

Is it the Culture?

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Brief Analysis

Ms. Hiam Nawas, an analyst based in Washington, D.C., argues that, essentially, the source of the Arab world's current crisis is its 'culture', promoting James Clapper's claim that the United States "can't fix" the Middle East region. But a solution for the region's fundamental problems needs a proper diagnosis, and to blame 'culture,' while understandable, is a small portion of the very complicated equation. Like any complex issue, the current perceived disorder of the Middle East is predicated on a rhizomatic string of factors – not a single source wherein regional chaos emanates.

Culture is generally defined as the many manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively or, according to Merriam Webster, "the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time." But despite the strong vein of pan-Arabism that colors many discussions of the Arab world, it is debatable whether a single Arab culture or society actually exists. Indeed, at the regional, national, sub-national, and community levels, individuals practice their own beliefs, behaviors, and ways of life within the borders of what we know as the (so-called) Arab world. Even language varies widely among Arab communities; Arabic dialects are not necessarily mutually intelligible. Nor is it elucidating to claim that a monolithic interpretation of 'Islam' is to blame for the malaise in the Arab world. Even disregarding the plethora of Arabs who practice other religions, Arabs practice Islam in a huge variety of ways, with Sunni and Shiite strains of thought being only one the most visible differences.

Hypothetically, a political scientist would diagnose the ails of the region with authoritarian political systems, a social scientist with lingering old tribal traditions, an educator with the poor educational institutions, an economist with the dire economic conditions, and a psychiatrist might delve deeply in communal psyche affected by all these elements. But the current chaos in the Arab world has many roots, and with so many structural challenges that those in the region must face, the scapegoat of 'culture' is too abstract and too simplistic to explain these issues in a major way.

In fact, on closer examination many perceived cultural failings often have a much more recent catalyst: the decades of Arab states' devastating political choices. A common external critique of the Arab world is a lack of empathy, often extrapolated from the widespread persistent denial or ignorance of the presence of Holocaust denial in some Arab communities. However, this denial or ignorance is better characterized as a warped political tool or educational

failure than a cultural responsibility. There is nothing inherently exceptional about the use of Holocaust denial by authoritarian forces to distract populations from domestic struggles, and the Arab Spring demonstrated the true revolutionary power of these struggles.

Similarly, Western media has often criticized an Arab unwillingness to respond to the plight of the Syrian refugees. These people tend to ignore those small, relatively impoverished Arab countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have opened their doors to over one million refugees each, when more rich, more powerful and more industrialized countries have only admitted a small fraction of that number.

Due to the rampant failures of state educational systems, less-educated Arabs—like their compatriots around the world—are searching for zero sum solutions. But Arab elites do realize that cooperation and compromise with other countries is a more sustainable option in the long run, even when it may be painful. Arabs, like many others, ought to take a self-critical look at their time-worn entrenched traditions to improve their stagnant environment; but traditionalism does not explain the current blood bath in the Middle East – it can only describe it. Instead, the region's violence is better attributed to its uniquely deplorable political authoritarian setting. For example, the continued savagery of the dictatorial Baathist Assad regime in Syria was supported and maintained over time by international cohorts in the face of popular discontent and frustration – as is the case with other current Arab nations.

There is also the issue of morality, and whether the present situation in the region has been catalyzed by a particularly Arab lack of understanding of the term. Traditional Arab societies undoubtedly have some archaic values unpalatable to the humanitarian world such as the 'honor' crimes. But are there no other societies in the world that value revenge over compromise, men over women, and groups over individuals? And like other parts of the world, there are courageous Arab individuals from both genders fighting for women's rights, both legal and societal, against extrajudicial acts of revenge, and for individual freedoms. More often than not, these battles are waged against the state.

This also touches on a popular but inaccurate representation of Arab culture in the form of tribalism. While it is true that the structure of a tribal community differs somewhat from modern western understanding of familial links, it is an exaggeration to claim that Arabs in general have tribal allegiances such as those that prevailed during the pre-Islamic era.

More accurately, submission to authority can be traced to the desire of those in power, whether within a society or a home, to maintain the status quo. The lack of political personal autonomy is a structural benefit for and advocated by those who wish to maintain power, such as political, religious, and social leaders in the community. While this may be presented by said advocates as 'cultural necessities', it is more valuable to understand them as corollaries to the authoritarian structures at the sub-state level.

One should not equate self-reflection and constructive criticism as an integral part of any one culture. Rather, these are learned behaviors embedded in the educational curriculum from an early age, which can only thrive in societies unbound by authoritarianism. Given the proper educational encouragement, there is little evidence that Arab youth would have any greater tendency to rely on a narrative of victimization and blaming of the other.

Many citizens of Arab countries face significant challenges obtaining a liberal education and expressing individual freedoms under authoritarian states. Nonetheless, the failings often attributed to Arabs are not so far off from the rest of the world. Blaming external forces for one's own problems isn't only an Arab trait, it's a human one. The current movements sweeping the West that advocate for an excision of 'the other' to solve perceived domestic insufficiencies and failings seem no more enlightened than Arab attempts to prevent 'Westernization' from corrupting their own valued 'traditions.'

Arab and Western intellectuals alike should seriously engage in self-reflection, but the political realities of the Arab world warrant very serious scrutiny from those who wish to understand and explain the region's current challenges. ❖

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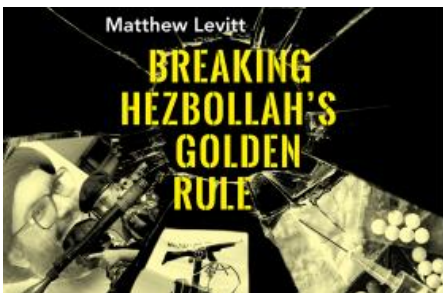
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