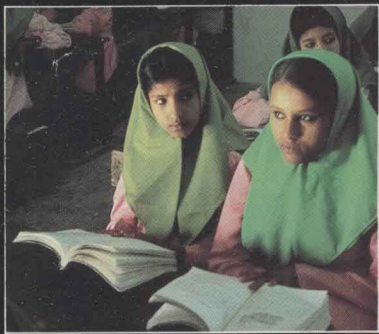


PETER MANSFIELD



THE ARABS

'Should be studied by anyone who wants to know about the Arab world and how the Arabs have become what they are today' – *Sunday Times*

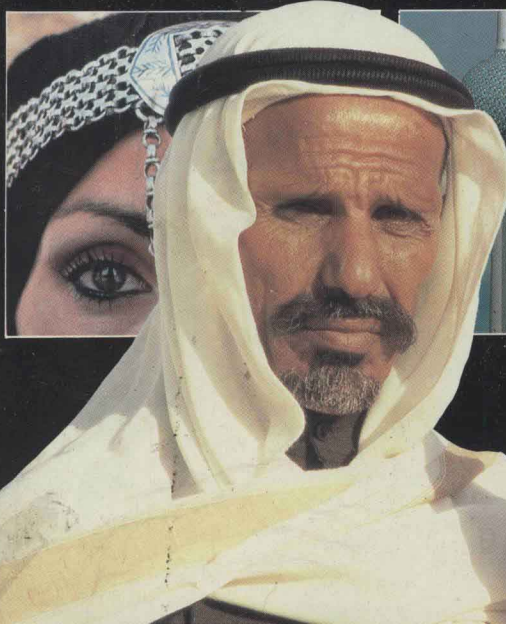
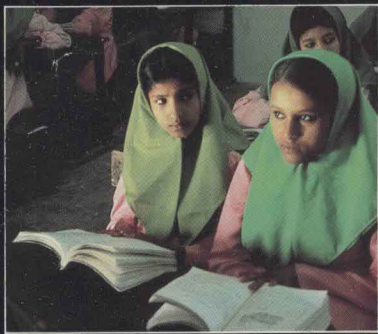


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modern Arab world**

Drawing on his considerable experience as historian and journalist in the Middle East, Peter Mansfield explores social, political and historical aspects – from the pre-Islamic nomads of Arabia, the life of Muhammad and the rise of Arab power that followed, to the Western colonial period, the tragedy of Palestine and the modern Arab renaissance, reinforced by the power of oil. He shows how the consequences of centuries of struggle for dominance between Christendom and the Islamic world survive to this day in various forms.

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The Arabs

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Contents

Part One. The Arab Past

1. Who are the Arabs?	13
2. The Great Arab Explosion	31
3. The Long Decline	48
4. The West Counter-attacks	56
5. Ottoman Subjects	65
6. The West Invades	103
7. The Seeds of Arab Nationalism	134
8. The Arab Revolt	161
9. The Great Deception: the West Disposes	179
10. Western Tutelage and the Rise of Arab Nationalism	195
11. Disaster in Palestine	236
12. The Second Arab Revolt	242
13. Disunity, Frustration and Defeat	270
14. The Search for Hope: 1973–	300

Part Two. The Arab World Today

15. The Gulf: the Eldorado States	331
16. Oman: the Hermit Disclosed	344
17. Saudi Arabia: Financial Superpower	348
18. The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen: the First Marxist Arab State?	358
19. The Yemen Arab Republic: the Awakened Recluse	362
20. Syria: the Heart of Arabism	368
21. Lebanon: Arab Supermarket; Ruin or Reform?	376
22. Iraq: the Dynamic Outsider	385
23. Jordan: the Stubborn Survivor	394

6 *The Arabs*

24. Sudan: the Loose-limbed Giant	401
25. Egypt: the Centre of Gravity	410
26. Libya: the Inveterate Challenger	421
27. Tunisia: the Dogmatic Moderate	427
28. Algeria: Austere Revolutionary	433
29. Morocco: Kingdom of the Far West	442

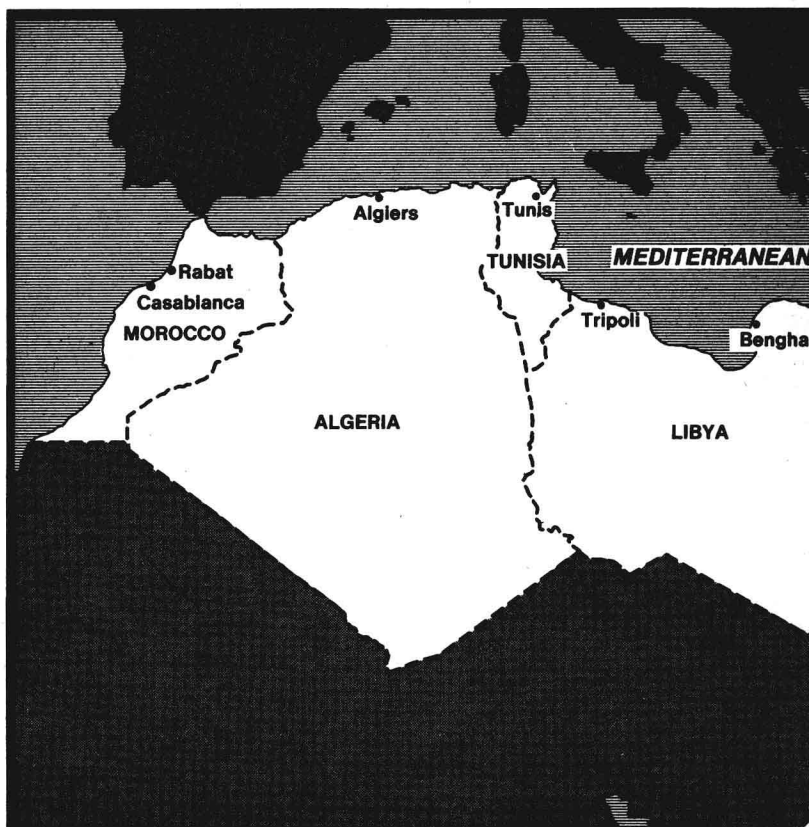
Part Three. The Arabs Today

30. Through Western Eyes	451
31. Through Arab Eyes	461
Index	511

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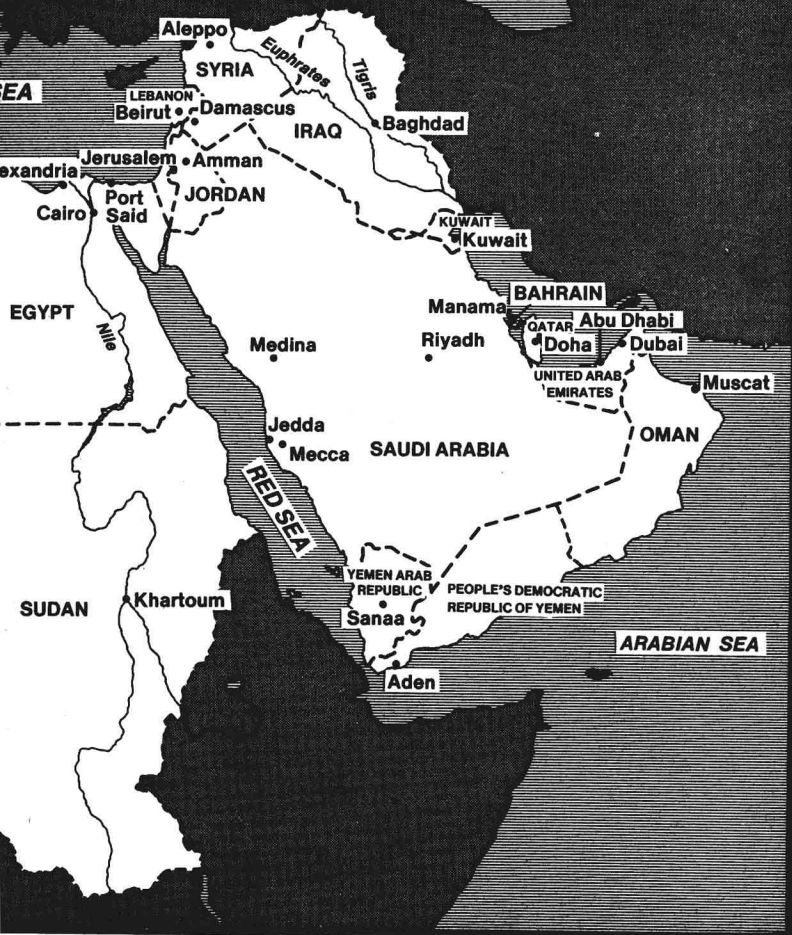
The Arabs

Peter Mansfield was born in 1928 in Ranchi, India, and was educated at Winchester and Cambridge. He has spent the last thirty years writing and broadcasting about the contemporary affairs and history of the Middle East. In 1955 he joined the British Foreign Office and went to Lebanon to study Arabic at the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies. In November 1956 he resigned from the foreign service over the Suez affair but remained in Beirut working as a political and economic journalist. He edited the *Middle East Forum* and corresponded regularly for the *Financial Times*, *Economist*, *Guardian*, *Indian Express* and other papers. From 1961 to 1967 he was the Middle East Correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, based mainly in Cairo, and since 1967 he has lived in London but makes regular visits to the Middle East and North Africa. In the winter of 1971-2 he was Visiting Lecturer on Middle East Politics at Willamette University, Oregon. His books include *Nasser's Egypt*, *Nasser: A Biography*, *The British in Egypt*, *The Ottoman Empire and its Successors*, *The New Arabians* and, as editor, *The Middle East: a Political and Economic Survey*. He has also edited a *Who's Who of the Arab World*.



Morocco 19,470,000 (1979)	Syria 9,622,632 (1979)
Algeria 18,250,000	Jordan 2,150,000 (1979)
Tunisia 6,520,000 (1981)	Iraq 12,171,480 (1977)
Libya 2,900,000 (1977)	Saudi Arabia 9,160,000 (1976)
Egypt 44,000,000 (1981)	Kuwait 1,562,000 (1982)
Sudan 19,500,000	Bahrain 358,857 (1981)
Lebanon 2,780,000 (1974)	Qatar 250,000 (1982)
United Arab Emirates 1,000,000 (1980)	
Oman 850,000 (1982)	
People's Democratic Republic of Yemen 1,800,000 (1977)	
Yemen Arab Republic 8,556,974	
Population figures from Whitaker's Almanack 1983	

THE ARAB WORLD



Part One
The Arab Past

1. Who are the Arabs?

Before answering this question we have to try to answer another: Who are Arabs? The difficulty is that for many centuries the word 'Arab' had two different meanings. It still has today, although the wider of the two definitions is tending to predominate. But in the past Arab historians and writers, such as the great Ibn Khaldoun of Tunis in the fourteenth century, used the word in either of its senses without explaining which use was intended.

The older of the two definitions referred to some of the Semitic people of the Arabian peninsula. In prehistoric and pagan times two races inhabited Arabia: one was largely nomadic and wandered with their flocks over the great deserts which lie between the river Euphrates and the centre of the peninsula. The others were the inhabitants of the rain-fed uplands in the south – the Yemen. It was the former who were the 'Arabs'. The earliest surviving account of the people of Arabia comes in the tenth chapter of Genesis, which names the descendants of Noah. Noah's eldest son, Shem, is regarded as the ancestor of the Hebrews, Arabs and Aramaeans – the speakers of 'Semitic' languages, the term invented by the German historian A. L. Schlözer in 1781. But the term 'Arab' is not mentioned in Genesis.¹ So far as is known the word first appears in an inscription of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III announcing his victory over a group of rebellious chieftains, one of whom is referred to as 'Gindibu the Aribi'. From then on Assyrian and Babylonian inscriptions refer frequently to Aribi or Arabu. They are a nomadic people living in the north Arabian desert, and their tribute to their Assyrian overlords was usually in the form of camels, first domesticated in Arabia between about 1500 and 1200 B.C. In the Bible the name Arab is the first word used in the second book of Chronicles (xvii, 11) to refer to nomads from the east bank of the river Jordan in the time of King Jehosaphat (c. 900–800 B.C.) ('... and the Arabians brought him flocks, seven thousand and seven hundred rams, and seven

1. However it has been suggested that the 'mixed multitude' (Hebrew *erev*) mentioned in Exodus xii, 38 as having accompanied the Israelites into the wilderness from Egypt could be a mistake for Arabs (Hebrew *arav*). Hebrew, like Arabic, has no written vowels. (See N. Barbour, *Nisi Dominus*, London, 1946, p. 73.)

thousand and seven hundred he-goats'). But the term most frequently used for Arabs in the Bible is Ishmaelites. This is because after the rise of Islam, Jewish tradition regarded the Arabs as fellow-descendants of the patriarch Abraham, the father of monotheism. The Jews acknowledge that it was only because of the miraculous birth of Isaac to Abraham's elderly wife Sarah that Ishmael, the son of Abraham by his concubine Hagar, was superseded as the patriarch's natural heir whose descendants would inherit the Promised Land. Even then the inheritance would have passed to Isaac's elder son Esau (ancestor of the Transjordanian Edomites, and therefore of King Herod the Great), if his younger son Jacob had not secured it by a trick. From early Christian times the Ishmaelites appear in Jewish tradition as enemies, together with Romans, and as rivals for possession of the Land of Israel.

An Arab was therefore a nomad inhabitant of the central and northern Arabian peninsula. The word itself is probably derived from a semitic root related to nomadism. There are several possibilities, including the word *abhar* which means 'to move' or 'to pass' and from which the word Hebrew is probably derived. In the Arabic language, which developed later than Hebrew, the word *arab* (plural) means 'those who speak clearly' as contrasted with *ajam* or 'those who speak indistinctly' – a term which later came to be applied chiefly to Persians. This does not tell us the derivation of the word but only the definition it was given by the Arabic-speaking people themselves. But Herodotus and later Greek and Roman authors began to extend the terms 'Arabia' and 'Arab' to cover the whole peninsula, and its inhabitants, including the Yemenis of the south-west. The Romans referred to Yemen as *Arabia Felix*. Already the term 'Arab' was broadening. Inevitably also some of the Arabian nomads were settling down around the oases, where a sedentary civilization was possible. One of these was Yathrib in western Arabia, which became Medina after the time of the Prophet Muhammad; another was Petra, the valley hidden among the bare mountains of south Jordan which in the second century B.C. became the centre of the powerful kingdom of the Nabataeans. 'Arabic in speech, Aramaic in writing, Semitic in religion, Hellenistic in art and architecture, the Nabataean culture was synthetic, superficially Hellenic but basically Arabian, and so it remained.'² Still another was Palmyra in the central Syrian desert, which achieved high prosperity as a trading centre at a junction of caravan routes and ultimately great political power in the third

2. Philip Hitti, *Syria: A Short History*, London, 1959, p. 61.

century A.D. under the astute and beautiful Queen Zenobia. For a time she defied the legions of the Roman Emperor Aurelian, but was ultimately defeated and brought to Rome in golden chains to be displayed in his triumph.

But while some of the peoples of Arabia adopted a sedentary way of life, the nomadic tribes, who held a strong military advantage over the settlements, remained convinced of the superiority of their own style of living. Moreover, most of the settled peoples showed that they accepted this belief by adopting nomadic values; some of them abandoned their settlements for the freedom of the desert. The great horizons of the desert provided a sense of liberty, but the harsh environment made its own iron laws which moulded the structure of tribal life. Survival depended on the solidarity and self-protection of the tribe, and the system whereby the whole family, clan (that is, group of families), or tribe were held responsible for the acts of any one of them ('life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . burning for burning, wound for wound') helped to create such security as there was. There was no written code of laws; individual crimes were restrained by the fear of lasting vengeance. No such restraints however applied to communal acts of violence. Inter-tribal disputes might be settled by an arbiter, a wise authority on tribal customs, but meanwhile they were the excuse for a *ghazu*, or raid, aimed chiefly at driving off your opponents' camels, which for many centuries could be regarded as the national sport of the Arabs.

Desert life was exceedingly harsh. The nomads lived as parasites on the camel, drinking its milk and very occasionally eating its meat. The other staple food was dates, 'the mother and the aunt of the Arabs', as it was known. After one of the rare and irregular rainstorms, which cause dangerous flash floods in the *wadis* or valleys, there would be a brief period of relative ease after which life would once again be centred on the water-holes where a few shrubs and bushes survived.

The nomad Arabs in the first centuries after Christ were animists by religion; that is to say they worshipped trees, rocks or water-springs. Over the years this developed into a polytheism – a belief in a variety of spirits who could be of either sex and were often based on a particular rock or tree shrine. The most famous of these was the shrine at the Ka'ba at Mecca, where the great Black Stone (probably a meteorite) was a place of pilgrimage for centuries before it became central to the religion of Islam.³ Friendly and helpful spirits were the

3. According to popular legend, the Black Stone was given to Adam on his fall from Paradise.

jinn (i.e. genies), while the hostile and malevolent were *afrit* or *ghul*. In the settled trading and farming communities of the oases the situation was different. Through their contacts with the Christian, Byzantine and Abyssinian Empires and the Zoroastrian Persian Empire they had begun to acquire monotheistic ideas. Agriculture in the peninsula was largely developed by Arabs who had adopted Judaism (although some of the farmers may also have been Jewish refugees expelled from Palestine by the Romans). By the fourth century A.D. the people of southern Arabia abandoned polytheism to adopt their own form of monotheism – a belief in a supreme god known as *al-Rahman*, 'the Merciful'.

It was early in the sixth century A.D. that the Arabian peninsula began to emerge from its isolation to play a part in world affairs. In the north-east the Arabian Kingdom of Hira allied itself with the Persian Empire and in the north-west the Kingdom of Ghassan was usually in alliance with the other great power of the period – Byzantium. In south Arabia the able King Abraha built up a strong state independent of Persia and Ethiopia and even sent his armies northwards into central Arabia. But there was no kind of unity of the peninsula. King Abraha died in about A.D. 570 and south Arabia was occupied by the Persians. The buffer states of Ghassan and Hira also declined, and by the beginning of the sixth century A.D. Arabia was a conglomeration of petty autonomous states.

A stable political background is not essential for the arts, and the sixth and seventh centuries were the great period of Arab heroic poetry. As in the Homeric age of ancient Greece, poetry, which was intended always to be recited aloud in public, was the supreme art. The poverty of the desert nomads made them use words as the chief form of artistic expression. The multiple gods or spirits of Arabia had little hold over their hearts and minds; if anything their religious faith was bound to the honour of the tribe. The poet was the spokesman of the tribe who sang the praises of its heroes and leaders and poured scorn on those of its enemies. He sang magnificently. The images he used were familiar, derived from the elements and the desert with its birds and beasts, but the vocabulary was rich and the sense finely-shaded and allusive. As Richard Burton, the great Victorian orientalist and traveller, wrote of this early Arabic poetry:

The language, 'like a faithful wife, following the mind, and giving birth to its offspring', and free from that 'luggage of particles' which dogs our modern tongues, leaves a mysterious vagueness between the relation of word to word, which materially assists the sentiment, not sense, of the poem. When verbs