

The Arab World Thought of It

INVENTIONS, INNOVATIONS,
AND AMAZING FACTS



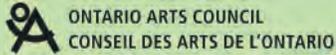
Saima S. Hussain

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**For my family, especially my nephews Ammad and Omar.
And for the family of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian
street vendor who, by dying, gave birth to the Arab Spring.
May his sacrifice not have been in vain. —S.S.H.**



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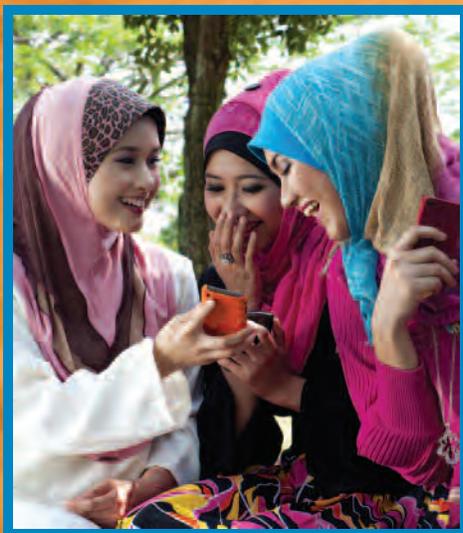
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Marhaba, Welcome.

In my memories of growing up in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, I remember the desert, looking much as it must have centuries ago, and the tall palm trees that have always grown in the region. Occasionally I would even see a camel in the desert. My mother and I would sometimes go to a traditional outdoor marketplace, called a *souk*, to buy spices and cloth, just as people did long ago. But I also have memories that show how Saudi Arabia has changed from times past. There were tall office buildings along modern highways, where luxury cars and early versions of today's SUVs were everywhere. We did most of our shopping in grocery stores and malls, which—like homes and office buildings—were air-conditioned to provide relief from the very hot sun. The Saudi Arabia of my childhood was a mix of old and new, and this is true of the Arab world today.



Who is an Arab? A simple answer is to say that an Arab is someone whose first language is Arabic and who can trace his or her family's history to the Middle East or North Africa. (Not



everyone would agree with this definition. For example, there are members of some groups, such as Coptic Egyptians and North African Berbers, who fit the definition but do not consider themselves Arabs.) While most Arabs are Muslims, there are also many Arab Christians, as well as Arab Jews.

Arabs have a very long and fascinating history. When I lived in Saudi Arabia, I learned some of this history at school and some from my parents and grandparents, who told me about important people and events from the past. Later, when I studied history at the University of Toronto, I learned a lot more.

One of the things I learned was that many centuries ago all Arabs lived in the area called the Arabian Peninsula, once known as Arabia (see page 10). Most of Arabia was desert, with some fertile areas where grains, coffee, and fruits were grown.



The Liberation Tower in
Kuwait City, Kuwait

Some Arabs were Bedouins—desert nomads who moved from place to place and invented useful things such as tents. Bedouin Arabs did not own land or houses. They considered their camels, horses, and sheep to be their wealth.

Other Arabs lived in fertile areas and developed better farming techniques to make the best use of the little land where crops could grow. There were also Arabs who made their living as traders, traveling around the world by land and sea, buying luxury goods to sell to buyers in Europe. From India and China, Arab traders bought goods such as spices, silk, and jewels. From Africa they bought gold, which they traded for salt.

A photograph showing the interior of the Great Mosque of Cordoba, Spain. The image features a long, perspective view of a series of double arches supported by columns. The arches are decorated with alternating red and white stripes. The floor is made of large stone tiles. In the foreground, a few people are walking, and a wooden railing is visible on the left side.

The Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.





Around the year 629 CE, groups of young Arab men set out to conquer other parts of the world and create a large empire. Many of them married and lived in the places they conquered—including Spain, where Arabs ruled for 700 years. Over time, Arab language and culture and the Muslim religion spread all over this empire, and even outside of it.

Arabs who lived in this empire built schools, hospitals, and beautiful palaces. They were responsible for the translation of many Latin and Greek books into Arabic so that more people could learn from them. They also carried out research in chemistry, physics, astronomy, agriculture, medicine, math, and geography, among other subjects.

Today, most Arabs live in the 22 countries that make up the League of Arab States (see page 10). There are also many people living in other parts of the world who can trace their roots to an Arab country. Well-known examples include the singer Shakira, who was born in Colombia but is proud of her Arab background (her name is Arabic for "thankful"); North American celebrities Salma Hayek, Paula Abdul, and Tony Shalhoub; and two Arab Americans who won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, Dr. Ahmed H. Zewail and Dr. Elias Corey.

Let's get going on our journey into the Arab world. On this journey we will meet some Arabs who became famous for their inventions and innovations over the centuries.

THE ARAB WORLD TODAY

The countries labeled on the map below are today considered to be part of the Arab world. All of these countries belong to a group called the League of Arab States. Long ago, the area shown in darker brown was known as Arabia. Today, people sometimes call this area the Arabian Peninsula.

