

Arab Culture in the Eyes of the West

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The failure of the United States to impose order in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the European attempts at dialogue with Iran on termination of its nuclear project exposed the limited understanding on the part of the West of “the other side of the Middle East tracks” and the wide gaps between them. Substantial disagreement between foreign policymakers in the US and Israel regarding the objectives of Arab leaders, and diverging interpretations¹ by various intelligence agencies in the US and Israel with respect to the intentions of the Arab adversary give the impression that the knowledge of the people making these evaluations is too narrow to provide them with the proper tools necessary for well-based and reliable assessments.

In its dealings with the Arab world, the West appears unable to summon the same capabilities that it demonstrated formerly in dealing with the Communist bloc countries and currently shows in dealing with the Far East. As a result, both Western leaders and their intelligence services at times conduct a policy based on a faulty concept of the adversary's intentions and a lack of familiarity with its cultural and conceptual environment.

One of the well-known phenomena in this context is excessive use of a “mirror image” – viewing the opponent as if it were an exact reflection, in other words, analyzing the drives and intentions of the Islamic adversary according to what is familiar to the analyst, namely, what is known and logical within the Western culture that the analyst represents. In this fashion, the opponent is evaluated according to the analyst's subjective feeling, without regard to its (the opponent's) innate culture and philosophy. If the analyst is exhausted, then the other side must also be tired; if he is interested in the quality of life, then the other side must be interested in it as well. If the analyst or policymaker desires a peace agreement, the other side must surely share this desire. This imaginary symmetry is a function of a limited acquaintance with the opposing side.

The aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq illustrates the gap between the Western view and the reality on the ground. According to American thinking, at least Saddam Hussein's opponents should have regarded his fall as a positive development to be credited to the United States. The reality is that resistance to the US and the moderate Arab regimes identified with its Middle Eastern policy is increasing daily, even among Saddam's former critics. What has caused all this? Is it possible that the decision making process in Washington was based on liberal Western values, without a thorough evaluation of the conservative local culture in Iraq?

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The factors that make it difficult to understand “the Muslim side” are many, but it appears that the most important of them result from a limited acquaintance with all levels of Arab culture. The “ordinary” difficulties² facing a decision maker or intelligence analyst³ in predicting the future acts of a decision maker on the other side coming from a different culture and tradition are augmented by the geographical and cultural isolation of the Islamic fundamentalist world.

This article presents several cultural features of the Arab-Islamic world in order to emphasize the risks and obstacles that confront those who would interpret the Islamic opponent exclusively through Western spectacles. This is true even though as in any other society, Arab society features principles and characteristics shared by other societies and those that are unique to its own sector. Moreover, the dividing line within the characteristics lies in the quantitative ratio between them: a public characteristic becomes a cultural trademark when it is shared by most of the people in that culture. The characteristics presented in this article are true for most of the public in Islamic countries, despite the obvious existence of exceptions.

One final qualification: both the disregard for political correctness and the generalizations used in this article are designed to emphasize the full power of cultural attributes, notwithstanding that this type of approach imposes some analytical limitations.

The Power of Language

More than in other societies, people in the Arab society express themselves in words. Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami, who has researched the renewal of Arab society, found that Arabic was a key factor in the Arab national philosophy. In some cases, the language itself, and by itself, has limited cultural progress and renewal.

By its nature, Arabic is not merely a means of expression; its perceptible power lies in its powerful rhetoric and demagogic use. Verbal and semantic ability marks and influences all levels of society, from the simplest uneducated people to Arab leaders. An Arab politician is not judged by the value of what he says,

but by his command of the Arabic rhetoric passed on from generation to generation as a tool for arousing the masses and inciting them against the adversary. Ajami writes, “Contemporary discourse suffered from the burden of the past – was stultified by the spirit of a Thousand and One Nights, according to several harsh critics – because the historical experiences that had transformed other languages had not taken place in the Arab world.”⁴

“Terrorism first arose in the Arab world from the religious discourse, as a result of the extremism to which this discourse leads,” claims Saudi Arabian scholar Khaled al-Duchil.⁵ Kuwaiti liberal Ahmad al-Badadi backs up al-Duchil’s argument, and

puts the blame on religious leaders for their speeches and appearances in the Arab media that “distort Islam; they are therefore responsible for the troubles afflicting the Islamic world today.”⁶ The nationalism and the wave of Islamic fundamentalism that have swept the Arab nations in recent decades have also saddled the holiness of the language with the task of realizing their ideas. Their very use in speech about political goals with a religious coloring has made the language assume excessive importance, even if its content smacks of irrationality in heralding objectives such as destruction of the West or the recreation of the Islamic caliphate.

Sanctification of the language

has eliminated any significant desire on the part of the Arabs⁷ to interact with the West, because Arab Islamic society is unwilling to undergo a process of rebellion against its national history, tradition, and values – which are challenged, if not undermined, by liberal and free Western societies. Only a profound recognition of the dedication to “the purity of Arabic” makes it possible to understand a philosophy that regards processes of global modernization as merely cosmetic changes, while the older truth and values introduced with the rise of Islam in the Arabian peninsula remain firm and binding.

The Outlook of Arab Society

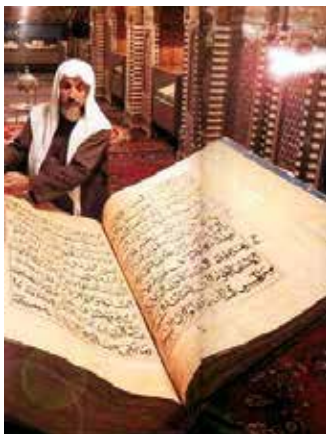
Albert Hourani describes three concentric circles that depict the basic affinities of the Arab.⁸ The first involves his existence as an individual believer, as a Muslim Arab. The second circle concerns the nuclear family unit, which encompasses him as part of the extended clan (the *hamula*). The third relates to regional loyalty to a tribe, village, neighborhood, and town. Yet in addition to the basic circles, Hourani asserts that Muslims ideologically belong to something much more extensive, grand, and utopian: the “Islamic nation,” or *umma* – a community of believers distinguished from the faithful of other religions. According to this concept, the difference in religious affiliation is not merely one of modes of worship and ritual; rather, it primarily stems from a feel-

ing of personal pride. Although this feeling originated in the pre-Islamic period in Hejaz, the emergence of the community of Islamic believers greatly reinforced it.

This philosophy comes to the fore when the Arab-Islamic world feels that it faces a clash that extends beyond military and political aspects to cultural and scientific questions. Although the Islamic world has experienced a number of changes in science (mostly in the last generation), these changes, despite their superficial nature, are regarded as a challenge to the solidity of Arab society. They therefore depend on their assimilation and reclassification as a local custom. Iraqi social scientist Ali al-Vardi, who wrote about problems in Arab society, states, “Arabs suffer from a conflict between Bedouin values passed on from generation to generation and cultural values acquired by Arab society.” Abed al-Halek Hussein continues al-Vardi’s argument, saying, “Arabs suffer from multiple personality schizophrenia. This is not limited to specific sectors of Arab society; it

includes governments, institutions of civil society, and political parties, especially Islamic political parties.”⁹ Tunisian author and scholar Akbal al-Arbi presents a gloomier picture, indicating that as a nation, Muslims still adhere to the principles of the Bedouin tribes as they existed in the pre-Islamic era, which were religiously validated by the rise of Islam: “We still insist that we are always the victims, and that we are always blameless. Our history is angelic, our imperialism consists of blessed conquests (*fotuh*), our invaders (*ghuzza*) are liberators, our violence is holy jihad, our murderers are *shahids*, and our faulty understanding of the Quran and daily violations of the rights of women, children, and minorities are tolerant religious law (*shariya*). . . . There is no doubt that aggression, invasions, and acts of wild destruction are engraved in human history. What distinguishes us (the Muslims) today is the degree of our awareness of history . . . and the degree to which we justify the values of the past in the name of Islam.”¹⁰

This cultural conflict causes members of the liberal professions, such as journalists and jurists, to undergo a process of “Middle Eastern adjustment,” so that their opinions will suit the rules of society.¹¹ Scientists, on the other hand, constantly struggle against criticism by religious sages, who regard science as *bidaa*, a human invention aimed at undermining belief in the existence of God.¹² Indeed, this ambivalent



attitude towards scientific development has led many people to avoid pursuing scientific disciplines¹³ even if they studied science at school. It has also strengthened the fundamentalist viewpoint, which regards science solely as a tool for developing weapons.

The Nature of Arab Leadership

The nature of Arab leadership constitutes the third important characteristic of Arab society. The existing mode of leadership in the Arab world is patrimonial and stresses the actions of the leader himself. Over the course of time, Islam developed patrimonial patterns that are expressed through an emphasis on religious ideals of surrender and acceptance of burdens at both the national and transnational level. At the heart of these ideals is the value of the leader's pride and preservation of his honor; frequently, his pride is the main political priority. Politics is informal, and is conducted without political institutions or participation. The leader maintains a personal government with the help of the military power at his disposal, and for his needs.¹⁴ Critical importance is attached to strategic connections on a personal level. To this is added the fact that most of the population, which is subordinated to the leader's authority, is often of no real importance. Without any political institutions or active participation by the people's representatives, most of the population

has no actual ability to influence the decision-making processes. Bahrain journalist Omran Salman endorses this claim, asserting that the struggle against America and the West is a direct result of the hatred that exists only among the Islamic and national leadership. In Salman's opinion, average citizens are no more than "blindfolded hostages held by this alliance (the Islamic and national leaderships)."¹⁵ As a result, the state or organization becomes a formal framework in which the leader's behavior is affected more by a feeling of the personal threat to him than by the threat to his people or members of his organization.

In general, both domestic policy and foreign policy in most Arab countries are a direct continuation of the same philosophy that regards pride as an absolute value. Local leaders, whether they head a country or a transnational organization (such as the various terrorist organizations), interpret its future intentions in terms of Islamic values. That does not necessarily mean that their real intentions are of a religious nature. In their statements to their constituencies, however, leaders will use words that reflect national pride and loyalty to the greater Islamic public. In addition to religious expressions in their address to the Islamic public, leaders base the legitimacy of their leadership on their personalities, prestige, and influence, all reflected in the rhetorical expressions that they use.

In most Arab and Islamic coun-

tries, politics itself is limited to a chosen group of people among the controlling or religious elite. This is part of a longstanding Islamic tradition that regards dominance by the leader as a desirable religious phenomenon. Mecca and Medina admired, desired to adhere to, and were bound to the Prophet Muhammad; similarly, the modern leader is considered the bearer of his legacy, and therefore worthy of occupying the political center stage, surrounded by advisers, cronies, and citizens competing among themselves for proximity to power and influence.¹⁶

Arab pride has made Islamic society an extroverted society that revolves around three values: honor, shame, and revenge. Honor is the most important value, sometimes more so than life itself. Damage to honor causes shame, which can be erased only through revenge. This process begins at the personal level, and moves into the communal-national sphere.

Guiding Arab Principles

The combination of these three key features – language, society, and leadership – complemented by the values inherent in Arab pride, inherently divides Western culture from Arab culture. In order to scale this dividing wall, a Western decision maker must understand and internalize that the Arab outer layer, the facade of the Islamic opponent, is not the main reality. In order to reach the other side of the wall, he must understand the significance

of the language and its expressions, and learn to identify the circles of loyalty and the leader's status among his constituents.

In understanding the Arab dimension, i.e., its culture and characteristics, and by freeing oneself of Western projections, it is possible to identify the following operative elements in Arab culture when it surfaces in confrontation with the West:

- **The concept and significance of time.** As part of the general concept of Islamic pride, institutionalized compromise between enemies cannot exist, only an arrangement of convenience and acceptance "until anger passes." Time does not press or restrict in matters of war and peace. The desire to achieve the goals defined by the leadership in the guise of religion is stronger than the restrictions of life and time. An Arab proverb says, "If not I, then my son, and if not my son, then, my grandson." In other words, the goal will be achieved, because the person who set it is walking in the path of God.

- **Conducting political dialogue.** On the one hand, conducting dialogue is designed to achieve political goals that cannot be achieved through military means (e.g., the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt), or in order to gain enough time to store up the military power necessary to fully achieve the political goals (the second intifada). On the other hand, foot-dragging and demagogic attacks by Arab leaders

are not necessarily a declaration of a future war. The government usually uses demagoguery against Israel and the West as a fig leaf in order to prevent a serious and concrete discussion of the weakness of Islamic societies in the face of the challenges presented by the modern world. Such a discussion would deal with the unstable state of the people and the totalitarian character of the Arab regimes.

- **Honoring agreements.** This element is linked to the concept of time and compromise between Arabs and the West. As a rule, a political agreement is worth implementing only in times of military or political distress. An agreement in any other circumstances would damage the general Islamic circle of reciprocity, and would certainly demonstrate weakness in a world of words and external facades. The agreement itself is worthy of being violated as soon as the distress that caused it to be signed is gone. This follows in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad, who signed a ten-year agreement (the Hudabiy-yah agreement) with the inhabitants of Mecca. He broke it after only two



years, after he had accumulated enough military strength to continue his political policy. It should be noted that political convenience and a substantial interest on the part of an Arab leader (preserving his regime) are the only parameters that can sustain agreements and reduce the potential for their violation. Since most Arab countries have patrimonial totalitarian governments, the interests of the leader usually determine policy, even if the desires of the people and the religious sages differ. Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are prime examples; despite significant internal opposition to them, the agreements continue to exist as an interest of the rulers.

- **Preservation of absolute justice.** Religious justice constitutes a guideline in determining political policy. The leader and values outline what is permitted and what is forbidden, what is good and what is evil. In times of conflict, enemies will therefore be portrayed as evil, and will always be regarded as collectively guilty. This philosophy can be summarized in the saying, "*Darabni v'baka; sabakni v'eshtaka*" – "He beat me and wept (after I responded), and he preempted me by complaining (because I hit him back in response to his deeds)." The Arab-Islamic side will always consider itself the victim, the deprived, and the unfortunate one, while the world is painted in black and white – even if the violence resulted from an Islamic motive.

Conclusion

Sometimes the national will, the longing for peace, or the desire for revenge overcomes recognition of reality. The adversary's intentions are never completely clear; there is always room to cultivate a personal interpretation. Those who practice political commentary or intelligence assessments must be familiar with the whole of Arab culture. Without such knowledge, they are liable to make important decisions on the basis of ignorance. It must not be assumed that the philosophy of the Western world – what the Arabs regard as “patronizing progress” – also determines the mode of thought in other cultures. What is logical in one culture is folly in another.

Those engaged in interpreting and analyzing the Arab world should look back ninety years to the comprehensive wisdom of T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), and learn to engage with Arab culture while recognizing the abilities, limitations, and intentions of its leaders.

Notes

1. See, for example, the differences in approach between the IDF intelligence branch and the Mossad regarding the attitude of the Syrian president towards peace in December 2006-January 2007.
2. Y. Harkabi, “Difficulties in the Study of Foreign Peoples,” in *Getting to Know Nearby Peoples* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute, 1985).
3. See in this context the influence of the American intelligence agencies on the invasion of Iraq, following the misunderstanding of their enemy's intentions; P. R. Pillar, “Intelligence, Policy, and the War in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006).
4. Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 28.
5. *Al-Atehad*, United Arab Emirates, November 15, 2005. The article was also published on a Kuwait website devoted to democracy and human rights: <http://www.kwtanweer.com/articles/readarticle.php?articleID=576>, December 5, 2005.
6. <http://www.alseyassah.com/alseyassah/opinion/view.asp?msgID=1097>, March 20, 2006.
7. And also on the part of the Islamic ideologues, since the Quran is written in Arabic. This issue also has a great effect on the substance and character of non-Arab Islamic societies.
8. Albert Hourani, “A History of the Arab Peoples” (Tel Aviv, Dvir Publishing House, 1991), p. 91.
9. <http://www.elaph.com/ElaphWeb/ElaphWriter/2006/5/148429.htm> May 14, 2006.
10. http://www.mettransparent.com/texts/ikbal_algharbi_arabs_muslims_in_age_of_forgiveness.htm, October 17, 2005.
11. Dan Scheuftan, “The Overall Perspective: Changes in the International and Regional System” (based on his lecture at a seminar conducted by the Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University on May 2, 2002), p. 6.
12. This intensifies the feeling of victimization and conspiracy theories (since modern science has long been considered a strategy by unbelievers aimed at damaging and subverting the status of Islam).
13. Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East and the West* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
14. David Bukai, “The Arab State, Inter-Arab Relations, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1937-1985 – The Politics of the Balance of Power (PhD thesis), Haifa University, 1993), p. 130.
15. http://www.mettransparent.com/texts/omran_salman_who_are_us_haters_and_why.htm, October 25, 2005.
16. Bukai, p. 131.