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When history passes by

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The Arab world, in despondent mood, blames outsiders for its ills. Peter David, our international editor, says its biggest troubles are self-inflicted

SCENE: a dinner party in Amman. Characters: several businessmen, some journalists, a sprinkling of diplomats. Conversation: full of the humour and wistful self-deprecation peculiar to the Arab world. Underlying mood: despair at the wretchedness of the Arab condition. "Look at us," complains one Jordanian journalist, "Our situation is terrible. The whole world is getting democracy except for us. Our economies are a mess, we are weak, we are being left behind. We can't even stop the Russian Jews from immigrating to Israel".

Most generalisations about the Arab world are either too vague to be useful or else simply wrong. For many of those who inhabit it, the "Arab world" is a misty concept. The 21 states (22 if you count Palestine) that belong to the Arab League stretch from the Atlantic to the Tigris and from Khartoum to Aleppo. Millions of their citizens—such as the black people of southern Sudan and Mauritania—do not consider themselves Arabs at all. Some Arabs are Arabs first and Syrians, Iraqis or Libyans second. For others, being an Arab has come to mean as little as being an Anglo-Saxon means to Britons and Americans.

The peoples of the Arab world converse mainly in Arabic, but also in French, Kurdish and Berber. And even Arabic's regional dialects are so strong that it can be hard for an Algerian and an Iraqi to talk to one another. Most Arabs are Muslims—and most of the Muslims are Sunnis rather than Shias—but millions of Arabs are devout Christians. Arabs divide themselves between westerners (from the Maghreb) and easterners (from the Mashraq). The sophisticated northern Arabs of Lebanon and Syria consider the southern Arabs of the Arabian peninsula ignorant tribesmen. Damascus and Cairo are equally certain that each is the beating heart of the Arab world.

The generalisations of this survey are offered in spite of these complexities, not in ignorance of them. But one generalisation is safely made. Nobody can travel anywhere in the Middle East in the first quarter of 1990 without noticing that Arabs do not share the euphoria of the rest of the world at the birth of the new decade. For a sense of the mood, consider how Arabs are reacting to three great changes taking place elsewhere in the world.

- East Europe's Leninists collapse, tyranny ends in Romania. This reminds Arabs mainly that their own Ceausescus are still riding high. In a few countries—Jordan, Algeria, Tunisia and soon, perhaps, in Kuwait—a handful of democratic experiments is under way. But they are so far a pallid reflection of events in Eastern Europe.
- The European Community takes giant strides towards closer integration. This reminds Arabs that their own efforts to achieve economic coordination through the Arab League and three newer regional organisations are feeble by comparison. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), created in 1981, ties together Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. In 1989 two more clubs were born. Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia and Libya banded together in the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), while Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and North Yemen created the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC). So far no practical benefit has emerged from the alphabet soup.

- The cold war ends, the Soviet Union embarks on massive reform. Here Arabs see mainly the loss of previously reliable supporters of their cause against Israel. Under President Mikhail Gorbachev the Soviet Union has trimmed back support for Syria and let hundreds of thousands of Jews emigrate from the Soviet Union to the Jewish state. The decisions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland to restore relations with Israel salt the wound.

The cloud behind the silver lining

Needless to say, not all the news is bad. A recession in the oil-driven economies of the Gulf is bottoming out, amid forecasts of a sharp rise in the oil price (and therefore in the international influence of the Gulf states) later in the 1990s. The end of the Gulf war and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini have calmed fears of Iran's revolution contaminating the Arab world. The fading of the cold war may have loosened the Soviet bond with Syria, but it is also beginning to pick at the knot that binds America to Israel. Handled wisely, this could help rather than hinder moves towards peace between Arab and Jew in Palestine.

Unfortunately, most of the good news affects the external environment of the Arab world rather than the powerful internal processes working against stable development. Arab governments spend a lot of time talking about how to align their foreign policies or to promote the Arab cause against Israel. It is all fascinating stuff. Yet these vague aspirations have virtually nothing to do with the one vast practical problem that is going to dominate the Arab future: the problem of people.

The Arab world is in the middle of an unstoppable population explosion. Its 200m-plus people will double in less than 25 years. Most of the extra 200m will grow up in countries which are scarcely able to find bread and jobs for their existing numbers. Some basic resources—including water—are already fully exploited, with little prospect of growth. In Algeria in 1988 and Jordan in 1989, economic hardship caused rioting in the streets. But it is not only the very poor who are suffering. Increasingly, Arab governments are failing to meet the aspirations of the urban middle classes on whose support their political survival may come to depend.

A widening gap between demands and resources spells trouble anywhere. In the Arab world the absence of democratic government sharpens the dangers. Not one ruler in today's Arab League got his job through a free election. Whatever legitimacy these regimes enjoy derives mainly from tradition, fear, or an unwritten contract between ruler and ruled: in return for your loyalty I will meet your basic economic and social needs. That may be a splendid contract in times of plenty. But a bursting population is already making it hard for governments to keep their side of the bargain.

This survey begins by asking why the number of Arabs is growing so fast, and what can be done about it. It describes the region's water shortage, where the mismatch between population and natural resources is already acute. It assesses the chances of economic salvation through another boom in oil prices. But at the core of the survey is the question of democracy. For in one respect the predicament of the Arabs is similar to that of Russians and Eastern Europeans. In order to cope with their profound economic and social problems, Arabs must first consider some equally profound political changes.

Sounds obvious? Not, alas, to erudite Arabists in western universities, who caution against applying western tests of democracy in an Arab context. The Arabs, they say, are primed by Islam to accept or even to relish authoritarian government. Without strong leaders, they add, some of the new Arab states manufactured by the great powers at the end of the first world war would collapse into warring tribes, as Lebanon has. The best that Arabs can hope for is therefore a slow and controlled opening up of political life, with full, western-style democracy postponed for the distant future.

This survey begs to differ. Those are indeed views to which Arab rulers find it convenient to subscribe. But ordinary Arabs have little trouble understanding what the West, and now increasingly the East, mean by democracy. Arabs are as keen as Indians, Americans, Poles and Romanians to see their rulers' autocratic power constrained by checks and balances. They would like the chance to remove unpopular leaders through the ballot box instead of uprisings or coups. And they are denied that right by rulers who cling ruthlessly to power, not by some ineffable cultural handicap it takes a professional Arabist to understand.

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