



An Introduction to the Arab World: Stereotypes, Misconceptions, and What is the Arab League?

One must exercise great care when undertaking the study of the Middle East in the United States. The perceptions of Americans are coloured by historical biases and relationships, by the media, and by the actions of small groups and individuals in the 1970s which shaped the views of our parents' generation. Perhaps the greatest of these many factors is that of simple difference, or more accurately of perceived difference. "The Arabs, they are Muslims, they're different, they're not like me" might be a common response given by an American. "They're all fundamentalist terrorists" is another. Inadequacies in the American education system often leave even the introduction to the basic principles of Islam and the Arab world to the Model Arab League faculty advisor or head delegate, a task that might seem daunting.

One must start by addressing some of the common misconceptions and stereotypes about the Middle East, the Islamic world, and the Arab world in particular. In the first place, the three are not synonymous. The Middle East is a region called the Near East by the British and Southwest Asia by the US military, and stretches roughly from Turkey in the north to Yemen in the south and from Egypt in the west to Iran in the east. This area contains three non-Arab states, Turkey (which is Turkish and Kurdish), Iran (which is Persian), and Israel, the Jewish state. It also excludes almost half of the 22 member states of the Arab League located in North Africa and further south in northeast Africa. The Arab world is more or less coterminous with an area known as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), although this descriptor excludes

Somalia, Djibouti, and the Comoro Islands, three Arab League members. The Islamic world is far wider still, stretching more or less around the world, including most of northern Africa, Central and Southern Asia, Southeast Asia, and even parts of China, in addition to the Middle East. The five-plus million American Muslims will soon overtake Jews as the second-largest religious group in the United States, and Muslims number over one billion worldwide. Muslims are not all Arabs, nor are all Arabs Muslim. There are large numbers of Arab Christians in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq, as well as others elsewhere, and even a few Arabic-speaking Jews left in some Arab countries. Indonesia, a non-Arab country in Southeast Asia, is the world's most populous Muslim country, with a population of about 180 million.

A second common misconception is that the Arab world is backward and uncivilized. Anyone who has ever set foot in an Arab country for even a short time will tell you otherwise. The Arabs have a highly-developed culture and civilization, where modern cities mingle with ancient ones from the time of Christ and before, similar to many European cities. During the period of known as the Dark Ages in European history, the Arab-Islamic civilization was flourishing in the Middle East and North Africa, and the Muslim state in Andalusia in southern Spain was the most advanced state in Europe. During this time when Europe had lost most of the Roman and Greek knowledge and texts, the Arabs were translating these works into Arabic and preserved them for future centuries, so that when Europe rediscovered the ancient

masters, it did so through the Arabic translations. Today all Arab states have free primary and secondary education and at least one major university, which students can attend at minimal cost. Most Arab states have several universities, and al-Azhar in Egypt and Zaytouna in Tunisia, which developed from mosque schools, are the oldest universities in the world. Throughout the centuries, Arabs have made major contributions to the world. Ibn Khaldoun was the founder of the social sciences, and Ibn Haytham made major contributions in the field of optics. More recently, Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt has won the Nobel Prize in literature, and Boutros Boutros-Ghali, another Egyptian, served as Secretary-General of the United Nations and is currently serving as Secretary-General of La Francophonie, the association of French-speaking states.

Another popular misconception is that the Arab world is dry and completely desert. While large parts of the region are indeed desert, the Middle East and the Arab world possess incredible geographic diversity. The mountains of Lebanon and Syria are covered with vegetation, and some are covered with snow. There are also many river valleys that are lush and green, producing large quantities of wheat and other crops for the region. The Tigris and Euphrates in Iraq and Syria, the Nile in Egypt and Sudan, and the Jordan are among the Arab world's major rivers. However, despite these rivers and the many bodies of water in the region, the Arab world is facing a critical water shortage. The most important resource in the Middle East, far more so than oil, is being depleted at a rapid rate. The tremendous increases in population of the

states in the region, combined with external factors, will within a few years leave the Arab states without sufficient water to support their populations and industries. Turkey's massive Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP), which aims to irrigate large areas of southeast Turkey, includes damming the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and the flow of water in these rivers to Iraq and Syria has already been drastically cut, forcing them to abandon their own irrigation projects. Israel is also taking the lion's share of water from the Jordan River and the West Bank aquifers, putting pressure on the Palestinians and Jordan. Israeli control of the Syrian Golan and southern Lebanon allows Israel to obtain water from the Yarmouk and Litani Rivers, and also allows Israel to prevent Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon from using these rivers for irrigation, power, or drinking water.

Far from being a region with no interaction with the rest of the world, the Arab world derives a great portion of its income from economic interaction with the international community. While many states, especially those on the Persian (Arabian) Gulf, depend on oil sales, many of the less-wealthy countries derive income from workers abroad. Others generate income from the sale of other commodities to the rest of the world, and still others, such as Egypt, derive most of their income from the tourist industry. Several Arab states have beaches and resorts which cater to tourists from all over the world, as well as historic and cultural sites from all periods of history.

While there is a large degree of modernization and westernization in the Arab world, the region is in many ways still very traditional. Even in the most secular countries, Islam still informs the daily life of the people and still permeates the social system. The family remains the most important social unit in the Arab world, and the old Arab notions of upholding family honor still guide the interactions of most Arabs. For most Americans, Islam remains the key to understanding the region, its people, and its politics. Seen by many as a religion of war and violence, Islam is actually a religion of peace which abhors violence. The root of both Islam and Muslim, S-L-M, means peace in Arabic. Violence is only to be used as a last resort to defend the community from attack, and jihad, or religious struggle, is to be

performed first in the self, to assure pure motives and submission to the will of Allah—the Arabic word for God—(known as the greater jihad, *al-jihad al-akbar*), before engaging in the struggle to defend Islam (known as the lesser jihad, *al-jihad al-asghar*). Many “Islamic” movements which use violence are merely cloaking themselves in religion in an attempt to make their grab for power appear more palatable and more legitimate.

The final common stereotype about Islam is that women have no rights. This could not be farther from the truth. In Islam, women have more rights than they do in most other world religions, including Christianity. When the religion of Islam was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 600s AD, it was incredibly progressive in the area of women's rights. Women have the right to own and retain property, and their money and property cannot be mixed with that of their husbands. Women also have the right to write whatever they want into their marriage contract, which is a legally binding document. The provisions in Islam allowing multiple wives required absolute equality for all wives and limited the number to four, a great improvement from the pre-Islamic customs. The provision, which was meant to protect and help provide for widows of the early Muslim warriors and martyrs, has been nullified in the Arab countries today, where men are limited to only one wife at a time. The modesty rules, which many interpret to force women to be secluded or completely covered, in fact call on both women and men to be modest and cover their ornaments. In many Arab countries, one will find a women in a wide variety of attire, from traditional Arab dress to completely covered to western miniskirts. Women work outside the home in large numbers in most Arab countries, in occupations ranging from doctors and engineers to university professors and factory workers.

All of these influences combine to create a very diverse Arab world, currently divided politically into twenty-two different states which are members of the Arab League. All are independent states except for Palestine, which has been represented since by 1974 by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), declared the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League summit at Rabat in the same year. The League of Arab States, as it is officially known, was

founded in March 1945 and is the world's oldest international political organization, predating the United Nations by several months. The League, headquartered in Cairo, Egypt, had as its purposes helping the other Arab states attain independence and safeguarding the rights of the Palestinians. As the remaining Arab states gained their independence and joined the League, its focus shifted towards promoting Arab unity and cooperation and towards supporting the Palestinians economically and politically. Since the Arab League dealt with the Palestinians as a full member state and no other international body did so, the League or its member states often served as a go-between for the Palestinians and other bodies. The League has twice been divided by crisis, first when Egypt was suspended in 1980 for making a unilateral peace with Israel, and secondly when the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 pitted Arab against Arab and divided many states. The League has struggled since 1990 to regain its unity and prominence in the post-Cold War, post-Gulf War world. The rapid changes in the international system since 1989 have caused the League to reevaluate its role and its positions.

The League consists of several standing committees, *ad hoc* committees, and affiliated organizations, similar to that of the United Nations. Committees deal with everything from political issues and cultural concerns to economic cooperation and educational policies. The League's day-to-day operations are carried on by the Secretariat, which is headed by the Secretary-General. The current Secretary-General is Esmat Abd al-Meguid of Egypt, and many of the Secretaries-General have been Egyptian, reflecting Egypt's guiding role in the Arab League. The League Council meets at least once a year, and can meet on several levels (foreign ministers, prime ministers, heads-of-state, and the like). Meetings of League Council on the head-of-state level are called Arab League Summits. The Model Arab League conferences reflect the actual League's structure and deal with similar issues. Currently, the Model consists of the Economic Affairs, the Palestinian Affairs, the Political Affairs, the Security Affairs, and the Social Affairs Committees, and each deals with topics of current concern in the Arab world within its area.

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