Arabs

What’s in it for me? A whistle-stop tour of Arab history, jam-packed with moments of high drama.

There is drama and personality aplenty to be had in the story of the people we know as Arabs. From ancient civilizations fixated on irrigation to their meteoric ascent to the world stage with Muhammad, through the louche Umayyad dynasty followed by the bookish Abbasids, from dastardly betrayals that have yet to be forgiven to forces of nature in the form of Mongol horsemen – the story of the Arabs is one whose oldest themes are still playing out today. The Arab world hasn’t been unified politically since the seventh century. But in these blinks, you’ll get a sense of the forces that bind this disparate region together. In these blinks, you’ll learn

why people in Tang Dynasty China were sporting the latest Arab kaftans; the origin of the English word “algebra”; and why Indonesian has 3,000 loan words from Arabic.

The lives of early Arabs revolved around three things – water, trade, and war.

Landscapes have always shaped the destinies of people from the Arabian Peninsula. Geographically, the region can be divided into three zones: the rocky northwest, the arid and sandy central plateau, and the fertile southern part. One thing connects all three areas: the lack of water. The people of the Arabian Peninsula developed two approaches to finding water: in the more fertile south, they captured and stored rainwater through large-scale agricultural works. This facilitated political and social organization. In the other parts of Arabia, people roamed the desert from well to oasis. These rootless roamers, who grouped themselves into tribes, were the first people to have been known as Arabs. Their nomadic freedom has been a hallmark of Arab culture ever since. Eventually, the settled southern Arabs and the nomadic groups began to come together to trade. In the first century BCE, settled Arabians from the south began trading frankincense and other valuables across the mountains, traveling by camel. But luxury goods weren’t the only things to spread along the trade routes. Poetry was used by early Arabs to keep records, pray, and communicate in general, and it was wildly popular, passed across communities from north to south. The first written reference to Arabs is by an Assyrian king, who fought a coalition of Arab tribes and thousands of their camels in 853. The reference is indicative of the relationships Arabs had with neighboring empires: to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and later the Persians, Arabs were pests, raiding their trade caravans and stealing their camels. Arabian tribes got a lot better at fighting each other, as well as outsiders, when they added horses to their arsenal. Camels were great for plodding to battle, but the speed and agility of horses, combined with new innovations like the saddlebow and stirrups, spurred Arabs to become an effective fighting force. Arabs at the time didn’t consider themselves one people. But contact with two imperial enemies gradually changed this. From the west came the Romans; from the east came the Persians. Both these empires thought of the various Arab tribes as a group, and gradually Arabs began thinking of themselves that way, too.

Cultural, political, and religious advancements transformed the disparate Arabs into a unified force to be reckoned with.

Due to bureaucratic mismanagement and threat of invasion from African kingdoms just across the Red Sea, civilization in southern Arabia began to crumble in the first century CE. Tribes filtered north, looking for better opportunities. Two families, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, established themselves as clients of the Byzantines and the Persians, respectively. They kept mobile courts, moving from camp to luxury camp, and fought each other on behalf of their imperial benefactors. Poets were revered in the courts of both dynasties, and in the sixth century Arabic poetry reached what some believe was its all-time zenith. The refinement of the language began to establish a unified voice in terms of art, identity, and politics. It was this cultural and linguistic unity that would make possible both Islam and the idea of Arabs as a unified people. With this new national spirit came a new belligerence as well. As war technology improved in the sixth century, fighting among tribes on the peninsula intensified. There was no organized religion – yet – but there was a binding ethical code that exalted generosity, hospitality, bravery, and loyalty to family, tribe, and ancestors. Many of these traditions are still valued by Arab communities to this day. Soon the Byzantines and Persians were no longer working with the Ghassanids and Lakhmids, but were defending their borders against them. In 602, a coalition of Arab tribes defeated the Persians at Dhu Qar. It was a turning point. For a while, at least, the Arabs would agree to dream the same dream of unity. It was about this time that the most famous Arab entered history. Muhammad was a member of the Quraysh clan of Mecca, which had long been a trading capital on the spice routes between northern and southern Arabia. In the early seventh century, it was de rigueur for Meccans to decamp to the mountains for contemplative retreats. During one of Muhammad’s retreats, he started having revelations that would ultimately form the Qur’an. Muhammad’s religion, which became Islam, worshipped Allah, an ancient high god of Arabia. Under Islam, Allah was not just a high god, but the only God. The poetic language and message of the Qur’an, and the personal magnetism of Muhammad, attracted a small, fervent, and growing body of believers in Mecca. But not everyone in Mecca was captivated by the new ideology.

On the strength of Muhammad’s personality and the power of the Qur’an, Islam grew into an unstoppable force.

To the ruling clans of Mecca, Muhammad was a dangerous dissident, upsetting pagan traditions and, more importantly, the mercantile norms that kept them in frankincense and fine robes. Muhammad saw the writing on the wall. His solution was a hijrah – he migrated. In 622, he and his followers made for the city of Medina, where his grandfather had been raised. If the Meccan years were the spiritual underpinnings of Islam, the years in Medina established it as a sociopolitical force. We’re not totally sure

why, but when Muhammad arrived in Medina, citizens there put him in charge of the city immediately. Aware of the new power of writing, Muhammad immediately set down a constitution for the city, and organized a series of raids to build up Medina's coffers. Muslim power rapidly grew. Only eight years later, the Meccan clans capitulated to Medina's growing power, realizing it would be more profitable to join Muhammad. Muhammad triumphantly returned to Mecca, and his own Quraysh clan was granted the keys to the sacred Ka'bah shrine, which they've held ever since. As rumors of Muhammad's leadership drifted around Arabia, more and more clan chiefs began to pay tribute to Medina. Soon, Arabia was united for the first time in its history. It would also be the last. Muhammad died in 632. Under him, Islam had become the dominant force in Arabia. But he died without naming a successor. In the prophet's final illness, his companion Abu Bakr had led prayers, and it was he who took over immediately as the leader of Islam when Muhammad died. But could he keep Muhammad's followers together in the long term? Abu Bakr had a clever plan. He realized the Arabs needed a common enemy to cement their unity. The Byzantines and Persians presented convenient options, both of them nearby and weakening. He marshaled Arabs across the peninsula against this common foe; when he died, his successor Umar took up the mantle. The Byzantines and Persians weren't keen on capitulating. But the upstart Arab armies were aided by the existential nature of their campaigns: their choice was either to expand or collapse. So they expanded, miraculously defeating both empires in battle almost simultaneously, aided by their sharpshooting archers. The world was now at their fingertips.

As Arab armies marched across the world, trauma at home would forever shape the face of Islam.

The defeat of the Byzantines and Persians opened up the world to the Arabs. They moved fast: within only a few generations, Arab armies conquered vast tracts of land, from Portugal to Tajikistan, from Aden to Azerbaijan. As generations passed, populations across their territories became Arabized. But Arab culture itself was diluted by the indigenous cultures of the conquered lands. Being Arab became more like being a citizen of today's United States – less about ethnic background and more about shared language and culture. Meanwhile, trouble was brewing in the Arabian metropole, Medina. Uthman succeeded Caliph Umar when he died in 644. Corruption spread under his leadership. He rewarded his own tribe, the Umayyads, with cushy jobs and the fabulous riches that began pouring in from the growing empire. Other leaders in Medina weren't happy. Uthman succumbed to a mutiny in 656, and was succeeded by Ali, Muhammed's first cousin. Ali tried to put a stop to the corruption, but some wealthy tribes in Mecca and Medina preferred the elevated station they had risen to under Uthman. Violence engulfed the peninsula, culminating in the traumatic four-month battle of Siffin in 657. Siffin permanently dashed the hope for a unified Islam; it led to the schism between Sunnah – those who follow customary practice – and Shi'at Ali, the party of Ali. When Ali was killed in battle in 680, he became a martyr to his followers, who to this day feel guilt for not having protected him. After the schism, a member of Uthman's Umayyad clan took on the mantle of caliph. Mu'awiyah founded the Umayyad dynasty, with Damascus – in modern day Syria – as his new capital. The Umayyads are thought of as the first Islamic dynasty, but in reality, they were more like the last of the pre-Islamic dynasties. Umayyad rulers became famous for allegedly enjoying decidedly

un-Islamic pleasures, like copious amounts of wine, in their lavish palaces. Arab culture was migrating from the rough desert to the softer urban pleasures of architecture and calligraphy. The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is the greatest monument of the era, a symphony of anti-iconic mosaics and geometric inlaid wood. The Umayyads also presided over the formation of an Arab national identity. Umayyad subjects lived according to the rules of Arabic bureaucracy, conducted trade in its coinage, and wrote in cursive Arabic script. Keeping the peace wasn't always peaceful, though. Rebellions were brutally crushed, like one in Iraq in which Umayyad forces killed 120,000 people in one go. But ultimately, one rebellion would stick.

Under the Abbasids, Baghdad became an intellectual and cultural capital.

The clan that finally brought down the Umayyads was descended of Abbas, the uncle of Muhammad. The Abbasids brought together various factions disaffected by Umayyad rule, from Persian peasants to solemn Muslims fed up with the Umayyads' dissolute ways. The rebel Abbasid armies easily wiped out the Umayyad armies, which were themselves annoyed at not having been paid. Arab power, and the caliphate, shifted east from Damascus to Baghdad, in Iraq. While the Umayyads had ruled largely in the manner of pre-Islamic kings, the Abbasids had a more flexible approach to leadership. While they ultimately lost their territorial empire, they managed to cling to the symbolic power of the caliphate for nearly 800 years. The Abbasids transformed Baghdad into an urbane cultural capital, a cosmopolitan metropole of the far-reaching empire. Architectural styles for new pavilions and palaces were imported from the far-flung corners of the empire, constructed by 50,000 workers simultaneously. News and revenue also came with increasing speed from the great beyond. It was possible to travel more than 1200 kilometers from Central Asia to Baghdad in as little as 12 days. The Abbasids also presided over an intellectual revolution of religion and science. In the ninth century, Caliph Ma'mun developed the first Islamic orthodoxy, transmuting what had previously been opinions into rights and wrongs. Ma'mun was also fascinated by geography, mathematics, and astronomy. The English language has Arabic loan words like "algebra," "algorithm," and many others thanks to advances made during this time. Arab intellectual and aesthetic trends soon became fashionable in neighboring urban centers, too. In Constantinople, the Byzantine emperor constructed a Baghdad-style pleasure palace on the Bosphorus; in Guangzhou during the Tang Dynasty, chic Chinese courtiers promenaded in Arab-style kaftans and turbans. But Arab-dom was becoming increasingly diluted, distanced from its nomad past. Of the 37 Abbasid caliphs over 500 years of rule, only three had free-born Arab mothers. Caliphs and Abbasid kings were increasingly reliant on their advisors, military, and courtiers, who were increasingly from elsewhere. Slowly, political power slipped from Arab hands – into the control of the enslaved Turkish troops the Arabs depended on for protection. Like the Umayyads before them, the Abbasids faced spirited rebellions, including the Zanj Rebellion of enslaved people in Iraq, that drained efforts and coffers.

A dark new period for Arabs loomed as its last great territorial empire fell.

The Abbasid fall finally came in 1055, when the Turkic Saljuq tribe took Baghdad from

the Turkic warlords who had been running the show in the Arab caliph's name. Rival groups in Persia, Syria, and Iraq also wrested power from the fracturing empire. The breakup of the Abbasid empire spelled a new reality for unified Arab territorial power – a decline. But Arab culture, or at least hybridized versions of it, was on the upswing throughout the world. Arab power in Spain flourished, intellectually, architecturally, and linguistically – Spanish has at least 4,000 loan words from Arabic. Islam now stretched from West Africa to Indonesia. For the territorial Arab empire, there were new threats from Christendom, primarily the Crusades in the Levant. The Crusades foreshadowed later European imperialism: violent attacks aimed at plundering treasure, hidden behind a veil of religion. The European Franks – the Arabized word for "French" – were repulsed by the Arabs under the famous Saladin, but they brought inspiration back home: The first European hospitals were modeled on Levantine versions, and Europeans were enraptured with new crops like sugarcane, rice, and lemons. The direction of travel, in terms of goods and ideas, was increasingly toward Europe. But a worse catastrophe was about to strike the Arab world. It would come on horseback from the east. No one knows exactly how many were killed when the Mongols descended on Baghdad in 1258. That's because few were left alive to do a proper count. Chingis Khan's grandson Hulagu razed the city to the ground, massacred its inhabitants, and ransacked its libraries, throwing precious books into the Tigris. The Mongols were finally stopped in Palestine by the Egyptian Mamluks – but the damage was done. It was a devastation from which Baghdad has never fully recovered. After a destabilizing few centuries, including the ravages of the Black Death, which killed about a third of humanity across Eurasia and North Africa, the last vestiges of Arab rule at the far ends of the empire finally fell. The last Arab outpost in Grenada, Spain was taken in 1492, a few decades after the Ottomans took over Constantinople. Hemmed in by the Mamluks, the Franks, and the Mongols, there was only one escape route for Arabs looking to carry on spreading their culture. Arabs seeking to slake their wanderlust would now take to the Indian Ocean.

As Arab cultural influence spread via the Indian Ocean, it came into increasing competition with European power and innovation.

The Mongol ravages pushed Arabs in a new direction: to sea. Starting in the thirteenth century, Arabs' oceanic wanderings – from Tanzania across the Indian Ocean to Java – became as important as the military expansions of the seventh and eighth centuries, as they set the stage for today's Islamic world. With wind in their sails from regular monsoons, Arabs made fortunes from the wealth of the oceans and coastal lands: gold, gems, pearls, ivory, ebony, sandalwood, nutmeg, and cloves were all harvested and traded from port to port. It got to the point where Arab wanderers were a common sight all over Asia and Africa. In one instance, the explorer Ibn Battutah ran into someone from the Moroccan village that neighbored his own, in Delhi! Wherever Arabs went, they took their language with them. Many languages adopted Arabic script, from Uyghur in China to Croat in the Balkans. Indonesian has as many as 3,000 loan words from Arabic, and Swahili, spoken on the Indian Ocean coast of East Africa, owes about half its vocabulary to Arabic. But Arabs weren't the only ones roaming the high seas: in the fifteenth century, the Portuguese began sniffing around after the fabulous wealth of

which they'd heard rumors. They hobbled Arabs' role as middlemen, building hulking forts on Indian Ocean coasts and threatening interlopers with a terrifying new technology: firepower. Arab sea migrations would now take place against the backdrop of other peoples' empires: the Portuguese, followed by the British in India and the Dutch in the East Indies. These new empires were run on the printed word. This was one place Arabs couldn't follow. Arabic is written in cursive, and its letters change based on where they appear in a word, which makes printing in Arabic devilishly difficult. The first Arabic printing press appeared in Cairo in the nineteenth century, nearly 400 years after its Latin equivalent. This inability to print at scale was a brake on scientific and technological development, the true extent to which we may never know. In 1798, a latter-day crusade descended on Egypt. It consisted of another species of Frank, this time led by Napoleon. They came, they saw, the conquered – and then they left after only two years, ousted by the British and Ottomans. The French introduced the wheelbarrow, their court system, and the Arabic world's first printed propaganda. The most important thing the French left, however, was a sense of Egyptianness. Having clearly seen "the Other" on their streets and in their palaces, Egyptians understood anew what made them Egyptian.

Across the Arab world, groups reacted variably to European influence.

One of the things that made Egyptians Egyptian was their language. So, Arabic became the official language of Egypt. But Egyptians also realized they could still be Egyptian even with European things like the steam engine, an opera house, and a modern canal – and a massive canal at that. Suez connected the Mediterranean and Indian oceans via the Red Sea. Across that Red Sea, another awakening was rocking Arab society: the Wahhabi tribesmen in the Arabian Peninsula were on a mission to disinfect the Islamic faith from things like opera houses. They unleashed a wave of vandalism across the peninsula, desecrating anything they viewed as polytheistic, including the long-revered tombs of Muhammad's companions. They didn't stop there, either: in southern Iraq, they massacred a village of people. Diametrically opposed to the inward turn of the Wahhabis was a turn outward in the Levant. In the 1800s, Arabs in Lebanon and Syria began to migrate to Europe, West Africa, and the Americas in huge numbers. By the early twentieth century, between a quarter and a half of all Lebanese people had migrated; it's because of this huge population shift that 12 million Arabs now live in Brazil – substantially more than the population of Lebanon itself. The Great War brought change to the region. The Balfour Declaration in 1917 set the groundwork for what would become the state of Israel – with little to no acknowledgment that a lot of other people already lived on the land intended for the new country. The Balfour Declaration was a logical impossibility, like saying you could build a reservoir without angering the people whose villages would soon be flooded. According to the author, the only place it might have worked is Antarctica. In the aftermath of the Great War, the Sykes-Picot agreement finished off the Ottoman Empire, granting provisional independence to Arab lands but under the permanent influence of France and Britain. Official borders were drawn between countries, sometimes in straight lines. But this didn't put an end to Arab nationalism; on the contrary, colonialism energized the movement. Rebels in Morocco, Syria, and Iraq were constantly hectoring their French and British overlords. Ibn Sa'ud, backed by the Wahhabis, founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, and found enthusiastic support for its project of independence in the United States, conveniently coinciding with the discovery of oil in the region in 1933. But colonialism was soon to

face a brilliant new adversary: a pan-Arab Egyptian with a megawatt grin.

From its high point of Nasser, the contemporary Arab world has reached a nadir of despair.

Egypt threw off the yoke of colonialism more flamboyantly than most. In 1952, a group of army officers, led boldly by the movie-star-handsome Gamal Abdul Nasser, overthrew the king. Nasser, the first Egyptian to rule Egypt since the pharaohs, would set Egypt on a new course – its own, for perhaps the first time. Nasser electrified the Arab world with his voice, which was broadcast via radio to millions. His brazenness in dealing with Western powers was thrilling to many; he humiliated the British by nationalizing the Suez Canal, and spurned the US by doing an arms deal with the Soviet Union. He seemed unstoppable. But in 1948, a little to the northeast, Zionism defeated a fractured coalition of Arab allies to form the state of Israel. This sparked a major wave of migrations: Jewish Arabs from all over the region moved to the new state, and Palestinian refugees to neighboring countries. Then, on June 5, 1967, Israeli war planes wiped out the entire Egyptian air force in a few minutes, and seized the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights in Syria, and the remaining Arab-controlled parts of Palestine in a matter of days. It was a humiliating defeat, one from which Nasser never recovered. He died only a few years later. As the hope of the mid-century faded, a new Islam rose to meet the despair felt by many young Arabs. Islam has always been political. But modern political Islam is a new creature altogether: It promises the perfect simplicity of the past instead of the messy, muddled, distracting chaos of modern times. Autocracy, Islamocracy, and convulsive violence remained the status quo for decades. But then, in 2011, the Tunisian fruit seller Mohammed Bou Azizi’s spectacular act of self immolation sparked a movement. Young people in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen poured into the streets, protesting corruption, arbitrary rule, and lack of opportunity. But this Arab Spring wasn’t followed by a summer. In Egypt, the movement was ultimately co-opted by the army, the same old rulers. In Syria, protests sparked a civil war that has killed half a million. In Bahrain and Yemen, scores of people were killed as rulers stamped out the buds of spring. Why have Arab communities supported autocratic leaders? Perhaps if you’re under the influence of a strongman, it’s easier to argue that he’s good rather than admit your own lack of agency. In today’s Arab world, disappointment has frequently turned to despair. We can only hope that exploring the past will help young Arabs today build a better future.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: From their earliest days roaming the desert, to cutting-edge intellectual and scientific innovation, to belligerent armies with religious righteousness at their backs, to the age of dashing explorers sailing through monsoons to distant lands teeming with riches, the Arabs have had a dramatic journey through history. Their more recent path has been more difficult, with threats from colonialism, Zionism, and autocracy preventing social and political reconstruction in the Arab region. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Arabs as the subject line, and share your thoughts!