Beliefs and Values, Emotion and Logic in the Arab World

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Beliefs and Values

When we set ourselves the task of coming to a better understanding 1
of groups of people and their culture, it is useful to begin by identifying their most basic beliefs and values. It is these beliefs and values which determine their outlook on life and govern their social behavior.

Westerners tend to believe, for instance, that the individual is 2
the focal point of social existence, that laws apply equally to everyone, that people have a right to certain kinds of privacy, and that the environment can be controlled by humans through technological means. These beliefs have a strong influence on what Westerners think about the world around them and how they behave toward each other.

Arabs characteristically believe that many if not most things in 3
life are controlled, ultimately, by fate rather than by humans, that everyone loves children, that wisdom increases with age, and that the inherent personalities of men and women are vastly different. As with Westerners, these beliefs play a powerful role in determining the nature of Arab culture.

One might wonder whether there is in fact such a thing as 4
"Arab culture," given the diversity and geographic disparateness of the Arab World. Looking at a map, one realizes how much is encompassed by the phrase "the Arab World." The twenty Arab countries cover considerable territory, much of which is desert or wilderness. Sudan is larger than all of Western Europe, yet its population is less than that of France; Saudi Arabia is larger than Texas and Alaska combined, yet has fewer people than New York City. Egypt, with forty-two million people, is 95% desert. One writer has stated: "A true map of the Arab World would show it as an archipelago: a scattering of fertile islands through a void of sand and sea. The Arabic word for desert is 'sahara' and it both divides and joins."[1] The political diversity among the Arab countries is notable; governmental systems include monarchies, military governments, and socialist republics.

But despite these differences, the Arabs are more homogeneous 5
than Westerners in their outlook on life. All Arabs share basic beliefs and values which cross national or social class boundaries. Social attitudes have remained relatively constant because Arab society is conservative and demands conformity from its members. Their beliefs are influenced by Islam even if they are not Moslems, child-rearing practices are nearly identical, and the family structure is essentially the same. Arabs are not as mobile as people in the West, and they have a high regard for tradition.

Initially foreigners may feel that Arabs are difficult to under- 6
stand, that their behavior patterns are not logical. In fact their behavior is quite comprehensible, even predictable. For the most part it conforms to certain patterns which make Arabs consistent in their reactions to other people.

It is important for the foreigner to be able to identify these cultural pat- 7
terns and to distinguish them from individual traits. By becoming aware of patterns, one can achieve a better understanding of what to expect and thereby cope more easily. The following lists of Arab values, religious attitudes and self-perceptions are central to the fundamental patterns of Arab culture. . . .

Basic Arab Values

- A person's dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance and no effort should be spared to protect them, especially one's honor.
- It is important to behave at all times in a way which will create a good impression on others.
- Loyalty to one's family takes precedence over personal needs.
- Social class and family background are the major determining factors of personal status, followed by individual character and achievement.

Basic Arab Religious Attitudes

- Everyone believes in God, acknowledges His power and has a religious affiliation.

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- Humans cannot control all events; some things depend on God (i.e., "fate").
- Piety is one of the most admirable characteristics in a person.
- There should be no separation between "church and state"; religion should be taught in schools and promoted by governments.
- Religious tenets should not be subjected to "liberal" interpretations or modifications which can threaten established beliefs and practices.

Basic Arab Self-perceptions

- Arabs are generous, humanitarian, polite, and loyal. Several studies have demonstrated that Arabs see these traits as characteristic of themselves and as distinguishing them from other groups.[2]
- Arabs have a rich cultural heritage. This is illustrated by their contributions to religion, philosophy, literature, medicine, architecture, art, mathematics, and the natural sciences.[3]
- Although there are many differences among Arab countries, the Arabs are a clearly defined cultural group, members of the "Arab nation" (al-umma al-'arabiyya).
- The Arab peoples have been victimized and exploited by the West. For them, the experience of the Palestinians represents the most painful and obvious example.
- Indiscriminate imitation of Western culture, by weakening traditional family ties and social and religious values, will have a corrupting influence on Arab society.
- Arabs are misunderstood and wrongly characterized by most Westerners.

Arabs feel that they are often portrayed in the Western media as 8
excessively wealthy, irrational, sensuous, and violent, and there is little counterbalancing information about ordinary people who live family- and work-centered lives on a modest scale. One observer has remarked, "The Arabs remain one of the few ethnic groups who can still be slandered with impunity in America."[4] Another has stated, "In general, the image of the Arabs in British popular culture seems to be characterized by prejudice, hostility, and resentment. The mass media in Britain have failed to provide an adequate representation of points of view for the consumer to judge a real world of the Arabs."[5]

Emotion and Logic

How people deal with emotion or what value they place on objective 9
vs. subjective behavior is culturally conditioned. *While objectivity is given considerable emphasis in Western culture, the opposite is true in Arab culture.*

Objectivity and Subjectivity

Westerners are taught that objectivity, the examination of facts 10
in a logical way without the intrusion of emotional bias, is the mature and constructive approach to human affairs. One of the results of this belief is that in Western culture, subjectivity, a willingness to allow personal feelings and emotions to influence one's view of events, represents immaturity. Arabs believe differently. They place a higher value on the display of emotion, sometimes to the embarrassment or discomfort of foreigners. It is not uncommon to hear Westerners label this behavior as "immature," imposing their own values on what they have observed.

A British office manager in Saudi Arabia once described to me 11
his problems with a Palestinian employee. "He is too sensitive, too emotional about everything," he said. "The first thing he should do is *grow up.*" While Westerners label Arabs as "too emotional," Arabs find Westerners "cold" and inscrutable.

Arabs consciously reserve the right to look at the world in a subjective 12
way, particularly if a more objective assessment of a situation would bring to mind a too-painful truth. There is nothing to gain, for example, by pointing out Israel's brilliant achievements in land reclamation or in comparing the quality of Arab-made consumer items with imported ones. Such comments will generally not lead to a substantive discussion of how Arabs could benefit by imitating others; more likely, Arab listeners will become angry and defensive, insisting that the situation is not as you describe it and bringing up issues such as Israeli occupation of Arab lands or the moral deterioration of technological societies.

Fatalism

Fatalism, or a belief that people are helpless to control events, is 13
part of traditional Arab culture. It has been much over-emphasized by Westerners, however, and is far more prevalent among traditional, uneducated Arabs than it is among the educated elite today. It nevertheless still needs to be considered, since it will usually be encountered in one form or another by the Western visitor.

For Arabs, fatalism is based on the religious belief that God has direct and ultimate control of all that happens. If something goes wrong, a person can absolve himself of blame or justify doing nothing to make improvements or changes by assigning the cause to God's will. Indeed, too much self-confidence about controlling events is considered a sign of arrogance tinged with blasphemy. The legacy of fatalism in Arab thought is most apparent in the oft heard and more or less ritual phrase "Inshallah" (if God wills). 14

Western thought has essentially rejected fatalism. Though God is believed by many Westerners to intervene in human affairs, Greek logic, the humanism of the Enlightenment and cause-and-effect empiricism have inclined the West to view humans as having the ability to control their environment and destinies. 15

What Is Reality?

Reality is what you perceive—if you believe something exists, it is real to you. If you select or rearrange facts, and repeat these to yourself often enough, they eventually become reality. 16

The cultural difference between Westerners and Arabs arises not from the fact that this selection takes place, but from how each makes the selection. *Arabs are more likely to allow subjective perceptions to direct their actions.* This is a common source of frustration for Westerners, who often fail to understand why people in the Middle East act as they do. 17

If an Arab feels that something threatens his personal dignity, he may be obliged to deny it, even in the face of facts to the contrary. A Westerner can point out flaws in his argument, but that is not the point. If he does not want to accept the facts, he will reject them and proceed according to his own view of the situation. An Arab will rarely admit to an error openly if it will cause him to lose face. *To Arabs, honor is more important than facts.* 18

An American woman in Tunis realized, when she was packing to leave, that some of her clothes and a suitcase were missing. She confronted the maid, who insisted that she had no idea where they could be. When the American found some of her clothes under a mattress, she called the company's Tunisian security officer. They went to the maid's house and found more missing items. The maid was adamant that she could not account for the items being in her home. The security officer said that he felt the matter should not be reported to the police—the maid's humiliation in front of her neighbors was sufficient punishment. 19

In 1974 an Israeli entered a small Arab-owned cafe in Jerusalem and asked for some watermelon, pointing at it and using the Hebrew word. The Arab proprietor responded that it should be called by the Arabic name, but the Israeli insisted on the Hebrew name. The Arab took offense at this point. He paused, shrugged, and instead of serving his customer, said, "There isn't any!" 20

At a conference held to discuss Arab and American cultures, Dr. Laura Nader related this incident: 21

> The mistake people in one culture often make in dealing with another culture is to transfer their functions to the other culture's functions. A political scientist, for example, went to the Middle East to do some research one summer and to analyze Egyptian newspapers. When he came back, he said to me, "But they are all just full of emotions. There is no data in these newspapers." I said, "What makes you think there should be?"[6]

Another way of influencing the perception of reality is by the choice of descriptive words and names. The Arabs are very careful in naming or referring to places, people, and events; slogans and labels are popular and provide an insight into how things are viewed. The Arabs realize that *names have a powerful effect on perception.* 22

There is a big psychological gap between opposing labels like "Palestine/Israel," "The West Bank/Judea and Samaria," and "freedom fighters ('hero martyrs' if they are killed)/terrorists." The 1967 Arab-Israeli War is called "The War of the Setback" in Arabic—in other words, it was *not* a "defeat." The 1973 War is called "The War of Ramadan" or "The Sixth of October War," *not* "The Yom Kippur War." 23

Be conscious of names and labels—they matter a great deal to the Arabs. If you attend carefully to what you hear in conversations with Arabs and what is written in their newspapers, you will note how precisely they select descriptive words and phrases. You may find yourself being corrected by Arab acquaintances, and you will soon learn which terms are acceptable and which are not. 24

The Human Dimension

Arabs look at life in a personalized way. They are concerned about people and feelings and place emphasis on "human factors" when they make decisions or analyze events. They feel that Westerners are too prone to look at events in an abstract or theoretical way, and that most Westerners lack sensitivity toward people. 25

In the Arab World, a manager or official is always willing to reconsider a decision, regulation, or problem in view of someone's personal situation. Any regulation can be modified or avoided by someone with enough persuasive influence, particularly if the request 26

is justified on the grounds of unusual personal need. This is unlike most Western societies, which emphasize the equal application of laws to all citizens. *In the Arab culture, people are more important than rules.*

T. E. Lawrence stated it succinctly: "Arabs believe in persons, 27
not in institutions."[7] They have a long tradition of personal appeal to authorities for exceptions to rules. This is commonly seen when they attempt to obtain special permits, exemptions from fees, acceptance into a school when preconditions are not met, or employment when qualifications are inadequate. They do not accept predetermined standards if these standards are a personal inconvenience.

Arabs place great value on personal interviews and on giving 28
people the opportunity to state their case. They are not comfortable filling out forms or dealing with an organization impersonally. They want to know the name of the top person who makes the final decision and are always confident that the rejection of a request may be reversed if top-level personal contact can be made. Frequently, that is exactly what happens.

Persuasion

Arabs and Westerners place a different value on certain types of 29
statements, which may lead to decreased effectiveness on both sides when they negotiate with each other. Arabs respond much more readily to personalized arguments than to attempts to impose "logical" conclusions. When you are trying to make a persuasive case in your discussions with Arabs, you will find it helpful to supplement your arguments with personal comments. You can refer to your mutual friendship, or emphasize the effect which approval or disapproval of the action will have on other people.

In the Middle East negotiation and persuasion have been devel- 30
oped into a fine art. Participants in negotiations enjoy long, spirited discussions and are usually not in any hurry to conclude them. Speakers feel free to add to their points of argument by demonstrating their verbal cleverness, using their personal charm, applying personal pressure, and engaging in personal appeals for consideration of their point of view.

The display of emotion also plays its part; indeed, one of the 31
most commonly misunderstood aspects of Arab communication involves their "display" of anger. Arabs are not usually as angry as they appear to Westerners. Raising the voice, repeating points, even pounding the table for emphasis may sound angry but, in the speaker's mind, indicate sincerity. A Westerner overhearing such a conversation (especially if it is in Arabic) may wrongly conclude that

an argument is taking place. *Emotion connotes deep and sincere concern for the outcome of the discussion.*

Foreigners often miss the emotional dimension in their cross- 32
cultural transactions with Arabs. A British businessman once found that he and his wife were denied reservations on an airplane because the Arab ticketing official took offense at the manner in which he was addressed. The fact that seats were available was *not* an effective counter-argument. But when the Arab official noticed that the businessman's wife had begun to cry, he gave way and provided them with seats.

Arabs usually include human elements in their arguments. In ar- 33
guing the Palestine issue, for instance, they have always placed emphasis on the suffering of individuals rather than on points of law or a recital of historical events.

Notes

1. Stewart, Desmond, *The Arab World*, pp. 9–10.
2. Dr. Levon H. Melikian (see bibliography) has studied the modal personality of some Arab students, searching for traits to define "national character."

   The author administered a word-association test to a group of Lebanese university students in 1972. The most common responses associated with the word "Arabs" were "generous," "brave," "honorable," and "loyal." About half of the forty-three respondents added the word "misunderstood."
3. This subject is very thoroughly discussed by Abdel-Rahim Omran in his book, *Population in the Arab World*, in the chapter, "The Contribution of the Arabs to World Culture and Science," pp. 13–41.
4. Slade, Shelley, "The Image of the Arab in America: Analysis of a Poll of American Attitudes," *Middle East Journal*, p. 143. Many of the stereotypes about the Middle East which are taught in schools or depicted in American media are discussed in *The Middle East, The Image and Reality*, edited by Jonathan Friedlander (see bibliography).
5. Nasir, Sari J., *The Arabs and the English*, p. 171.
6. Atiyeh, George N., ed., *Arab and American Cultures*, p. 179.
7. Lawrence, T. E. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, p. 24.

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