inalienable rights is shared not only by other Arabs but also by many Americans.

ANERA has received special gifts in memory of the following people:

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*This issue of the ANERA Newsletter was written by Ann Barhoum, ANERA Executive Assistant.
Map of Arab World by Betsy Shine, ANERA Administrative Assistant.*

ANERA

1522 K Street, N.W., #202
Washington, D.C. 20005

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