

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The Second Capital of the Arabs ^[1]

London

It has often been said that London is the expatriate capital of the Arab World. It is the city to which a generation of Arab princes came for their educations, where the Middle East's wealthy come to play and where its dissidents come to plot. Many of the Saudi government's fiercest critics – the sort of people who believe Saudi Arabia to be a dangerously liberal place – run their websites and publish their manifestos from here. It is also the place to which many of the region's best scholars and, especially, journalists have long come seeking freedoms they cannot enjoy at home.

What got me thinking about the ways in which the Arab World has changed in recent years was an article about airplanes in yesterday's Financial Times. Earlier today in Toulouse, France Airbus rolled out its latest plane, the A380. The plane is a monster: 555 seats in the standard configuration (that's about 150 more people than the biggest 747 holds), but theoretically capable of carrying 800 people if you really squeeze them in (waiting for your bags with 800 other people... the mind boggles).

As I write this I'm listening to radio coverage of the plane's roll-out. Much is being made of the fact that Virgin Atlantic plans to purchase six of these behemoths. According to the FT, however, the largest customer for the A380 will be Emirates. The Dubai-based airline plans to buy 43 A380s and lease two more. That will give them almost as many of the planes as the next four customers (Lufthansa, Qantas, Singapore Airlines and Air France) combined. Add in the four A380s that Abu Dhabi-based Etihad has ordered, and the two reserved for Qatar Airways and it's clear we are going to be seeing a lot of these things around the Middle East by, say, mid-2007.

What is extraordinary is the contrast between the Arab World's economic muscle and its lack of political progress. There is an odd disconnect between the FT's reference to Emirates as "one of the world's most important buyers of long-haul aircraft" and the controversy that attends the very idea of political reform in the world's least democratic region.

Things are beginning to change in many parts of the Middle East. But spend a few days here in Britain, and it's difficult to miss the gulf that increasingly separates the Arab World's business culture from its political realities.

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