CHAPTER 9

Comparative Cultural Patterns

Arab Culture

What You Can Learn From This Chapter

- What defines Arab culture
- The major beliefs of the Islamic faith
- How Arab and U.S. cultural values compare
- The difficulties in intercultural communication between Arab and Western cultures

Any two cultures could be compared as a way of learning more about both. Knowledge of other cultures is critical. You remember that cultural awareness is identified as a critical intercultural communication skill. In this chapter, the same categories used to describe dominant U.S. cultural values are used to learn more about Arab culture—a culture often misunderstood in the United States.

This chapter is devoted to how religion and language define Arab culture and then extends that with an examination of the conservative Arab state Saudi Arabia and the more tolerant state Oman. The chapter concludes by identifying some of the communication barriers among the Arab states and the United States.

As you study this chapter, make comparisons to the previous chapter on dominant U.S. cultural values. What intercultural communication problems could arise between individuals from these diverse cultures?
THE ARAB STATES

There is much diversity in the Arab world today, composed of 22 countries with a total population of 280 million. The population per country ranges from 600,000 in Qatar in 2001 to 65 million in Egypt in 2001. Iran is not considered an Arab country because its language is Persian (Farsi). Life expectancy in Arab countries ranges from 45 years in Djibouti to 76 in Kuwait. Annual per capita gross domestic product (GDP) ranges from $278 in Comoros to more than $19,000 in Qatar. Literacy rates range from 27% in Somalia to 89% in Jordan (see Table 9.1).

The Arab world’s history spans more than 5,000 years. Yet from the time of Napoleon, who invaded Egypt in 1798, until the end of World War I, European countries conquered close to 90% of the Arab world by military force. After World War I, the European colonial powers began a slow retreat.

FOCUS ON THEORY

Christianity’s New Testament makes no claims for religious orthodoxy, but in the 4th century, once it had been embraced by Emperor Constantine, its leaders began to demand it, converting some by the sword and burning alleged heretics at the stake. Achieving religious freedom without abandoning religious belief was the difficult challenge. The struggle for religious freedom paved the way for discussions of freedom of speech and the press. Zagorin (2003) argues that a nation’s progress depends on the creation and maintenance of human freedom, which in turn depends on religious freedom. Freedom in the modern sense of the term was introduced into the Arab culture through contact with Europe—particularly France. The scholar Ahmed bin Khalid al-Nasseri wrote that “the notion of freedom invented by the ferenja (foreigners or French) is, undoubtedly, the work of heretics. It requires disregard of the rights of God, the rights of parents and even the rights of humanity” (Arab Human Development Report 2004, 2004, pp. 54). On the other hand, the liberal Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid wrote, “Our freedom is our very being and our being is our freedom” (Arab Human Development Report 2004, 2004, p. 55). Lewis (2002) recognizes the argument that Islam was once the pioneer of freedom, science, and economic development yet also raises the same point that in modern times, it is the separation of church and state and the creation of societies governed by secular laws that has fostered freedom of thought and expression, which have made progress possible.

THE ISLAMIC FAITH

Traditionally, Arabs have had three political and cultural trends: nationalism, pan-Arabism, and Islam. After the 1970 death of Egypt’s pan-Arab leader,
Gamal Abdel Nasser, secular Arab nationalism has not regained the influence it had. Later, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein appealed to secular Arab nationalism. And in some countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, many people identify themselves as Egyptians or Lebanese. But in much of the Arab world, people identify themselves as Arab or Muslim.

The Arab culture transcends time and space, particularly through its language and its Islamic faith, the second largest in the world after Christianity,
with some 1.2 billion followers, or about 20% of the world’s population. Arabs, the ethnic group that originally spread Islam, are now a minority in the religion. The Muslim religion extends far beyond the Arab world from Africa to Europe to Asia, including the republics of the former Soviet Union, which had experienced suppression of religion and language since the time of the Russian czars. Today, some 75 countries have large Muslim populations. Just as the Muslim religion includes more than Arabs, not all Arabs are Muslim. The Arab world, however, is connected by a shared culture that developed in the Islamic faith. Of course there is diversity within Islam, but it can be said that Islam is a “multidimensional system of beliefs that embraces the spiritual and the material, the divine and the earthly, the heavenly soul and mortal worldly deeds” (Arab Human Development Report 2003, 2003, p. 118).

People who practice this religion are called Muslims (literally “submitters” to the will of God). Islam is a nonhierarchical religion; there is no priesthood. No one institution or individual speaks for Muslims. Rather than churches, there are places to pray.

**BOX 9.1 Muslims in the United States**

The number of Muslims in the United States is a matter of dispute. Estimates range from 1.6 to 6 million. The first Muslims in the Americas were enslaved Africans brought over in the 17th century. African-Americans account for the majority of all converts to Islam in the United States. Among African-Americans, the Nation of Islam grew most rapidly in the 1960s. Most of its mosques underwent reforms after 1975 to join conventional Islam. Today, the Nation of Islam represents a small fraction of Muslims in the United States. Today, Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States. Islam’s presence is being felt in the United States: Casio markets a watch that sounds an electronic call to prayer, some banks have set up “Islamic accounts” in response to the Muslim prohibition against paying or receiving interest, and Warith Deen was the first Muslim to open the U.S. Senate with a prayer.


*Muhammad, the Prophet*

The prophet Muhammad (born circa 570, died 632) founded the religion in the early 7th century in Arabia. Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad ibn
Abdullah was a businessman when, in 610, it is said he received his first revelations through the angel Gabriel. These continued for another 20 years to form the Koran, the holy book of Islam.

The Koran

The Koran (often spelled Quran) was revealed by God to the prophet Muhammad in Arabic and is considered to contain the literal words of Allah, or God. The Koran contains stories, admonitions, verse and prophetic segments, and social, political, and economic laws. The Koran embraces all areas of human affairs, from the most personal to international relations. Not only is it unique in its completeness, but it also deals with human transactions in such a way as to make God’s presence felt in every human transaction. There is no separation of church and state as in the United States. The Koran is a spiritual guide, a system of law, a code of ethics, and a way of life. Islam is the only world religion that offers rules by which to govern a state as well as a set of spiritual beliefs.

Religious Practices

Westerners once called Islam “Muhammadanism,” but Muslims dislike the term because Muhammad is not regarded as divine. He is considered the last and most important prophet in a line that includes Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus. The accounts of Muhammad’s life and teachings are second only to the Koran as authoritative guidelines in Muslim faith and law. Many Muslims stress the similarities between Islam and the principal Abrahamic faiths in the United States. For example, Jewish and Islamic dietary laws resemble one another very closely. According to Islamic law, Muslims may not drink alcoholic beverages, eat pork, or gamble. Muslims honor Jesus as one of the prophets of the Bible but not as the son of God. Most who practice the faith are religious conservatives with a literalist view of the holy book of Muslims.

The five religious obligations of Muslims begin with the public witness, or shahadah, “I testify that there is no God but God; I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” Saying this confession with conviction makes one a Muslim. Short prayers, or salah, are recited by individuals five times daily at intervals from early morning to evening, each time after washing hands, arms, face, hair, and feet (although rubbing water lightly over socks is permissible). Facing east (toward Mecca), Muslims go through prescribed motions of standing, kneeling, and touching the floor with the forehead and palms. Congregational prayers at Friday noon are led by an imam, or spiritual leader.
Alms giving, or zakat, is the duty of sharing with the poor a small percentage
of wealth beyond one's basic expenses.

Fasting, or sawm, is central during Ramadan, the ninth month on Islam’s
lunar calendar. Ramadan commemorates the prophet Muhammad receiving
revelations from the angel Gabriel. Ramadan is a time to reflect on the mean-
ing of Islam, to rejuvenate faith. Muslims abstain from food, drink, and sexual
intercourse during the daylight hours. Nourishment is allowed only for the sick,
the elderly, the pregnant, and the very young.

At least once in a Muslim’s lifetime, a believer is expected to make a pil-
gramage, or hajj, to Mecca. It is an elaborate series of rites requiring several
days.

Muslims generally fall into either the Sunni or the Shiite branch. The Sunni,
who account for 85% to 90% of the world’s Muslims, believe that Muslim
leadership in the early years passed to a series of caliphs, whereas the Shiite
Muslims believe that leadership fell to the martyred Ali, Muhammad’s cousin
and son-in-law, and his descendants. Shiites tend to be more ecstatic in religious
practice and have messianic expectations of a future imam who will bring jus-
tice to the world. Sufism is an ascetic movement throughout Islam directed
toward mysticism and a direct personal experience with God.

The sunnah are the traditions relating to the deeds and utterances of
Muhammad. Together with the Koran, they are the basis of the sharia, or
canonic law. The legal system is different from Western models. The sharia
system relies far less on physical evidence than on the accused’s statements and
answers to questions posed by judges. Cleric-scholars using the Koran and the
acts of Muhammad as their guide get to the truth through patient questioning.
If they err, they must answer to Allah. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the
crime rate is low by Western standards. The Koran and sunnah dictate specific
penalties for some crimes, such as amputating a thief’s hand. Contrary to pop-
ular belief, these are rarely carried out because the crimes are narrowly defined
and proof is strict. For example, a shoplifter would not suffer amputation
because shoplifting is not considered a theft as the goods were not locked up.
Executions occur only if all heirs of the victim demand it. Judges often encour-
age the family to accept “blood money,” traditionally the price of 100 camels,
instead. Punishment is often mild by Western standards. Some trials fall short
of international standards—even “divine law must be carried out by mortals.”

Most cultural differences come from the religion’s conservatism. Muslims
preserve ethics and family values. There are strict prohibitions against alcohol,
smoking, and premarital sex. To many Muslims, people in the United States
don’t care about families, abandon parents when old, and have an epidemic of
AIDS, pornography, pregnant teenagers, abortions, and illegitimate babies.
These aspects of U.S. culture are not desired by Muslims as they bring shame on
the family. To Muslims, God and family are most important. The dividing line between the Arab and Western worlds is religion. Islam is a religion, a way of life, and the central force of Arab existence.

The prophet Muhammad achieved victory as a military commander and political ruler. The state has been the instrument of Islam, and God was considered to be head of both the state and the religion. This is in sharp contrast to Western Christian countries, which separated church and state. Perhaps as a consequence, only four of the Arab states have developed even nominal democracies (Lewis, 2002).

My Islam is a religion of tolerance and brotherhood.
—Sai’d Al-Ashmawy, former chief justice, Egypt’s Supreme Court

Jews and Christians and whoever believes in God . . . and does what is right shall have nothing to fear or regret. Among his other signs are the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors. Surely there are signs in this for all mankind.

—Koran

SAUDI ARABIA

Geography

Because of the importance of Saudi Arabia in the Arab world, we need to pay particular attention to this country. Saudi Arabia occupies nearly 90% of the Arabian peninsula and is the 12th largest country in the world—2,250,000 square kilometers (868,730 square miles), or one fourth the size of the United States. As 98% of the land is desert, most cities are built on the coast and on oases. With an average of only 10 centimeters of rainfall a year, Saudi Arabia gets most of its water from underground aquifers filled with fossil water thousands of years old. This water—like oil—is a nonrenewable resource. Desalination provides only a small percentage of Saudi Arabia’s water.

Discovery of Oil

In the 1940s, Saudi Arabia was mostly unknown to the rest of the world, and the rest of the world was unknown to most Saudis. Nomads outnumbered
the economy was on a subsistence level. Illiteracy was high. In 1933, U.S. oil companies launched the California Arabian Standard Oil Company, which later became the Arabian-American Oil Co. (ARAMCO). With monies from the oil discovered in the late 1930s, Saudi Arabia developed at a pace unparalleled in history. With 25% to 30% of the world's proven oil reserves, Saudi Arabia became one of the strongest economies in the world, with oil as the source of its income. Saudi Arabia is wealthy but is deeply in debt partly because of lower oil prices, government deficits, and rising unemployment as contributing factors. As a result, young Saudis are no longer guaranteed good salaries and prestigious jobs. In the early 1980s, per capita income in Saudi Arabia was about $18,000, but by 2003, it had fallen to around $7,200, with many people now living in poverty.

**Ruling Saud Family and Conservative Wahhabism**

Saudi Arabia's ruling Saud family gained power in the 1920s by consolidating feudal tribes through an alliance with an ultraconservative brand of Islam known as Wahhabism that frowned on smoking, drinking, and virtually any contact between unmarried members of the opposite sex. In this sense, Wahhabism can be compared to the Puritans. Even today, as guardian of the two holy Muslim mosques in Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia is the most conservative Islamic country in the world. Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia remains today much as it was in the time of Muhammad.

**Media**

The government licenses all bookshops, printing presses, and public relations agencies to ensure that standards of taste are maintained. There are at least 10 daily newspapers and 9 weekly or monthly magazines published in Saudi Arabia. All are privately owned but subsidized in varying degrees by the government. Editors patrol themselves, deferring to the government's Ministry of Information in questionable cases.
Some advertisers have attempted to adapt to Arab cultural values, such as in the portrayal of women. European ads for the men’s cologne Drakkar Noir by Guy Laroche showed a man’s hand clutching the cologne bottle and a woman’s hand seizing his bare forearm. In the Saudi version, the man’s arm is clothed in a dark jacket sleeve, and the woman is touching the man’s hand only with her fingertips. Even so, some might find such ads objectionable in that they suggest sexual temptation (Nafeesi, 1986).

Satellite television brings in *The Sopranos, Ally McBeal, Sex and the City,* and other U.S. shows. Saudi Arabia is saturated with symbols of U.S. culture but at the same time promotes hostility against U.S. foreign policy, values, and Judeo-Christian beliefs.

**Matawain**

Public morality committees, the *matawain* or the regional Societies for the Preservation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, ensure strict compliance with religious requirements. Salaried morals police patrol the public domain, making sure that businesses close at prayer times and that women are properly covered and observe the off-limit signs. The religious police have declared Barbie dolls with their revealing clothing as a threat to morality and offensive to Islam. There are no public worship services of any religion except Islam. There is no church, no temple of any kind, and no missionary work allowed. In fact, the Koran is part of Saudi Arabia’s constitution. The country bases its legitimacy on its commitment to Islam and the implementation of sharia, or Islamic law. Anything that is not allowed in Islam will not happen.

**Contact With the United States**

Just weeks before his death, President Franklin Roosevelt hosted King Saud aboard a U.S. ship and gave the aging king his wheelchair. They formed a relationship that has continued between the two countries. President Harry S. Truman signed the first security agreement with Saudi Arabia in 1947. For years, American and Saudi peoples worked together, liked each other, but didn’t know much about each other. For example, the ARAMCO compound in Dhahran is like a 1950s midwestern U.S. small town isolated from the rest of the country with well-sprinkled lawns, neat houses, U.S.-brand groceries in stores, and even U.S. electrical current—not Saudi. The following full-page advertisement appeared in newspapers on September 13, 2002:
The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On the eve of the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks against the American people, I take the opportunity to renew to you and the families of the victims and indeed the entire American nation, the sincere condolences and sympathy of the Saudi people and myself.

As long as I live, I shall never forget the horrible scenes of carnage, the raging fires, the smoke that covered the horizon, and the innocent people who jumped out of windows in their attempt to escape. On that fateful day, the whole world stood with the American people in unprecedented solidarity that made no distinction as to race, religion or language.

It was the perverted hope of the perpetrators of this heinous crime that they could bring humiliation to and terrorize the American nation. But the brave people of the United States of America, whose greatness lies in the strength of its brave sons and daughters in facing adversity, and which is enriched by their remarkable achievements, all of this will make them ever stronger than the designs of the evildoers. Instead of being terrorized by this catastrophe, they become more steadfast and determined.

The target of the terrorists who engineered this crime was humanity at large. They hoped that this outrageous act would incite and ignite bloody strife among different faiths and civilizations. But their evil was turned against them, for all humanity united to fight terrorism, and wise voices from all corners of the world arose to echo your declaration that terrorism has no religion or nationality, that it is pure evil, condemned and abhorred by all religions and cultures.

Mr. President, we in Saudi Arabia felt an especially great pain at the realization that a number of young Saudi citizens had been enticed and deluded and their reasoning subverted to the degree of denying the tolerance that their religion embraced, and turning their backs on their homeland, which has always stood for understanding and moderation. They allowed themselves to be used as a tool to do great damage to Islam, a religion they espoused, and to all Muslims. They also aimed at causing considerable harm to the historic and strong relationship between the American people and the people of Saudi Arabia. I would like to make it clear that true Muslims all over the world will never allow a minority of deviant extremists to speak in the name of Islam and distort its spirit of tolerance. Your friends in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia denounced and condemned the September 11 attacks as strongly as did the American people. We, like you, are convinced that nothing can ever justify the shedding of innocent blood or the taking of lives and the terrorizing of people, regardless of whatever cause or
motive. Therefore, we do not simply reiterate sincere and true condolences to the relatives of the victims, but assure all of our continued will and determination to do our utmost to combat this malignant evil and uproot it from our world.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to stand solidly against terrorism. We shall act, independently as well as collectively, with the U.S.-led international coalition to wage a fierce and merciless war against the terrorists in order to eradicate this deadly disease that threatens all societies.

In conclusion, I would like to say to you, my dear friend, that God Almighty, in His wisdom, tests the faithful by allowing such calamities to happen. But He, in His mercy, also provides us with the will and determination, generated by faith, to enable us to transform such tragedies into great achievements, and crises that seem debilitating are transformed into opportunities for the advancement of humanities. I only hope that, with your cooperation and leadership, a new world will emerge out of the rubble of the World Trade Center: a world that is blessed by the virtues of freedom, peace, prosperity and harmony.

Sincerely,

Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud

Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister, and Commander of the National Guard
Jeddah, 10 September 2002 AD
3 Rajab 1423 Hijra

Today, the United States is the world’s largest oil consumer, and Saudi Arabia is the largest market for U.S. consumer products in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has spent tens of billions of dollars on Western technology, including $270 billion on high-tech weapons since the 1991 Gulf War.

The 1991 war in the Persian Gulf (for which Saudi Arabia reimbursed the United States $55 billion) brought individuals from the two cultures into contact, and, as we have seen, neither will be the same in the future. A number of reform-minded Saudi businessmen, government officials, and academics used the 1991 war as an opportunity to advocate for expanded rights for women, a reliable court system, and an elected parliament. The Bush administration hoped that the 2003 war with Iraq would lead to more democratic changes in conservative regimes elsewhere in the Middle East. The conservatives have worked to make Islamic Saudi Arabia even more fundamentalist—particularly in the areas of economic policies (i.e., eliminating Western-oriented banks), the parts of the legal system not fully based on sharia law, censorship of foreign media with secular ideas, and a heavy dependence on the West in foreign and defense policies—particularly in light of the war with Iraq.
Although Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, an age-old practice of **majlis** provides any citizen access to the king and local governors. Also in Bedouin tradition are **diwaniyahs**, political meetings where men discuss community issues and debate politics. Perhaps in response to calls for change from both religious conservatives who resented the influx of Western forces during the Gulf War and liberals who saw the war as an impetus for opening the kingdom more to the West, early in 1992 King Fahd announced on national television a new administrative structure for the country. The king created a national consultative council that would review government policies and advise the Cabinet of Ministers, thus providing citizens a voice in government, and announced guarantees for

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personal liberties, such as freedom from unreasonable searches, for the first time
in history. In 2005, the first nationwide elections were held for half of the seats
in municipal governing councils. The other half of the seats are appointed. Only
men were eligible to vote in the elections.

OMAN

In contrast to Saudi Arabia is its neighbor Oman, one of the most tolerant
countries in the region. Oman is a small country about the same size as the state
of New Mexico, with 1.7 million Omanis and 500,000 foreign guest workers.
For centuries, Oman had been a thriving seafaring nation. Its merchant ships
sailed the waters between India and the east coast of Africa. It governed Zanzibar
and the Kenyan seaports of Mombasa and Lamu and grew wealthy on spices,
gold, ivory, and slaves. Its merchant ships could not compete with British and
French steam vessels, and the country sank into bankruptcy and decay in the
early 20th century. Sultan Said ibn Taimur inherited the nearly penniless state
from his father. The country had only three elementary schools educating a max-
imum of 900 students and one hospital operated by missionaries. Modern con-
veniences such as eyeglasses and private cars were banned. Travel was by foot,
donkey, or camel. Disease was rampant and life spans short. The sultan sent his
only son to Britain’s Sandhurst Military Academy and later recalled him to keep
him in seclusion with his mother and a teacher of the Koran.

Opposition to the sultan reached a peak with open rebellion and Said’s only
family conspiring with the British, who had been handling Oman’s external
defense for decades. A coup on July 23, 1970, brought his son Kaboos ibn Said
to power. Kaboos has reinvented Oman by encouraging modernization in edu-
cation, commerce, technology, and democracy.

Like Saudi Arabia, oil made Oman a wealthy nation. Oman’s oil production
is 800,000 barrels a day, and it has 5.6 billion barrels in reserves. But, unlike
Saudi Arabia, Oman has charted a different path.

Oman’s oil reserves may last another 25 years. One goal has been to divers-
sify the economy before the supplies are depleted. The objective is to replace
90% of the 500,000 foreign guest workers with Omani nationals by 2010.
That requires an educated workforce. The sultan’s pride is the Sultan Kaboos
University, established in 1985. The majority of its students are women. Four
more universities are planned.

In 1970, the country had no electricity, three miles of paved roads, and 12
telephones. Today, Oman is a model of development with thousands of miles
of highways. It is open to world communication, commerce, and tourism. It is
building one of the largest container ports in the world to take advantage of its
location on the world’s main east-west shipping lines. The economy is now starting to move from government dominated to private sector led.

Oman is the only Persian Gulf country to have a Basic Law, or constitution, that guarantees inalienable rights to its citizens. In 1994, Oman became the first of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries to allow women to vote and hold national office. Kaboos has retained the right to appoint members of Oman’s Consultative Council from a pool of candidates approved by voters. In 1999, four women sat in its Consultative Council, which Kaboos is moving to transform into a full-fledged parliament. He has announced plans to allow direct elections to the Consultative Council. He has also announced plans to institute the region’s first independent judiciary. Oman has also become one of the region’s most tolerant countries. The sultan himself has built churches and Hindu temples for Christian and Indian minorities in the overwhelmingly Muslim country. Kaboos was the first to appoint a female ambassador from an Arab Gulf country and the only Arab leader to support Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Kaboos married only briefly and has no children. According to the Basic Law, on his death, his relatives will gather to appoint a successor.

■ DOMINANT CULTURAL PATTERNS

Muslins represent a growing social and political force that questions some of the West’s dominant cultural patterns, particularly the following:

- The relationship between God and humankind
- The role of morality in human affairs
- The role of technology and modernization
- The nature of progress

Using the categories developed to describe dominant U.S. cultural patterns, a description of Arab cultural patterns provides a useful comparison.

Worldview

As referred to before, worldview is the outlook that a culture has concerning the nature of the universe, the nature of humankind, the relationship between humanity and the universe, and other philosophical issues defining humans’ place in the cosmos.
In all aspects, Arab worldview is derived from Islam and expressed in its language. Islam draws no distinction between religion and the temporal aspects of life. According to Islam, everything in the world except humans is administered by God-made laws. The physical world has no choice but obedience to God. Humans alone possess the qualities of intelligence and choice. Humans can choose to submit to the Law of God and, in so doing, will be in harmony with all other elements of nature.

Islam holds that the world is totally real. It is incumbent upon every Muslim to seek knowledge in the broadest sense from the created universe, as it reveals knowledge and truth. Although Islam demands faith in God as the basis of knowledge and research, it encourages all methods of gaining knowledge, whether rational or experimental. This overwhelming quest for knowledge gave birth to, among other things, the modern sciences of mathematics, physics, chemistry, and medicine and triggered the Renaissance in Europe (Haiek, 1992).

Islam does not hinder private enterprise or condemn private possessions but does not tolerate selfish and greedy capitalism. This is an expression of the general philosophy of Islam of a moderate and middle but positive and effective course between the individual and the state—yet among the most egregious violators of human rights are the authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, such as Saddam Hussein's former Iraqi regime.

**Activity Orientation**

Earning a living through labor is not only a duty but also a virtue. Islam respects all kinds of work as long as there is no indecency or wrong involved. Whatever a person makes is one’s private possession that no one else may claim. Islam encourages Muslims to work, to engage in free enterprise, and to earn and possess, but the “owner” is God and the human is the trustee. This means the Muslim has a responsibility to invest and spend wisely. Just as Islam provides the values for work, it also guides other aspects of human activity. Islam encourages practicality. It does not encourage wishful thinking but does encourage one to accept and deal with the reality within one’s reach.

Adherence to Islam conflicts with uncritical acceptance of progress and change. Islam is conservative because of its adherence to the Koran.

**Time Orientation**

Saudi accounting of time shows a strong relationship to the cosmos. Saudi Arabia adheres to the traditional Hijrah (or Hegirian) calendar, which is based on
the cycles of the moon. A lunar month is the time between two new moons. The Hijrah year contains 12 months and so is 11 days shorter than the solar year. As a result, the months shift gradually from one season to another. Months in the Hijrah calendar have no relation to the seasons. The first day of the first year of the Hijrah calendar corresponds to July 15, 622, the date on which Muhammad fled Mecca for Medina to escape persecution at the hands of the Quraish. The Western method of designating Islamic dates is A.H. (anno Hegira).

The traditional system of accounting time during the day is tied to the rising and setting of the sun. International communications, however, forced Saudi Arabia to adopt Greenwich mean time. Saudi use of time shows a difference as well. Edward Hall (1983) has provided a useful way of describing how cultures use time. One way is to do one thing at a time, which Hall labels monochronic time; this is characteristic of Northern Europe and the United States. These cultures tend to try to plan the order of their use of time.

Doing many things at once is called polychronic time and is characteristic of Latin America and the Middle East. Polychronic time stresses the involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than adherence to schedules. In polychronic cultures, nothing is firm; plans can be changed up to the last minute. Arab markets and stores appear to be in a state of mass confusion as customers all try to get the attention of a single clerk. Arab government offices may have large reception areas where groups of people are all conducting affairs at the same time. As a polychronic culture, Arabs can interact with several people at once and still be immersed in each other’s business. Polychronic managers can supervise a large number of people. By their actions, polychronic cultures demonstrate that they are oriented to people, human relationships, and family.

**Human Nature Orientation**

Muslims believe that every person is born free of sin. When a person reaches the age of maturity, the individual becomes accountable for deeds and intentions. Thus, human nature is more good than evil, and the probability of positive change is greater than the probability of failure. God created only humans endowed with intelligence and choice. The purpose of human life is to worship God by knowing, loving, and obeying him.

**Relational Orientation**

As we have seen, Arab culture is group oriented. Social lives are organized around the family and tribal line. Loyalties are to family, clan, tribe, and
government in that order. Individuals subordinate personal needs to the family and the community.

Saudis live in large extended families, and devotion to the family is central. In contrast to Western culture, the concept of individuality is absent. There is a strong sense of identity with the family. Saudis see themselves in the context of family. Duty is not to oneself but to the group. Loyalty is first to the family. All family members suffer from the dishonorable act of any one of them. Honor is the collective property of the family. Islam unifies humanity on the basis of equality. There are no bounds of race, country, or wealth. All are born equal and should have equal civil, political, and spiritual rights. In this sense, Islam is an international religion. Central to the Arab culture’s social organization is family and Islam. Generous hospitality is a manner of honor and a sacred duty.

A man is considered a descendant only of his father and his paternal grandfather. A man’s honor resides in the number of sons he sires. A man belongs to his father’s family. Decisions are made by the family patriarch—not by the individual.

Role of Women

 Muslims would say that women in Arab cultures are equal to men. The prophet Muhammad revolutionized life for women in the 7th century by granting women access to the mosque, full participation in public affairs, and the right to inherit property. The rights and responsibilities of women are equal to those of men but not identical with them. In Arab cultures, equality and sameness are two quite different things. It is said that women are deprived in some ways but are compensated in other ways. Thus, Arab women are equal as independent human beings, equal in the pursuit of knowledge, and equal in the freedom of expression. An Arab woman who is a wife and mother is entitled to complete provision and total maintenance by her husband. She may work and own property herself.

A traditional Saudi woman does not go out alone. She speaks to no man other than her husband or blood kin. All public facilities are segregated by sex. Even the takeout counters at McDonald’s and Häagen-Dazs have two sections split by plywood dividers. Women who work outside the home work in capacities with other women exclusively. Saudi society is structured to keep a woman within strictly defined limits to protect her chastity.

Wearing the abaya and the veil is an old tradition to safeguard women from the actions of strange men. A woman is not permitted to expose any part of her body before strangers. Thus, the abaya and the veil represent honor, dignity, chastity, purity, and integrity. The great majority of Saudi women are willing to accept this position in society in return for the guarantee of security that Arab traditions provide. Those who want change want it within the context of the Arab culture.
COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

In summer 1990, there were no Western journalists and only a few thousand U.S. military advisers in Saudi Arabia. The war in the Persian Gulf changed that. By February 1991, more than 700 journalists and half a million U.S. troops were stationed there. Many U.S. soldiers spent up to 20 classroom hours learning about Arabs and Arab culture before being sent to Saudi Arabia. U.S. soldiers and Saudis started to get to know each other as individuals.

Political Unrest and Terrorism

Several barriers unique to the United States and Arab countries impede effective intercultural communication. One is the continuing political unrest in the region.

Islam emphasizes community over individual rights, and because the Koran provides rules for governing society, the line between religion and politics is blurred. Eight of the world’s most authoritarian monarchies are in Islamic countries. Three Arab states—Iraq, Libya, and Sudan—have at times been labeled “outlaw” states by the United States and other countries. And 15 of the 19 suspected hijackers in the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were Saudis. Saudi King Abdullah, in a 2005 interview on ABC-TV, said that the kingdom will fight terrorists and characterized Al-Qaida as the “work of the devil.”

The effect of the 2003 war with Iraq is yet to be fully known. Initially, the televised images of the rapid U.S. thrust into Baghdad were seen as occupation—not liberation. In 1917, the British took Baghdad from the Ottoman Turks. The British general Frederick Stanley Maude told the citizens the British came not as conquerors but as liberators. The British stayed as colonialists until 1932. Some saw the United States acting to protect oil reserves and to create governments that would not threaten Israel. And some view the war on terrorism as a war on Islam. A Pew Global Attitudes Project survey in six Arab countries in 2005 found that support for violence against civilian targets had fallen but that there remains substantial support for attacks in defense of Islam (Pew Global Attitudes Project, www.pewglobal.org). Conversely, some in the United States view Islam as the source of the terrorist problem.

Before and after the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf and the 2003 war with Iraq, the major issue between the United States and the Arab world was Israel. The U.S. recognized Israel as a country within minutes of its creation in 1948 and has been its staunchest ally ever since.
Westernization Versus Cultural Norms

The conflict that Westernization provides is a lingering problem. The West has technological and organizational superiority. Petrodollars brought a modern infrastructure to Saudi Arabia. To operate that infrastructure, Saudi Arabia relies on foreign workers: Up to one third of the residents and up to half of the workforce are foreigners with diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Westernization and the presence of the foreign workforce have put a strain on family life, caused women to question women’s role, and put corrupting pressures on the devout. Negative aspects of family life in U.S. culture such as divorce are not desired by Arabs. In the face of Westernization, Saudi Arabia remains committed to traditional values. That also poses a barrier to intercultural communication.

Stereotypes

However, the major barrier to intercultural communication between U.S. and Arab peoples appears to be the stereotypes each holds of the other. Shaheen (2001) contends that U.S. media have vilified Arab Muslims in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

Arabs tend to stereotype Western women as loose or immoral. Men in other cultures are stereotyped as well: the British as obnoxious, the Germans like a mechanized tank division, the French as impossible, and the Americans as cowboys—not all that different from how some in the United States stereotype the Arabs as Bedouins who roam the desert.

To counter Arab-language radio and television in the Middle East that U.S. officials say feeds public stereotypes against Israel and the United States, the United States funds Radio Sawa, which targets Arab youths younger than age 30. Sawa means “together” in Arabic. Its message is that the West and the Arab world are not as estranged as it may appear. The United States also funds the satellite television station Al Hurra, or the Free One.

FROM THE INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Western and Arab cultures have much contact with each other, and misunderstandings occur between them. Intercultural communication barriers, especially stereotypes and insufficient knowledge of each other’s cultures and languages, contribute to these continuing problems.