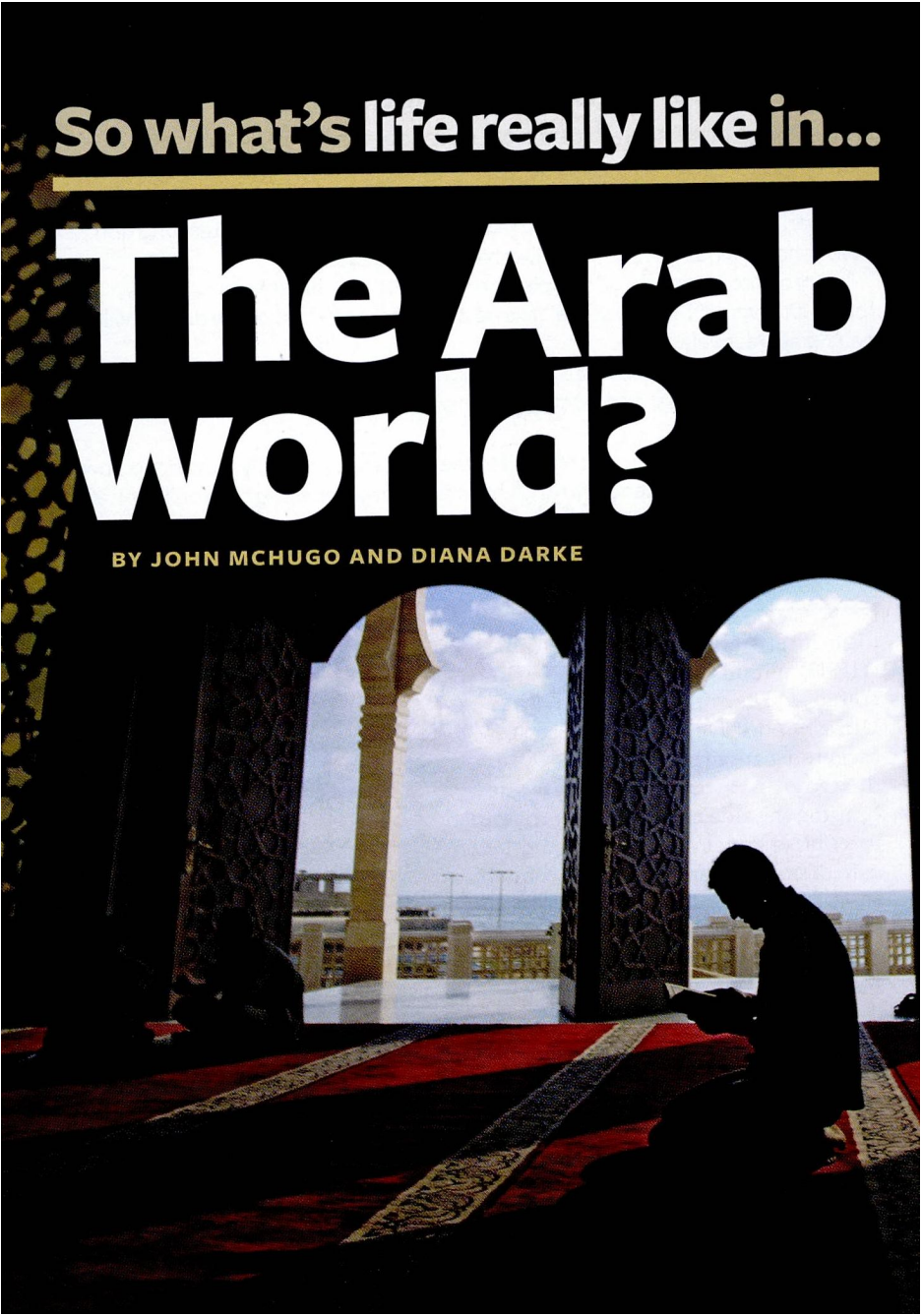


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So what’s life really like in...

The Arab world?

BY JOHN MCHUGO AND DIANA DARKE

Yes, there are wars, extremist groups and human-rights abuses. **But to understand these 22 countries properly, you need to go behind the stereotypes. Here’s how...**



Many nations, but the words remain the same

Despite all the conflict in the region, the 22* Arab countries across the Middle East and North Africa have a close collective identity, thanks largely to the unifying power of language. Spoken dialects may be very different from state to state, but written Arabic is exactly the same no matter where you are because of the influence of that most important Muslim text, the Quran.

Ironically, given some of the nations’ uneasy relationship with Israel, Arabic is a Semitic language like Hebrew, and the alphabets are

very similar – although Arabic is written in joined-up writing.

Arabic is a vast and sophisticated language and learning its grammar and syntax is tricky for foreigners. For instance, Amman, the Jordanian capital, and Oman, the country, sound very different but are spelt in exactly the same way.

The average English-speaking tabloid reader is said to have a working vocabulary of 3000 words, while their Arab equivalents have 10,000, a testimony to the expressiveness of their language. Arabic lends itself comfortably to poetry and persuasive rhetoric: a public speaker, such as a politician

or prayer leader, can sway crowds – many of whom will be illiterate – in a very powerful way. Saddam Hussein and Colonel Gaddafi were particularly adept at this.

Arabs often use colourful proverbs, complete with rhymes and subtle plays on words, as part of everyday speech. More than 4000 have been recorded in one small Levantine village alone. The translations don't do them justice, but here's a brief selection of Middle Eastern favourites:

>> “Destiny caresses the few and molests the many.”

>> “He who takes a donkey up a minaret must bring it down again.”

>> “If you are patient in a moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.”

>> “For the birds that cannot soar, God has provided low branches.”



“WHO HAS SEEN TOMORROW?”

As this popular Arab saying suggests, time is most definitely not money in the Middle East. While that can be very frustrating if you need to get lots done during a short visit, it can also help you relax and unwind.

Patience, “the key to happiness”, is a virtue prized above all others, and you will need to cultivate it in yourself if you're to do business successfully. Conveying impatience will bring an instant loss of respect in a region where personal relationships are



A PROUD PEOPLE

The call of the crowds during the Arab Spring was for *karamah*, “dignity”, and pride and honour are very important to Arabs. But their effects are both positive and negative.

Rates of theft, rape and assault are traditionally lower in Arab societies than in the West, partly because of severe punishments, but also because no-one wants to shame their family.

However, this intense concept of honour can also lead to feuds between clans and nations that last for generations. The civil war in Syria and disorder in Iraq, for example, risk shredding communities with revenge killings for years to come.



“A GUEST IS A GUEST, EVEN IF HE STAYS ALL WINTER AND SUMMER”

Arab hospitality is rightly legendary – and both of us have experienced it. In 1974, John walked the mountains of Syria as a penniless student planning to camp. Instead, every night local villagers insisted he stay with them. One mother even burst into tears at the thought of what his mother must be suffering in his absence.

So strong is the tradition of honouring guests that your host may feel obliged to give you anything of theirs that you've praised. Staying with a Bedouin tribe as a student, Diana said she liked their white baby camel. When a feast was served later, the camel was nowhere to be seen.

Admittedly, this tradition is now under severe strain from war refugees in countries whose resources are already stretched.



SOMEONE'S WATCHING ME

Superstitions are very much part of the culture. The commonest is the “evil eye”, a concept going back to Roman times, where a particular malevolent look is thought to bring misfortune to the person at whom it's directed. People hang ceramic eye talismans in their homes, cars and offices to dispel evil.

It's thought that gazing at something in admiration may accidentally cause harm too. This is why the Evil Eye is often portrayed as blue, because foreigners are more likely to have blue eyes and to have a habit of staring.

Another good luck charm (see left) is the so-called Hand of Fatima – the prophet Muhammad's daughter – often used as a door knocker to protect the house and its occupants. Belief in *jinn* (“genies”) is also common – they are mentioned in the Quran. These invisible spirits can be good or evil.



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; JEFF KUJUM/ALAMY

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CHILDREN WELCOME HERE

Arabs adore kids and one of the first things you'll be asked is how many you have. The more the better, so if you don't have any, be prepared for pitying looks and questions as to why.

Parents often go out late to restaurants with quite small children, who'll be expected to amuse themselves and eat the same as everyone else. Adults, especially mothers, are very physically affectionate to youngsters and the idea of leaving them behind with a babysitter is thought alien and almost barbaric.

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SHEEP'S EYES AND BELCHING

There have been some amusing Western misunderstandings of Arab etiquette. For a start, it's not true that it's polite to show you've enjoyed a meal by burping. The reason for this myth is probably that the Arabic word *shaba't* can sound a bit like a belch. In fact, it means "I have had enough", a courteous way of declining a further helping.

And sheep's eye is not a typical Arab

delicacy. The origin of this belief is said to be a British diplomat invited to dinner by a tribal sheik. The sheik showed him the eye of the sheep he was about to serve so that his guest would know the meat was fresh. Thinking he was being offered a prized treat, the diplomat ate it out of politeness. The courteous sheik didn't want to correct and embarrass the Brit, so he ate the other eye himself.



YOUTH EXPLOSION

The Arab Spring was triggered not just by the

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oppression of despotic regimes, but also by a demographic time bomb.

More than half of the 350 million people in the 22 Arab League countries are under 25, and youth unemployment statistics are extremely high. Under-occupied young people are always good candidates for starting revolutions, and



many young Arabs have had access to education.

They're technologically literate and use YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as means of communication that are (for now) beyond

government censorship.

The challenge for governments who want to maintain the current political order is to give youngsters meaningful roles in innovative, job-creating new areas.

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THE POWER BEHIND THE VEIL

Arab culture and Islam encourage the segregation of the sexes to an extent probably greater than has ever been the case in the West, but that does not mean women are without influence.

In the Middle East, more women than men now graduate from universities and women can drive in all Arab states except Saudi Arabia. In most Arabic-speaking countries, women don't take their husband's surname on marriage but keep their own – and they often control the finances in the home.

John McHugo is an author, lawyer and Arabic linguist who's lived in the Middle East for more than 20 years. His book *A Concise History of the Arabs* is out now. His wife Diana Darke has written guide books on Syria, Jordan, Tunisia, the UAE and Oman.

PRAYING FOR RAIN

As the population and urbanisation both grow, the Arab world is experiencing an accelerating water shortage that could cause future wars. Rivers such as the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates are not inexhaustible and droughts have always afflicted many areas where agriculture is reliant on rainfall.

Technology such as desalination, the discovery of subterranean rivers and the unlocking of fossil water resources may come to the rescue, but it is likely to be a close call.

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