

The Geography of Arabia

It is a convention of historians to begin the history of a region with its geography. They do so partly because the drama of history is played out in the “theater” of its geographical backdrop; and partly because of the factor known in geopolitics as the “determinism of geography.”

It has been said that not only institutions but geography, climate, and many other conditions unite to form the influences which acting through successive generations, shape up the character of individuals and nations, and character plays a vital role in shaping up their history.

The Arabian peninsula is the cradle of Islam. Islam was “born” in it, and “grew up” in it, and was already “full-grown” when it came out of it. It was in the Arabian cities of Makkah and Medina that the classic Islamic identity was evolved, and Islam actually “jelled.” A grasp of the geography of Arabia, therefore, is necessary for the understanding of the drift of its history.

Following is a synopsis of the geography of the Arabian peninsula:

Arabia, like any other region, has the kind of terrain that molds and modifies those who live in it and move through it. It's a stern, grim and inhospitable land, and is or was, until the obtrusion of oil, a constant challenge for survival to the wits of man. His survival in it depended upon his ability to come to terms with it.

Contrary to popular notions, Arabia is not all a wilderness of sand. It has considerable variety in the configuration of its surface, the salient features of which are broiling sand, mauve mountains, jagged gulches, grotesque peaks spiking a copper sky, friable rocks, flinty plains, startling geometrical and conical shapes of crags, constantly shifting sand dunes and oases, and mirages of lakes, streams and gardens.

Though most of the surface of the desert is bleak and desolate, Arabia has many parts which are highly photogenic. They possess a peculiar, rhythmic, haunting, elusive and illusive beauty – the beauty of textured sand, which like the waves of the sea, is forever in motion.

This beauty is even more evanescent than the beauty of the patterns of fern and feather in frost, and

even more ephemeral than the cosmetic of freshly-fallen snow. The ripples of sand extend as far as the horizons and beyond, in a world of silence and emptiness. The sun makes bright scales on the sand, and the wind makes strange, surrealistic, and “futuristic” patterns in it only to obliterate them a few moments later.

Thus the wind is constantly creating, destroying and recreating beauty. And this beauty, in all its infinite similitudes, is born to blush unseen in the desert air, and to perish and vanish unsung. In the immensity of sand, the landscape keeps changing and assuming forever newer and more fantastic shapes, and keeps erratically “moving” from one place to another. Sand can be piled up into massive dunes which can rise more than 150 meters above bedrock.

Depending on the direction and force of the wind, the dunes assume a variety of shapes like the spectacular crescent moon or long parallel ridges or great pyramidal massifs which may be called sand mountains.

If the desert has many faces, it also has many moods, and most of them are unpredictable. One moment it may be deceptively benign and tranquil but the very next moment, it may become vicious, temperamental, menacing and treacherous like a turbulent ocean. Whole caravans of men, camels and horses, are said to have disappeared in it, devoured, as if, by the cruel and hungry sands.

In a sandstorm which can last for several days, the sun, the moon, the stars, the contours of the landscape and the horizons are all obliterated, and towering columns of dust spin crazily, flashing surreal shadows over the surface of the roiling desert.

In summer, the vertical sun generates thermal whirlwinds which scorch the land as if with a torch, and the desert becomes a composite of two elements – heat and sand. Sometimes a dust storm is followed by a brisk shower which sports a “double-rainbow” – a full rainbow inset with a smaller one. Thus horror and beauty both fit strangely into the “life-cycle” of the desert.

But through it all and forever, the desert remains remote, silent, sinister, savage, forbidding and formidable; and it remains overwhelming in its vast and awesome loneliness. Some people believe that the brooding desert has its own “mystique” which profoundly affects men. It is against this backdrop that the Arab – the son of the desert – played out his life.

Arabia is the world's largest peninsula but the Arabs themselves call it *Jazirat-ul-Arab* (the Island of Arabia), which in a sense it is. Bounded on the east by the Persian Gulf, on the south by the Arabian Sea, and on the west by the Red Sea, it is bounded on the north by the great “sand sea” of the Syrian desert.

In outline, Arabia is a quadrilateral with an area of 1.2 million square miles. The Red Sea littoral from the Gulf of Aqaba in the north to the Bab-el-Mendeb in the south, is 1200 miles long; and the distance from Bab-el-Mendeb in the west to Ras-el-Hadd in the east is roughly the same.

In configuration, Arabia is a vast plateau rising gently from east to west. Except for Yemen and the valleys interspersed in the western mountain ranges, the whole country is sandy or rocky, and dry and barren.

Following are the political divisions of the Arabian peninsula (1992):

1. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
2. The Republic of Yemen
3. The Sultanate of Oman
4. The United Arab Emirates
5. The State of Qatar
6. The State of Bahrain
7. The State of Kuwait

Following is a brief description of each of these seven political units:

1. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accounts for 850,000 square miles of the Arabian peninsula. Its population is estimated at ten million, and its capital is Riyadh.

The “maritime” provinces of the Kingdom are Hijaz and Aseer on the Red Sea. The narrow coastal plain of Tihama runs parallel to the Red Sea.

The twin cities of Makkah and Medina are in the province of Hijaz. Hijaz, therefore, is the holy land of Islam. The population of Hijaz is estimated at two million, and its area is 135,000 square miles. Other cities and towns in Hijaz are Jeddah, the port of Makkah, and the country's major commercial center; Yenbo, the port of Medina; Ta'if, a hill station in the south-east of Makkah, and the summer capital of the kingdom; Khyber, Tabuk and Tayma.

The “Great Design” of Islam was perfected in Hijaz, and the history of its birth and growth is inextricably bound up with this province which makes it the hub of the Muslim world.

Aseer is the relatively fertile strip of coastal plains and mountains in the south-west, north of Yemen, with some peaks rising as high as 10,000 feet, and sufficient rainfall to permit terraced farming. The famous hill station of Abha and the important agricultural settlement of Jizan are in Aseer. Jizan is the port for Aseer.

Najd is the central highland of Arabia with a mean elevation of 3000 feet. The dominant feature of its topography is the mountain system called Tuwayq. Riyadh, the capital of the kingdom, is in Najd. The oases of Buraydah and Hayil are in the northern part of Najd.

Al-Hasa or the Eastern Province is on the Persian Gulf. All the oil and gas of the kingdom are found in this province. It also has the important oases of Hofuf and Qatif. The leading commercial centers of the province are Al-Khobar and the port city of Dammam. Other important cities are Dhahran and Ras Tanura.

The Ruba'-al-Khali (the Empty Quarter) in the south is the largest continuous body of sand in the world, and covers an area of 250,000 square miles. To the Arabs, it is known simply as "Ar-Ramal" (the Sands). It is an almost lifeless desert, and is one of the most isolated and desolate regions of the world.

An-Nufud in the north of the peninsula is the second largest desert in Arabia. It is 30,000 square miles in area.

2. The Republic of Yemen

The Republic of Yemen is in the south and south-west of the Arabian peninsula, with a population of 11 million and an area of 190,000 square miles. It is the only part of the peninsula that receives monsoon rains, making it the most fertile and populous part of the area. The highest mountain of Arabia, An-Nabi Sho'aib, is in Yemen, and reaches a height of 12,350 feet.

Sana'ais the capital and the largest city in the country. It is at an elevation of 7200 feet, and is noted for its healthful climate. Aden is the commercial capital. Al-Mocha, Al-Hodaydah, Ta'izz, and Mukalla are other cities. Sayun and Shibam are towns which are famous for their skyscrapers.

3. The Sultanate of Oman

The Sultanate of Oman occupies the south-east corner of the Arabian peninsula and consists of the regions of Oman and Dhofar. It has a population of one million and an area of 90,000 square miles. Muscat is the capital and Matrah is the largest town.

4. The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates comprise the seven states of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Ajman, Sharjah, Fujairah, Ras el-Khaimah, and Umm el-Quiwain. They add up to a total of 32,000 square miles, and a population of 500,000. The capital of the Union is Abu Dhabi which is also the largest and most important city of the Emirates.

5. The State of Qatar

Qatar has an area of 4250 square miles and a population of 200,000. Its capital is Doha. Qatar has the smallest population of any Arab state.

6. The State of Bahrain

Bahrain is a group of 30 islands, with a total area of 240 square miles, and a population of 300,000. Manama, the capital, is on Bahrain Island, and Muharraq is the second largest city in the group of islands.

7. The State of Kuwait

Kuwait is 6200 square miles in area, and has a population of 1.5 million. Kuwait City is the capital.

Climate

Although the Tropic of Cancer passes through the center of the Arabian peninsula, the land is not tropical. Its summers are long and extremely hot, with temperatures rising as high as 130 degrees Fahrenheit in many places. Winters are short and cold. Rainfall is scanty, averaging four inches a year. The south-west corner, however, gets relatively heavy rainfall, as much as twenty inches.

Vegetation

Vegetation is generally very sparse due to lack of rain and due to the high salt content of the soil. True trees are rare, and shrubs are common. All plants have had to adapt themselves to the conditions of desert existence.

The date-palm grows wherever there is water. It is the most important cultivated tree in the whole peninsula. Date fruit is the staple of many Arabs, and the tree supplies valuable wood and other by-products. Tamarisk and acacia trees are also found in many parts of the country.

The principal cereals of Arabia are wheat, barley, oats, maize and millet. Coffee grows in Yemen; and cotton grows, in varying quantities, in Yemen and in Oman. The mango fruit has been successfully cultivated in the oases of Al-Hasa province of Saudi Arabia, and the coconut palm grows in Oman. Such "forests" as Arabia has, are a few clusters of junipers in the highlands of Yemen.

The Ecology of Arabia The most important component of the ecology of the Arabian peninsula is water. Its presence or absence has shaped its history to a great extent. Settlers were attracted to the site of Makkah in Hijaz by the presence of the spring discovered by Hajra, the wife of Ibrahim and the mother of Ismael, and was named by her as *Zamzam*. Assured by the availability of its tart waters in all seasons,

they built the city of Makkah around it.

The hydrosphere of the region consists of wells, torrents and flash-floods. The whole area is devoid of rivers and streams with the exception of the sixty-mile long Hajar in the Republic of Yemen. But even this is not a perennial stream; it becomes a stream only when torrential rains fall in its basin.

A new and complex factor of tremendous geopolitical significance is the presence of vast reservoirs of oil in the Arabian peninsula. In 1900 the whole peninsula was thinly populated, and was desolate, poverty-stricken and isolated. It was one of the few regions in the world almost untouched by western influence.

Then came oil and everything changed. Saudi Arabia sold her first concession in 1923, and the first producing well was drilled in 1938. Within a few years, annual revenues from petroleum exceeded \$1 million. The kingdom passed the \$1 billion mark in 1970; the \$100 billion mark in 1980.

Life in Saudi Arabia and in the other oil producing sheikdoms in the Persian Gulf was transformed by the effects of the new wealth – spectacular fortunes, rapid economic development, the arrival of foreign labor, international clout – perhaps more radically than life has been transformed anywhere else at any time in human experience.

The oil wealth is changing the face of the land in numerous parts of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf sheikdoms. It has made it possible to enlist modern technology to draw water from great depths or to convert sea water through desalination, and to bring barren lands under cultivation by using it for irrigation.

Reclamation of land for farming is also changing the demographic character of the peninsula. Nomadic tribes are striking roots in permanent settlements wherever availability of water is assured. Most sophisticated techniques are being applied in an attempt to control sand movement and to tame a hostile environment.

The most important animal in Arabia was the camel. The Arabian camel is the single-humped variety, or dromedary, as against the two-humped camel of Central Asia, the Bactrian. The dromedary has flat, broad, thick-soled cloven hoofs that do not sink into the sand, and it can travel long distances in the desert.

The milk of the camel formed an important part of the diet of the desert Arabs, and camel hair was used by them to make their tents. The camel, therefore, was indispensable for survival in the desert.

But amazingly and incredibly, the camel has almost disappeared from Saudi Arabia and all the sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf. William J. Polk writes in his book, *Passing Brave*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, in 1973:

“Shortly before his death in 1960, the great English desert explorer, St. John Philby, prophesied that within thirty years Arabia would have no camels. He was laughed at then but today it seems that his

prophecy may have been overly generous. The camel and its parasite, the nomad, have almost disappeared from Arabia.

Thus the era which began about 3000 years ago with the domestication of the camel, is ending. The camel has played a major role in the rise of civilization.”

Diesel trucks, trains, and jet airplanes have taken the place of camels and camel caravans. Most Arabs now travel by automobile or by air. The camels and the camel caravans have become “obsolete” in Arabia.

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