Holding Arab Culture Accountable

by Hiam Nawas **(/experts/hiam-nawas)**

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Articles & Testimony

Editor's Note: This is the first article in a two-part series. Next week, Prof. Mohammad Dajani presents the view that the region's challenges are primarily political rather than cultural.

James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, recently claimed that the United States "can't fix" the Middle East region. Clapper is right on the money. The region's fundamental problems are not political but rather cultural, therefore the United States and its military might is unable to fix them.

Culture matters because it is the foundation for the behavior and organization of any society. The current chaos in the Middle East has many roots, but some of the conflict's deepest draw on an Arab culture and identity that lacks internal and external empathy, favors authoritarianism over autonomy, and opts for zero-sum solutions. Unless Arabs take a self-critical look at their values, violence in the Middle East will continue.

In establishing the tenants of a culture or set of cultures, it is vital to examine the culture's sense of morality to determine the society's behavioral ideals. The Arab moral code values revenge over compromise, men over women, and groups over individuals. Collective Arab identity is based on tribalism, submitting to paternalistic authority, a sense of honor linked to women's virginity, and an ossified sanctification of custom and tradition. There is a glorification of the past along with a refusal to take responsibility for the present and the hope that the future will miraculously be better.

This is not to say that individual Arabs are a carbon copy of their culture. To the contrary, interaction with average members of Arab societies demonstrate a generally decent, generous, and tolerant demeanor. Nor is Arab culture without many positives. Nevertheless, these positives have not developed into a progressive sociopolitical belief system. The collective culture does not necessarily celebrate political freedom , personal autonomy, or respect for women.

The contemporary Arab world also often lacks self-reflection and self-directed criticism. Conversations with Moroccans, Egyptians, Tunisians, Jordanians, and Gulf Arabs repeatedly demonstrate an overall narrative of victimization and blaming the other. This most notably manifests into a plethora of conspiracy theories, such as the suspicion that ISIS is an American-Israeli invention manufactured to destroy the region, or that the Arab Spring was a Western plot to hand the region over to Islamists.

This type of thought process reveals a deep-seated aversion to accountability and responsibility that makes gestures

such as the condemnation of terrorism against Christians, Yazidis, Jews, or Shia individuals perfunctory. Meanwhile the outside world—Iran, Israel, the United States, colonialism, or other Arabs' failure to live up to "true Islam"—has become the bogeyman of any internal societal failures. This trend has lead to the ultimate irony: Arab troubles are constantly blamed on external forces, which are then expected to solve them.

This observation is not to exempt Western powers. The West's continuous support of Arab dictators has certainly contributed to the perpetuation of antiquated priorities and democratic deficits. Nevertheless, continuously relying on emphasizing the West's regional failures to avoid self-examination and reform is intellectually dishonest. Tribalism and disrespect for individual autonomy cannot be characterized and excused as a byproduct of colonialism and Western interventions.

By all measures, Arab countries have a statistically weak showing when compared to the rest of the world, factually documented in various UNDP Arab development reports. For example, a 2002 report highlighted a shortage in the Arab world of three traits recognized as essential by the international community: freedom, knowledge, and female empowerment. One can and should blame Arab governments and regimes for these deficits; but this only addresses half of the issue.

Individual liberty is not a cornerstone of Arab culture, learning is emphasized as a process of transmission rather than questioning, and women are often not seen as full citizens, regardless of their legal status. An anecdotal example: when an educated Arab acquaintance's wife tried scheduling an appointment for a cesarean section, the hospital sought his approval. according to the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report, statistical evidence suggests that of the fifteen countries with the lowest rates of women's participation in the labor force, thirteen are in the Middle East. The report further details that only 18% of working-age Arab women have jobs, and that in 2015 the unemployment rate among young women in Arab states was almost 44 percent, compared to 22.9 percent of male youth.

One can argue about the role that different strains of Islam have played in forming such values, or Islam's attempt to root out tribalism and ethnocentrism to no avail. whatever the case maybe, the combination of tribalism and religion has been deadly, the chaos in the region being a case in point. For the time being, Arab obsession with Israel has expanded into an obsession with Iran, coupled with a rampant moral amnesia regarding the Syrian refugees' catastrophe. There is no lack of financial resources in the Middle East, yet certain Arab states spend billions of dollars on weapons while unwilling to allow Syrian refugees in their countries, placing even greater burdens on the refugees themselves and the countries already hosting millions. Arabs are cheering the Saudi led coalition in Yemen, but make no effort to rebuild the country or settle the displaced Yemenis.

Today, Arab media, politicians, and the common people are busy condemning Iran and Shiites for the destruction in the region. Iran's pernicious behavior is counterproductive; yet pretending Iran's intervention in "Arab affairs" is the source of all ills in the region is a fallacy. Informed observers would argue the political turmoil has been in the making for decades, driven by a brutal combination of authoritarian leadership, limited social progress, and a dismal economic record. It is now time for Arab intellectuals to seriously examine the political, social, and economic circumstances that led to this state of affairs, in order to begin advocating for a real path forward.

Hiam Nawas is a Jordanian-American analyst based in Washington DC. This article was originally published on [*the Fikra website (http://fikraforum.org/?p=9674&lang=en#.V4G1HPkrLIU)*](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9674&lang=en#.V4G1HPkrLIU) . ❖

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