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Waking from its sleep

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The Arab world has experienced two decades of political stagnation, says Peter David (interviewed here). But there is a fever under the surface

AFP

IN A special report on the Arab world which *The Economist* published in 1990, the headline at the top of this page was "When history passes by" (see article). That was when the communist dictatorships of eastern Europe were beginning to wobble and fall. In the Arab world, however, authoritarian rule remained the order of the day. And whereas western Europe was making massive strides towards political and economic union, the Arabs remained woefully divided. Much Arab opinion remained fixated on the struggle with Israel, in which the Arabs seemed unable to hold their own, let alone prevail.

To revisit the Arab world two decades later is to find that in many ways history continues to pass the Arabs by. Freedom? The Arabs are ruled now, as they were then, by a cartel of authoritarian regimes practised in the arts of oppression. Unity? As elusive as ever. Although the fault lines have changed since Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait 19 years ago, inter-Arab divisions are bitter. Egypt, the biggest Arab country, refused even to attend April's Arab League summit meeting in Doha. Israel? Punctuated by bouts of violence and fitful interludes of diplomacy, the deadly stalemate continues. Neither George H. Bush at Madrid in 1991 nor Bill Clinton at Camp David in 2000 nor George W. Bush at Annapolis in 2007 succeeded in making peace or even bringing it visibly closer.

The stubborn conflict in Palestine is a reminder that in some doleful ways history has not passed the Arabs by at all. They have seen plenty of history of the wrong sort these past two decades. It includes a

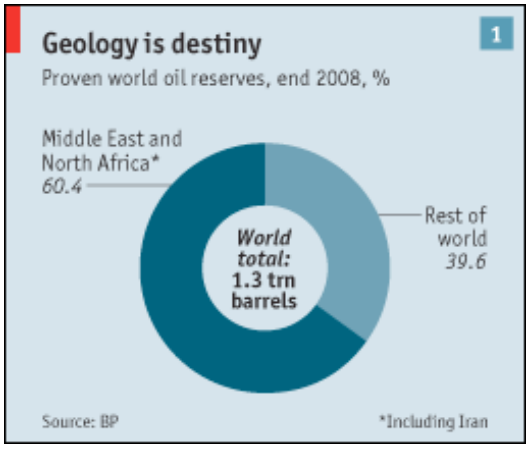
good deal of violence: the Arab world has been caught up in wars both major and minor, not only between Arabs and outsiders, such as those with Israel, but also between, and within, Arab states.

Indeed 1990, the year Saddam invaded Kuwait, was something of a turning point. America's quick eviction of his army from the tiny oil state after only 100 hours of ground fighting looked at the time like a triumph. But a case can be made that this was in fact the starting-point of a whole sorry sequence of events encompassing the rise of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's September 11th strikes on the American mainland and—in Arab eyes—America's no less traumatic invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 in its "war against terror".

Wars can happen anywhere. What makes the Middle East especially prone to them? Just count the ways. First is oil. In the late 1990s Mr bin Laden wrote a letter to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, in which he pointed out that 75% of the world's oil was found in the Persian Gulf region and that "whoever has dominion over the oil has dominion over the economies of the world." So long as that remains broadly true, the interests of energy-hungry powers from near and far will continue to grind against each other there.

Second is the continuing and worsening Arab, and lately also Iranian, conflict with Israel. Since 1990 thousands more Arab and Israeli lives have been thrown into the maw of this voracious struggle—in the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) that started after the collapse of Mr Clinton's Camp David peace summit in 2000, and in Israel's ruthless mini-wars in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza at the beginning of this year.

The last and perhaps greatest underlying cause of instability arises from the nature of the Arab states themselves. Elections are widespread in the Arab world. And yet if you put aside the Palestinians' imaginary state, hardly any of the 21 actual states that belong to the Arab League can plausibly claim to be a genuine democracy. In the absence of democracy, Arab states therefore rely to an extraordinary degree on repression in order to stay in power. And from time to time this system of control breaks down.



A spectacular example came in Algeria in 1991, when the army blocked a promising experiment in free elections that was starting to unfold under President Chadli Benjedid. After an opposition Islamist party won in the first round of parliamentary elections, the generals blocked the second, and so detonated a gruesome civil war that lasted almost a decade and may have killed 200,000 people. In the 1990s internal terrorism stalked Egypt too: radical Islamist movements such as Islamic Jihad and the Jamaat Islamiya claimed more than 1,000 lives. And although most of Egypt's erstwhile jihadists have long since renounced violence, others—notably Ayman al-Zawahiri, Mr bin Laden's number two—went on to found and lead al-Qaeda.

Tribes with flags

The political instability of the Arab world is in turn connected to another problem: the missing glue of nationhood. Many years ago an Egyptian diplomat, Tahsin Bashir, called the new Arab states of the Middle East "tribes with flags" (though he exempted Egypt). His point still holds. In countries as different as Lebanon and Iraq, ethnic, confessional or sectarian differences have thwarted programmes of nation-building. That is why Iraq fell apart into Sunni, Shia and Kurdish fragments after the removal of Saddam despite decades of patriotic indoctrination. Syria could follow suit if the minority Alawi sect of the ruling Assad family were somehow to lose control of this largely Sunni country. Sudan has seen not one but two civil wars between its Arab-dominated centre and the non-Arab minorities in its south and west.

In reviewing this litany of troubles, it is necessary to remember that what people call "the Arab world" is a big and amorphous thing, and arguably (see article) not one thing at all. It would be a distortion to portray the whole region as a zone of permanent conflict. However bloody they have been, the wars in Iraq, Algeria, Sudan or on the borders of Israel have not disrupted ordinary life in the whole Arab world. Most Arabs have been touched by the violence only through their television screens (though, as we shall see, the powerful emotions such images stir up have real-world consequences too). Many Arab countries can look back over the past two decades and see elements of progress to be proud of, including, in some places, rising prosperity and a slow but steady expansion of personal freedom.

And yet the years of conflict cannot just be written off, as if the various outbreaks of internal or inter-state violence were just local aberrations or the product of bad luck, or as if they had no bearing on the region's future prospects. It is not just that, if you add all the bloodletting together, up to a million citizens of the Arab world may have perished violently since 1990, and that killing on this scale cannot but leave deep scars (see table 2). The disturbing point for the future is that none of the underlying causes of conflict enumerated above has disappeared. On the contrary, each appears to be taking on the characteristics of a chronic condition.

Two bloody decades 2

Conflicts in the Arab world since 1990

Conflict	Arab deaths
Darfur (since 2003)	400,000
Algerian civil war (1991-2002)	150,000-200,000
Invasion of Iraq (since 2003)	101,000-109,000
Iraqi Shia rebellion (1991-92)	60,000-100,000
War for Kuwait (1990 & 1991)	24,000-31,000
Second Palestinian *intifada* (2000-05)	5,500
Gaza war (2009)	1,400
Lebanon war (2006)	1,200

Sources: Algerian government; British Council; B'Tselem; Iraq Body Count; Kuwaiti government; Palestinian Centre for Human Rights; Project on Defense Alternatives; Reuters; UN

Take the contest over energy resources. This stands little chance of abating at a time when the energy appetites of China and India continue to grow and when a beleaguered America and a rising Iran are competing for domination of both the Levant and the Persian Gulf. As for Palestine, peace looked more achievable during the negotiations initiated by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat in the 1990s than it does now, with Hamas and a Likud-led government in Israel darkening hopes of a two-state solution. In most Arab countries the glue of nationhood is still weak: the sectarian conflict in Iraq may intensify again as America begins to withdraw its forces (and Shia-Sunni tensions have spread beyond Iraq). Lastly, in almost any Arab country, at almost any time, political and social discontent is in danger of tipping into violence—even, some insiders and outsiders are beginning to argue, into revolution.

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