

## Topic Page: [Arabs](#)

Definition: **Arab** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Peoples of many nationalities, found predominantly in the Middle East and North Africa, who share a common heritage in the religion of Islam and their language (Arabic). The patriarchal family is the basic social unit in a strongly traditional culture that has been little affected by external influences. Wealth from oil has brought rapid modernization in some Arab countries, but a great deal of economic inequality exists.

Summary Article: **Arabs**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

name originally applied to the Semitic peoples of the Arabian Peninsula. It now refers to those persons whose primary language is Arabic. They constitute most of the population of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank, and Yemen; Arab communities are also found elsewhere in the world. The term does not usually include Arabic-speaking Jews (found chiefly in North Africa and formerly also in Yemen and Iraq), Kurds, Berbers, Copts, and Druze, but it does include Arabic-speaking Christians (chiefly found in Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan). Socially, the Arabs are divided into two groups: the settled Arab [*fellahin*=villagers, or *hadar*=townspeople] and the nomadic Bedouin.

The derivation of the term Arab is unclear, and the meaning of the word has changed several times through history. Some Arab scholars have equated Joktan (Gen. 10.25) with the ancient Arab patriarch Qahtan whose tribe is thought to have originated in S Arabia. The Assyrian inscriptions (9th cent. B.C.) referred to nomadic peoples inhabiting the far north of the Arabian Peninsula; the sedentary population in the south of the peninsula was not called Arab. In classical times the term was extended to the whole of the Arabian Peninsula and to all the desert areas of the Middle East, and in the Middle Ages the Arabs came to be called Saracens.

### **The Arab Empire**

It was the Muslims from Arabia, nomads and settled people alike, whose invasions in the 6th and 7th cent. widely diffused both the Arabic language and Islam. They founded a vast empire, which at its height stretched from the Atlantic Ocean on the west, across North Africa and the Middle East, to central Asia on the east. The Arabs became the rulers of many different peoples, and gradually a great Arab civilization was built up. Although many of its cultural leaders were not ethnically Arabs (some were not even Muslims, but Christians and Jews), the civilization reflected Arab values, tastes, and traditions. Education flourished in the Islamic lands, and literature, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and science were particularly developed by the Arabs. At the same time in all the provinces of the huge empire, except in Persia, Arabic became the chief spoken language. The waves of Arab conquest across the East and into Europe widened the scope of their civilization and contributed greatly to world development. In Europe they were particularly important in Sicily, which they held from the 9th to the late 11th cent., and the civilization of the Moors in Spain was part of the great Arabic pattern. Christian scholars in those two lands gained much from Islamic knowledge, and scholasticism and the beginnings of modern Western science were derived in part from the Arabs. The Arabs also introduced Europe to the Greek philosophers, whose writings they had already translated into Arabic. The emergence of the Seljuk Turks in the 11th cent. and of the Ottoman Turks in the 13th cent. ended the specifically Arab

dominance in Islam, though Muslim culture still remained on the old Arab foundations.

## The Arabs in the Twentieth Century

In the 20th cent., Arab leaders have attempted to form an Arab nation, which would unite the whole Arabic-speaking world from Morocco on the west, across the Middle East, to the borders of Iran and Turkey. Since 1945 most of the Arab nations have combined to form the Arab League, its purpose being to consider matters of common interest, such as policy regarding Israel and colonialism. With 22 member states in the Arab League by the mid-1990s, attempts to forge a unity among the Arabs have continued. Perhaps the most significant economic factor for the Arabs has been the discovery and development of the petroleum industry; two thirds of the world's oil reserves are thought to be in the Middle East. Since World War II a continual problem for the Arab states has been their relations with the Jewish state of Israel, created out of former Arab territory; hostility between them has resulted in four Arab-Israeli wars.

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