

"Imperial empires" and "democratic empires": Arabic and the "minorities", yesterday and today.

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The paper provides a sketch of the linguistic history of what is nowadays called "the Arab world" since the Islam and the spread of Arabic. It is argued that language contact in the Islamic empire followed a traditional pattern, whereby bilingualism with the dominant language (Arabic) led to language attrition, decay and possibly, ultimately, language death of the minority language over a long period of time. The contemporary persistence of minorities in North Africa (Berber), the Middle East (Aramaic), and the very Arabian peninsula (South Arabian) witnesses to a radically different language-contact pattern than is found in the modern Arab world. The latter, composed of nation-states modeled along the European pattern, exhibits a very aggressive language policy, coupled with nationalism, state control over media and education, etc. The consequences are the rapid demise and possibly impending death of, e.g., the South Arabian languages and many languages of the northern and central parts of the Sudan.