



How to Negotiate in the MIDDLE EAST

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IT IS NOW COMMON during civil-military and combat operations for Soldiers of all ranks to become involved in negotiations, dispute resolutions, or bargaining for individual or collective advantages. This is particularly true during sudden, unexpected confrontations.

The values of people from other organizations and nationalities directly affect their understanding of any given situation. The success of military operations calls for Soldiers and leaders to be culturally aware when negotiating with persons from other cultures.

We Americans have an ethnocentric belief in our superiority, an attitude that may be helpful in winning wars on the field of battle, but can often work against us in sustaining the peace. As a Middle East cultural advisor and specialist during 12 Mission Readiness Exercises at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Polk, Louisiana, I have observed the U.S. military training for negotiations with local Iraqi leaders and seen firsthand a negative trend in the cultural preparation of our leaders and Soldiers. Simply put, we don't seem to take culture training very seriously. A brigade combat team at JRTC even cancelled its scheduled culture training (a decision it came to regret later in Iraq). We need to do better. Figure 1, adapted from Frank L. Acuff, a respected lecturer on negotiation, suggests just how much better.¹

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PHOTO: CPT Colin Fleming, HHC, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division, discusses business with a local sheik near Al Batha, Iraq, 23 January 2007. (DOD)

Competency	Grade
Preparation	B-
Synergistic approach (win-win)	D
Cultural I.Q.	D
Adapting the negotiating process to the host country environment	D
Patience	D
Listening	D
Linguistic abilities	F
Using language that is simple and accessible	C
High aspirations	B+
Personal integrity	A
Building solid relationships	D

Figure 1. U.S. negotiators' global report card.

Some Negotiating Basics

The term “negotiation” presupposes both common interests and conflict between the two or more sides entering the negotiation process. Parties agree to negotiate when they cannot resolve issues unilaterally. Negotiation implies a willingness to accept a compromise between one’s maximum goal and the absolute minimum that one can countenance. A negotiation is cross-cultural when the parties to it belong to different cultures and do not share the same ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving.²

Today in Iraq, Afghanistan, and anywhere else U.S. forces are deployed, military leaders from squad leader to flag officer may have to conduct negotiations with other parties to find and strike a balance between realizing short-term gains and cultivating long-term relationships that might facilitate future interaction.³ Our leaders need to understand the dynamics of negotiation and be good at negotiating. Successful negotiations save lives, enhance the ability to achieve campaign goals, and facilitate transition to a secure environment.

Conducting negotiations is a three-phase process: pre-negotiation, the negotiation, and post-negotiation. The pre-negotiation phase is often the most critical. Each party identifies its strengths, assesses its interests, and works to understand the negotiation’s wider context. This is the phase in which it is important for a military leader to understand the cultural context in which his counterpart operates. To be effective, negotiators should base their strategy and tactics on the situation and the people involved.⁴

Jeswald Salacuse outlines “ten factors in the negotiation process that seem to be influenced by a person’s culture.”⁵ According to Salacuse, culturally different responses in a negotiation tend to fall within an identifiable range. Figure 2 depicts Salacuse’s ten factors and their associated ranges of possible responses.⁶ A discussion of each follows, with comments where relevant to negotiations with Middle Easterners.

Goals. Goals reflect the purpose or intent of the parties to a negotiation. In business, American negotiators typically regard the signing of a contract between the differing parties as their primary goal. They consider the contract a binding agreement that outlines the roles, rights, and obligations of

Negotiation Factors	Range of Cultural Responses
Goal	Contract ↔ Relationship
Attitude	Win/Lose ↔ Win/Win
Personal Styles	Informal ↔ Formal
Communications	Direct ↔ Indirect
Time Sensitivity	High ↔ Low
Emotionalism	High ↔ Low
Agreement Form	Specific ↔ General
Agreement Building	Bottom Up ↔ Top Down
Team Organization	One Leader ↔ Consensus
Risk Taking	High ↔ Low

Figure 2. The impact of culture on negotiation.

each party. Middle Eastern business negotiators, however, differ in their aims and expectations. They usually seek sustainable business relationships rather than contracts, eschew the “Western tradition of legalism,” and “prefer to leave things vague.”⁷ In the Middle East, personal relationships take time to build, are founded on loyalty and reciprocity, and are important when negotiating. Trust between partners must never be feigned.

Attitude. Negotiations are affected by the attitudes or dispositions each party brings to the table. In what theorists call distributive bargaining, negotiators see each other’s goals as incompatible and believe only one party can gain, and only at the expense of the other (I win; you lose). In integrative bargaining, the negotiating parties consider themselves to have compatible goals and assume that both parties stand to gain from the final agreement (I win; you win). In business, negotiators, regardless of cultural background, prefer to come out ahead. The attitude they bring to the negotiations depends on their personalities or their positions of power.⁸

Personal styles. Style refers to the way a negotiator interacts with his counterparts at the table. In the Middle East, negotiators usually prefer longer, less formal sessions, insist on addressing counterparts by their titles, and are given to expressing philosophical statements that are often more important to the negotiation process than the technical issues of the problem. Arab culture is high context; that is, Arab negotiators attach great importance to context. For



A typical tactical negotiation: COL Ralph O. Baker, commander, 2d Brigade Combat Team (BCT), 1st Armored Division, and LTC Jim Danna, 2BCT executive officer, parley with local clerics in Karada, Baghdad, August 2003.

example, they “make a sharp distinction between the way matters of state should be conducted and matters of commerce.”⁹ Other contextual factors, such as history, which might be thought extraneous to the process by U.S. negotiators, will also affect discussions with Arabs.

Middle Eastern cultures allow more touching than Americans are used to during greeting rituals and more eye contact during negotiations. In Arab cultures, eye contact is taken as a sign of trustworthiness.

Communications. Some cultures adopt direct, simple methods of communication, while others prefer indirect, more complex methods. Middle Eastern cultures fall into the latter category. When communicating with Arabs, pay attention to body language, eye movements, and hand gestures. Arabs can use such nonverbal communication to contradict, emphasize, or substitute for verbal messages. For example, most Middle Easterners will often say “yes” when they really mean “no” because they prefer to avoid conflict or want to save face.

Time sensitivity. Americans view time as monochronic (one thing happening at a time), sequential, and absolute. They value promptness. Arabs and some other Middle Easterners, on the other hand, tend to view time as polychronic (many things happening simultaneously), non-linear, repetitive, and

associated with other events. That is, “they have a cultural preference to establish a relationship before beginning negotiations proper,” and therefore may involve many people.¹⁰ For Arabs, the time it takes to complete an interaction is unbounded, not subject to a timetable or schedule.

Unlike Americans, Arabs tend to exchange pleasantries at length before getting down to business. They will also employ silent intervals, which American negotiators try to avoid, for contemplation. Another aspect of time relevant to negotiations with Arabs is that they tend to focus on the past. U.S. negotiators focused on the present should be mindful that their counterparts might see the past as part of the present.¹¹

Because most Middle Easterners prefer to establish a relationship before they begin the negotiations proper, and because they favor a consensus-based decision-making process, U.S. negotiators should be prepared for slow deliberations and long negotiations.

Emotionalism. Different cultures have different views about the appropriateness of displaying emotions. These differing cultural norms may be brought to the negotiating table. Arab negotiators, in a high-context culture, are more likely to show emotions than are Americans.

Agreement forms. As I mentioned earlier, Americans prefer detailed contracts that anticipate

all possible circumstances. Middle Easterners, however, prefer an agreement in the form of general principles rather than detailed rules. Middle Easterners regard an agreement as being relatively flexible and symbolic of the relationship established, rather than a binding legal document.

Agreement building. Middle Eastern negotiators tend to begin negotiations by establishing general principles that become the framework on which to build an agreement. They employ a deductive, or top-down, process. Americans, on the other hand, generally use an inductive, or bottom-up, process, and tend to begin negotiations by first dealing with details.

Team organization. Groups organize themselves in culturally specific ways that reflect and affect how the group makes decisions. A negotiating team usually will have a designated leader who appears to have complete authority to decide all matters. In the Middle East, though, a hidden authority rests with the group, and, as aforementioned, decision making often occurs through consensus. Thus, negotiating teams may be relatively large due to the greater number of personnel thought to be necessary to the decision-making process.

The concept of “power distance” refers to the acceptance of unequal power between people and the degrees of deference thought appropriate. High power-distance cultures are those in which some people are considered superior to others because of their social status, gender, race, age, education, birth, personal achievements, family background, or other factors. Middle Eastern cultures are high power-distance cultures; thus, their negotiators are comfortable in high power-distance situations. Middle Eastern negotiators accept hierarchical structures and clear authority figures, use power with discretion, and defer to status.

Risk taking. Some cultures are more risk-averse than others. In general, Middle Easterners seek to avoid uncertainty. This proclivity can affect their willingness to take risks in a negotiation. They may be less likely to divulge information, try new approaches, or tolerate a risky course of action. Gaining the trust and confidence of Middle Easterners can be difficult. Americans have a higher tolerance for uncertainty. They tend to value risk-taking, will entertain risk if it might lead to problem solving, and employ flat organizational structures that tend to diffuse control.¹²

Two More Cultural Considerations

Salacuse’s ten factors to consider in cross-cultural negotiating are useful but not exhaustive. In my experience, negotiations in the Middle East can be affected by two other factors: the Arab imperative to save face, and the American need to use interpreters.

Saving face. Face and the allied concepts of honor and shame are important in the Middle East. Face has to do with a person’s reputation and the respect in which others hold him. In addition to attaching high importance to creating bonds of friendship and trust between negotiators, Arabs believe it is imperative that negotiating partners respect each other’s honor and dignity. To an American, losing face may be embarrassing, but to an Arab, it is devastating. Losing face is the ultimate disgrace, and an Arab will go to almost any length to avoid it. U.S. leaders must keep the concept of face in mind when conducting negotiations in the Middle East. Failure to do so could freeze or kill a negotiation.

Interpreters. U.S. forces don’t have enough Arabic-speaking linguists and contracted third-country interpreters, so they rely on locally hired interpreters. This can cause problems. With their disproportionate influence and their personal biases, interpreters can favor some groups at the expense of others. Animosity toward interpreters can also impair the U.S. mission. For example, U.S. forces that used Kuwaiti interpreters were received coldly by Iraqis because of the animosity between Iraqis and Kuwaitis. Similarly, an interpreter’s tribal and sectarian affiliations might interfere with U.S. objectives and operations. In short, the lesson is to be aware of one’s operating environment and the differences between the nationalities and ethnicities in the Middle East.¹³

The Bottom Line

Cultures differ in the amount and type of preparation they do for a negotiation, in the value they place on efficiency (time on task) versus interpersonal relationships, in their predilection for principles instead of specifics, and in the number of people they include who have a say in the negotiations. Although cultural stereotypes are simplistic, many contain elements of truth. For example, the United

States is likely to give one negotiator complete control, and Middle Eastern cultures will often pursue subtle, protracted negotiations.¹⁴

There is no one right approach to negotiations, only effective and less effective approaches that vary according to contextual factors. As negotiators understand that their counterparts may see things very differently than they do, they will be less likely to make negative judgments and more likely to make progress.¹⁵

Cultural Awareness: How Far to Adapt?

This is a question I am often asked. The answer is, it depends. But military leaders who must negotiate with representatives of other cultures will not go wrong by adhering to two basic rules:

- *In order not to cause serious offense, it is appropriate to show some degree of cultural sensitivity.* This involves more than just knowing the “dos and don’ts” presented in typical cultural briefings; it requires the negotiator to preserve face and demonstrate respect for his or her counterpart. At best, cultural insensitivity can lead to an impasse; at worst, to increased hostility and competition. Negotiations can fail because the negotiator was unwilling to pay the respect considered appropriate by the other party. The ultimate result can be

mission failure and the negation, for the foreseeable future, of any past gains.¹⁶

- *Respect the culture of your counterparts, but be yourself.* It is neither necessary nor appropriate to be culturally subservient when conducting negotiations with members of a foreign culture. In fact, doing so might put you at a marked disadvantage. In other words, it may be appropriate to “do as the Romans do” when you are in Rome, but you should not try to become Roman.¹⁷ Your counterpart wants to understand who you are and what type of person you are.

Last But Not Least

I see problems today as the U.S. military attempts to deal with other cultures in the international arena. To be good negotiators, we must understand how our cultural traits, values, and assumptions differ from those of others. When conducting some sort of negotiation, formal or informal, with a person or persons from another country, we have to be sensitive to the cross-cultural dimensions of the operating environment. Traditionally, we have not understood these issues at all and so have largely ignored them. But to conduct successful negotiations—negotiations that could be critical to winning the peace—you must have or develop strong cross-cultural skills. **MR**

NOTES

1. Figure adapted from Frank L. Acuff, *How to Negotiate with Anyone, Anywhere Around the World* (New York: AMACOM, 1997).

2. David Mitrovica, “International Negotiations,” *CSEGE Recorder* (March 2001): 48-50.

3. Kishan S. Rana, “Bilateral Diplomacy,” *Bilateral Negotiation* (Geneva and Malta: DiploProject, 2002), 283.

4. An excellent primer for conducting negotiations is Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983). The authors’ goal is to develop a method for reaching good agreements. They explain that a good agreement is one that is wise and efficient and that improves the parties’ relationship. Wise agreements satisfy the parties’ interests and are fair and lasting. Negotiations often take the form of positional bargaining, in which each party opens with its position on an issue and the parties then bargain from their separate opening positions to agree on one position. Haggling over a price is a typical example of positional bargaining. Fisher and Ury argue that positional bargaining does not tend to produce good agreements. It is inefficient, the agreements often do not satisfy the parties’ interests, and it encourages stubbornness, which tends to harm the parties’ relationship. Fisher and Ury claim that *principled negotiation* provides a better way of reaching good agreements. They develop four principles of negotiation: 1) separate the people from the problem; 2) focus on interests rather than positions; 3) generate a variety of options before settling on an agreement; and 4) insist that the agreement be based on objective criteria. Their process of principled negotiation can be used effectively in almost any type of dispute.

5. Jeswald W. Salacuse, “Ten Ways That Culture Affects Negotiating Style: Some

Survey Results,” *Negotiation Journal* (July 1998): 223.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Leszek Buszynski, “Negotiating Styles in East Asia,” *The Practising Manager* 13, no. 2 (1993): 19-20.

8. Max Smith, “International Business Negotiations: A Comparison of Theory with the Perceived Reality of Australian Practitioners,” Research Paper Series: 00-9, School of Commerce, The Flinders University of South Australia, <www.ssn.flinders.edu.au/commerce/researchpapers/00-9.doc>.

9. Buszynski.

10. Michelle LeBaron, “Culture-Based Negotiation Styles,” *Beyond Intractability*, eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder, posted July 2003, <http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_negotiation/>.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. CALL [Center for Army Lessons Learned] Newsletter 04-13, “Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) CAAT II Initial Impressions Report (IIR),” Chapter 2: Civil Military Operations—Civil Affairs, Topic C: Cultural Issues in Iraq, <www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/call/call_04-13_chap02-c.htm>.

14. Mitrovica, 48-50. I wish to acknowledge that I derived much of the rest of the information in this section from Max Smith. See note 8.

15. LeBaron.

16. Smith.

17. *Ibid.*