



Through an ARAB Cultural Lens

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RETIRED MAJOR GENERAL Robert H. Scales has described how in today's world, military victory "will be defined more in terms of capturing the psych-cultural rather than the geographical high ground."¹ It is in this spirit that we look at the Arab Middle East.

U.S. military and civilian personnel are increasingly sensitive to customs, social organization, leadership, and religion as aspects of Arab culture. It is clear that, with international events as they are, America and its allies need to appreciate how Arabs think. When we misunderstand the Arab perspective and fail to see events through Arab eyes, we can make costly mistakes. To this end, the U.S. Air Force commissioned a study of the Arab mind to identify key differences between Arab and Western thinking.² Study members reviewed research literature, religious texts, and even business and travel guides. The United Nation's report on Arab culture proved particularly valuable.³ The group conducted in-depth interviews with 16 Arabs from Egypt, Israel's West Bank, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, and with 6 Westerners with extensive experience in dealing with Arabs from Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Based on their research, the study group identified differences that can fuel misunderstanding and hostility during Arab-Western interactions. Knowing these differences will help us cultivate an appreciation for Arab thinking and improve negotiation, coordination, and planning with Arab nations.⁴

Several caveats should be noted. In every region, some people are bound to be atypical, so we can't expect every Middle Easterner to show the features we describe below, particularly those who have interacted extensively with Westerners or the Internet. Further, the region is not culturally homogeneous, so thinking patterns may vary somewhat across and even within nations. This article is really just a starting point for observing and learning about the way Arabs think. It should sensitize readers to features they might otherwise not notice.

We found that Arabs and Westerners define their roles in society in very different ways. This is particularly true in regard to personal identity, social behavior, and the manner in which they reason.

Personal Identity

Three perspectives that demonstrate contrasting ways of viewing personal identity are pertinent to this study: independent versus interdependent, honor and the concept of self, and fatalism versus mastery.

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Independent versus interdependent. Westerners typically believe that they have unique traits and values, and so we attend to our own needs and interest.⁵ In contrast, Arabs value interdependence and collectivism, identifying themselves in relation to their family and tribe rather than to individual traits and experiences.⁶ These connections offer the social support that secular institutions and government provide in the West. The people we interviewed noted, “Retirement villages were unheard of in the Arab world where families take care of the elderly and infirm.” Another interviewee captured this sense of community: “AAA [American Automobile Association] would go out of business in the Middle East. If your car dies, people stop and help you fix it.” Interdependence provides social support and nurture. Arabs are often repelled by the sense of isolation and lack of caring they perceive in Westerners.

The downside of interdependence is that it can make people reluctant to show initiative; it can constrain the flow of ideas and stifle debate. Arabs, and indeed any interdependent people, may not strive for new discoveries and knowledge because their group identity is more important to them than technological growth.⁷ Raphael Patai, a noted ethnographer and anthropologist, speculated that the weakness of the Arab military stems from stifled thinking rather than from a lack of courage or intelligence.⁸ When we Westerners interact with Arabs, we should remember that families and tribes factor into every decision. If we believe we are just dealing with an individual, we will not appreciate the dynamics and power of the social network surrounding decision making and leadership.

Honor and the concept of self. A sense of honor permeates Arab self-concept and motivation.⁹ A man’s honor reflects on his kin and is a measure of his worth. For example, one man we interviewed explained how his friend wanted to marry a neighbor but his family persuaded him to marry his cousin instead. Marrying kin is more important than

personal choice. In the Arab mind, such a marriage brings harmony and protects property, power, and honor. Similarly, another interviewee explained that a person who disgraces his family might be excluded from the family or even killed. Honor can compel families to protect kin at great cost and to retaliate for harm inflicted.¹⁰

Honor drives many life choices. An interviewee told us, “When I came to the United States to study it is [sic] a source of pride for my family.” Another reported, “My sister married a high status man. This brings honor to my family.” A third said, “What kind of car I drive and how big my house [sic] are all important. They make my family higher.” Providing hospitality, either to benign strangers or potential adversaries, brings honor, as well. Influential Arabs consider manual labor shameful; thus, Westerners lose respect when they engage in physical work.¹¹

Because honor is critical for high self-esteem, disapproval can be excruciating. People compromise or endure harm to conceal errors.¹² A Western contractor explained, “We needed employees to clean a building. I described the requirements and they said, ‘Yes, we understand.’ But when I checked, they hadn’t done it because they didn’t understand. They’ll say ‘Yes’ because it’s dishonorable to admit limitations.” Arabs avoid directly criticizing each other and may postpone decisions to save face for those involved.¹³ They can harbor anger at constructive criticism, which they see as insulting and demeaning. Westerners may interpret this anger as an inability to learn from others and see postponement as indecisiveness or incompetence. To be more effective, Westerners should offer indirect feedback and respect face-saving gestures.

Fatalism versus mastery. In the Middle East, planning discussions are regularly punctuated by *Inshallah*—“if Allah wills it.” The status of a person’s health, wealth, and safety are believed to be inevitable.¹⁴ Arabs tend to invoke luck and conspiracy theories instead of expecting human actions to make a difference. Interviewees reported, “We don’t plan ahead,” “We only act when a catastrophe happens,” and “If it’s going to come, then it will come.” While educated Arabs show less fatalism, they are still typically more fatalistic than Westerners.¹⁵ Westerners generally believe that they can master most barriers with adequate resources and hard work.¹⁶

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One implication of fatalism is a disdain for detailed planning. To the Arab mind, planning implies a lack of trust in the divine; thus, their planning may not encompass the time and resources needed to get a job done. Many Arabs were inclined to doubt that the 9/11 attacks were the handiwork of Arabs because the acts were so precisely executed. Fatalistic people may act with incomplete information, believing that things will work out if they are destined to. One Arab interviewee reported, “We say ‘I’ll do my best, and the rest is in God’s hands.’” Arabs may see agreements as hopes, not realities; they often view life as too unpredictable for long-term planning. Because Westerners expect others to live up to agreements, they may see this view as shortsighted or lazy. Arabs may consider Westerners arrogant or stupid when they work to change things that supposedly are beyond their control.

Social Behavior

Differences in social behavior are relevant to this discussion as well. They include focusing on achievements versus relationships, concepts of time, and power-distance relationships.

Achievement versus relationship. Westerners tend to be achievement-oriented while Arabs focus more on relationships and social connections. Arabs try to avoid doing business with strangers.¹⁷ Because developing relationships is more important to them than the pressure of deadlines, they are disturbed when Westerners disregard relationships to save time. An American interviewee explained, “You can’t say ‘we’ve got to resettlement the displaced persons; that’s the task, now how are we going to do it?’ You have to let people get to know the others—their roles and power status. Once you’ve established relationships, they can work on the problem.” Decisiveness, a virtue in the West, may seem rude to Arabs. For them, a decision’s value increases with the time spent making it, so the pace is slow. Arabs cultivate long-term relationships that lead to reciprocal concessions. One interviewee told us, “Because relationships are important, we will pay a higher price at a friend’s business. My uncle had a taxi office that all his friends go to. If all the taxis are out, they will walk or take a bus rather than call another taxi service. A Westerner might take another taxi, but not my uncle’s friends!” Decisions are personal as well as pragmatic.

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Westerners typically work to reach goals and define themselves by their accomplishments.¹⁸ The Arab emphasis on relationships can be frustrating. We may see it as wasteful and unprofessional to depend on “old boy” networks rather than on competence and outcome. Arabs view Westerners as impersonal and disrespectful. Many Arabs told the study group that “All [Westerners] care about is the work,” and “they don’t care about us as people.” This can cause ill will during collaborations. If we want cooperation with Arabs, we need to acknowledge relationships as we also work to accomplish goals.

The concept of time. Westerners typically view time as a tangible, valuable commodity that should be preserved or “spent” wisely.¹⁹ We emphasize schedules, deadlines, and promptness.²⁰ In contrast, Arabs view time as fluid, schedules as flexible, and multi-tasking as comfortable.²¹ Time is about arranging relationships, not crossing items off lists. Arab interviewees explained, “People get busy, and then something comes up and they drop what they’re doing and go onto whatever came up”; and “A lunch could easily stretch into 3-4 hours.” For Arabs, work and personal time are blurred.²² A Western interviewee explained his interaction with an Arab friend: “When we had meetings I’d show up to his office. He’d be in a meeting and he’d come out and greet me.” Others said that “Someone would show up late and say ‘Oh, I met this person and we chatted’”; and “If their phone rang in a meeting, they’d pick it up and start talking.”

While Westerners may consider such behavior unprofessional and disrespectful, Arabs see schedules

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and agendas as hostile and counterproductive. Phrases such as *time is money* and *don't waste time* are used to ridicule Westerners. The Arabs' flexible approach to time values interpersonal obligations over the tyranny of the appointment book or PDA. In short, each side may see the other as rude.

Power distance. People differ in the extent to which they accept and expect uneven distribution of power.²³ Westerners are more egalitarian in their social and work practices. Leadership is generally based on merit, and leaders often consider the input of subordinates. In contrast, groups in Arab culture observe high power distance: they accept inequality between subordinates and superiors; those in power make decisions, with intermediaries facilitating and implementing. This saves face if a request or idea is rejected. Westerners often confuse these functionaries with the actual leader. High power distance speeds decision making. When coordination fails, however, intermediaries may be reluctant to act and progress can stop.

In the Middle East, power generally comes from family and tribal membership, and it increases with education, professional attainment, and age. Our research uncovered a variation on power distance described as “first among equals.”²⁴ Here, in a way that is familiar to Westerners, power in politics, commerce, and the military comes from personal strength. People jockey for power through strategic manipulation—voice tone, body language, and shows of generosity. As one interviewee described the dynamics of generosity: “It brings you status to pick up the check. It shows that you have power. But you must do it with great humbleness. Otherwise, the others might reject you.”

Powerful people assume privileges, but also responsibility for subordinates. Because leaders must provide services to maintain their position, leadership is unstable. A second-in-command does not necessarily replace the leader. Westerners can be surprised when alliances, formed for mutual interests, disappear as interests and power change. During joint operations, Arabs watch how Western leaders assert power or defer to others before they decide who is strong and worthy of respect.

Forms of Reasoning

Three relevant ways of examining forms of reasoning are important to understanding cognitive differences between Arab and Western cultures: direct versus

contextual language, analytic versus holistic thinking, and concrete versus hypothetical reasoning.

Direct versus contextual language. Westerners equate accurate, direct communication with honesty. People are expected to say what they mean. In the Middle East, meaning and intent are judged by the speaker's words, but also by status and non-verbal cues such as tone, gesture, and circumstance. An interviewee reported, “Rumors become truth without having to be confirmed if they come from someone that is trusted and respected—in a position of authority.” Arabs sometimes use exaggeration to voice emotional reactions. One Arab interviewee explained, “If an Arab says, ‘My uncle has a dog that is as big as a donkey,’ what he means is that his uncle has a big dog. If he says ‘The Palestinians have no food to eat and no water to drink,’ he means that there is some poverty in the community. People understand and don't see it as a lie.” Westerners can hear exaggerations as lies because they tend to take words more literally.

Arabs can hear public directness as rude and threatening to their honor and social cohesiveness.²⁵ For example, several Arab TV producers were working on an Arab-language version of *The Apprentice*.²⁶ They decided to replace the show's hallmark phrase of humiliation “You're fired!” with a more characteristic Arabic phrase roughly translated as “May Allah be kind to you.” Arab viewers, who expect respectful subtlety and indirectness, would understand this to mean “You're fired.” When Westerners ignore context, they misread meaning; when they speak or respond directly, they can create embarrassment and anger.

Westerners and Arabs also differ in how closely they expect words and actions to correspond.²⁷ For an Arab, an enthusiastic statement of intention may serve as a symbolic substitution for action. A desired goal may be stated as an accomplishment. Because it is impolite to directly deny a request, a person might

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say “Inshallah” instead of “No.” One interviewee explained, “If you mean ‘no,’ you wouldn’t exactly say it. There are nice ways to say ‘no.’ You soften it by not being completely honest.” Showing respect and saving face are valued over accuracy. Unfortunately, Westerners who are insensitive to the nuanced ways of the Middle East often assume Arabs are dishonest when they renege on agreements.

Analytic versus holistic thinking. Westerners, typically analytic, use Aristotelian logic to categorize attributes of objects, people, or events.²⁸ We connect causes to specific attributes. Arabs, typically holistic, also attribute cause to attributes, but they consider other features of the situation, such as personal relationships, too.²⁹ Arabs are more sensitive to secondary variables and relationships than are Westerners.

Arabs are troubled when Westerners limit consideration to specific attributes. They think we are naïve when we ignore wider issues such as the emotions and dynamics of the situation. Westerners, on the other hand, report frustration when Arabs bring up seemingly extraneous details. For example, an American interviewee who works with international students in the United States complained, “When Arab students are doing poorly, they often explain the complexities that make it impossible to improve—a bad landlord, trouble back home, a nagging cold. They just don’t look for the problem and try to solve it. They’re looking for excuses!” Military personnel also report frustration with the myriad of seemingly irrelevant details that Arabs deem important. Westerners focus narrowly on the problem. When Arabs define a problem broadly, they seek more complex solutions. Solutions deemed appropriate by analytic Westerners appear shortsighted and insufficient to Arabs; those proposed by Arabs may seem poorly focused and unjustified to Westerners. These differences can derail negotiations and strain collaborations.

Concrete versus hypothetical reasoning. Arabs rely on concrete reasoning; they tend to base planning and decision making on past experience. In contrast, Westerners reason hypothetically, using mental simulations to generate plans, envision outcomes, and sharpen details. Western childrearing practices cultivate hypothetical reasoning, while Arab practices stress memorization, instilling respect for content knowledge. For Arabs, hypothetical reasoning is neither expected nor rewarded.³⁰

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Our interviews provided unexpected evidence about differences in reasoning. After eliciting information about an incident, we routinely asked how hypothetical changes to the incident might have played out. For example, when Arab interviewees described a planning session, we asked what would have happened if they had suggested a different approach. Typical answers were, “I didn’t,” “They had a good approach,” and, “It wasn’t my place to make suggestions.” If the interviewee reported an incident of hypothetical reasoning in a U.S. classroom, we might ask, What would have happened if this had occurred at home? A typical response was, “It wouldn’t ever happen there. We repeated and rephrased these “what if” questions to no avail. Interviewees didn’t understand the questions.

Faced with challenges, Westerners often speculate about possible consequences of potential actions. Arabs typically borrow from similar past cases and wonder why Westerners want to reinvent the wheel. Arabs may misunderstand speculation as reality, creating fear and consternation. They reason with precision while Westerners are more flexible (but often at the expense of precision). Thus, multinational planning can leave both sides dissatisfied.

Implications and Conclusions

Combined military and peacekeeping operations can bring legitimacy and attract international support; however, Westerners in the Arab Middle East face many cultural differences:

- Arabs make decisions as members of families and tribes and place a high value on honor.
- Fatalism can threaten collaborations: in cases where Westerners are confident about the possibility of change, Arabs may see the limitations of human power.
- Arabs see relationship building as a prerequisite for joint action and take time to cultivate relationships.

- Differences in power distance can create conflict and confusion.
- Arabs use and respect nonverbal information while Westerners stress direct communication.
- When analytic and holistic thinkers define problems differently, they generate different types of plans. Because accurate prediction and anticipation are prerequisites for effective coordination, we need to appreciate how Arabs think.
- Hypothetical and concrete reasoning lead to different courses of action.

The bottom line is that Westerners who dismiss the actions of Arabs as inappropriate, dishonest, or childish appear arrogant and disrespectful. When Westerners fail to accommodate cultural differences, cooperation and effectiveness suffer.

To date, the cultural training provided by the military has emphasized the customs and behaviors needed to create positive impressions, build relationships, and avoid giving offense. These skills are necessary but not sufficient. Military personnel also need an appreciation of the self-concept, social, and cognitive differences that plague collaboration and mar combat operations. Westerners must be able to decode, anticipate, and accommodate the words and actions of Arab counterparts and opponents. One way to provide needed familiarization and sensitization is through interactive computer or Web-based simulations that help Westerners take the Arab perspective. Scenarios can provide guided experience for cross-national collaboration, negotiation, and accommodation. Such training holds promise for preparing military personnel for multinational settings, not least because it can allow mistakes without negative consequences.³¹

The countries of the Arab Middle East will remain important to the West for the foreseeable future, whether as allies or adversaries. The Western-Arab differences presented here can hamper

exchanges. Describing differences is a first step towards capturing the psych-cultural high ground. Training must go beyond rules and procedures so that military personnel can see events through an Arab cultural lens. As U.S. personnel gain fluency in reading intent and predicting reactions, we can expect improved communication, prediction, teamwork, and ultimately effectiveness. **MR**

NOTES

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One way to provide needed familiarization and sensitization is through interactive computer or Web-based simulations that help Westerners take the Arab perspective.