

The world of the Arabs

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What do they have in common?

CONVENIENT as it is to describe the 22 countries (including the unborn Palestine) that belong to the Arab League as “the Arab world”, the neat phrase can mislead. This is a heterogeneous agglomeration of some 350m people—Maronites, Copts, Berbers, Kurds and Africans as well as Arabs and Muslims—inhabiting a miscellany of lands from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf and from the Saharan desert to the foothills of Anatolia. So all generalisations about the Arabs—their experiences, instincts and styles of faith or politics—should be treated with scepticism.

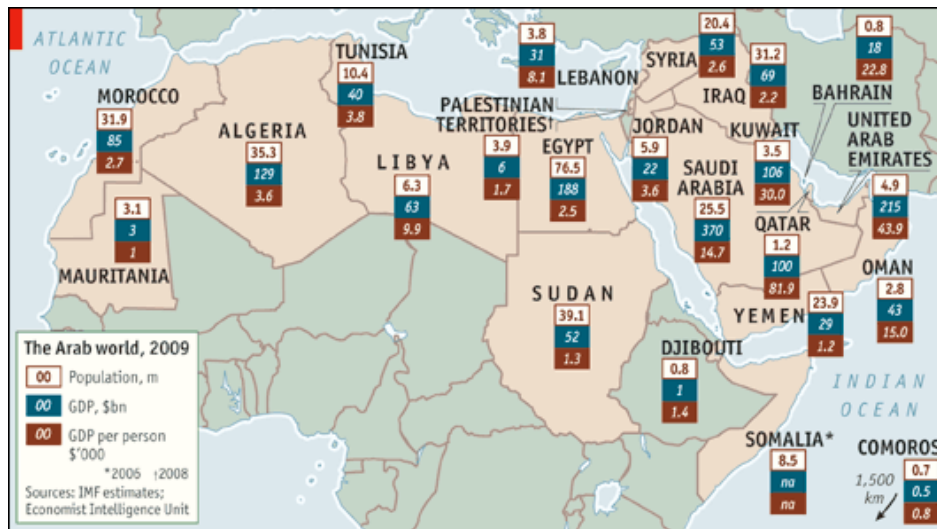
Being “an Arab” is as slippery a notion as being “a European”. These are loose identities, put on and taken off according to taste and circumstance (see chart 3). Many a black Christian African living in the south of Sudan, a country that happens to be a member of the Arab League, would be astonished to be told he was an Arab. So, despite being Muslim, would an Iraqi Kurd (though a Lebanese or Palestinian Christian would not be).

If they are not an ethnic or a religious group, nor are the Arabs a language group. Arabic is widely spoken in the Arab world, but so for that matter is French. And Arab dialects differ so much that a Syrian will struggle to understand the Arabic of a Moroccan. Since most of the borders of the Arab world owe more to the dispositions of European colonialists than to authentic national groupings, some Arabs may think of themselves as Arabs first and Jordanians or Libyans second. For an Egyptian it would probably be the other way round.

Islam is the dominant religion of the Arab world, but most of the world’s Muslims are not Arabs. And although Islam gives Arabs a strong sense of fellowship, it can be a dividing force too. In some circumstances Sunnis and Shias still fight religious wars against each other, as they recently did in Iraq.

Also in stark contrast to Europe, the Arab world has seen little formal integration. The United Arab Republic (UAR), which Egypt and Syria formed in 1958, lasted only three years. Other regional acronyms have come and sometimes acrimoniously gone. Thanks to Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, the ACC (the Arab Co-operation Council of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and North Yemen) survived only a year after its birth in 1989. The Arab Maghreb Union has been a flop. The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC), consisting of Saudi Arabia and its five Gulf satellites, has fared better. But this and other projects have been held back by rivalries. As for the Arab League, it does little more than organise bad-tempered summits, fend off Western criticism of human-rights abuses by its members and denounce Israel. Al-Jazeera, the Arab world’s most popular television channel, does an infinitely better job of providing the disparate Arabs with a sense of unity.





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