A Message from Margaret Nydell
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In the late morning of 11 September 2001, I walked from the Georgetown University campus in Washington, D.C., and crossed the Key Bridge into Virginia. I found many buildings evacuated, public transportation stopped, and all roads going past the Pentagon blocked off. I finally found a taxi and the driver assured me that he would help me get home to Crystal City by skirting around the Pentagon area and going far into Virginia. He did so, brilliantly, using small residential streets, until I was close enough to walk home. It took over an hour. He was Pakistani and, of course, Muslim. He was near tears (I was crying openly). He did not want to take any money. He said he was going to do this all day as a public service. I gave him money anyway and told him that if he didn't want to take it, he could donate it to Zakat charity (Islamic alms).

The shock of Black Tuesday brought all Americans together in a moment of clarity—we are one nation. I hope this clarity will persist, and will encourage us to seek greater understanding of other cultures. America is part of the world. We are all one family now. We are all in it together.
The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September left Americans and millions of others around the world bewildered as well as shocked and angry. Who could have committed such an atrocity? As the smoke cleared, a Saudi Arab, Osama Bin Laden, became identified as the chief perpetrator, commanding a network called Al Qaeda, which was unknown a few years ago. Its known members and accomplices are mostly Arabs and are all Muslims.

People all over the world are asking why. Why the United States? What could have motivated this act? The media, impelled as always to provide instant answers, came up with a variety of theories of varying degrees of merit. Some of them were based on popular misconceptions about Muslims, notably:

* This is a religion- and culture-based clash—the "Clash of Civilizations" theory. The Bin Laden group is characterized as representative of the thinking of the majority of Muslims.

* The attackers (and others who "hate America") are envious of the American "way of life." They want to change American values and eliminate American freedoms.

* These particular attackers were motivated by visions of rewards in Paradise because for them this was a Jihad (a so-called Holy War) against unbelievers.

All of these explanations are without merit. They do not conform to the facts. They confuse the motives of this particular terrorist group with the prevailing discontent in the Islamic world. But the Al Qaeda group did not come out of nothing; it is an aberrant, cult-like faction that grew out of the Mideast milieu. This terrorist act, although rooted in political grievances, was an expression of their anger, through terrorist violence, for its own sake.

Statements such as "They hate American freedom," and "They want to destroy America" do not satisfy for long—they are impossibly vague. As time passes, people will begin to identify reasons that make more sense. They will dig deeper, because unless the terrorists are all crazy or all evil, there must be better reasons. If the three statements above were true, they would lead us first to despair, then to defiance, and ultimately back to despair.

Perhaps the reasons include things we don't understand or even know about. For example, resentments against the U.S. in particular have grown out of a context with which few Americans are familiar. The resentments are not primarily against American wealth and power as such. Rather, they reflect profound dismay at how America is perceived to use its unique wealth and power when dealing with other countries and cultures.

Perceptions become realities to the people who hold them, and people who lack cross-cultural experience can easily misunderstand the attitudes and behaviors they confront. Americans, for example, are notoriously ill-informed about the Mideast. In turn, the average Mideastern individual may be keenly interested in American political policies but actually knows very little about Western societies. Each side has enormous misconceptions about the other.

Language is a huge barrier. If we accept the premise that all people express themselves more accurately and candidly in their own language, then we should be skeptical about statements being reported from conversations with foreigners, filtered through English or other languages. Unfortunately, too many of our Mideast experts and reporters do not speak the local languages (imagine an expert on the U.S. who did not speak English). Thus they have severely limited access to information, and they may gravitate toward people with whom they can communicate easily, people who sometimes misrepresent the thinking of the general populace.

There are many arguments that can be made on both sides, but one thing is certain: The language barrier accounts for much of the misunderstanding on both sides. In the thirty-five years I have been listening to political discussions in Arabic, among Arabs who were talking to one another and not to me, I have never heard resentment expressed about anything American except for foreign policy. Mideasterners in general care only about American activities that negatively affect their own lives.

*Al Qaeda arose from a puritanical version of Islam, Wahhabism, which is followed officially only in Saudi Arabia. It has become the prevailing interpretation of Islam among the Taliban group. The Wahhabi version of Islam forbids, for example, theaters and churches. It forbids the marking of graves. No alcohol or pork products may be imported. Publications are censored. Government-appointed officials enforce the law that requires all commercial establishments to close during prayer time. Wahhabs require women to cover their faces. Other Muslim countries generally do not follow these rules.
Consider the explanations offered by the terrorist leaders and others we have associated with terrorist movements. We must not ignore what they are saying; we must try to understand their statements, recognizing that this does not require agreeing with them.

* Bin Laden: “They violate our land and occupy it and steal the Muslims' possessions, and when faced with resistance, they call it terrorism. What America is tasting now is something insignificant compared with what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for more than eighty years.”

* Omar, leader of the Taliban: “America has created the evil that is attacking it...the U.S. should step back and review its policy.”

* A spokesman, Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt): “We want to understand, are you Americans in favor of human rights and freedom? Or is that the privilege of some people and not others?”

* Khamenei, president of Iran: “We are neither with you nor with the terrorists...They [America] expect the entire world to help them because their interests demand it. Do they ever care about others' interests? These are the characteristics that make America so hated in the world.”

None of these statements expresses threats that any group or faction is setting out to conquer the United States, force it to change its society, or impose its own ways of thinking on us. As far as I know, there have been no such statements. The September attacks were not aimed at targets like the Statue of Liberty but at structures that symbolize U.S. economic and military power.

How do Americans respond to this type of criticism? Righteous indignation is natural but not very productive over time. We need to examine such statements and try to understand the context out of which they come. It is not appeasement to search for knowledge we do not currently have. How can such acts be prevented from happening again if the real reasons for the acts are left undiscovered—or worse, ignored?

In my opinion one of the most tragic aspects of this trauma has been that thousands of families are bereaved, forever, and they do not know why this happened to them. Perhaps this book can help.

Understanding Arabs provides background and context for increasing cultural awareness, but it was written years before the problem of world terrorism assumed its present proportions. It was written primarily as a guide for Westerners, particularly Americans. To make the book more relevant to the current situation and to broaden the intended audience, I offer here some salient points that I believe must be considered as the world's people decide how as nations they will cope with this emergent threat. My purpose is to list what I believe to be objective facts rather than to interject recommendations or to suggest specific solutions.

* Mainstream Muslims do not approve of this terrorist group's acts. In fact they are horrified. The decision to engage in terrorism was the response of a singularly misguided cult-mentality group. Terrorism is in no way supported by the doctrines of the Islamic religion, which has always placed emphasis on human relationships and social justice. (There is much material on this topic, some of it available on the Internet.)

The Al Qaeda group have disguised themselves as immigrants, thus taking advantage of the good reputation Mideastern immigrants have earned. As a group, the immigrants are known to be industrious and family-centered. The terrorists betrayed these people. They posed as immigrants who wanted to share in the bounties of the West, but from the very beginning the terrorists had an entirely different agenda.

* Mainstream Muslims do not want to change Western (or other non-Muslim) cultures. Many Muslims do not want Western values to enter their own societies, but providing their own lives are not affected. Muslims (and Mideasterners in general) are not concerned with how Westerners and others structure their own lives. The vast majority do not resent Western prosperity and freedom; in fact, millions of them immigrate to the West because they admire many of the social values and want to participate in a Western way of life. They want their children to grow up free and with the possibility of prosperity.

* We must not allow a cult to represent an entire religion. The bombing of abortion clinics is not justified by mainstream Christian faith. Sectarian violence in Ireland does not represent mainstream Protestantism or Catholicism.
Muslims, Arabs, and other Mideasterners do not blame Americans as individuals. Their assumption, right or wrong, is that the people of the United States cannot be held personally responsible because they are generally unaware of their government's policies. Americans are known to other nations as uninformed. (Less obvious to Mideasterners is the fact that many Americans, at least prior to 11 September, also didn't care. Unlike the terrorists' sympathizers, most Mideasterners have genuinely grieved for innocent lives lost in this or in any violent warlike act. They are like people everywhere.

The 11 September attack was not a real Jihad. The term Jihad, as used in mainstream Islam, is misunderstood. Its primary meaning is not "Holy War," although that has become its meaning in Western languages. Most pertinent here, a true Jihad must be a response to an attack or threat made by non-Muslims toward the Muslim community. Muslims may not initiate a Jihad.

The terrorists are trying to promote enmity between Islam and Christianity. They are misusing the term Jihad just as they misuse terms like Crusade, infidel, and unbeliever. The term Jihad has become politicized and is constantly being invoked and misused for political purposes. During the war between Iraq and Iran, for example, each declared a Jihad against the other.

The Koran and other Muslim sacred scriptures, like those of other religions, are long, complex, and open to wide-ranging interpretations. Emphasis on details such as presumed rewards in Paradise for people who die in a Jihad are, frankly, irrelevant and insulting to most educated Muslims. Muslims are not religiously motivated in any way to harm or kill non-Muslims. As with any body of sacred scripture, a selective choice of quotes can "prove" anything, including completely opposite ideas.

Focusing on Al Qaeda and Islamic terrorists is too narrow a goal. It will not end the threat. These terrorists are short-term enemies, current targets against whom the U.S. now wages war. But even if they are eliminated, the root causes of resentment will continue to exist. The U.S. must reverse the negative perceptions about itself, and this cannot be done by force. No security is effective enough to prevent an attack by a person who is willing to commit suicide. Long-term strategic thinking is needed.

Sweeping statements that are frightening but do not suggest a remedy are not a solution. What use are statements such as "All humanity is at risk" and "You will never take down this great nation" and "What the United States has done to attract violent attacks is to be strong, wealthy, and successful"? If Americans blindly declare that the terrorists hate them for their benevolence, successes, and innocence, where does it lead? It does not help in framing an appropriate response.

If the United States and the world continue to ignore accusations, especially those they do not fully understand, they do so at their own peril. What brings forth statements that America is "morally corrupt and hypocritical"? Why is America accused of "supporting state-sponsored terrorism"? Why is there cheering when someone says "Americans never see the blood"? These are the types of statements that must be thoughtfully considered if there is to be any hope of a just and lasting peace.

Thousands of innocent citizens have died. More may follow. What should be done?
When we set ourselves the task of coming to a better understanding of groups of people and their culture, it is useful to begin by identifying their most basic beliefs and values. It is these beliefs and values which determine their outlook on life and govern their social behavior. We have to make broad generalizations in order to compare groups of people—here, Arabs and Westerners. Bear in mind that this generalizing can never apply to all individuals in a group; the differences among Arabs of some twenty nations are many, although all are achieving a public national identity.

Westerners tend to believe, for instance, that the individual is the focal point of social existence, that laws apply equally to everyone, that people have a right to certain kinds of privacy, and that the environment can be controlled by humans through technological means. These beliefs have a strong influence on what Westerners think about the world around them and how they behave toward each other.

Arabs characteristically believe that many, if not most, things in life are controlled, ultimately, by fate rather than by humans; that everyone loves children; that wisdom increases with age; and that the inherent personalities of men and women are vastly different. These beliefs play a powerful role in determining the nature of Arab culture.
One might wonder whether there is, in fact, such a thing as Arab culture, given the diversity and spread of the Arab World. Looking at a map, one realizes how much is encompassed by the phrase "the Arab World." The twenty Arab countries cover considerable territory, much of which is desert or wilderness. Sudan is larger than all of Western Europe, yet its population is far less than that of France; Saudi Arabia is larger than Texas and Alaska combined, yet has fewer than twenty million people. Egypt, with sixty-five million people, is 95 percent desert. One writer has stated, "A true map of the Arab World would show it as an archipelago: a scattering of fertile islands through a void of sand and sea. The Arabic word for desert is sahara and it both divides and joins." The political diversity among the Arab countries is also notable; governmental systems include monarchies, military governments, and socialist republics.

But despite these differences, the Arabs are more homogeneous than Westerners in their outlook on life. All Arabs share basic beliefs and values which cross national and class boundaries. Social attitudes have remained relatively constant because Arab society is conservative and demands conformity from its members. Arabs' beliefs are influenced by Islam, even if they are not Muslims (many family and social practices are cultural, some are pre-Islamic); child-rearing practices are nearly identical; and the family structure is essentially the same. Arabs are not as mobile as people in the West, and they have a high regard for tradition. One observer summarized the commonalities shared by all Arab groups: the role of the family, the class structure, religious and political behavior, patterns of living, the presence of change, and the impact of economic development on people's lives.²

Initially, foreigners may feel that Arabs are difficult to understand, that their behavior patterns are not logical. In fact, their behavior is quite comprehensible, even predictable. For the most part it conforms to certain patterns which make Arabs consistent in their reactions to other people.

It is important for the foreigner to be aware of these cultural patterns, to distinguish them from individual traits. By becoming aware of patterns, one can achieve a better understanding of what to expect and thereby cope more easily. The following lists of Arab values, religious attitudes, and self-perceptions are central to the fundamental patterns of Arab culture and will be examined in detail in subsequent chapters.

**Basic Arab Values**

- A person's dignity, honor, and reputation are of paramount importance, and no effort should be spared to protect them, especially one's honor. Honor (and shame) is often viewed as collective, pertaining to the entire family or group.
- It is important to behave at all times in a way which will create a good impression on others.
- Loyalty to one's family takes precedence over personal needs.
- Social class and family background are the major determining factors of personal status, followed by individual character and achievement.

**Basic Arab Religious Attitudes**

- Everyone believes in God, acknowledges His power and has a religious affiliation.
- Humans cannot control all events; some things depend on God's will, that is, fate.
- Piety is one of the most admirable characteristics in a person.
- There should be no separation between church and state; religion should be taught in schools and promoted by governments (this is the Islamic view, not necessarily shared by Arab Christians).
Established religious beliefs and practices are sacrosanct; liberal interpretations which threaten them must be rejected.

**Basic Arab Self-Perceptions**

- Arabs are generous, humanitarian, polite, and loyal. Several studies have demonstrated that Arabs see these traits as characteristic of themselves and as distinguishing them from other groups.

- Arabs have a rich cultural heritage, as is illustrated by their contributions to religion, philosophy, literature, medicine, architecture, art, mathematics, and the natural sciences (some of which were made by non-Arabs living within the Islamic Empire). Most of these outstanding accomplishments are largely unknown and unappreciated in the West.

- Although there are many differences among Arab countries, the Arabs are a clearly defined cultural group and perceive themselves as members of the Arab Nation (al-umma al-arabiyya).

- The Arab peoples have been victimized and exploited by the West. For them, the experience of the Palestinians represents the most painful and obvious example. The Gulf War may be viewed (in part) as a Western action to force Iraq's compliance regarding an internationally recognized border, in contrast to nonenforcement in the case of Israel.

- Indiscriminate imitation of Western culture, by weakening traditional family ties and social and religious values, will have a corrupting influence on Arab society.

- Arabs are misunderstood and wrongly characterized by most Westerners. Many people in the West are basically anti-Arab and anti-Muslim.

Arabs feel that they are often portrayed in the Western media as excessively wealthy, irrational, sensual, and violent and that there is little countering information about ordinary people who live family- and work-centered lives on a modest scale. One observer has remarked, "The Arabs remain one of the few ethnic groups who can still be slandered with impunity in America." Another has stated, "In general, the image of the Arabs in British popular culture seems to be characterized by prejudice, hostility, and resentment. The mass media in Britain have failed to provide an adequate representation of points of view for the consumer to judge a real world of the Arabs." Muslims as a whole are broadly stereotyped in the media, as an article in the Christian Science Monitor illustrates.

Today, despite multicultural awareness and education, stereotypes of Muslims persist in popular media. Islam is often equated with violence; Muslims are reduced to film clips of fist-shaking extremists. Yet the image misrepresents the majority of Muslims in the U.S.—who are successful, educated, and socially conservative.

The same article reported incidents after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993.

The media riptide from the bombing had a sobering effect on the Muslim community. Some 227 incidents of harassment ranging from verbal threats to assault on Muslims were reported. "We all phoned each other for support. I'll never forget it," says Omar Dajani, owner of Falafel King restaurant in Orlando, Florida.

At a 1988 conference titled "Information and Misinformation in Euro-Arab Relations," this statement was made by Dr. Chedli Khibi, Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, in his opening address:
In many areas of Western Europe the image of the Arab has greatly suffered, especially in recent decades, and mainly on account of media activity. Whether it be the stereotypes of the Gulf Arab, the disparaging way in which workers from the Maghreb are depicted, or the indiscriminate identification of Palestinian fighters as terrorists devoid of an ideal, the imagery of the Arabs in certain organs of the press, or even in certain widely-read novels, inspires neither sympathy nor esteem.

3 Melikian, “Saudi College Students.” Melikian has studied the modal personality of some Arab students, searching for traits to define “national character.” I administered a word-association test to a group of Lebanese university students in 1972. The most common responses associated with the word Arabs were “generous,” “brave,” “honorable,” and “loyal.” About half of the forty-three respondents added “misunderstood.”
4 This subject is thoroughly discussed by Omran in *Population in the Arab World*, in the chapter, “The Contribution of the Arabs,” 13-41.
5 Shelley Slade, “The Image of the Arab in America: Analysis of a Poll of American Attitudes,” *Middle East Journal* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 143. Many of the stereotypes about the Middle East which are taught in schools or depicted in American media are discussed in *The Middle East*, edited by Jonathan Friedlander (see the bibliography).

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Friends and Strangers

The Concept of Friendship

Relations between people are very personalized in the Arab culture. Friendships start and develop quickly. But the Arab concept of friendship, with its rights and duties, is quite different from that in the West.

Westerners, especially Americans, tend to think of a friend as someone whose company they enjoy. A friend can be asked for a favor or for help if necessary, but it is considered poor form to cultivate a friendship primarily for what can be gained from that person or his or her position. Among Arabs, also, a friend is someone whose company one enjoys. However, equally important to the relationship is the duty of a friend to give help and do favors to the best of his or her ability.

Differences in expectations can lead to misunderstandings and, for both parties, a feeling of being let down. The Westerner feels “set up” to do favors, and the Arab concludes that no Westerner can be a “true friend.” In order to avoid such feelings, we must bear in mind what is meant by both sides when one person calls another “friend.”
**Reciprocal Favors**

For an Arab, good manners require that one never openly refuse a request from a friend. This does not mean that the favor must actually be done, but rather that the response must not be stated as a direct no. If a friend asks you for a favor, do it if you can—this keeps the friendship flourishing. If it is unreasonable, illegal, or too difficult, the correct form is to listen carefully and suggest that while you are doubtful about the outcome, you will at least try to help. Later, you express your regrets and offer to do something else in the future instead. In this way you have not openly refused a favor, and your face-to-face encounters have remained pleasant.

I once talked to an Egyptian university student who told me that he was very disappointed in his American professor. The professor had gratefully accepted many favors while he was getting settled in Egypt, including assistance in finding a maid and buying furniture. When the Egyptian asked him to use his influence in helping him obtain a graduate fellowship in the United States, the professor told him that there was no point in trying because his grades were not high enough to be competitive. The Egyptian took this as a personal affront and felt bitter that the professor did not care about him enough to help him work toward a better future. The more appropriate cross-cultural response by the professor would have been to make helpful gestures; for example, helping the student obtain information about fellowships, assisting him with applications, and offering encouragement—even if he was not optimistic about the outcome.

A similar incident happened to an American military officer in Morocco, who became angry when his Moroccan neighbor asked him to buy some items from the local military exchange (PX), which is illegal. When he bluntly refused, his neighbor was offended and the friendship was severely damaged.

In Western culture actions are far more important and more valued than words. In the Arab culture, an oral promise has its own value as a response. If an action does not follow, the other person cannot be held entirely responsible for a "failure."

If you fail to carry out a request, you will notice that no matter how hopeful your Arab friend was that you would succeed, he or she will probably accept your regrets graciously without asking precisely why the favor could not be done (which could embarrass you and possibly force you to admit a failure). You should be willing to show the same forbearance and understanding in inquiring about one of your requests. Noncommittal answers probably mean there is no hope. This is one of the most frustrating cultural patterns Westerners confront in the Arab World. You must learn to work with this idea rather than fighting against it.

When Arabs give a yes answer to your request, they are not necessarily certain that the action will or can be carried out. Etiquette demands that your request have a positive response. The result is a separate matter. A positive response to a request is a declaration of intention and an expression of goodwill—no more than that. Yes should not always be taken literally. You will hear phrases such as Inshallah (If God wills) used in connection with promised actions. This is called for culturally, and it sometimes results in lending a further degree of uncertainty to the situation.

In his controversial book *The Arab Mind*, Dr. Raphael Patai discusses this characteristic in some detail.

The adult Arab makes statements which express threats, demands, or intentions, which he does not intend to carry out but which, once uttered, relax emotional tension, give psychological relief and at the same time reduce the pressure to engage in any act aimed at realizing the verbalized goal.... Once the intention of doing something is verbalized, this verbal formulation itself leaves in the mind of the speaker the impression that he has done something about the issue at
hand, which in turn psychologically reduces the importance of following it up by actually translating the stated intention into action. There is no confusion between words and action, but rather a psychologically conditioned substitution of words for action. The verbal statement of a threat or an intention (especially when it is uttered repeatedly and exaggerated) achieves such importance that the question of whether or not it is subsequently carried out becomes of minor significance.¹

Sometimes an Arab asks another person for something and then adds the phrase, “Do this for my sake.” This phrasing sounds odd to a foreigner, especially if the persons involved do not know each other well, because it appears to imply a very close friendship. In fact, the expression means that the person requesting the action is acknowledging that he will consider himself indebted to return the favor in the future. “For my sake” is very effective in Arab culture when added to a request.

An Arab expects loyalty from anyone who is considered a friend. The friend is therefore not justified in becoming indignant when asked for favors, since it should be understood from the beginning that giving and receiving favors is an inherent part of the relationship. Arabs will not form or perpetuate a friendship unless they also like and respect you; their friendship is not as calculated or self-serving as it may appear. The practice of cultivating a person only in order to use him or her is no more acceptable among Arabs than it is among Westerners.

**Introductions**

Arabs quickly determine another person’s social status and connections when they meet. They will, in addition, normally give more information about themselves than Westerners do. They may indulge in a little (or a lot of) self-praise and praise of their relatives and family and present a detailed account of their social connections. When Westerners meet someone for the first time, they tend to confine personal information to generalities about their education, profession, and interests.

To Arabs, information about family and social connections is important, possibly even more important than the information about themselves. Family information is also what they want from you. They may find your response so inadequate that they wonder if you are hiding something, while your impression is that much of what they say is too detailed and largely irrelevant. Both parties give the information they think the other wants to know.

Your Arab friends’ discourse about their “influence network” is not bragging, and it is not irrelevant. This information may turn out to be highly useful if you are ever in need of high-level personal contacts, and you should appreciate the offer of potential assistance from insiders in the community. Listen carefully to what they have to say.

**Visiting Patterns**

Arabs feel that good friends should see each other often, at least every few days, and they offer many invitations to each other. Westerners who have Arab friends sometimes feel overwhelmed by the frequent contact and wonder if they will ever have any privacy. There is no concept of privacy among Arabs. In translation, the Arabic word that comes closest to privacy means “loneliness”¹.

A British resident in Beirut once complained that he and his wife had almost no time to be alone—Arab friends and neighbors kept dropping in unexpectedly and often stayed late. He said, “I have one friend who telephoned and said, ‘I haven’t seen you anywhere. Where have you been for the last three days?’”

By far the most popular form of entertainment in the Arab World is conversation. Arabs enjoy long discussions over
shared meals or many cups of coffee or tea. You will be expected to reciprocate invitations, although you do not have to keep pace precisely with the number you receive. If you plead for privacy or become too slack in socializing, people will wonder if someone has offended you, if you don't like them, or if you are sick. You can say that you have been very busy, but resorting to this too often without sufficient explanation may be taken as an affront. "Perhaps," your friends may think, "you are just too busy for us."

I once experienced a classic example of the Arab (and especially Egyptian) love of companionship in Cairo. After about three hours at a party where I was surrounded by loud music and louder voices, I stepped onto the balcony for a moment of quiet and fresh air. One of the women noticed and followed immediately, asking, "Is anything wrong? Are you angry at someone?"

A young Arab American was quoted as saying "In the United States...you can have more personal space, I guess is about the best way to put it. You have privacy when you want privacy. And in Arab society they don't really understand the idea that you want to be alone. That means that you're mad, you're angry at something, or you're upset and you should have somebody with you."

If you are not willing to increase the frequency or intensity of your personal contacts, you may hurt your friends' feelings and damage the relationship. Ritual and essentially meaningless expressions used in Western greeting and leave-taking, such as "We've got to get together sometime," may well be taken literally, and you have approximately a one-week grace period in which to follow up with an invitation before your sincerity is questioned.

Some Westerners, as they learn about the intricate and time-consuming relationships which develop among friends, decide that they would rather keep acquaintances at a distance. If you accept no favors, you will eventually be asked for none, and you will have much more time to yourself, but you will soon find that you have no Arab friends. Arab friends are generous with their time and efforts to help you, are willing to inconvenience themselves for you, and are concerned about your welfare. They will go to great lengths to be loyal and dependable. If you spend much time in an Arab country, it would be a great personal loss if you develop no Arab friendships.

Business Friendships

In business relationships personal contacts are much valued and quickly established. Arabs do not fit easily into impersonal roles, such as the "business colleague" role (with no private socializing offered or expected) or the "supervisor/employee" roles (where there may be cordial relations during work hours but where personal concerns are not discussed). For Arabs, all acquaintances are potential friends.

A good personal relationship is the most important single factor in doing business successfully with Arabs. A little light conversation before beginning a business discussion can be extremely effective in setting the right tone. Usually Arabs set aside a few minutes at the beginning of a meeting to inquire about each other's health and recent activities. If you are paying a business call on an Arab, it is best to let your host guide the conversation in this regard—if he is in a hurry, he may bring up the matter of business almost immediately; if not, you can tell by a lull in the conversational amenities when it is time to bring up the purpose of your visit. If an Arab is paying a call on you, don't be in such a rush to discuss business that you appear brusque.

The manager of the sales office of a British industrial equipment firm based in Kuwait told me about his initial inability to select effective salesmen. He learned that the best salesmen were not necessarily the most dapper, eager, or efficient, but were instead those who were relaxed, personable, and patient enough to establish friendly personal relations with their clients.
You will find it useful to become widely acquainted in business circles and, if you learn to mix business with pleasure, you will soon see how the latter helps the former proceed. In the end, personal contacts lead to more efficiency than following rules and regulations. This is proven over and over again, when a quick telephone call to the right person cuts through lengthy procedures and seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

**Office Relations**

When Westerners work with the same people every day in an office, they sometimes become too casual about greetings. Arabs are conscientious about greeting everyone they see with “Good morning” or “Good afternoon” if it is the first meeting of the day, and they will go out of their way to say “Welcome back” when you return after an absence. Some Westerners omit greetings, especially if they are distracted or hurried, and Arab coworkers invariably take notice. They usually understand and are not personally offended, but they interpret it as a lack of good manners.

An American nurse at a hospital in Taif, Saudi Arabia, had an enlightening experience on one occasion when she telephoned her Saudi supervisor to report arrangements for an emergency drill. She was enumerating the steps being taken when the Saudi said, “That’s fine, but just a moment—first of all, how are you today?”

If you bring food or snacks into the office, it is a good idea to bring enough to share with everyone. Arabs place great value on hospitality and would be surprised if you ate or drank alone, without at least making an offer to share with everyone. The offer is a ritual, and if it is obviously your lunch or just enough food for yourself, it is usually politely refused; it depends on the situation.

Remember to inquire about business colleagues and coworkers if they have been sick, and ask about their personal concerns from time to time. Arabs do mention the things which are happening in their lives, usually good things like impending trips, weddings, and graduations. You do not need to devote much time to this; it is the gesture that counts.

In Arab offices supervisors and managers are expected to give praise to their employees from time to time, to reassure them that their work is noticed and appreciated. Direct praise, such as “You are an excellent employee and a real asset to this office,” may be a little embarrassing to a Westerner, but Arabs give it frequently. You may hear “I think you are a wonderful person, and I am so glad you are my friend” or “You are so intelligent and knowledgeable; I really admire you.” Statements like this are meant sincerely and are very common.

I was once visiting an American engineering office in Riyadh and fell into conversation with a Jordanian translator. I asked him how he liked his work. He answered in Arabic so that the Americans would not understand, “I’ve been working here for four years. I like it fine, but I wish they would tell me when my work is good, not just when they find something wrong.” Some Westerners assume that employees know they are appreciated simply because they are kept on the job, whereas Arab employees (and friends, for that matter) expect and want praise when they feel they have earned it. Even when the Westerner does offer praise, it may be insufficient in quantity or quality for the Arab counterpart.

**Criticism**

Arab employees usually feel that criticism of their work, if it is phrased too blantly, is a personal insult. The foreign supervisor is well advised to take care when giving criticism. It should be indirect and include praise of any good points first, accompanied by assurances of high regard for the individual. To preserve the person’s dignity, avoid criticism in front of others, unless an intermediary is used (see below for further
discussion of intermediaries). The concept of constructive criticism is truly not translatable into Arabic—forthright criticism is almost always taken as personal and destructive.

The need for care in criticism is well illustrated by an incident which occurred in an office in Amman. An American supervisor was discussing a draft report at some length with his Jordanian employee. He asked that more than half of it be rewritten, adding, “You must have entirely misunderstood what I wanted.” The Jordanian was deeply hurt and said to one of the other employees, “I wonder why he doesn’t like me.” A far better approach would have been, “You are doing excellent work here, and this is a good report. We need to revise a few things, however; let’s look at this again and work through it together, so we can make it even better.”

I remember overhearing a dramatic confrontation in an office in Tunis, when an American supervisor reprimanded a Tunisian employee because he continually arrived late. This was done in front of other employees, some of whom were his subordinates. The Tunisian flared up in anger and responded, “I am from a good family! I know myself and my position in society!” Clearly he felt that his honor had been threatened and was not at all concerned with addressing the issue at hand.

In her perceptive book Temperament and Character of the Arabs, Dr. Sania Hamady writes:

Pride is one of the main elements on which Arab individualism rests, since it is sheer being which is primarily respected. To establish a good rapport with an Arab one must be aware of the fact that foremost in the Arab’s view of the self is his self-esteem. It is important to pay tribute to it and to avoid offending it. The Arab is very touchy and his self-esteem is easily bruised. It is hard for him to be objective about himself or to accept calmly someone else’s criticism of him…. Facts should not be presented to him nakedly; they should be masked so as to avoid any molestation of his inner self, which should be protected.³

Intermediaries

The designation of one person to act as an intermediary between two other persons is very common in Arab society. Personal influence is helpful in getting decisions made and things done, so people often ask someone with influence to represent them (in Arabic an intermediary is called a wassta).

If you are a manager, you may find that some employees prefer to deal with you through another person, especially if that person knows you well. An intermediary may serve as a representative of someone with a request or as a negotiator between two parties in a dispute.

Mediation or representation through a third party also saves face in the event that a request is not granted, and it gives the petitioner confidence that maximum influence has been brought to bear. You may want to initiate this yourself if an unpleasant confrontation with someone appears necessary. But because you, as an outsider, could easily make a mistake in selecting an intermediary, it is best to consult with other Arab employees (of a higher rank than the person with whom you have a conflict).

Foreign companies have local employees on their staff whose job is to maintain liaison with government offices and to help obtain permits and clearances. The better acquainted the employee is with government officials, the faster the work will be done and the better the service will be. Arab “government relations” employees are indispensable; no foreigner could hope to be as effective with highly placed officials.

You will observe the wide use of intermediaries in Arab political disputes. Mediators, such as those who undertake shuttle diplomacy, are often essential in establishing the personal contact that makes consensus possible. Their success depends on the quality of the personal relationship they establish with the parties involved. If mediators are recognized by both parties as being honorable and trustworthy,
they have already come a long way in solving the problem. That is why some negotiators and diplomats are far more effective than others; personalities and perceptions, not issues, determine their relative success.

An outstanding example of diplomatic success due, in large part, to personality may be seen in Henry Kissinger's achievements when he served as a negotiator between the leaders of Syria, Egypt, and Israel after the 1973 War. He established personal friendships with the individuals involved: Anwar Sadat's remark that "Dr. Henry is my friend" is very revealing. These friendships contributed greatly to Kissinger's ability to discuss complicated issues and keep a dialogue going, something no one had managed to do before.

On the political level, you will constantly see situations in which an individual Arab leader attempts to mediate disputes among other Arab governments.

Private and Public Manners

In the Arab way of thinking, people are clearly divided into friends and strangers. The manners required when dealing with each of these groups are very different. With friends and personal acquaintances, it is essential to be polite, honest, generous, and helpful at all times. When dealing with strangers, "public manners" are applied and do not call for the same kind of considerateness.

It is accepted practice to do such things as crowd into lines, push, drive aggressively, and overcharge tourists. If you are a stranger to the person or persons you are dealing with, then they will respond to you as they do to any stranger. Resenting this public behavior will not help you function better in Arab societies, and judging individuals as ill-mannered because of it will inhibit the development of needed relationships.

All over the Arab World people drive fast, cross lanes without looking, turn corners from the wrong lane, and honk

their horns impatiently. Yet, if you catch a driver's eye or ask his or her permission, the driver will graciously motion for you to pull ahead or will give you the right-of-way.

While shopping in a tourist shop in Damascus, I watched a busload of tourists buy items at extremely high prices. When they were gone, I chatted with the shopkeeper for a few minutes and bought some things. After I had left, a small boy came running after me—the shop owner had sent him to return a few more pennies in change.

Whenever I am in a crowded airport line, I try to make light conversation with the people around me. I have never had anyone with whom I talked try to push in front of me; in fact, they often motion for me to precede them.

Personal contact makes all the difference. If you feel jostled while you are waiting in line, the gentle announcement "I was here first" or "Please wait in line" will usually produce an apology, and the person will at least stand behind you. Keep calm, avoid scenes, and remember that none of the behavior is directed at you personally.

Emotion and Logic

How people deal with emotion or what value they place on objective versus subjective behavior is culturally conditioned. While objectivity is given considerable emphasis in Western culture, the opposite is true in Arab culture.

Objectivity and Subjectivity

Westerners are taught that objectivity, the examination of facts in a logical way without the intrusion of emotional bias, is the mature and constructive approach to human affairs. One of the results of this belief is that in Western culture, subjectivity—a willingness to allow personal feelings and emotions to influence one's view of events—represents immaturity. Arabs believe differently. They place a high value on the display of emotion, sometimes to the embarrassment or discomfort of foreigners. It is not uncommon to hear Westerners label this behavior as immature, imposing their own values on what they have observed.

A British office manager in Saudi Arabia once described to me his problems with a Palestinian employee. "He is too sensitive, too emotional about everything," he said. "The first thing he should do is grow up." While Westerners label Arabs as too emotional, Arabs find Westerners cold and inscrutable.
Arabs consciously reserve the right to look at the world in a subjective way, particularly if a more objective assessment of a situation would bring to mind a too painful truth. There is nothing to gain, for example, by pointing out Israel's brilliant achievements in land reclamation or in comparing the quality of Arab-made consumer items with imported ones. Such comments will generally not lead to a substantive discussion of how Arabs could benefit by imitating others; more likely, Arab listeners will become angry and defensive, insisting that the situation is not as you describe it and bringing up issues such as Israeli occupation of Arab lands or the moral deterioration of technological societies.

**Fatalism**

Fatalism, or a belief that people are helpless to control events, is part of traditional Arab culture. It has been much overemphasized by Westerners, however, and is far more prevalent among traditional, uneducated Arabs than it is among the educated elite today. It nevertheless still needs to be considered, since it is often encountered in one form or another.

For Arabs, fatalism is based on the belief that God has direct and ultimate control of all that happens. If something goes wrong, people can absolve themselves of blame or justify doing nothing to make improvements or changes by assigning the cause to God's will. Indeed, too much self-confidence about controlling events is considered a sign of arrogance tinged with blasphemy. The legacy of fatalism in Arab thought is most apparent in the ritual phrase “Inshallah,” noted in chapter 2.

Western thought has essentially rejected fatalism. Though God is believed by many Westerners to intervene in human affairs, Greek logic, the humanism of the Enlightenment, and cause-and-effect empiricism have inclined the West to view humans as having the ability to control their environment and destiny.

**What Is Reality?**

Reality is what you perceive—if you believe something exists, it is real to you. If you select or rearrange facts and if you repeat these to yourself often enough, they eventually become reality.

The cultural difference between Westerners and Arabs arises not from the fact that this selection takes place, but from how each makes the selection. Arabs are more likely to allow subjective perceptions to determine what is real and to direct their actions. This is a common source of frustration for Westerners, who often fail to understand why people in the Middle East act as they do. This is not to say that Arabs cannot be objective—they can. But there is often a difference in outward behavior.

If Arabs feel that something threatens their personal dignity, they may be obliged to deny it, even in the face of facts to the contrary. A Westerner can point out flaws in their arguments, but that is not the point. If they do not want to accept the facts, they will reject them and proceed according to their own view of the situation. Arabs will rarely admit to errors openly if doing so will cause them to lose face. To Arabs, honor is more important than facts.

An American woman in Tunis realized, when she was packing to leave, that some of her clothes and a suitcase were missing. She confronted the maid, who insisted that she had no idea where they could be. When the American found some of her clothes under a mattress, she called the company's Tunisian security officer. They went to the maid's house and found more missing items. The maid was adamant that she could not account for the items being in her home. The security officer said that he felt the matter should not be reported to the police; the maid's humiliation in front of her neighbors was sufficient punishment.

An American diplomat recounted an incident which he had observed in Jerusalem. An Israeli entered a small Arab-
owned cafe and asked for some watermelon, pointing at it and using the Hebrew word. The Arab proprietor responded that it should be called by the Arabic name, but the Israeli insisted on the Hebrew name. The Arab took offense at this point. He paused, shrugged, and instead of serving his customer, said, "There isn't any!"

At a conference held to discuss Arab and American cultures, Dr. Laura Nader related this incident.

The mistake people in one culture often make in dealing with another culture is to transfer their functions to the other culture's functions. A political scientist, for example, went to the Middle East to do some research one summer and to analyze Egyptian newspapers. When he came back, he said to me, "But they are all just full of emotions. There is no data in these newspapers." I said, "What makes you think there should be?"

Another way of influencing the perception of reality is by the choice of descriptive words and names. The Arabs are very careful in naming or referring to places, people, and events; slogans and labels are popular and provide an insight into how things are viewed. The Arabs realize that names have a powerful effect on perception.

There is a big psychological gap between opposing labels like "Palestine/Israel," "The West Bank/Judea and Samaria," and "freedom fighters" ("hero martyrs" if they are killed)/terrorists." The 1967 Arab-Israeli War is called in Arabic The War of the Setback—in other words, it was not a "defeat." The 1973 War is called The War of Ramadan or The Sixth of October War, not The Yom Kippur War.

Be conscious of names and labels—they matter a great deal to the Arabs. If you attend carefully to what you hear in conversations with Arabs and what is written in their newspapers, you will note how precisely they select descriptive words and phrases. You may find yourself being corrected by Arab acquaintances ("It is the Arabian Gulf, not the Persian Gulf," for example), and you will soon learn which terms are acceptable and which are not.

The Human Dimension

Arabs look at life in a personalized way. They are concerned about people and feelings and place emphasis on human factors when they make decisions or analyze events. They feel that Westerners are too prone to look at events in an abstract or theoretical way and that most Westerners lack sensitivity toward people.

In the Arab World, a manager or official is always willing to reconsider a decision, regulation, or problem in view of someone's personal situation. Any regulation can be modified or avoided by someone who is sufficiently persuasive, particularly if the request is justified on the grounds of unusual personal need. This is unlike most Western societies, which emphasize the equal application of laws to all citizens. In the Arab culture, people are more important than rules.

T. E. Lawrence stated it succinctly: "Arabs believe in persons, not in institutions." They have a long tradition of personal appeal to authorities for exceptions to rules. This is commonly seen when they attempt to obtain special permits, exemptions from fees, acceptance into a school when preconditions are not met, or employment when qualifications are inadequate. They do not accept predetermined standards if these standards are a personal inconvenience.

Arabs place great value on personal interviews and on giving people the opportunity to state their case. They are not comfortable filling out forms or dealing with an organization impersonally. They want to know the name of the top person who makes the final decision and are always confident that the rejection of a request may be reversed if top-level personal contact can be made. Frequently, that is exactly what happens.
Persuasion

Arabs and Westerners place a different value on certain types of statements, which may lead to decreased effectiveness on both sides when they negotiate with each other. Arabs respond much more readily to personalized arguments than to attempts to impose "logical" conclusions. When you are trying to make a persuasive case in your discussions with Arabs, you will find it helpful to supplement your arguments with personal comments. You can refer to your mutual friendship or emphasize the effect which approval or disapproval of the action will have on other people.

In the Middle East, negotiation and persuasion have been developed into a fine art. Participants in negotiations enjoy long, spirited discussions and are usually not in any hurry to conclude them. Speakers feel free to add to their points of argument by demonstrating their verbal cleverness, using their personal charm, applying personal pressure, and engaging in personal appeals for consideration of their point of view.

The display of emotion also plays its part; indeed, one of the most commonly misunderstood aspects of Arab communication involves their "display" of anger. Arabs are not usually as angry as they appear to be. Raising the voice, repeating points, even pounding the table for emphasis may sound angry, but in the speaker's mind, they merely indicate sincerity. A Westerner overhearing such a conversation (especially if it is in Arabic) may wrongly conclude that an argument is taking place. Emotion connotes deep and sincere concern for the substance of the discussion.

Foreigners often miss the emotional dimension in their cross-cultural transactions with Arabs. A British businessman once found that he and his wife were denied reservations on a plane because the Arab ticketing official took offense at the manner in which he was addressed. The fact that seats were available was not an effective counterargument. But when the Arab official noticed that the businessman's wife had begun to cry, he gave way and provided them with seats.

Arabs usually include human elements in their arguments. In arguing the Palestine issue, for instance, they have often placed the greatest emphasis on the suffering of individuals rather than on points of law or a recital of historical events. This is beginning to change, however, with a growing awareness of how to relate effectively to the way Westerners think and argue.

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2 T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (New York: Doubleday, 1926), 24.
Getting Personal

The concept of what constitutes personal behavior or a personal question is culturally determined, and there are marked differences between Westerners and Arabs. This is a subject which is rarely discussed openly, since how one defines what is personal or private seems so natural to each group. On the whole, Westerners feel that Arabs become too personal, too soon.

Personal Questions

Arabs like to discuss money and may ask what you paid for things or what your salary is (this is more common among less Westernized people). If you don’t wish to give out the information, consider responding without answering. You can speak on the subject of money in general—how hard it is to stay ahead, high prices, inflation. After a few minutes of this, the listener will realize that you do not intend to give a substantive answer. This is the way Arabs would respond if they were asked a question they did not really want to answer.

If you are unmarried or if you are married and childless, or have no sons, Arabs may openly ask why. They consider it unusual for an adult to be unmarried, since marriage is ar-
ranged for many people by their families and, in any event, is expected of everyone. People want children, especially sons, to enhance their prestige and assure them of care in their old age.

Unmarried people may well find themselves subjected to well-intentioned matchmaking efforts on the part of Arab friends. If you wish to avoid being "matched," you may have to resort to making up a fictitious long-distance romance! You might say, "I am engaged and we're working out the plans. I hope it won't be long now." Statements such as "I'm not married because I haven't found the right person yet" or "I don't want to get married" make little sense to many Arabs.

When you explain why you don't have children, or more children, unconvincing answers include "We don't want any more children" (impossible to believe) or "We can't afford more" (also doubtful). A more acceptable answer is "We would like more children, and if God wills, we will have more."

Questions which Arabs consider too personal are those pertaining to women in the family (if asked by a man). It is best to ask about "the family," not a person's wife, sister, or grown daughter.

**Sensitive Subjects**

There are two subjects Arabs favor in social conversation—religion and politics—and both can be risky.

Muslims enjoy discussing religion with non-Muslim Westerners because of their curiosity about Western religious beliefs and because they feel motivated to share information about Islam with friends as a favor to them. They are secure in their belief about the completeness of Islam, since it is accepted as the third and final refinement of the two previously revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity. They like to teach about Islam, which eventually leads to the question: Why don't you consider conversion? A Westerner may feel uncomfortable and wonder how to give a gracious refusal. The simplest, most gracious and most acceptable answer is to state that you appreciate the information and respect Islam highly as a religion, but that you cannot consider conversion because it would offend your family. Another option is to assure people that you are a serious, committed Christian (if this is the case). There is a widespread perception that most Westerners are not religious; if you are, people will be very impressed.

Arabs like to talk politics with Westerners and readily bring up controversial issues like the Palestine problem and the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Yet they are not prepared for frank statements of disagreement with their positions on these questions or even inadvertent comments which sound negative toward their point of view or supportive of the opposing side of the argument. The safest response, if you cannot agree fully, is to confine yourself to platitudes and wait for the subject to change, expressing your concern for the victims of war and your hope for a lasting peace. A frank, two-sided discussion is usually not constructive if the subject is an emotional one, and you may find that Arabs remember only the statements you made in support of "the other side."

You will be able to tell when you have brought up a sensitive subject by the way your Arab friend evades a direct answer to your questions. If you receive evasive answers, don't press further; there is a reason why the person does not want to pursue the subject. John Laffin has described a discussion with the late Kamal Nasir, who was the press officer for the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Nasir, a likeable but nervy man, put his hands to his head in despair. "Do you know, Arafat has never said either 'yes' or 'no' to me when I ask him a direct question. You would think he could do that much for his Press officer!" I sympathized with him. "Do you like Arafat?" I asked. And Nasir replied, "It's not a matter of liking or disliking."
In my three long talks with him [Nasir] he, too, never once said "yes" or "no."!

It is useful to introduce other topics into the conversation if you can, to change the subject. These are suggested topics which most people love to discuss:

- the Golden Age of the Arabs and their contributions in the Middle Ages,
- the culturally required traits of an "ideal person,"
- the experience of making the Hajj,
- the person's extended family, and
- the Arabic language, its literature and poetry.

Social Distance

Arab and Western cultures differ in the amount of touching they feel comfortable with in interpersonal relations and in the physical distance they maintain when conversing. These norms are largely unconscious, so both Arabs and Westerners may feel uncomfortable without knowing exactly why.

In general, Arabs tend to stand and sit closer and to touch other people (of the same sex) more than Westerners do. It is common to see two men or two women holding hands as they walk down a street, which is simply a sign of friendship. You must be prepared for the possibility that an Arab will take your hand, especially when crossing the street. After shaking hands in greeting, Arabs may continue to hold your hand while talking—if the conversation is expected to be brief. They will then shake it again when saying good-bye.

Kissing on both cheeks is a common form of greeting (again, only with members of the same sex), as is embracing. It is also common to touch someone repeatedly during a conversation, often to emphasize a point. Children, especially if they are blond, should be prepared to have their heads rubbed by well-meaning adults.

Arab culture does not have the same concept of public and private space as do Western cultures. Westerners, in a sense, carry a little bubble of private space around with them. Arabs, on the other hand, are not uncomfortable when they are close to or touching strangers.

Westerners are accustomed to standing in an elevator in such a way that maximum space is maintained between people. In the Arab World it is common for a person to board an elevator and stand close beside you rather than moving to the opposite corner. When an Arab boards a bus or selects a seat on a bench, he often sits beside someone rather than going to an empty seat or leaving a space between himself and others. To give a typical example, this tendency was particularly annoying to an American who was standing on a street corner in Beirut waiting for a friend. He had a good view of the intersecting streets until a Lebanese man came to the corner and, apparently also waiting for someone, stood directly in front of him. The American could see no rationale for the Lebanese standing so close. When Arabs and Westerners are talking, they may both continually shift position, in a kind of unconscious dance, as the Arab approaches and the Westerner backs away, each trying to maintain a comfortable distance. For Arabs the space which is comfortable for ordinary social conversation is approximately the same as that which Westerners reserve for intimate conversation.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall has described the Arab concept of personal space as follows:

For the Arab, there is no such thing as an intrusion in public. Public means public. In the Western world, the person is synonymous with an individual inside a skin. And in northern Europe generally, the skin and even the clothes may be inviolate. You need permission to touch either if you are a stranger.... For the Arab, the location of the person in relation to the body is quite different. The person exists somewhere down inside the body.... Tucking the ego down inside the body shell not only would permit higher population den-
sities but would explain why it is that Arab communications are stepped up as much as they are when compared to northern European communication patterns. Not only is the sheer noise level much higher, but the piercing look of the eyes, the touch of the hands, and the mutual bathing in the warm moist breath during conversation represent stepped-up sensory inputs to a level which many Europeans find unbearably intense.¹

Robert A. Barakat, in a study of Arab gestures, also discusses Arab body language.

All Arabs...share a certain basic vocabulary of body language. They stand close together and frequently touch each other in a conversation, and they look each other in the eye constantly, instead of letting their gaze drift to the side as Americans do.¹

You do not need to adopt Arab touching patterns, of course; just be aware that they are different from your own and accept them as natural and normal. Note: in Saudi Arabia and the Arabian Peninsula countries, touching other people is not nearly so common and can even be offensive.

**Gestures**

Arabs make liberal use of gestures when they talk, especially if they are enthusiastic about what they are saying. Hand and facial gestures are thus an important part of Arab communication; you should be able to recognize them in order to get the full meaning of what is being said to you.

Listed here are some of the most common gestures used in Arab countries. There are variations among countries, but most are in wide use. Men use gestures more than women, and less educated people use them more than the educated do. You should not try to use these gestures (foreigners often use gestures in the wrong place or situation), but you should learn to recognize them.

1. Moving the head slightly back and raising the eyebrows: no. Moving the head back and chin upward: no. Moving the chin back slightly and making a clicking sound with the tongue: no.
2. After shaking hands, placing the right hand to the heart or chest: greeting someone with respect or sincerity.
3. Holding the right hand out, palm downward, and moving it as if scooping something away from you: go away.
4. Holding the right hand out, palm upward, and opening and closing it: come here.
5. Holding the right hand out, palm upward, then closing the hand halfway and holding it: give it to me.
6. Holding the right hand out, palm downward, and moving it up and down slowly: quiet down.
7. Holding the right hand out, palm upward, and touching the thumb and tips of fingers together and moving the hand up and down: calm down; be patient; slowly.
8. Holding the right forefinger up and moving it from left to right quickly several times (the "windshield wiper"): no; never.
9. Holding the right hand out, palm downward, then quickly twisting the hand to show the palm upward: what? why?
10. Making a fist with the right hand, keeping the thumb extended upward: very good; I am winning. (This is a victory sign. You may have seen this gesture made by Yasser Arafat when talking to the press.)

**Names**

In many Western societies, one indication of the closeness of a personal relationship is the use of first names. In Arab society, the first name is used immediately, even if it is preceded by Miss, Mrs. or Mr.
Arabs do not refer to people by their third, or "last," name. Arab names, for both men and women, are comprised of a first name (the person's own), their father's name and their paternal grandfather's name, followed by a family name (in countries where family names are used). In other words, an Arab's name is simply a string of names listing ancestors on the father's side. A Western example might be John (given name) Robert (his father) William (his grandfather) Jones.

Because names reflect genealogy on the father's side, women have masculine names after their first name. Some people include ibn (son of) or bint (daughter of) between the ancestral names. This practice is common in the Arabian Peninsula; for example, Abdel-Aziz ibn Saud (son of Saud), the founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In North Africa the word ben or oued is used to mean "son of"; bou (father of) is also a common element of a family name. Examples are Chadli Bendjedid, the president of Algeria; Muhammad Khouna Ould Haidalla, the president of Mauritania; and Habib Bourguiba, the former president of Tunisia.

Because a person's first name is the only one which is really his or hers, Arabs use it from the moment they are introduced. A Western man can expect to be called "Mr. Bill" or "Mr. John." If he is married, his wife will be called "Mrs. Mary," or possibly "Mrs. Bill." An unmarried woman would be "Miss Mary." First names are also used with titles such as "Doctor" and "Professor."

A person may retain several names for legal purposes but will often omit them in daily use. A man named Ahmad Abdallah Ali Muhammad, for example, would be commonly known as Ahmad Abdallah; if he has a family or tribal name, let's say Al-Harithi, he would be known as Ahmad Abdallah Al-Harithi or possibly Ahmad Al-Harithi. Similarly, a woman whose full name is Zeinab Abdallah Ali Muhammad Al-Harithi may be known as Zeinab Abdallah or Zeinab Al-Harithi. People are not always consistent when reciting their names on different occasions.

When a genealogical name becomes too long (after four or five generations), some of the older names will be dropped. The only pattern which is really consistent is that the father's name will be retained along with the family name, if there is one. It is entirely possible that full brothers and sisters may be registered with different combinations of names.

In Arabian Peninsula countries telephone books list people under their family names. In some Arab countries, however, the telephone book lists people under their first names, because the first name is the only one which can be depended upon to be consistently present. Some business organizations find it easier to keep payroll records by first name.

A family or tribal name identifies a large extended family or group whose members still consider themselves tied by bonds of kinship and honor. A family name may be geographical (Hijazi, "from Hijaz"; Halaby, "from Aleppo"); denote an occupation (Haddad, "smith"); Najjar, "carpenter"); be descriptive (Al-Ahmar, "red"); Al-Tawil, "tall"); denote tribe (Al-Harithi; Quraishi); or sound like a personal name because it is the name of a common ancestor (Abdel-Aziz; Ibrahim).

Among Muslims, an Arab woman does not change her name after marriage, since she does not take her husband's genealogy, which is what it would imply. Arabs are very proud of their mother's family and want her to retain the name and refer to it. Only informally is a wife called "Mrs." with her husband's first or last name.

When people have children, an informal but very pleasing and polite way to address the parents is by the name of the oldest son or oldest child: abu (father of) or umm (mother of) the child; for example, Umm Ahmad (mother of Ahmad). It is considered respectful and is especially useful when talking to a woman, as it provides a less personal way of addressing her.

Arabs do not name their sons after the father, but naming a child after his paternal grandfather is common. You will meet many men whose first and third names are the same.
Titles are used more widely in Arabic than in English. Anyone with an M.D. or Ph.D. degree must be addressed as "Dr." (duktaar for a man, duktaara for a woman). It is important to find out any titles a person may have—omitting the title can be insulting. Sheikh is a respectful title for a wealthy, influential, or elderly man. Government ministers are called Ma'ali and senior officials are given the honorary title Sa'ada before their other titles and name.

Most Arab names have a meaning and can be clues to certain facts about a person. Many names indicate religion or country of origin. Because the exchange of personal information is so important, some people introduce themselves with various long combinations of names, especially if their first and last names are ambiguous (used by more than one group). It is useful for foreigners to be able to place people, at least partially, upon hearing their names. Here are a few guidelines.

1. If a name sounds Western (George, William, Mary), it marks a Christian.

2. If a name is that of a well-known figure in Islamic history (Muhammad, Bilal, Salah-Eddin, Fatima, Ayesha), it marks a Muslim.

3. Most hyphenated names using "Abdel-" are Muslim. The name means "Servant (Slave) of God," and the second part is one of the attributes of God (Abdallah, "Servant of Allah"; Abdel-Rahman, "Servant of the Merciful"; Abdel-Karim, "Servant of the Generous"). There are a few Christian names on this pattern (Abdel-Malak, "Servant of the Angel"; Abdel-Massih, "Servant of the Messiah"), but over 90 percent of the time you can assume that a person with this type of name is Muslim. Of the ninety-nine Muslim attributes for God (the All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Compassionate, All-Wise, etc.), most are currently in use as names.

4. Names containing the word Deen (religion) are Muslim (Sharaf-Eeddin, "The Honor of Religion"; Badr-Eeddin, "The Moon of Religion"; Sayf-Eeddin, "The Sword of Religion").

5. Many names are simply descriptive adjectives (Aziz, "dear"; Said, "happy"; Amun, "faithful"; Hasan, "good"). Such descriptive names do not mark religion.

6. Names which come from both the Qur'an and the Bible (Ibrahim, "Abraham"; Sulaiman, "Solomon"; Daoud, "David"; Yousef, "Joseph") do not distinguish whether the person is Muslim, Christian, or Jewish.

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In Arab society, the nature of interaction between men and women depends on the situation. Continual interaction is expected at work or in professional situations, although it is actually reserved by Western standards, and in Saudi Arabia, it remains restricted. The degree of control among Arab countries, depending on their relative conservatism, is as free and casual as in Western societies.

Social Interaction

The maintenance of family honor is one of the highest values in Arab society. Since misbehavior by women is believed to do more damage to family honor than misbehavior by men, Arab men and women are careful about appearances when they meet. They must never permit themselves to be alone together, even for a short time. It is improper to be in a room with the door closed, to go out on a date as a couple, or even to see each other in the same place.

Men and Women
or to travel together, even on a short daytime trip. Shared activities take place with other people present. At mixed social events women are accompanied by their husbands or male relatives. In Saudi Arabia "religious police" often question couples who are at a restaurant or in a car together and ask for proof that they are married.

Foreigners must be aware of the restrictions which pertain to contact between Arab men and women and then consider their own appearance in front of others. Arabs quickly gain a negative impression if you behave with too much (presumed) familiarity toward a person of the opposite sex. They will interpret your behavior on their own terms and may conclude that you are a person of low moral standards. If an embarrassing incident involves a Western man and an Arab woman, they may feel that the Westerner insulted the woman's honor, thereby threatening the honor of her family.

A Western man can feel free to greet an Arab woman at a social gathering (though it is not a common practice in Saudi Arabia), but it is best if their subsequent discussion includes other people rather than just the two of them. A married Western woman may greet and visit with Arab men, provided she is accompanied by her husband. If a woman is unmarried or if her husband is not present, she should be more reserved. In many Arab countries men and women separate into their own conversation groups shortly after arrival at a social gathering; this depends on the customs of a given area. In Saudi Arabia women are often excluded from social gatherings altogether, or they may be more restricted in their behavior when they are included. It is important to point out that social separation is not practiced merely because it is required by custom; it is often preferred by both men and women because they feel more comfortable. Westerners can expect to spend much of their social time in all-male or all-female groups.

Western men and women should also give thought to their appearance in front of others when they interact among them-
selves. Behavior such as overly enthusiastic greetings, animated and joking conversations, and casual invitations to lunch are easily misinterpreted by Arabs and reinforce their stereotype of the morally lax Westerner.

Displaying Intimacy

The public display of intimacy between men and women is strictly forbidden by the Arab social code, including holding hands or linking arms or any gesture of affection such as kissing or prolonged touching. Such actions, even between husband and wife, are highly embarrassing to Arab observers. A married couple was once asked to leave a theater in Cairo because they were seen holding hands.

This type of behavior is a particularly serious offense in Saudi Arabia, and incidents of problems and misunderstandings are frequent. One such incident occurred when an American woman was observed getting into a car with an American man, sliding over to his side, and kissing him on the cheek. A captain of the Saudi National Guard, who happened to see this, demanded proof that they were married. They were, but not to each other. The woman was deported, and the man, who compounded his problem by being argumentative, was sent to jail. Even behavior such as hand holding (especially among young people in the less traditional countries), is still viewed by most people with disapproval.

The Status of Women

The degree to which women have been integrated into the workforce and circulate freely in public varies widely among the Arab countries. In Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt, educated women are very active at all levels of society. In Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Arabian Gulf states, few women have jobs outside the home; those who do work only in all-female
environments such as schools and banks for women, with the exception of those in the medical professions.

All Arab governments now strongly support efforts to increase women's educational opportunities. In 1956, many years before the issue gained its current prominence, the Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba, instituted laws improving the legal status of women, ultimately becoming known as "Liberator of Women." Iraq revised personal status laws regarding marriage, child custody, and inheritance in 1959. Egypt has drastically revised laws concerning marriage and divorce; for example, an Egyptian woman can now sue for divorce if her husband takes a second wife without her permission (this law was rescinded in 1985 on technical religious grounds, then reinstated in substance). In Morocco a woman can stipulate in her marriage contract that polygamy is grounds for divorce. In the past ten to twenty years, personal status laws have been revised to increase the legal rights of women in most Arab countries, either by supplementing or reinterpreting traditional Islamic law. In virtually every Arab country today, the laws regarding women are being discussed and are subject to change.

In traditional Arab society men and women have well-defined spheres of activity and influence. Do not assume that because Arab women are not highly visible in public, their influence is similarly restricted in private life.

Arab women have a great deal of power in decision making. They usually have the decisive voice in matters relating to household expenditures, the upbringing and education of children, and sometimes the arrangement of marriages. Men are responsible for providing for the family's material welfare; though if a woman has money, she need not contribute to family expenses. Most women in fact do have their own money, and Islamic religious law states clearly that they retain sole control over their money and inheritance after marriage.

The older a woman becomes, the more status and power she accrues. Men owe great respect to their mothers all their lives and most make every effort to obey their mother's wishes, including her whims. All older women in the family are treated with deference, but the mother of sons gains even more status.

Arab women generally wear clothing which is at least knee-length and partially sleeved. The practice of wearing more conservative, floor-length, fully sleeved clothing is increasing, not decreasing, even in modern cities like Cairo and Amman, and use of the hejab hair cover has increased enormously in the last twenty years. In fact, women's clothing is taking on political and social implications, "an outward sign of a complex reality." In many countries conservative dress is most common among young, educated women. This issue is widely discussed and debated within families and different groups of friends.

Many Muslim women veil their faces, wholly or partially, in conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the Arabian Gulf states, Yemen and Libya, and to some degree in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Veiling has almost disappeared except in rural areas or in very conservative families in such countries as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. The Qur'an itself says nothing specific about veiling, although it does urge women to be modest in their dress. Veiling has always been a matter of local custom, not a religious requirement.

Tradition-oriented Arab men and women do not view social customs and restrictions as repressive, but as an appropriate acknowledgment of the status and nature of women. They see the restrictions as providing protection for women so that they need not be subjected to the stress, competition, temptations, and possible indignities found in outside society. Most Arab women feel satisfied that the present social system provides them with security, protection, and respect.

Some women, however, view their situation otherwise and have begun pressing for greater social, legal, and personal freedom. There has long been a trend toward relaxing some
of the restrictions which have regulated women’s activities, although now counterpressure is also being applied by conservative religious leaders to impose or reimpose restrictions.

Middle Eastern gender roles have traditionally been governed by a patriarchal kinship system that had already existed in the regions to which Islam spread. Many of the variations in the status of women are due to local traditions and social customs (such as covering the entire face). Men are expected to provide for their families; women, to bear and raise children; children, to honor and respect their parents and grow up to fulfill their adult roles (which includes marriage). It is important for an outsider to keep these points of view in mind when analyzing or discussing the status of Arab women.

**Western Women**

Western women find that they do not quite fit into Arab society; they are not accorded the rights of men but they are not considered bound by all the restrictions of Arab women either.

Western women are expected to behave with propriety, but they are not required to be as conservative as Arab women in dress or in public behavior. They need not veil in Saudi Arabia, for example, but must wear conservative street dress in all Arab countries. They may go shopping, attend public activities, or travel alone.

Arabs accept professional Western women and admire them for their accomplishments. Well-educated women find that their opinions are taken seriously, and they are often invited to all-male professional gatherings. When a woman has a work-related reason to call on someone or to be present at any event, she is almost always welcomed, and men are comfortable with her presence.

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2. Ibid., 77.

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