

MICHAEL FIELD

**INSIDE
THE
ARAB
WORLD**



Inside the Arab World

MICHAEL FIELD

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To my godchildren and their brothers and sisters

Oliver and Peter
Alexander, Anne-Marie and Lydia
Christopher and Katherine
Georgina and Victoria
Mungo, Theodora and Lydia

Preface

This book has its origins in two articles I wrote for the *Financial Times* in November 1987 and January 1990. The first, headlined ‘The Agony of the Arab World’, dealt with the reasons for the Arabs’ political and economic failure during the previous seventy years, and the other, ‘Living in Fear of the Mosque’, discussed economic reform and its political consequences. In this book I follow roughly the sequence of logic of those articles, but I also discuss Arab-Israeli peacemaking, the political and economic problems of Saudi Arabia and the changes there have been in the relations of Arab countries with each other and with the West since the end of the Gulf war.

My research was done in three visits I made to the region specifically for the book, in the trips I made before I wrote the *Financial Times* articles and in many other trips during the past twenty-seven years. Hundreds of people have helped me during this time and here I should like to thank some of them. I am leaving out the names of all those to whom I have spoken in Iraq, Syria, Sudan and Iran because I believe that many, or all, of those who are not in government would rather they were not mentioned. Otherwise, working from west to east, I should like to thank:

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1

Failure

The Arab World

*Failure and reform – the Arab peoples – minorities – Sunnis
and Shias – Arab economies – oil states*

The Arab world has not been a happy or successful place in the last fifty years, and the misery and disenchantment of the people has recently become acute. As one of the Arab ambassadors in London put it to me, ‘the people have lost faith in their governments. There is a sense of failure, which has opened a gap between the rulers and the ruled. It has led to a lack of self-confidence in Arab culture, and hostility to foreign influences. For years the Arab world has not been at ease with itself’.

When he made these remarks the ambassador, who represented Algeria, had particularly in mind the disastrous recent events in his own country. The obvious corruption of Algeria’s political system in the 1980s had led the mass of the people to reject the Government and embrace the revolutionary Islamic Salvation Front, not because they were necessarily devoutly religious but because the Islamists were the only powerful and organized opposition party. The results during the years since 1988 had been that the Government’s belated but genuine attempt to introduce democracy had led to riots, mass arrests, the cancellation of elections, the assassination of the President and the imposition of what amounted to military rule. For the Algerian establishment, the people associated with the Front de Liberation Nationale, which had won the country’s independence from France, the whole experience was politically (and financially) threatening, and also disillusioning. The ambassador and many like him wanted to believe that they were creating a new, just, powerful and successful society and it hurt them to be told by their people that they had failed.

Algeria's experience of hope being destroyed by corruption, and corruption breeding violence, has been the experience of the Arab world as a whole since the end of the Second World War. This book is about exactly this theme. It is about failure and the reaction to it. It deals first with the rise and fall of the Arabs' political and economic hopes, and with the unhappiness and soul-searching that has gone with the fall. Then it discusses the change that is happening. In all Arab societies there is a feeling among a large part of the middle classes – not just the intelligentsia but small businessmen and traders – that they have been badly ruled. There is a debate on how government should be improved, on how it should be made 'legitimate'. Legitimacy is an important topic in the Arab world at present. Coinciding with this debate the huge indebtedness of the poor countries, which make up most of the Arab states and contain almost all of the region's population, has led the creditors, namely the Western governments, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, to demand economic reforms. These have involved devaluations, the reduction of the food and energy subsidies given to the people and the privatization of state corporations – all measures designed to stop the countries consuming more than they produce. In return for seeing these reforms put in place the creditors have been prepared to grant new credit or reschedule the repayment of loans, and in one case they have actually forgiven debt.

Any government which cuts its spending and tells its people that they can no longer have the subsidies and guaranteed jobs they have been used to for the last twenty years, is going to have to give something in return. This has taken the form of steps towards democracy: it is here that the economic pressures and the intellectual ferment of recent years have come together. Since 1988 there have been democratic reforms, or moves in a democratic direction, in Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria and even in Morocco, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In Algeria the reforms were radical. A totally free press was allowed, the Ministry of Information was abolished, all sorts of political parties were licensed and elections were being held in December 1991 and January 1992 when the Government panicked at the prospect of an Islamic victory, cancelled the second round of the contest, imprisoned thousands of Islamic political activists and banned their party. Algeria's problem was that it had gone too fast. As a Palestinian columnist writing a few months later observed, 'Arab democracy is like a medicine which if taken all in one dose kills the patient and embarrasses the doctor'. The more successful countries so far have been those where reform has been slow. At times this has led to the process coming to a halt, or even taking a few steps backwards.

In every case the reason for the governments' hesitation has been the challenge of the Islamists, the only body ready and waiting to step into the vacuum created when opposition has suddenly been made legal. While new secular political parties have had to build themselves from scratch, the Islamic politicians have had an established network of contacts through the links between mosques, the religious faculties at the universities and charitable societies. Some of the Islamic politicians have been genuinely idealistic and even Godly people, but most are using religion simply as a means of gaining power. Their supporters are backing them for a mixture of reasons: disenchantment with the corruption of the existing regimes, dislike of the way Western influence has been undermining the family, which is at the very centre of a Muslim's sense of values, and a general objection to what a journalist in Jordan described as 'spivs, BMW drivers and women in mini-skirts'. A few people believe they can re-establish the perfect Islamic society that the Prophet Mohammad created in Medina in the seventh century. In socialist countries the small shopkeeper class likes the sense of strength it gets from belonging to a militant organization and looks forward to the bigger profits it might make from a more free enterprise Islamic economy. All of the supporters of the Islamists are reacting to a feeling that their countries have failed in the last half century. They see political Islam as a philosophy that comes from their own culture, rather than being an imported Western ideology, such as socialism, and because it has its roots in their own society they believe it will bring out their hidden strengths and make them great again.

While the Arab countries, or some of them, have been changing internally their relations with each other and with Israel have changed. Since the late 1970s, the Arab world has been edging towards making peace with Israel. Egypt agreed a peace treaty in 1978, which left the other Arab states knowing that there was no longer any possibility of their being able to confront Israel militarily. But none of them dared follow Egypt in making peace because they knew that they would be accused by their brethren of betraying the national cause. Then the Palestinian leadership and a large part of its guerilla force was evicted from Lebanon in 1982 and 1983, having been thrown out of Jordan in 1970 and 1971. The leadership went to Tunis, a thousand miles from its homeland. Although a majority of the Palestinian fighters stayed in Lebanon and others trickled back in the mid-1980s, they were embroiled in that country's civil war and since 1990, when the Syrians were able to impose peace on Lebanon, they have been firmly under Syrian control. For the last ten years the Palestinian Liberation Organization and its guerilla forces have not been able even to pretend to wage

war on Israel. They have had no base from which to operate. After 1987, when an uprising against Israel, the *intifadah*, was begun by the Palestinians living in the occupied territories, the leadership in exile realized that if it did not get involved in the American-sponsored 'peace process' it could be ignored, and excluded from any deal that emerged between the Israelis and the Palestinians in the territories. It risked being forgotten. Therefore in late 1988 Yasser Arafat, the PLO Chairman, prodded by the Americans, finally, awkwardly recognized Israel. The Israelis, meanwhile, were slowly coming to realize that their occupation of the West Bank and Gaza entailed economic and security costs, as well as giving them a buffer between their state and Arab countries which looked far less threatening than they had twenty years earlier. From late 1988 the Palestinians and Israelis began intermittent talks, and in September 1993 the Israeli Foreign Minister and Mahmoud Abbas signed the first stage of a peace settlement between them.

The peace process has been speeded up by the change in the global balance of power that has occurred with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was the principal backer of the Arab radicals, Syria, Iraq and Libya, the countries which used to work hardest to embarrass or undermine any Arab state or Palestinian group which might have recognized Israel – while making sure that they were not sucked into war with Israel themselves. The departure of the Soviets has left America as the dominant power in the Middle East, able to put pressure both on the Arab radicals and on Israel, which is no longer seen as such a vital ally in 'the fight against Communism'. American power has been enhanced by the easy victory of the allied coalition over Iraq in the Gulf war of 1991. That war and the crisis which led to it also had the effect of splitting the Arab world in a way which will take many years to heal. The immediate effect of this for the Arab nationalists, particularly the Palestinians, was traumatic. Previously the Arabs had tried always to maintain a veneer of unity, however bad their disagreements, because they found it emotionally necessary to do so. The Gulf crisis, however, forced the different governments to admit to themselves that they had fundamentally different interests. The Gulf states and Saudi Arabia acknowledged that the Western powers were closer friends and better allies than other Arab countries. I was in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf war and I noticed in the early stages, when Iraqi missiles were landing on Riyadh every night, how the Saudis were becoming steadily more pro-Western and anti-Palestinian, and they were on the verge of being quite sympathetic to the Israelis who were also under attack, when the missile raids stopped.

After the war several of the poor Arab countries, which had

sympathized with the Iraqis, realized that they would be getting little aid from the oil states in future and should redouble their efforts to live within their means. The countries of the Maghreb, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, decided there was no point in looking to the future in pan-Arab terms and they had better look directly to their own interests and try to develop their relations with Europe. This type of idea has become general in the Arab world. People are no longer thinking of unity, or joint Arab action as a means of solving their problems and achieving prosperity and greatness. They are no longer looking to their brothers to help their cause, and so giving themselves somebody else to blame when things go wrong. Each country is having to fend for itself. The pressing economic problems of the poor countries – debt, fast expanding populations, huge unemployment, worries about a shortage of water – are pushing in the same direction. Arab politicians are becoming more pragmatic – not in a smooth and steady fashion, but in a difficult and erratic way with steps backwards as well as forwards. The result may be disappointing for the nationalists, but in practical terms of peace and prosperity it should be beneficial for everybody, inside the Arab world and outside.

Before going on to discuss these themes of economic and political change in more detail, it may be useful to give some introductory information on the Arab world, to explain what it is, who are its people and what its resources are.

A simple political definition is that the Arab world is composed of the twenty-one members of the Arab League, an institution promoted by the British at the end of the Second World War and based in Cairo. During its first thirty years Arab states joined the League as they became independent, which by 1973 gave it the following eighteen members, working from west to east: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, North and South Yemen, which merged in 1990, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (principally Abu Dhabi and Dubai) and Oman. During the 1970s three further states, Mauritania, Somalia and Djibouti, were admitted, though it was muttered that these new members had rather doubtful Arab credentials and had joined in part to benefit from the flow of aid that might result from the rise in oil prices in 1973–4. A final member, admitted in 1976, was the Palestine Liberation Organization, representative of the Palestinian state in exile.

What the Arab League members, with the exception of Somalia and Djibouti, have in common is that most of their inhabitants speak Arabic as their mother tongue. It is this rather than any physical or ethnic trait

that makes them Arab. A language brings with it a way of thinking and a culture, and in the Arabs' case it also brings a religion. Not all Arabs are Muslim – a minority of about 5 per cent is Christian – and certainly not all Muslims are Arabs – together the Turks, Iranians, Pakistanis, Indian Muslims, Bangladeshis and Indonesians greatly outnumber the Arabs – but, even so, Islam is a particularly Arab religion. It was revealed by God to the Prophet Mohammad in Arabic and its laws were suited to the structure of society in seventh-century Arabia. Muslims are called to prayer five times a day in Arabic, the prayers themselves are in Arabic and anyone who aspires to be an Islamic scholar has to speak Arabic. For most Arabs the senses of being Arab and being Muslim are closely bound together.

The Arabs, therefore, define themselves as a collection of peoples who speak Arabic and are mainly Muslim, and they are bound together in a broad emotional and cultural sense not just by these two characteristics but by a sense of being heirs of a shared history. This history begins with God's revelation of the Koran to the Prophet – anything before this is regarded as being rather obscure and of minority academic interest. Then it runs through the early conquests, which spread Islam and Arabic as the language of religion, law and government, out of the Arabian Peninsula to Egypt, North Africa, Spain, Syria, Iraq, Persia and central Asia. The two centuries after the conquests were a time of cultural and scientific prosperity. Arab scholars developed the system of counting that uses zeros, they invented algebra, advanced the Greeks' and Romans' discoveries in astronomy and medicine, and, assisted by Greeks and Persians, built some magnificent and spacious buildings of beautiful proportions. Modern Arabs, who are much more conscious of their history than Westerners are of theirs, like to remind foreigners of how far they were in advance of Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries. It is fair to say that Arab schools today represent the golden days of Arab civilization in a religious and uncritically glowing fashion, without stressing the contributions of the conquered peoples, or the political turbulence of the early caliphate, or the relatively short time, two hundred years, that elapsed between the initial conquests and the Arab empire beginning to fall under the control of the Turks. These shortcomings of teaching, of course, do nothing to alter the relevance of history to the people's feeling of themselves as being Arab. An Arab in Morocco and an Arab in Oman can learn the same lessons in school or watch the same Egyptian-produced historical drama on television, and each can say to himself 'ah, that invention, those buildings, that victory, that civilization, were the works of my ancestors'. And the more the story is glamorized the stronger its influence may be. The

knowledge that when the Arab world was very briefly under one rule it was rich, sophisticated and powerful has inevitably acted as a strong force pushing twentieth-century Arabs towards the idea of unity.

The definition of 'Arabs' in terms of their language, religion and history is made necessary by their being so varied racially. The Arab armies which came out of the Arabian Peninsula in the mid-seventh century numbered only a few tens of thousands at the most. A few of the people they conquered, in Yemen, the Syrian desert and the Sahara, were Arab, but the rest were not. They were Persians and the descendants of the Sumarians and Assyrians in Iraq, Greeks and Syrians on the east Mediterranean coast, Egyptians and, further south, black African tribes on the Nile, and Berbers, Vandals and whatever settlers had arrived in Roman times along the coast of North Africa. The descendants of these people now regard themselves in a broad sense as being Arab. But they may be very different from each other physically. The Sudanese are black and many of the Syrians, who must have much Crusader blood, are quite fair. The people of the Maghreb, who by origin are mainly Berber, tend to have a slimmer, more angular physique than the thick-set, swarthy Iraqis. None of this means that anybody can tell where an Arab comes from just by looking at him – most Arabs look just generally Arab, Middle Eastern or Mediterranean – but it does mean that sometimes one can say of a particular person 'he looks typically Egyptian, or Nejdi (central Saudi Arabian) or Yemeni'.

Along with the physical differences goes people's sense of belonging to a particular place. The inhabitants of the Arab world feel themselves to be both Arabs and citizens of individual countries. A hundred years ago, when the broad concept of Arabism hardly existed, people thought of themselves, and were thought of by foreigners, only as inhabitants of countries or regions. The idea of the 'Arab world' did not begin to be developed by nationalists until early this century, and it did not become common in Western countries until the Egyptian President, Gamal Abdel-Nasser, made it popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

The temperaments of Arab peoples differ. Arabs and the other nations of the Middle East readily make sweeping and often disdainful generalizations about each other. The Iraqis are said to have a streak of violence and brutality running through their character, and it is certainly true that their country has had an appallingly violent history both recently and in past centuries. Another characteristic of the Iraqis is that in business and government they are forceful and energetic. They are said to be 'effective' people. The Syrians have a reputation for being cunning and commercial. The Kuwaitis are 'arrogant' – or have become arrogant since they became rich in the 1950s – though this is a trait

that seems to be much more apparent to Arabs than to Westerners. Algerians are secretive and suspicious. And the Egyptians are tolerant and easy-going, with a relaxed confidence that comes from having 5,000 years of history behind them. They are the one Arab people for whom history does not begin with the Muslim conquests. Another characteristic of the Egyptians is that they have a fatalistic and submissive streak, which makes them liable to be mistreated when abroad. An Egyptian once complained to me in a surprised and hurt tone, 'the other Arabs, they are not nice to us'.

These sorts of generalizations may not be easily accepted by the more sensitive members of the Western liberal intelligentsia. And the decision of an Iranian newspaper a few years ago to run a daily series of jokes – albeit very innocent and quite affectionate jokes – that were meant to represent the characters of different Middle Eastern peoples (including the Iranians themselves) would seem extraordinary to most Westerners. But the fact is that an awareness of racial differences and discrimination based on this is part of life in the Middle East, and anyone who looks at the area through Western eyes and pretends that these prejudices do not exist is likely to misunderstand it. The Arabs – and the Iranians and Turks – believe in racial differences and are not embarrassed about discussing them. Middle Eastern society, and for that matter society in most developing countries, is coarser than that in the industrialized West.

The ethnic mixture of the Arab world is complicated further by the existence of distinct minorities of non-Arab peoples, and by religious minorities, some Arab and some non-Arab. In some countries the minorities together make up more than half of the population. The classic case is Iraq, a country created after the First World War out of the three Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. In the south, including the marsh areas between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the population is composed of Arabs of the non-conformist Shia sect of Islam. In the centre it is mainly orthodox Sunni Arab and in the north it is Kurd. The exact origin of the Kurds, who are spread between Turkey, Iran and Iraq, is uncertain. They are one of the Iranian peoples, who live to the east of the Arab world in Iran, Afghanistan, Tadjikistan and Pakistan. They may be descendants of the Medes, who are mentioned in the Old Testament, particularly in the context of King Darius, 'the Mede and Persian', who was one of the monarchs who built the Persian empire. In smaller communities spread around Iraq are groups of Assyrian and Armenian Christians, Iranians, Turkomans and Christian Arabs.

Lebanon and Syria have similar mixtures of peoples, with Lebanon