

Who Is an Arab?

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Over a hundred million people in the world call themselves Arabs. That is, to say the least, a potential force in world politics, quite apart from the question of oil. Yet many observers are inclined to doubt whether there is any reality underlying the common use of the term Arab. And it is indeed not easy to define what is meant by an Arab.

The Arabs are not a distinct ethnic group, since there are both white Arabs and black Arabs. Some of the black Sudanese Arabs claim descent in the male line from Arabs of Mohammed's time, and may well be correct in their claim. Nor is language a sufficient criterion of Arabness, since there are many Arabic-speaking Jews who are not normally called Arabs. The figure of a hundred million comes from the populations of the states in the Arab League. For membership in the Arab League the primary criterion appears to be language; but, despite the presence of Lebanon, which is half Christian, this tends to be coupled with the acceptance of Arab-Islamic culture.

Modern Arab intellectuals are well aware of the difficulty in defining an Arab. As long ago as December, 1938, a conference of Arab students in Europe, held in Brussels, declared that "all who are Arab in their language, culture and loyalty [or "national feeling"] are Arabs." Some of the same intellectuals, however, have spoken of the present disunity of the Arabs as the result of European imperialism during the last century or more. It does not take much knowledge of history to demonstrate that that is a complete misconception.

The only time Arabs have been politically united was from about A.D. 634 to 750. Before Mohammed they were divided into feuding tribes, and not all the tribes entered into alliance with him. The so-called wars of the Apostasy that followed his death ended in unity under the second caliph, and

this unity continued until about 750, with the Arabs as a ruling élite in an empire stretching from Spain to the Punjab and Central Asia. Soon after 750, however, the Arabs of Spain formed an independent government, and in the following centuries other dynasties gained varying degrees of autonomy. It often happened that two rulers, both nominally owing their appointment to the politically powerless caliph (or emperor), would fight bitterly to extend their territories at the other's expense. Where there was an opportunity, the local Muslim princelings were ready to ally themselves with a Christian princeling against a Muslim rival; this happened both in Spain and, in the Crusading period, in Syria. So much for the myth of political unity.

At the same time, there was always an impressive cultural unity. Even before Mohammed there was some common cultural awareness among the Arabs. The very word Arab has the connotation of "people who speak clearly," and is contrasted with *ajam*, or "people who speak indistinctly." Though *ajam* came to be used specially of Persians, the contrast is similar to that between Greeks and "barbarians." Arabic literature was vigorously cultivated in Spain under Muslim rule. Most rulers and courtiers could write tolerable Arabic verse, and a few achieved true elegance. One or two scholars knew by heart vast amounts of the poetry of the leading authors of Syria and Baghdad, and the poetical standards of the heartlands still guided taste in Andalusia. At different times several local poets were dubbed "the Mutanabbi of the West," in much the same way one called a man "the Milton of America."

Outstanding works from Baghdad quickly made their way to Spain and were studied and commented on. Indeed, in various ways the Arabs of Spain were more Arab than those of the heartlands, perhaps because of their relative isolation in a somewhat alien environment. While one may emphasize the distinctive Iberian character of the Arab literature of Spain, the Arabic language used in Spain remains very close to the classical models. Thus Arab culture has been a potent unifying force even in the face of great political disunity.

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The beginning of the twentieth century saw many of the Arab countries nominally parts of the Ottoman Empire; that is, they were under non-Arab Muslim rule. This was officially the case with Egypt, although *de facto* Egypt was being ruled by Britain, as was also the "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan." Algeria was ruled by the French, who also had some say in Morocco and Tunisia. World War I freed the Arabs from the Ottoman Empire, but brought many of them varying degrees of European tutelage. Only in the early 1950's did most of the Arabs become completely independent. Through this whole period, however, there has been no significant progress toward political union. As long as the Arabs were under foreign occupation it was easy for them to claim that only imperialism divided them, that their separate "national struggles" were in fact a common cause, and that union would be easily achieved once the foreigners were ousted. Some twenty years of independence have given the lie to this hope.

The League of Arab States was founded in 1945 by Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Transjordan, and Yemen. It has since grown to include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, the Sudan, and various smaller states like Kuwait. Its aim, however, has never been unity but only cooperation, and even this limited goal has sometimes proved very difficult in the political field. The chief successes of the League have probably been in cultural matters, such as the formation of a library including microfilms of rare manuscripts.

There have been numerous more specific proposals for union, but these have now been forgotten or have turned sour. Egypt has been involved in a number of such projects: the unity of the Nile Valley (with the Sudan), the United Arab Republic (with Syria, which functioned for a short time and then was dissolved), federation with Yemen, and a union with Libya. Then there have been projects of a Greater Syria and a union of the Fertile Crescent (Syria and Iraq). None of these has worked in practice. While some Arabs have pushed idealistic proposals for unity, others seem determined to press their quarrels, both old and new. There was deep-rooted dynastic rivalry between the family ruling Saudi Arabia and the Hashemite family of Jordan and Iraq. Morocco and Algeria have yet to agree on the border between them (an important factor in Hassan's attempted nonviolent march into the Spanish Sahara in November, 1975). Iraq, in its greed for oil, threatened Kuwait. During the civil war in the Yemen, Egypt backed the republicans and Saudi Arabia the monarchists. And of course, Gamal Abdal Nasser of Egypt quarreled with Qasim of Iraq over who should be the leader of the Arabs.

Along with all this, however, strong cultural affinities have persisted throughout the Arab world. A literary movement in one country quickly spreads to the others. Around 1930, for example, similar "romantic" features were to be seen in the poetry of Syrian exiles in America, of the Egyptian "Apollo" group, and of the Tunisian ash-Shabbi, the last having been born in an oasis of the interior. Similarly, the

"free verse" movement, which appeared in Iraq in 1949, has spread as far as Morocco. Nor is the sense of cultural affinity restricted to intellectuals. The Algerian man in the street clearly has a stronger feeling of kinship with the Asian fellow-Arab of Iraq than with the non-Arab fellow-African of Mali.

This long story of political disunity and cultural affinity is not the end of the matter. There are other forces at work beneath the surface, and we may today be witnessing a shift of emphasis that could, over time, prove crucial. The crucial question is that of religion. For many centuries the basis of cultural affinity has been primarily religious. The religion of Islam provided the historical impetus creating the vast society to which the Arabs belonged. Intellectual disciplines associated with religion were the flywheel that maintained a steady, even movement. Within the community of Muslims, however, there was the still stronger bond of the Arabic language. Arabic had a special status as the language of revelation. Arabic linguistic and literary standards remained remarkably homogeneous in the various regions of the Arab world and even in other Islamic provinces. This is the way it has been for centuries.

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While the Arab masses in city and countryside are still on the whole religious, the modern intellectuals have tended to play down the religious bond in favor of Arab nationalism. The overriding aim of the intellectuals has been the Westernization of their countries, and the aspects of the West that most fascinate them have been the more secular ones. In addition, the Arab renaissance has been led by Egypt and Syria (in the larger geographical sense), two countries with substantial Christian minorities to integrate. As a result, literature has avoided specifically Islamic themes, often tending to leave out religion altogether. Yet another factor is that, for many Arabs, the rise to nationhood meant the overthrow of Ottoman rule; influenced by the secularizing tendency of Turkish nationalism, in 1916 Muslim Arabs found themselves allied to British Christians and fighting against Turkish Muslims allied to German Christians.

The downplaying of religion manifests itself in many ways. Many Arab intellectuals quite explicitly accept

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secularism. In 1935 Taha Husayn, the doyen of the literary renaissance, wrote: “In the civilized regions of the earth modern government stands on a purely political basis consisting of economic and civil interests—nothing more and nothing less.” The most recent Arabic literature is overwhelmingly humanistic, and the fact that colloquialisms are coming to be accepted is a measure of the move away from religion (since literary Arabic has been essentially the language of the Koran). The attitudes of the educated public show this trend in yet another way. In the Ottoman Empire an educated man knew Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, but now he knows only his own language, and, as Bernard Lewis has put it, “is almost totally ignorant of the intellectual and cultural movements expressed in the other two languages.” In much the same way, the Arabs have little sympathy politically for other Muslims such as Turks, Pakistanis, and Indonesians.

The obvious question is whether “Arabism” can continue to exist if it loses its religious core. A secular Arabism is threatened on several fronts. Clearly a secular Arabism is at variance with traditional Islamic attitudes. In addition, Arab nationalism has to compete with Egyptian nationalism, Syrian nationalism, and the like. These other nationalisms are now existentially entrenched in rival nation-states. A secular Arabism has as its main prop the Arabic language, with all the deep-rooted cultural attitudes that embodies. But the secularist trend, by

encouraging the use of the colloquial, may be opening the way for the splitting of Arabic literature into regional literatures.

The growth of secularism, however, is paralleled by a certain reassertion of religious loyalties insofar as they coincide with Arabism. Among the masses, of course, there has never been any appreciable movement away from religion. Some intellectuals, too, have been attracted by movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter, though its political wing may have had more journalistic prominence, also has a mainly religious wing. The intellectuals who still look to the West find its example neither so compelling nor so homogeneous as it appeared between the wars. (At that period they had access to little more than the liberalism and rationalism of Britain and France.) It is also worth noting that among the countries whose influence has increased because of oil are Saudi Arabia and Libya, and these are countries where there has been relatively little secularization and where there are no non-Muslim minorities to conciliate.

Despite the political disunity of the Arabs and despite the differences between the various Arab countries, the cultural unity of the Arabs remains a factor of potential political significance, especially when it is reinforced by religious sentiment, as it often is. Pan-Arabism is unlikely to override local interests or established regional nationalisms, but it is by no means powerless. The leader who knows how to rouse the Arab and Islamic sentiments of his followers has, for certain purposes, a powerful weapon. It is obviously easy to use this weapon against an outsider like Israel, but it can also be used in an act of collective self-assertion, as, for example, in the OPEC embargo on oil.

For all the ambiguities surrounding what it means to be an Arab, and for all the obvious disunity among Arabs, the West should not be blinded to the great potential of Pan-Arabism in various spheres of action. The memory of the years 634 to 750 is, for some, the hope of the future. That may seem improbable to us, since the twentieth century is dramatically different from the seventh and eighth. But Arab history, like all histories, is not without its ironies.