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## THE ARAB WORLD\*

The Arab World today stretches from south-west Asia to north-west Africa. It is a vast, complex, and diverse universe. Geopolitically as well as economically it occupies an area of great importance. A cradle of many rich civilizations, the Arab World has a long history encompassing many millennia. Through the vicissitudes of time and history it has witnessed many ups and downs, periods of unprecedented prosperity and also of turmoil and turbulence, all of which have left a deep and indelible imprint on the Arabs and also the rest of the world. Volumes have been written on the subject.

This paper has three principal components; (i) geographical, ethnic, and historical background touching only on the land-mark developments in the evolution of the Arab World, (ii) the structure and characteristics of the contemporary Arab World, and (iii) their foreign policy and strategic concerns with a reference to some of the emerging trends. Besides using some of the well known secondary sources, I have also freely drawn on my own perceptions based on my interactions with the Arab leaders and others during the period I was in charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh.

### **Geographical, Ethnic and Historical Background**

In this paper Arabs have been terminologically used to mean "Ummah-al-Arabiyya" embracing the Arab speaking peoples and

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those who are so closely linked to them that they are accepted as members of the Arab League. It will appear that language and religion have been the key factors in binding the Arab peoples before the emergence of the modern concept of nation-state.

The "Arabian Peninsula", the original home-land of the Arabs, is a primary geographic formation of South West Asia, about a million square miles in area, separated from India and Persia by the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf and from North Africa by the Red Sea. The original inhabitants of the Peninsula known as the Arabs belong to the oriental race and by their physical features considered as a variety of the Mediterranean race dominant in North Africa. In the north they intermingled with the Near Eastern race.

From the third millennium BC onwards swarms of people from the Arabian Peninsula, primarily for climatic reasons, moved to the north. In Mesopotamia as Babyloneans they took over the culture of the Sumerians, and as Cannonites, Hebrews and Arameans in Syria and Phoenicia. They were, thus, influenced by the Near Eastern race. Their language despite some modifications, however, preserved the basic characteristics akin to Arabic for which they were called Semites.

In southern Arabia the climate was more favourable for agriculture. An advanced civilization based on agriculture and trade was developed there as early as second millennium BC. Social conditions in the north were determined by the desert making up the bulk of the land mass and migration through extended regions rendered fixed dwelling for the Bedouins impossible. Blood relationship determined the orbit of their lives, integrating families into clans and clans into tribes.

Born and bred in desert, the Bedouins were fiercely individualistic and freedom-loving but deeply loyal to the tribe. Property conflicts between the members of the same tribe were settled in daily assem-

blies. Cases of disagreement between members of different tribes were referred to the wise elderly people, often a priest.

Constituted of many tribes, sometimes, violent, turbulent and feuding, the Arabs demonstrated remarkable creative talents as reflected in the rich civilizations they developed during the three and a half millennia before the advent of Islam. Southern Arabia, with its monsoon rains and lush vegetation, seemed like a world apart, but it fostered the growth of several ancient city-states. Saba (whence came the mythic Queen of Sheba) is the best known among them. Long before the time of Christ, its people, the Sabaeans, had developed a thriving trade across the Indian Ocean. They were the first people to make India and its products known to the Roman world and to colonize the East African mainland. The Sabaeans dammed up mountain streams and terraced the Yemen hillsides to support an elaborate agriculture.

The last of the great South Arabian kingdoms had been reduced in 525 to a dependency of Ethiopia. Three outside powers contended for control : the Byzantine Empire, champion of Orthodox Christianity; Sasanid Persia, officially Zoroastrian but harbouring Nestorian Christians, Jews, dissident Manichaeans and other sects; and Ethiopia. Each empire had a client Arab tribe that it paid well and furnished with the trappings of monarchy in return for military service. The peninsula was frequently ravaged by wars among these three powers. Southern Arabia experienced two consecutive foreign occupations : Ethiopian (ca. 525-575) and Persian (ca. 575-625).

Most of the central and northern Arabia remained highly vulnerable. In periods of peace the area was crossed by the camel caravans of the overland trade route between Syria and Yemen. Despite the declining market for frankincense, overland trade was gaining in importance as the shoals and pirates of the Red Sea made sailing hazardous. The Byzantin-Sasanian wars also tended to divert trade toward western Arabia. One of its Arabian towns,

formerly tied to the Sabaean kingdom as a religious shrine, emerged as a major station for caravan traders. This was *Mecca*, set inland from the Red Sea among the mountains of the Hijaz. It was a hot, dry place unsuited for farming. Mecca acquired some of its wealth and power from trade. But, its primacy among Arab towns stemmed from three additional factors: an annual poets' fair at neighbouring Ukaz; nearby Mount Arafat, a pilgrimage centre even in pre-Islamic times; and its Kabah, a cube-shaped structure of unknown antiquity that housed idols of the various gods and goddesses venerated by the Arab tribesmen.

Subsequently, some Muslims viewed pre-Islamic Mecca as a sinkhole of wanton vice, although they also believed that Abraham and Ismael had personally built the Ka'bah for the worship of the one true God, which was later corrupted. Its rulers belonged to a trading Arab tribe called the Quraysh. Prophet Muhammad (SM) was born within this tribe. Every Muslim Caliph for more than six centuries would trace his lineage to this tribe of traders. Under their able leadership, the centres of power shifted from the Mediterranean Sea and the Iranian plateau to the Arabian Desert and Fertile Crescent, marking a transition from the ancient to the medieval era.

The most fascinating transformation of the Arabs took place after the advent of Islam. In the words of a distinguished Arabist: "As the probable cradle of the Semitic family the Arabian peninsula nursed those peoples who later migrated into the Fertile Crescent and subsequently became the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians and the Hebrews of history. As the plausible fount of pure Semitism, the sandy soil of the peninsula is the place wherein the rudimentary elements of Judaism, and subsequently of Christianity together with the origin of those traits which later developed into the well-delineated Semitic character - should be sought for. In medieval times Arabia gave birth to a people who conquered most of the then civilized world, and to a religion - Islam - which still

claims the adherence of over three hundred and fifty millions of people, representing nearly all the races and many different climes.”<sup>1</sup>

It should, however, be mentioned in this context that the Muslim population of the world has since risen to nearly a billion. The Islamic era was admittedly one of most far-reaching impact on the history of the Arabs and the world. Its beginning was marked with the Hijrat of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina. From Medina the message of Islam spread all over Arabia and later to far-flung parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. The most striking development in the social and political life of the Arabs was the integration of the warring tribes into a united people bound together under the banner of Islam and the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (SM).

The impact of the dynamic and versatile leadership of the Prophet and the teachings of Islam were so profound that even after the death of the Prophet the successors of the Prophet were able to carry forward the message of Islam far and wide and build not only a vast empire, but also a great new civilization. Within a generation the Sasanid Empire was absorbed and within a century the empire extended to North Africa, Spain in Europe, and right upto China in the East. The Arab World, indeed, occupies a unique place in history as the birth place of three great religions and also as the cradle of some of most ancient and the greatest civilizations of the world.

A revolutionary development during the five hundred years of the expansion of Islam under the Arabs was the development of the new Islamic concept of polity marking a fusion of Arab and non-Arab Muslims as equal citizens of the state, thus, transcending the barriers of geographical, ethnic and linguistic differences. Islamic era also heralded a revolution in the field of knowledge.

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1. P. K. Hitty. *History of the Arabs*. (Macmillan and Co. Ltd, New York, 6th Edn. 1956), p. 3.

Baghdad became not only a symbol of progress and prosperity but also a great seat of learning and knowledge. The intellectual revolution which was spawned at Damascus during the Ummayyad period (661-750 A. D.) blossomed in many splendours during the Abbasid period (750-1258 A.D.). The indomitable spirit of inquiry, openminded quest for knowledge and cosmopolitanism of the Muslim scholars led them in their pursuit of scholarship to all sources of knowledge including the Roman, the Hellenic and the Indian. Their creative and inventive mind drawing on these valuable sources developed a new rich system of knowledge embracing practically all disciplines like history, philosophy, mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, geography, architecture, archaeology, hydrology, jurisprudence, engineering, fine arts, etc.

The new civilization and culture that bloomed during the five hundred years of Arab rule continued to flourish during the subsequent five hundred years. Islamic civilization was the leading civilization of the world for nearly a thousand years and formed the archstone on which subsequently the Europeans built what is now known as the modern civilization.

### **The Structure and Characteristics of the Contemporary Arab World**

The emergence of the contemporary Arab states is the culmination of a long historical process marked by the end of the Ottoman Empire and the rising influence of the colonial European powers. Though Arabic language and Islam acted as the two dominant binding forces and combined with the creative talents of Arab and Muslim scholars contributing to the rise of Arab-Islamic civilization, the centrifugal forces rooted in tribal rivalry and personal ambitions could not be altogether obliterated. Islam achieved unity in diversity. However, the Arab society under Islam continued to remain pluralistic in character and many of the traditional institutions exercised an active influence on the life of the Arabs. Some of

the notable examples of the divergent social and cultural components were: (1) The Muslim-Arabs, the mainstream Sunni Muslims, the Shi'ites, mainly in Iraq, Baharain and Lebanon, the Alawites and Druze in Syria, the Zaydis of Yemen; (2) Non-Muslim Arabs such as, the Christian sects of the Levant and Egypt, and the Jews. While the Christians, by and large, fully identified themselves as Arabs, most of the Jews reside in Israel which was born in hostility with the Arab; (3) Non-Arab Muslims, such as, Kurds of Iraq, Berbers of Algeria and Morocco; (4) Non-Muslim non-Arabs, such as, the animist and Christian Africans of Sudan and the Armenian Christians of Lebanon and Syria.

The religious and dynastic divisions were compounded by group-rivalry and remained a veritable source of tension, conflict and division (as during the last days of the Ummayyad and Abbasid periods) though Islamic polity in concept and practice had become independent of any particular ethnic groups or dynasties.

A number of separate local dynasties appeared in North Africa and Persia in the ninth and tenth centuries, some claiming the caliphate for themselves, while the Abbasid caliphate lingered on from the middle of tenth century until the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1238. The Mamluks seized power in Egypt in 1260. They allowed the old Islamic culture to survive until they were defeated by the Ottoman Turks in 1517. Afterwards for about 400 years until the end of World War I, almost all Arab lands were governed by the Turks.

During the Ottoman rule, the region's strategic importance attracted the attention of the European colonial powers. This importance stemmed chiefly from its strategic location commanding such vital water ways as the Suez Canal, Bosphorus, Dardenelles, Sea of Marmara, Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, Southern Mediterranean, Gibraltar and Indian Ocean. Proximity to both West and East Europe was an added factor of strategic importance of the region to both the

power-blocs. The rising military and economic strength of the European powers eventually succeeded in bringing about the fall of the Ottoman Empire and also profoundly influenced the political map of the region through direct intrusion into intra-Arab relations militarily and politically.

Except Oman, Saudi Arabia and North Yeman, the rest of the Arab World was parcelled out in different forms among the European colonial powers for varying periods as shown in the following chart :

<i>Arab Country</i>	<i>Colonial power</i>		
Algeria	France	until	1962
Bahrein	Britain	„	1971
Djibuti	France	„	1977
Egypt	France	„	1922
Iraq	Britain	„	1932
Jordan	Britain	„	1946
Kuwait	Britain	„	1961
Lebanon	France	„	1941
Libya	Italy	„	1951
Mauritania	France	„	1960
Morocco	France	„	1956
Palestine	Britain	„	1948

and then forcefully occupied by Israel.

Qatar	Britain	until	1971
Somalia	Italy	„	1969
Sudan	Britain	„	1936
Syria	France	„	1946
Tunisia	France	„	1936
United Arab Emirates	Britain	„	1971
South Yemen	Britain	„	1967



The pan-Arabian or Arab unity movement did not appear to have made much headway despite the periodical momentum it received at different times. The efforts made in this direction by the Hashemites before 1958, by Egypt during Nasser regime and also earlier and by the Saudis during King Faisal's rule did not produce any fruitful and enduring result.

As the custodian of the two most important Muslim holy places, King Faisal seemed to envision Arab unity within the broader frame of Islamic unity and took an initiative to strengthen the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).<sup>2</sup> There were short-lived unions or attempts to form unions among Arab countries, such as, between Egypt and Syria; Iraq and Syria; Egypt, Libya and Sudan; Egypt and Libya; Libya and Tunisia; Libya and Algeria; and Libya and Morocco. Following the recent Arab Summit held in Algeria, five Magreb countries have initiated a move to form a sub-regional association.

The initiatives taken at various times for pan-Arabism did not strike any deep roots despite the visible sense of Arab fraternity transcending the barriers of regime and ideological differences. The strongest front of Arab unity is, of course, the united position of all Arabs on Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab lands and the inalienable national right of the Palestinians to establish a state in their own homeland.

These abortive efforts reflected the divisive forces rooted in history, divergence in security perceptions and also the influence of geo-political forces which clearly acted to keep the Arabs divided.

### **Foreign Policy and Strategic Concerns**

History, asymmetry and geopolitical factors are among the prime forces influencing the foreign policy and strategic concerns of the

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2. A non-Arab Muslim, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia Tunku Abdur Rahman was picked up by King Faisal to be the first Secretary-General of the OIC.

Arab states. The key indicators on area, population, GDP, etc, are in Annexure 1. All Arab countries are non-aligned. But, on the basis of the shared foreign policy concerns and regime perception of security interests, the Arab states may be roughly classified as follows :

Group A : Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, North Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco (all monarchies or limited monarchies except Egypt, Tunisia and North Yemen, which have different types of democracy).

Group B : Iraq, Syria, Libya, Algeria, (with varying types of socialist government)

Group C : South Yemen (Marxist Socialist)

Group D : Mauritania, Somalia, (Military Dictatorship)

Group E : Lebanon, Djibouti, Sudan, (Parliamentary Democracy)

A phenomenon of far-reaching global importance vastly enhancing the economic and political strength of the Arab countries was the immense wealth acquired by most of the Arab countries through an unprecedented rise in oil prices during 1970s (See Annexure 2). Many of them emerged as the richest countries of the world. They found a powerful economic and political leverage in the petrodollars invested in the world market. It looked as though the Arabs and Muslims had once again emerged on the world scene as a new force to reckon with. But, the scenario before long underwent a change with the rapid decline in oil prices largely due to the lack of unity among the OPEC countries.

The countries of the Arab world, however, remain highly vulnerable.

(1) Some of them are far too small in the size of their population for safeguarding their security interests without alliance with other states. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has proved to be a

useful innovation in safeguarding and promoting the security interests of the region.

(2) The second factor of vulnerability stems from the perceived strategic concerns of the two power-blocs. Examples are the direct military intervention of Britain and France over the Suez Canal, US doctrine of containment leading to the establishment of CENTO (now defunct), increased superpower rivalry in the region in the wake of the building of the Aswan Dam through Soviet aid following the suspension of American aid to Egypt, and the subsequent American policy of building a strategic consensus in the region against communist intrusion. With the Soviet Union practically eased out of the region, American role in the region has emerged as the most important external factor bearing on the peace and stability of the region.

(3) By far the most serious threat to the security of the region is the aggressive, expansionist militant and terrorizing posture of Israel. While US military and economic aid was a source of sustained military strength of Israel, her military advantage over the Arab countries was vastly enhanced through the Camp David Accord. Under this Accord though Egypt regained her lost territories, she was militarily neutralized, thus, increasing the vulnerability of the other Arab states. The subsequent reconciliation of Egypt with the Arab countries has, no doubt, strengthened the political unity of the Arab countries, but has not altered the military status of the Arab countries vis-a-vis Israel. Israel's intransigence and brutal acts of aggression and repression, sometimes to the embarrassment of her patron, were reminiscent of the Nazi atrocities and outraged the international community and even sections of Israeli society. In Arab perception, this reversal of patron-client influence reflects the strength of the Zionist lobby in America and marks a weakness in American foreign policy inconsistent with the present geo-political realities and detrimental to both Arab and American interests.

(4) Another factor of vulnerability which is often overlooked lies in the internal forces of instability and turbulence inherent in all developing nations. The over-lay of modernism on traditional structures is a veritable source of tension in all changing societies. The Arab countries are committed to progressive modernization as reflected in their policies of rapid expansion of education, inexorably rendering peoples' increasing participation in all fields an imperative, thus, eroding the traditional structures. But, in the case of the Arab countries these sources of tension are aggravated by external forces particularly by superpower involvement compounded by an intransigent Israel. This factor has assumed a new dimension after the expulsion of the Palestinians from Lebanon following Israel's naked invasion of that country, and, in its wake, the outbreak of an armed conflict among the various sub-groups in Lebanon and uprising in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

(5) For a number of Arab countries, particularly those around the Gulf, the Iran-Iraq war was a matter of grave concern. Beyond doubt this war assumed a form posing a threat to the peace and stability of the entire region. The initiative taken by the UN Secretary General received the support of all concerned leading to the end of the war. The prospect of peace in the region, however, appears murky as the parties remain hostage to deep-rooted acrimonies in their mutual relations.

Taking an overall view of the geopolitical and geostrategic scenario in the region, the Palestinian problem appears to lie at the centre of the security concerns of the Arab states. A just solution of this problem holds the key not only to enduring peace in the region but also to containing the centrifugal forces in the region and ensuring stability and progress of the Arab world. The prospects for such a solution now look better than ever. With visibly improved relations between the two superpowers after the recent superpower summits, Israel's existence now implicitly accepted as a reality by the Arabs and *defacto* by the PLO vide its declaration of independent state and

acceptance of UN resolution 242 and, America left practically as the sole external actor in the Middle-East, what is needed is a rational and creative foreign policy strategy on the part of America to end the Arab-Israel conflict by boldly and effectively addressing its three principal elements (i) Israel's requirement of Arab recognition of her existence and security, (ii) the Arab requirement of the return of territories illegally occupied by Israel, and, (iii) the right of the Palestinians for national self-determination and a state in their own home-land. This is the just, rational and only way to secure enduring peace in the region.

Geopolitically viewed, particularly in light of the growing interdependence of nations in achieving national goals, the interests of the Arab nations and those of the Muslim nations appear to be complementary. One reinforces the other. While widening and deepening the traditional fraternal relations with the Arab countries and expanding bilateral cooperation with them in all fields, Bangladesh also laid a special emphasis on the strengthening of the OIC and enlarging its scope of functions so as to include cooperation not only in the cultural and economic fields but also in the political and initiated the proposal for the setting up of a political committee. The mobilization of the combined resources of the member states of the OIC could vastly enhance the strength of the Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries, act in reducing intra-Arab tension and boost up the Arab cause in the international forums.

The active constructive role played by Bangladesh in upholding the cause of the Arabs and the Palestinians received a special recognition in her election to the Jerusalem Committee at both the Ministerial and the Summit level in 1979 and also to the 4-member Bureau constituted at the Islamic Summit in Taif in 1981. The confidence reposed in Bangladesh was also demonstrated by the combined support of all Arab countries for the election of Bangladesh as a member of the United Nations Security Council for 1979-80 in a contest against Japan.

The establishment of the ICTVTR in Dhaka was also the outcome of Bangladesh initiative actuated by the objective of acquiring collective self-reliance through harnessing the rich human and material resources of the Islamic countries. Faster the pace of progress in this direction, greater will be the impact of the Arab and Islamic countries on their own development and also peace, stability and progress nationally, regionally and globally.

## The Arab World : Key Indicators 1986/87

	Population (m)	Area (.000 sq km)	GDP per capita	Inflation (%)	GDP real growth	Balance of trade
Algeria	21.87	2381.7	2213 (1)	10.0	-0.8	2400 (e)
Bahrain	0.43	0.7	9938	-1.0	-5.0	241
Djibouti	0.50	23.3	536 (2)	—	—	-264 (2)
Egypt	49.90	1101.5	958 (1)	13.3 (1)	5.0 (1)	-1360 (e)
Iraq	16.10	434.9	—	10.0 (e)	-5.0	-1500 (e)
Jordan	2.70	95.4	1441 (1)	4.5	3.0 (1)	-1988 (1)
Kuwait	2.00	17.8	8409 (e)	-1.0	1.9 (e)	3168
Lebanon	2.70	10.5	—	100.0 (e)	—	-1558 (l.e.)
Libya	3.90	1761.1	6953 (1)	10.0 (e)	20.6 (l.e)	4640 (1)
Mauritania	2.00 (e)	1030.7	360	7.0 (2)	2.2 (2)	144 (1)
Morocco	23.90	711.0	687	11.6	5.7	-1300
Oman	1.29	320.0	7164 (e)	25.0 (e)	20.0 (e)	200
Qatar	0.32	11.4	16680 (e)	-0.8	-11.0 (e)	613 (e)
Saudi Arabia	11.60 (e)	2149.7	8608 (e)	-1.0	-9.0 (e)	4850
Somalia	4.80	725.5	320	37.8 (1)	2.9 (2)	-240 (1)
Sudan	21.60 (1)	2505.8	228 (1)	45.4 (1)	-1.7 (1)	(-688 1)
Syria	10.70 (e)	185.2	1630 (1)	12.0 (1)	-8.6 (1)	-2600 (e)
Tunisia	7.20	164.2	1250 (e)	5.8	0.7 (e)	-808 (1)
United Arab Emirates	1.62	90.6	13385	2.0 (e)	-18.2	3294
Yemen Arab Republic	9.20	195.0	419	—	—	—
Yemen P D R	2.40 (e)	333.0	540 (l.e)	—	—	-446 (1)

(1) 1985 (2) 1984 (e) estimated figure

Source : *The Middle East Review*, 1988, World of Information, Essex, 1988

## Annexure-2

## The ARAB League's Oil Sector

Country	Crude Oil Production	Proven Reserves	Oil Consumption	Refining Capacity
	(thousand barrels per day)	(million barrels)	(thousand barrels per day)	(thousand barrels per day) Estimate capacity for
	1979	1979	1978	1975
Algeria	1210	8440	102.1	502
Bahrain	50	240	5.6	250
Djibuti	0	0	1.2	0
Egypt	550	3100	187.7	410
Iraq	3500	31000	175.8	320
Jordan	0	0	42.8	75
Kuwait	2600	65400	36.8	644
Lebanon	0	0	42.8	30
Libya	2020	23500	80.2	138
Mauritania	0	0	3.7	20
Morocco	0	0	61.4	148
Oman	295	2400	23.0	0
Qatar	500	2760	8.4	10
Saudi Arabia	10200	163350	225.5	1625
Somalia	0	0	4.6	10
Sudan	0	0	38.7	51
Syria	170	2000	86.0	237
Tunisia	108	2250	38.1	85
U A E	1776	29400	10.9	135
Yemen AR	0	0	5.3	0
Yemen PDR	0	0	12.9	0
Total Arab	22979	334840	1179.4	4859
Total World	64324	641600	—	—

Source : As of Annexure 1



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