ARAB NET: AN EVOLVING WINDOW ON THE ARABIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT: Arab Net is a website directory dedicated to Arab Nations in the world. It offers a detailed look into Arab culture and business, as well as being a comprehensive resource on Arab nations located primarily in the Middle East and North Africa. An examination of the 22 different countries and their websites within Arab Net reveals the varied number and nature of the sites as they differ from state to state. By analyzing the nature of these states' economies, several groups can be made based on each state's primary economic activities: oil producing/refining/petro-chemicals, agriculture, mining and sea-dependence, and service and tourism. From these four groups, clear distinctions can be made between the number of websites listed as well as the nature of each site. With added September data, comparisons can be made in the number of websites listed, the increase or decrease within countries and also the nature of the growth (general, business, culture, etc.). From the growth in Arab websites, Arab Net can be seen as a success internationally and within its own domain. Arab Net has only just begun, and already contains a substantial amount of information on topics ranging from personal expression to business interaction. As more organizations and people become involved in Arab Net, the sources and websites will only improve, possibly making Arab Net the most comprehensive Internet source on the Arab world.

Arab Net is a website dedicated to Arab nations in the world. Arab Net includes the countries of Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The site is owned by Arab Net Technology (ANT), part of the Saudi Research Marketing Group. ANT is the publisher of the leading newspapers and magazines in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia including Aasharq Al-Awsat.[1]

Arab Net has won various awards from excellence in business web site of the year, to culture choice site by the Web of Culture. It has been recognized as the best regional trade site by Dragon Web. Other awards commend its excellence all around. Arab Net offers a plethora of information in a well-organized and interconnected setting. My paper explores the geographical reach and typical contents of Arab Net in the spring and early fall of 1998.

The 22 countries and their web sites vary both in the number of links and nature of the sites. By analyzing the nature of these states' economies,

several broad groups could be derived.

For example Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia all share a common primary economic structure with high levels of involvement in the service industry. Lebanon has its banking centers, and there is a growing tourist industry in Egypt. Both states are in the process of achieving sustained stabilization of their economies; Lebanon dealing with rebuilding after civil war and Egypt dependent on the perceived level of safety. With each bomb that explodes, their tourist industry faces a depression.

Lebanon and Egypt have the highest number of country links in the April 1998 data. The September data also place Palestine in the top three for country links, despite the fact that the world does not recognize Palestine as a state. Egypt's country links are primarily associated with travel and tourist information. Services and commercial interests dominate the Lebanese links. These high numbers of links make sense, as companies advertise where they have a known or anticipated market for clients. The Internet provides this international market.

Table 1. Arab Net Nations Grouped by Economic Activity

Oil Producing/Refining and Petro-Chemicals	Agriculture	Services & Tourism	Mining & Sea-Dependent
Algeria	Comoros	Egypt	Djibouti
Bahrain	Morocco	Lebanon	Mauritania
Iraq	Palestine	Tunisia	
Jordan	Somalia		
Kuwait	Sudan		
Libya	Syria		
Oman	Yemen		
Qatar			
Saudi Arabia			
United Arab Emirates			

Table 2. Arab Net by Country and Category Coverage, April 1998

COUNTRY	CATEGORY							TOTAL
	General	Business	Culture	Government	Transportation	Geography	Tourism	
Algeria	9	2	3	1	1	4	2	22
Bahrain	7	5	5					17
Comoros								0
Djibouti		1						1
Egypt	7	16	2			6	23	54
Iraq	8							8
Jordan	13	1	2	1			5	22
Kuwait	9	5	3				1	18
Lebanon	5	28	3	1			8	45
Libya	9		3					12
Mauritania	2							2
Morocco	14	6	10	1			2	33
Oman	16	3	2				4	25
Palestine	39	6	8	5			4	62
Qatar	2	2	1	1	1			7
Saudi Arabia	7	4		4			1	16
Somalia	5							5
Sudan	9		1		1			11
Syria	14	1	2	1				18
Tunisia	13	2					2	17
UAE	11	13						24
Yemen	16	4	5				1	26
TOTAL	215	99	50	15	3	10	53	445

The rest of the world is not as connected and dependent on the World Wide Web as are Americans. In other countries those that are connected are primarily scholars, business-persons, and university students, all of whom utilize the resources that sites like Arab Net offer.

Within Arab Net, economies dependent on the sea for sea salt export and mining as primary industries have the fewest country sites. Djibouti with one site and Mauritania with two.

The numbers of links varied dramatically in the agriculturally based economies. Palestine contained the highest links of all the states in the April 1998 data (62) while Comoros has the fewest

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Table 3. Arab Net by Country and Category Coverage, September 1998

COUNTRY	CATEGORY							TOTAL
	General	Business	Culture	Government	Transportation	Geography	Tourism	
Algeria	9	2	3	1	1	4	2	22
Bahrain	4	6	4					14
Comoros	1							1
Djibouti	1							1
Egypt	29	9	8				18	64
Iraq	7		1					8
Jordan	11	1	4	1			5	22
Kuwait	7	6	4				2	19
Lebanon	25	11	6	3			4	49
Libya	6		2				2	10
Mauritania	2							2
Morocco	13	8	10	1			5	37
Oman	14	3	2				5	24
Palestine	35	6	12	5			4	62
Qatar	2	2	1	1	1		2	9
Saudi Arabia	9	7		4		1	3	24
Somalia	4							4
Sudan	9	1	1		1			12
Syria	13	1	2	1			3	20
Tunisia	12	3	1				3	19
UAE	11	12	1				3	27
Yemen	13	3	6	3			3	28
TOTAL	**237**	**81**	**68**	**20**	**3**	**5**	**64**	**478**

sites, zero in April and one general site added in September. The high number of Palestinian sites is due in part to the historical legacy of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. The majority of these web sites are politically motivated personal pages. There are also several organizations presenting the Palestinian opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process. These sites are to inform the general Internet-connected population with facts about the people of Palestine, where they live, and what they want to see happen with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Many of these sites are from around the world; pages of people who wish to remain dedicated to the Palestine of their birth.

Excluding Palestine, the other agricultural economy countries had an average of 19 sites in April 1998 and an increased average of 23 after September 1998 data. These sites are dedicated to general information, daily news, personal pages (university students abroad) and thoughts, and several connected universities.

A distinction must be made between the country links and Arab Net links. While a Saudi company operates Arab Net, individual country links are separate from the Net links. The majority of on site Arab Net companies directly linked to the Net are Saudi companies, found in the Special Features section of the Arab Net homepage, not the national directory. For example, Saudi Arabia has few country links, as the bulk of the Saudi sites can be found on the first page of Arab Net. Individual country links are far fewer than those accessible from the direct Net link. Numbered among the Saudi sites are the top 100 companies in Saudi Arabia in 1996. There is also the Saudi Public Relations Company (SPRC), the chief agent for Arab Net. Most sites contain SPRC sponsorship, which can be found at the

end of each web site. Not all of the sites on Arab Net are as up to date as the top 100 companies of 1996 exhibits. However, the bulk of the information presented is technical in nature and would not change over a short period of time.

The sites on the Net are predominately maintained and provided by various corporations, including SPRC. By clicking on these colored squares one can learn the origins of the Arabic style of cooking, facts on camels, shop for a home or a home away from home, or find what companies to invest in, as well as the best places to bank in the Arab world. These can be accessed under Special Features.

Despite the many commercial sites boasting their many advancements and capabilities, Special Features are incredibly educational on a wide variety of subjects. Hours can be spent examining these sites, learning the A-Z of camels, or Ata Allah, the Bedouin name for the one humped dromedary, meaning God's gift. News is available in Arabic for the Arab Internet surfer, including how to understand the significance of Arabic names, and the ancient art of falconry.

The individual country links vary in quality and quantity of useful information. Take the Algerian server, for example. The site is presented in English for the casual observer, the business firm, tourist, and investor. The site dedicated to the investor asks "You want to invest in Algeria, but you don't know more about it. "With us, you can contact any firm, that you want to make a business with.[2] "

I poke fun at all of the "informations" available, however I am silenced by my inability to translate English into Arabic. There is a program available on Arab Net: Special Features, for computers in which English can be translated into Arabic, at up to 3,000 words per minute.

My criticisms of Arab Net in April 1998 stemmed from the lack of interactive sites in which users can chat or converse in an open forum. Arab Net has since added among other sites, a section titled Arab View. It is described as the Internet Home of Independent Arab opinions. This site is a collection of articles written by leading Arab journalists and editors in the Middle East and North Africa. Here browsers can comment on any article in Arab View, thus creating an interactive website for "outsiders" to

look into the Arabic world.

Also added to the Arab Net homepage is a newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat. A subscription can be ordered online to provide the Arab Net browser with the daily news. More business links have been added including an Internet Service Provider list for the Middle East and North Africa. Arab Net's ISP Directory can be accessed from the homepage that then connects to a list of countries from which one can choose to explore. The Middle East Internet directory offers a listing of companies trading and operating in the Middle East and North Africa. This site provides a brief description of various companies and their activities. Finally, for the professional searching for employment, the Arab Net provides for up to one year for a small fee, the opportunity to post a Curriculum Vitae for potential employers to view.

The growth that Arab Net experienced in the last five months has been within the server itself. The added business links and multidimensional sites on Arab Net highlight its obvious market and clientele. Arab Net has experienced success and growth in the business sector. The use of the website directory by businesses is profitable, and hence it has expanded where independent and personal sites have otherwise decreased or experienced no growth.

While the individual country sites for Arab Net have not grown at the pace one is accustomed to for comparable Web initiatives in the United States, the directory itself expanded to include many valuable links. The visible changes made to Arab Net in five months include a face-lift of the web page link itself. The country pages and their links improved graphics as well as quality of the sites. There was also a definite restructuring of the country category links, moving away from more general links to more specific and detailed sites, including the introduction of the Sheraton Hotel chain to Arab Net. The new hotel links created exceptional growth in the tourism category. The percentage growth of tourism links for some countries is shown to be over 200%, even up to 300% growth in the case of UAE.

Comparing individual country figures, Algeria did not experience any growth while Egypt experienced the greatest change in growth of all nations, adding ten sites. Saudi Arabia, which added eight sites mostly in tourism but including several general sites, raised its total to 24 links. On average,

Table 4. Absolute Change in Country and Category Coverage, April – September 1998

COUNTRY	CATEGORY							TOTAL
	General	Business	Culture	Government	Transportation	Geography	Tourism	
Algeria	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Bahrain	-3	+1	-1					-3
Comoros	+1							+1
Djibouti	+1	-1						0
Egypt	+22**	-7	+6**			-6	-5	+10
Iraq	-1		+1*					0
Jordan	-2	--	+2*	--			--	0
Kuwait	-2	+1	+1				+1	+1
Lebanon	+20**	-17	+3*	+2**			-4	+4
Libya	-3	--	-1				+2**	-2
Mauritania	--							--
Morocco	-1	-2	--	--			+3	0
Oman	-2	--	--				+1	-1
Palestine	-4	--	+4	--			--	0
Qatar	--	--	--	--	--		+2**	+2
Saudi Arabia	+2	+3		--		+1	+2**	+8
Somalia	-1							-1
Sudan	--	+1*	--		--			+1
Syria	-1	--	--	--			+3**	+2
Tunisia	-1	+1	+1*				+1	+2
UAE	--	-1	+1*				+3**	+3
Yemen	-3	-1	+1	+3**			+2**	+2
TOTAL	**+22**	**-22**	**+18**	**+5**	**--**	**-5**	**+11**	**+29**

countries gained or lost one to three sites in their overall totals. As for category growth and decline, these totals also fluctuated minimally, one to two sites on average, with a huge exception in Egypt gaining twenty-two general sites, and declining in business by seven sites.

Perhaps it is not surprising that all areas of Arab Net did not sustain or achieve growth as an international server and browser. Certainly from the limited counter evidence available, businesses and professionals have utilized resources on Arab Net, for it is these areas of Arab Net that have experienced the greatest growth.

Arab Net is still in its beginning stage, changing and expanding trying to meet the demands of its users. There are sites for personal expression, business interaction, personal interaction, and governmental information. With structural additions within the framework of chat rooms and open forums, Arab Net can be expanded to include the essential Arab perspective on current issues.

The network is evidently dedicated to providing a link between Arab and non-Arab states for the purpose of education and awareness, as well as a sense of community across the globe. Arab Net unites Arabs around the world as well as in the Near East and North Africa. The support by local corporations helps to build a stronger network. Without the funding from these sponsors Arab Net would not be as impressive and accessible as it already is. As more organizations and people become involved in Arab Net the sources and sites will diversify and possibly make Arab Net the comprehensive source on the Arabic World.

NOTES

1. http:\\www.arab net/about.html
2. ibid. Algeria, the first server for Algeria (from Algiers)