

# WHO ARE THE ARABS?

By Steve Tamari

## INTRODUCTION

What is the Arab world? Who are the Arabs? In an age where movie images and news from political flashpoints dominate American perceptions of the world, the Arabs are, at best, little understood. The stereotypical images of the wealthy *shaykh*, the exotic bellydancer, and the hooded terrorist do not reflect the diversity of contemporary Arab society and the richness of Arab history. This module will provide an introduction to Arab history and a survey of contemporary Arab society, culture, and politics.

Arabs are those who speak Arabic as their native tongue and who identify themselves as Arabs. The Arab world is not to be confused with the “Middle East,” a strategic designation developed during the heyday of the British empire, which encompasses such non-Arab countries as Israel, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. And though Arab history is intertwined with Muslim history, the Arab world does not correspond to the Muslim world. There are significant non-Muslim Arab communities and most Muslims are, in fact, from large non-Arab countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, and many of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa. There are also large Arab and non-Arab Muslim communities in North America.

Arab geography books typically define the Arab world as extending from the Persian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean, from Iraq and the Gulf states in the east to Morocco’s Atlantic coast in the west. From north to south, the Arab world extends from Syria to Sudan. This vast region comprises such different ecological zones as the vast deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and the Sahara, the river valleys of the Nile and Euphrates, the rain-fed agricultural regions of the Mediterranean coastal areas, and the rugged heights of Mt. Lebanon, northern Iraq, Yemen, and the Atlas mountains of North Africa. Within these zones one finds nomadic bedouins, peasant farmers, agricultural wage laborers, industrial workers, craftsmen and craftswomen, and all the trades and services associated with booming cities such as Rabat, Cairo, and Beirut. Today around 250,000 million people live in the 17 independent countries that make up the Arab world. These are: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. \*Palestinians are Arab though they have yet to achieve full national independence.

## ORIGINS OF THE ARABS

Like other peoples around the world, most speakers of Arabic did not identify themselves as belonging to a particular national group until quite recently. Modern Arab nationalism is a product of 19th- and 20th-century transformations. Before the rise of nationalism, most Arabic-speakers identified themselves as members of a particular family or tribe; as

residents of a village, town, or region; as Muslims, Christians, or Jews; or as subjects of large political entities such as the Ottoman empire.

Prior to the 20th century, “Arab” designated the bedouin, tribal-based society of the Arabian desert, which is the birthplace of Arabic. Historians generally agree that the ancient Semitic peoples Assyrians, Aramaeans, Canaanites (including the Phoenicians and Hebrews) and, later, the Arabs themselves migrated into the area of the Fertile Crescent after successive crises of overpopulation in the Peninsula beginning in the third millennium before the Common Era (BCE) and ending with the Muslim conquests of the 7th century CE. These peoples spoke languages based on similar linguistic structures, and the modern Semitic languages of Arabic, Hebrew, and Amharic (the language of Ethiopia) maintain important similarities.

Language and literature, particularly poetry, are central to understanding the rise of the Arabs and of an Arab identity. Prior to the advent of Islam, a common Arabic poetic language emerged as testimony to a shared cultural tradition among the disparate tribes of the Peninsula. The earliest collections of Arabic verse that have survived date from the early 6th century CE; at first these were transmitted orally and then written down in the 8th century. The poets of this classical, pre-Islamic age were the propagandists and political representatives of rival tribes. They composed lengthy lyrical poems, called *qasidas*, to extol the values and virtues of a nomadic style of life: honor, courage, loyalty, generosity, and tribal solidarity. Some historians argue that this literary explosion sowed the seeds of a proto-Arab nationalist consciousness that paved the way for the rise of Islam.

## **THE ARABS AND ISLAM**

Arabs emerged on the world historical stage in the 7th century CE with the Prophet Muhammad and the rise of Islam. Muhammad was born in Makkah (Mecca) in the western part of the Arabian Peninsula, an important entrepot on the trade routes connecting Yemen to the south, the Mediterranean to the north, the Persian Gulf to the east, and Africa through the Red Sea port of Jeddah to the west. In a period of economic, political, and religious ferment, Muhammad delivered a spiritual and social message based on the unity and oneness of God. In 622, Muhammad established the original Muslim community in Medina. The popularity of his message and the weakness of the Byzantine and Sasanian empires to the north led to the success of a series of dramatic conquests. Within 20 years of Muhammad’s death in 632, Muslim Arabs ruled a territory extending from Egypt in the west to deep into Iran in the east.

Arabs and the Arabic language played central roles in the spread of Islam. The Qur’an, the holy book of the Muslims, is God’s word as transmitted to Muhammad in Arabic. The perfection of its language and the fact that Muslims consider its words the words of God (“Allah” in Arabic) make Arabic a sacred language for Muslims. Until the advent of the Abbasid dynasty in 750 CE, Arabs also dominated Islamic institutions. By that time, however, Islam became the religion of Arabs and non-Arabs alike, and the Arab elements

diminished in importance as non-Arab cultures, particularly Persian, Indian, and Greek, contributed to the emergence of a new Islamic civilization.

The mixing and melding of Arabs with other populations produced a cultural and scientific flowering which reached its apogee between the 8th and 10th centuries CE. Arabic was the language of politics and belles lettres. But, within the rubric of an Islamic civilization, Muslims and non-Muslims of a variety of ethnic backgrounds translated philosophic texts from Greek, adapted tales from Sanskrit, and copied the styles of the ancient Persian courts. Islamic scientists made path-breaking discoveries in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and mechanics. They invented algebra, demonstrated the circulation of the blood, developed the astrolabe, and were the first to use a magnetic compass for navigation.

In the fine arts, Arabo-Islamic civilization excelled in architecture, calligraphy, ceramics, textiles, and finely decorated metals. The most original architectural innovation of Arab Islam was the hypostyle mosque, a building in which the roof is supported by rows of columns. The congregational mosques of Cordoba in Spain, Kairouan in modern Tunisia, Cairo, Damascus, and Samarra in Iraq survive as monumental examples of this style of architecture. As Islamic civilization did not encourage representational art, Arabic calligraphy developed into a fine art in the preparation of manuscripts as well as in decorating buildings and objects. The highly stylized image known as “arabesque” was another way to express ideas without resorting to representation. Craft centers of the Arab world produced (and produce) fine textiles known around the world such as damask (from Damascus in Syria) and muslin (from Mosul in Iraq). Lusterware-pottery decorated by applying metallic compounds to the glaze was developed during the earliest period of Islamic history. Finely decorated bronze utilitarian objects indicate a long tradition of incorporating art into the utensils of everyday use.

Today Islam claims around one billion adherents around the world and is the fastest growing religion in the United States. Although the vast majority of Muslims are non-Arabs, Arabic continues to maintain its special status as Muslims around the world study classical Arabic in order to recite the Qur’an.

## **ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WEST**

For a variety of reasons, Westerners, including Americans, often assume there is a deep division between Arab and Islamic culture, on the one hand, and European and Christian culture, on the other. Western civilization is said to be based on the Judeo-Christian tradition; the Orient is thus distinguished from the Occident. In fact, Arab and Muslim societies have much more in common with Europe, Christendom, and the West than is often assumed. Islam recognizes the Judaic and Christian traditions and Arab Christians and Jews have always been integral members of the Arab world.

There are many historical instances of collaboration between Muslims, Christians, and Jews and of cultural fusion between Arabs and Europeans. The cultural flowering that

took place in Andalusia (southern Spain), between the Arab conquest in the 8th century CE and the fall of Granada to the Spanish in 1492 CE, is probably the most dramatic illustration of this phenomenon. Arabic was the language of this civilization, which produced many of the scientific and cultural achievements that were transmitted to Europe and helped lay the foundations for the Renaissance. Romantic Hispano-Arabic literary forms, such as the love songs of the *muwashshah* form, were precursors to the songs of the troubadours of the age of chivalry. The Islamic legal college, the *madrasah*, contributed to the development of European universities. Two of the more remarkable philosophers of this age were Andalusian contemporaries: the Muslim Ibn Rushd, known in Latin as Averroes, and the Jew Maimonides, who wrote in Hebrew and in Arabic. There are countless other indications of cultural and intellectual exchange across the Mediterranean throughout the ages. Perhaps the best illustration of the impact of Arabic on Europe is the large number of words of Arabic origin found in English and Spanish.

This is not to say that there were never conflicts between Europeans and Arabs. In fact, the more recent history of such conflicts is at the root of the notion that there is something fundamentally different between Christianity and Islam, between Europe and the Arab world, between the West and the East. From the Battle of Tours in 732 CE, which halted the Muslim advance into Europe, through the defeat of the Byzantines at Manzikert in 1071 CE, which provided the impetus for the Crusades, to the defeat of the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna in 1683 CE, relations between the Christian states of Europe and the Muslim states of the Middle East and North Africa have been punctuated by wars and hostility. By the 17th century, the balance of power had gradually shifted in favor of the European powers, a process which was to culminate in the European colonization of most of the Arab world by the beginning of the 20th century.

The legacy of European colonialism and imperialism in the Arab world does more to explain contemporary misunderstandings between Arabs and Westerners than any other single fact. Beginning in the late 18th century and continuing through the dissolution of the Ottoman empire during World War II, Britain and France divided up most of the Arab world between themselves. Though Europeans contributed to the development of states, economies, and education in many of these countries, the main legacy of colonialism is resentment against Western rule and power. The stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims in the American media and the view of America as the "Great Satan" in the imagination of many Arabs today is rooted in the violent history of colonialism and the United States' preeminent role in the Middle East following the denouement of the British and the French empires after World War II.

## **ARAB NATIONALISM**

The single most important development in the Arab world during the 20th century is the emergence of Arab nationalism. As with the development of nationalisms in Europe, the first expressions of Arab nationalism were literary. Among Arabs, the late 19th century is known as the period of the Arab Renaissance, *al-nahda*, when experiments with modern literary forms, the spread of print journalism, and the first stirrings of secret nationalist

organizations developed. Arab nationalism went on to dominate the politics of the region from the First World War to the Arab defeat at the hands of Israel in 1967. Arab nationalism took many forms but reached the climax of its psychological and political power during the 1950s and early 1960s under the sway of Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. Nasser defied the West and Egypt's former colonial ruler, Britain, by nationalizing the Suez Canal in 1956.

The 1967 defeat was, however, a catastrophic defeat for Nasser, Arab nationalism, and secularism. From that point on, particularist nationalisms—such as Egyptian nationalism, Syrian nationalism, or Palestinian nationalism—and Islamism have come to the fore. Particularism culminated in the 1991 Gulf War, which was started by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and resulted in dividing the states and peoples of the Arab world. Since the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, Islamist political movements in the Arab world have become increasingly popular and powerful, but even they operate largely within the context of the domestic challenges faced by particular nations.

## **THE ARAB WORLD TODAY**

The primacy of domestic problems and possibilities is an indication of the diversity among and between Arab peoples today. Economically, Arab countries and their populations span the spectrum from the wealthiest to the poorest populations in the world and have access to widely different natural resources. The Gulf states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, and Saudi Arabia have benefited from oil. Saudi Arabia is the world's largest exporter of oil. In 1994, the gross national product (GNP) per capita of the UAE was \$22,020. The GNP per capita of Sudan, where 80 percent of the labor force works in agriculture, was \$250—almost 100 times less in the same year. Whereas expatriates comprise almost 70 percent of the population of the UAE, one of Egypt's largest sources of revenue are remittances from Egyptians working abroad.

Though "Arab" originally referred to the nomadic people of the desert, bedouins actually account for a small fraction—two percent at most—of Arabs today. Most Arabs still make their living as farmers, though some of the region's urban centers are among the oldest (Jericho in Palestine and Damascus in Syria) and among the fastest growing (Cairo) in the world. Arab women have always played key economic roles in farming families and as owners of real estate in the urban centers. Today, they are increasingly entering the professional and industrial workforce.

Arab societies have always included a broad range of religious and ethnic groups. As recently as the 1940s, Lebanon had a majority Christian population. The minorities of Syria include offshoots of Shiism, one of the two main branches of Islam. Palestinians, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. Many of the inhabitants of modern Arab states are descendants of linguistic and ethnic groups that pre-date the Arab conquest. The Amazigh (or Berbers), for example, constitute as much as 40 percent of

Morocco's population. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of Sudan is represented by more than 50 ethnic groups; only half the population speaks Arabic as its native tongue.

Economic and social differences have contributed to political strife within Arab states today. Many Arab countries are dominated by autocratic regimes, a fact which fuels popular resentment against the status quo. A civil war in Algeria after the army's seizure of power in 1992 has left at least 50,000 dead and continues unabated. In the southern Sudan, demands for autonomy have led to two civil wars since independence in 1956. In Yemen, however, a short-lived effort by the south to secede in 1994 ended without spiraling into civil war and, by 1997, the central government was able to organize successful national parliamentary elections. Women have played important roles in revolutionary struggles in Algeria, Sudan, and in the Palestinian national movement and today, particularly in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, women are active in political, religious, and social movements.

Military actions and political pressures from outside the region contribute to social, economic, and political hardships. Israel, with decisive material and financial aid from the United States, continues to deny Palestinian demands for statehood with violent results for both peoples. According to UNICEF, crippling international sanctions against Iraq since its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 mean that about 56,000 Iraqi children die from malnutrition and disease every year. The Gulf War of 1990-91 was a dramatic illustration of the potential hostility between Arab states. On the other hand, there are important examples of regional cooperation such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, which aims to coordinate economic development and facilitate trade and communication between its six members. Morocco, meanwhile, seeks membership in the European Community.

These domestic and regional rivalries and differences notwithstanding, Arab national sentiment remains powerful. Throughout the Arab world, popular support for the Palestinians and resentment at the U.S.-led campaign against Iraq are the strongest political indicators of this sentiment. Whether or not Arab states ever achieve political unity, Arabs will always be united in pride in their history, their language, and their contributions to the development of the human spirit.

## **ARABS IN AMERICA**

Arab-Americans are part of the rich fabric of the United States' multicultural heritage. The first immigrants to the United States from the Arab world were Christians from modern-day Lebanon and Syria who arrived a little more than a hundred years ago. Today there are nearly three million Americans of Arab origin and their numbers are growing. The most recent immigrants come from Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, and, increasingly, Yemen and North Africa. Many more of the recent immigrants are Muslims. For the most part, Arab-Americans have settled in urban areas in and around Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC; but they are also scattered throughout the country. Many of the original migrants worked as peddlers and fanned out throughout the country to sell their wares. It is not surprising, therefore, that South Dakota, for example, has sent two Americans of Arab origin to the Senate,

including James Abourezk, founder of one of the largest grassroots movements of Arab-Americans in the United States.

Today, Arab Americans are involved in all types of work and activities. Many have reached the pinnacles of their professions. In the arts and entertainment actress Marlo Thomas, daughter of the late comedian Danny Thomas, actor F. Murray Abraham and Top Ten Announcer Casey Kasem are well known to all Americans. Other famous Arab-Americans include Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, Senator George Mitchell, Governor John Sununu, heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, basketball star Rony Seikaly, novelist Vance Bourjali, and poet Naomi Shihab Nye.

## RESOURCES

Books and articles:

AMIDEAST, *Introduction to the Arab World* (Washington, DC, 1989). Somewhat out of date but a concise and accurate presentation of history, Islam and the modern Arab world to the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada in 1987. Includes teaching tips, exercises, glossary, chronology, a video, and other useful resources.

Inea Bushnaq, *Arab Folktales* (New York: Pantheon, 1986). John Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). A concise and clear presentation of the main features of Islam historically and in contemporary contexts.

Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock and Robert A. Fernea, *The Arab World: Forty years of Change* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

John Hayes, ed., *The Genius of Arab Civilization: Source of Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983). Chapters on historic Arab contributions to the arts and sciences. Well illustrated.

Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Thorough discussion of Arab history from pre-Islamic times to the mid-1980s. Includes detailed bibliography.

Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Concise treatment of Arab history with emphasis on Arabs and Islam.

Naff, Alixa, *The Arab Americans* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998).

Lars Rodseth et al., *Arab World Mosaic: A Curriculum Supplement for Elementary Teachers* (Detroit, 1994).

Audrey Shabbas, ed., *Arab World Studies Notebook* (Berkeley, CA: Arab World and Islamic Resources, and Washington, DC: Middle East Policy Council, 1998).

Irfan Shahid, "Pre-Islamic Arabia," *The Cambridge History of Islam*, P.M. Holt et. al., eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), I: 3-29.

#### Films:

*The Arabs: A Living History* A series of 10, 50-minute documentaries on Arab history and culture. In their own words, Arab individuals from Morocco to Kuwait offer glimpses into lifestyles, beliefs, values, and struggles. Some footage is outdated, but the series is excellent.

*Young Voices from the Arab World: The Lives and Times of Five Teenagers*. A "slice of life" depiction of youth from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, and Morocco, with commentary on Arab history and society. American teenagers will identify with these cohorts as well as appreciate their cultural diversity. 30 minutes. Accompanied by a comprehensive guide to the Arab world.

*The Message* A dramatized story of the history of Islam, from its beginnings in Makkah in the 7th century. Although almost three hours, it can be excerpted for classroom use.

*The Hajj* An ABC ìNightlineî production with commentary by Ted Koppel, this is a video journal of an American Muslimís pilgrimage to Makkah. 23 minutes.

*Lion of the Desert* A feature film about Omar al-Mukhtar, leader of the Libyan nationalist struggle against the Italian army in the 1920s and 1930s. Slow moving but gripping. 159 minutes.

*Battle of Algiers* An engaging drama of the revolt of Algerians against French colonialism, culminating in independence for Algeria in 1962. 125 minutes.

*Palestine: 1890-1990* A historical account of the Palestinian diaspora, starting with the origins of Zionism in Europe in the 1890s and concluding with the 1993 agreement between Israel and the PLO. 34 minutes.

*Spain: The Moorish Influence* A beautiful overview of Andalusia, exploring the Arab heritage of Europe in architecture, philosophy, and the sciences as it was transmitted through the Iberian peninsula. 28 minutes.

#### On the web:



Middle East Network Information Center

The Middle East/North Africa Internet Resource Guide

Islamic Studies, Islam, Arabic and Religion

Middle East Studies Association of North America

High School Model Arab League

Arab World and Islamic Resources and School Services

Dar-Al-Islam

4Arabs Search Engine

Middle East and Islamic World Film Collections

Amideast

The Middle East Outreach Council

The Council on Islamic Education

## **IN THE CLASSROOM**

**National identity:** Discuss the meaning of national identity. What does it mean to be an Arab or an American? Is it simply a matter of language? What is nationalism? Discuss the origins of Arab nationalism. How does Arab nationalism compare with American nationalism? Write a poem in the style and tone of "Identity Card," by Mahmoud Darwish, from a nationalist perspective (Arab, American, or other).

**Religion and the Arab world:** What is the relation between Islam and the Arabs? Why is the Arabic language important to Muslims worldwide? Conduct research on non-Muslim communities in the Arab world, historically and in modern times. Compare the status of religious minorities in Muslim societies with ethnic minorities in the United States today.

**Arab history:** Conduct research on Arab contributions to the arts and sciences. Name some famous Arab scientists, philosophers, engineers, poets, and artists. What are some of their major achievements? How have their achievements influenced and been influenced by developments in Europe? How have the cultures of the Mediterranean influenced one another throughout the ages?

Arabic language: In a dictionary, look up the words admiral, alcohol, algebra, almanac, coffee, cotton, magazine, syrup, and tariff. Check their linguistic origins (immediately following each entry, often in parentheses). What do all these words have in common? What does this tell you about Arab civilization, and its contributions to the West?

Arab-Americans: Look up famous Arab-Americans and expand the list provided in this module. Write a poem with a similar style and theme as Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, "My Father and the Figtree." Investigate the immigrant experience from different points of view, such as nostalgia, exile, conflict, displacement, identity, assimilation, or specific generational experiences.

Life narratives: Divide the class into four groups, each representing the four areas covered by the eight narratives above: Egypt, the Palestinians, the Gulf and Yemen, and North Africa. Then divide each of the four groups into two, each taking one of the narratives as its own. Ask each sub-group to do research about their subject. Questions that can be asked include: What is the life of an Egyptian peasant like? What changes during the 1970s affected life in the Gulf? What events led some Palestinians to become refugees in the neighboring Arab countries? What are the causes of the civil war that has taken so many lives in Algeria since 1991? The four groups can then meet separately to discuss how their subjects reflect different populations and experiences within the same country or region. Then each group can present the background and lives of their respective subjects to the whole class based on the narratives and on outside research. Finally, the class can discuss the varieties of life experiences represented by these particular narratives. To what extent is it possible to generalize about the people of the Arab world?

Community Resource Service is an outreach program of CCAS that draws upon Georgetown University's knowledge and resources about the Arab world and makes them available to K-12 educators. For information contact the Outreach Coordinator, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 241 ICC, Georgetown University, Washington, DC 20057-1020. T: (202) 687-6176