

A Primer of Middle Eastern Leadership Culture

Sheldon Greaves

Henley-Putnam University, drshel02816@gmail.com

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Author Biography

Dr. Sheldon Greaves is an independent scholar and part-time faculty member at Henley-Putnam University, where he teaches courses in religious extremism and covert organizations. He is a founder of Henley-Putnam University, and the Founder of the Journal of Strategic Security. He holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California at Berkeley and lives in San Jose, CA.

Abstract

It is natural for someone looking in on a foreign culture from the outside to interpret what they see and frame their reactions based on their own background and assumptions. With cultures as different as those of the Middle East and the West, the potential for blunders increases dramatically, made worse by the high political, diplomatic, military, and commercial stakes involved. Leadership culture in this region has been shaped over centuries through a variety of factors, such as reputation, family, and religion, which continue to influence decision making. The present study posits that an understanding of these factors and how they work is crucial for intelligence analysts, policy and decision makers, strategists, and scholars who must find their way through a very unfamiliar cultural landscape in the Middle East. It is hoped that this discussion will in some way assist in the creation of more effective interaction, policies, and analysis associated with the Middle East.

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Abstract

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Introduction

Many factors determine the needs of national leadership, not all of which are always apparent to an outside observer. In the case of the national and regional leadership in the Middle East, history, culture, religion, and geography form a unique complex that influence both the decisions made by leaders and how others view those decisions. This primer examines a number of these factors and explores their influence on many of the leaders of Middle Eastern government and other major organizations. For purposes of this primer, "Middle Eastern" government excludes the gov-

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ernment of Israel, which is clearly shaped by a European model and was in fact created by European Jewish immigrants. The warning issued by Richards J. Heuer in 1999 is just as relevant today:

"To see the options faced by foreign leaders as these leaders see them, one must understand their values and assumptions and even their misperceptions and misunderstandings. Without such insight, interpreting foreign leaders' decisions of forecasting future decisions is often little more than partially informed speculation. Too frequently, foreign behavior appears 'irrational' or 'Not in their best interest.' Such conclusions often indicate analysts have projected American values and conceptual frameworks onto the foreign leaders and societies, rather than understanding the logic of the situation as it appears to them."¹

Defining "Leadership Culture"

Leadership culture is that body of cultural understandings by which leaders and citizens develop the necessary trust to govern effectively. This cultural understanding also influences the expectations of behavior and attitudes on both ends of the leadership spectrum. To further explain this process, the American experience provides a useful exposition. Americans place a premium on certain qualities in their leaders that are not all that different from those of any other region: fairness, decisiveness, hard work, service in the military, an interesting life history that includes overcoming various obstacles. But for Americans, these traits become more potent if the leader can link them to the historical and cultural roots of the American national character, namely, the frontier with its westward expansion, carving civilization out of a trackless wilderness through grit, ingenuity, and determination. Prior to that, we have the values of the Founding Fathers who put their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor on the line against an oppressive monarch backed by the greatest military power since Rome—and won. They, in turn succeeded the pious pilgrim forefathers, religious refugees seeking escape from persecution in a wild, still mostly undiscovered country. Gilbert Fairholm admirably summarized the role of culture in leadership thusly:

"Leadership is not so much a function of the individual leader as it is a function of culture. While leadership may be spontaneous at times, most often it is the result of specific, planned actions by individual leaders to create organizational cultures characterized by internal harmony around values and ideas the leader and follower share or come to share."²

Even a casual observer of a presidential election will find numerous attempts to at least pay passing homage to the colonist, the soldier, the pilgrim, the citizen legislator, the cowboy, the farmer not only as they are today, but as ideals. By evoking these images, leaders build credibility, associating themselves with historical and cultural archetypes. However, an astute observer will also note that the United States is by no means a monolithic country. Particularly in more recent decades, the national character has become more fragmented, regionalism more pronounced.³ In a way, this is more instructive as one observes how national candidates cater to regional cultures in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.

Out of the Desert

For the leadership cultures of the Middle East, culture has three major formative areas: the city, the village, and the desert.⁴ Of these three, the latter has by far the most profound influence on those traits that evoke admiration and loyalty among Mideast populations. While much of this is due, no doubt, to the modern tendency to idolize a way of life that persisted against such a harsh background for thousands of years, it is also clearly because of another major factor that formed in the context of the desert: Islam. That said, the Prophet Mohammed was himself well acquainted with city life, but it was his persona as a desert tribal and religious figure that helped define the dominant cultural substratum of the Middle East.

One sees even today how often Mideast leaders employ the garb of the desert nomads as part of their official dress. The Saudi royal family is, of course, well known for this, as are other leaders such as the late Muamar Qaddafi. Even when wearing western style military uniforms, officers and state officials often retain a traditional desert or village headdress.

The values of the desert, as exemplified by the Bedouin nomad, seem at first glance to be at odds with the requirements of leadership. The Bedu exist historically in a circumstance practically devoid of political power as westerners understand it. There was no overarching system of laws or means to compel any one man to do anything he didn't want to do. State sanctions against crime were unknown and, when tried, generally failed to impress the Bedouin tribesmen whose fierce independence was the stuff of legend. At the same time, Bedouins were as egalitarian as they were autonomous.

Key Cultural Values in the Middle East

Reputation

Ironically, it was this very lack of a larger ruling structure that led to the development of reputation as a key cultural value in ancient, medieval, and early modern Bedouin societies. There are three types of reputations relevant to leadership cultural values in the Middle East: political, economic, and knowledge or information-based reputation. Reputation carries far greater weight, both as political power and as wealth, in the Middle East than it does in Western societies. Politically, reputation was directly equivalent to political power:

"In a system where every man is equally free to follow his own bent and where there is no mechanism for coercion, the only political power available is the ability to influence the decision of others. This rests on four factors: good information, the ability to give good advice, a reputation for sound counsel, and an audience to influence. All must be acquired."⁵

Economic reputation is not merely a means to acquire material wealth among the Bedouin, it is wealth; it is currency in the Bedu society. This cultural view of reputation flows from the reality of life in the desert among a nomadic people where wealth must be "highly mobile, easily preservable, and non-stealable, in other words, non-material, like reputation."⁶ Knowledge that a person possesses is critical to one's reputation for expertise and offering good advice. As such, it must be preserved like the currency that it is. This creates disincentives about being too free with one's knowledge. So long as you know something important that no one else knows, the thinking goes, you are indispensable. While this helped to preserve the value of one's reputation in the desert, in modern life where the free flow of information is critical to success, this attitude creates problems in the Middle East even today.

Norvell B. De Atkine points out in his study of the lack of effectiveness in Arab military formations that the attitude of information and knowledge as personal currency vital to an individual's reputation and, by extension, rank can create bottlenecks during critical events.⁷ For example, soldiers may not be fully trained in a particular weapon system because the officer in charge who had that information withheld it in order to preserve his position. The result is poor performance on the part of the soldiers with negative results on the battlefield. De Atkine illustrates this point with the following anecdote:

"On one occasion, an American mobile training team working with armor in Egypt at long last received the operators' manuals that had laboriously been translated into Arabic. The American trainers took the newly minted manuals straight to the tank park and distributed them to the tank crews. Right behind them, the company commander, a graduate of the armor school at Fort Knox and specialized courses at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds ordnance school, promptly collected the manuals from those crews. Questioned why he did this, the commander said that there was no point in giving them to the drivers because enlisted men could not read. In point of fact, he did not want enlisted men to have an independent source of knowledge. Being the only person who could explain the fire control instrumentation or bore sight artillery weapons brought prestige and attention."⁸

Wealth

The Bedouin family economy was historically based on camels. They provided food in the form of milk, fuel, and transportation. They were not, however, synonymous with wealth. A moment's consideration will show why this is so. Fifteen to twenty camels was enough to support a family of about six persons. If you have extra camels and if you were near a town, you could sell them for gold, but it would not be of any use in the desert. Gold is heavy. You can't burn it to cook over it, you can't drink it when you're thirsty, or eat it when you're hungry. It invites theft or, perhaps worse, people asking for loans. You could convert the gold into something else, such as fine clothing, which will look very ordinary after a few weeks of hard wear in the desert. One could buy expensive weaponry, but that invites theft and raiding without much improvement in effectiveness.

Camels could also be converted directly into food. However, butchering an extra camel as food is a highly unprofitable use of the animal; they are large animals with far more meat than an average family could possibly consume before the meat spoiled. Finally, consider that if you decided to expand your herds, you would eventually need herdsmen. Raiding was a popular activity, so you would need to hire guards in addition to the herdsmen. How would you pay them? All you have are excess camels, but once each employee has enough camels, they no longer need to work for you and can become independent, leaving you back where you started. In other words, treating camels as wealth just wasn't viable.⁹

On the other hand, reputation could be garnered through disposing of excess camels by giving them away in a show of generosity. One can also gain reputation by acquiring camels through raiding—the greater the

audacity and cunning, the better. But then those extra camels can also be given away. In other words, you gain reputation based not on how much material wealth you acquire, but on how much passes through your hands.¹⁰ While giving away camels enhances reputation, losing your camels because a clever raider made off with them does not. This ideal persists in popular culture throughout the Middle East to this day. It helps to explain the role of favors granted by a leader to cronies and allies. By showing generosity, he enhances his own reputation.

Raiding

In the case of camels as a source of resources such as milk, etc., raiding for camels has traditionally been the way of obtaining them, since the fertility rate among pastoral camels has never been high enough to provide enough animals for all.¹¹ In addition, the occasional drought can wipe out large fractions of a herd, or even entire herds. Thus, raiding has been a way of life for the Bedu for centuries. In fact, it is fair to say that raiding was the driver of economic change in the desert. Along with diplomatic and negotiating skills and generosity, raiding—and the qualities that make a successful raider—is a primary source of reputation. Someone who can both defend their own holdings while successfully taking resources through daring, cunning, courage, and audacity is admired and could well be marked for leadership, provided they survive long enough.¹²

Hospitality

The role of generosity as a means to reputation leads us neatly into the role of hospitality in Mideast culture. The desert peoples are famous for their justly deserved reputations as hospitable hosts. The institutions of hospitality toward the stranger in your tent stretches back to time immemorial and once formed the basis of trade, commerce, and sometimes one's very survival. In addition to its value as a pious act and a means to acquire reputation, extending hospitality to a stranger was historically a means to develop trade and business arrangements. If the stranger was related to some degree, it might result in a marriage. In any case, this matter is still taken very seriously by Mideast peoples. An article written by Omar Tsalich El-Barghuthiin 1924 on Arab rules of hospitality in Palestine describes the great lengths villagers would go to in order to have the privilege of entertaining a passing traveler.¹³ Depending on the circumstances, proper displays of hospitality, especially for important visitors, required considerable effort and resources. The account of a Bedouin feast recounted by T. E. Lawrence remains an excellent example of such a gathering.¹⁴

The bond of obligation between guest and host is deeply respected even today. Traditionally the host is responsible for seeing to the needs of the guest, up to and including protecting the guest from harm, even if it meant putting himself or members of his family in harm's way. The guest also had obligations, but they tend to pale in comparison with those of the host. Further, the guest could invoke the laws of hospitality even from someone who was a sworn enemy and rest safely in that person's tent until the next day when they took their leave.

In a more modern example, shortly after the September 11 attacks, the United States demanded that the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan hand over Usama bin Ladin to western authorities. The Taliban replied that they could not do so because bin Ladin was a "guest."¹⁵ Most westerners saw this as a cynical ploy to protect a fellow Muslim, and it clearly was at some level. But anyone familiar with the ancient laws of hospitality would have recognized this as a deeply legitimate response within the context of the culture. The Taliban could not have given up their guest, no matter how great a liability he had become, without a significant loss of reputation and political stature among their own people.

Gifts

In a culture where money is not always available for use as a medium of exchange, barter was common. However, the giving of gifts in desert and other early Mideast cultures included a layer of complexity extending beyond the needs of mundane commerce. Gifts and gift-giving formed yet another way to establish reputation, as described above, and a way to establish relationships or even place underlings under obligation.

Gift culture in the eastern Mediterranean basin has very deep roots. The use of gifts as a tool of statecraft are attested as far back as the mid-third millennium BCE in the ancient Egyptian text "Teachings of Ptah-hotep," which instructs the reader that positions of authority demand generosity.¹⁶ This and other such texts from throughout the region treat gift giving from a position of power as a charitable or civic duty; however, there is also obligatory gift giving which follows a more rigid protocol, and can be manipulated by either party for political advantage. In one study that discusses these ancient protocols for the general region, Victor H. Matthews isolates four elements that continue to inform this practice in varying degrees up to the present time:

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1. Gifts must be given by a patron for every service rendered by a client.
2. All gifts must be equally measured so that there is no advantage to be gained by either side of the exchange.
3. Failure to give an appropriate gift dishonors the donor and insults the recipient.
4. The recipient may not contest the gift offered, but demur, based on the donor of the household, may be employed either to refuse the gift or negotiate a change in the gift.¹⁷

The exchange of gifts is a means to establish relationships, but the value of the gift is important. Reciprocation is expected. This means that gifts of roughly equal value will be exchanged, which also means that most gift exchanges take place between members of the same general economic stratum. However, there are some instances where a richer or more powerful person will give a gift that is beyond the ability of the receiver to reciprocate. In such cases, assuming they accept the gift, it places the receiver under an obligation until such time, if any, that they can repay.

Gifts could also convey messages not overtly expressed, but clearly understood nevertheless. For example, a "gift" of offering protection of one tribe by another, if accepted, amounted to an admission of their inability to defend themselves and, additionally, acknowledgment of their status as a vassal tribe vis-à-vis the stronger tribe.

Family

Observers of Mideast politics will note that the family of a ruler is deeply integrated into that ruler's administration. This is one of the more persistent remnants of the Bedouin culture, the almost exclusive priority given to members of the family or tribe in matters of access, resources, and power. The acquisition of personal power allows one to augment that power and reputation within the "reputation range" of one's family and tribe. This is one reason why the concept of democracy as the basis for a political nation-state has had so little traction in the Middle East.¹⁸

The ecology of the desert enforces an uncompromising standard for survival. Those who managed to overcome the difficulties of life in the desert do so at the expense of those who cannot. The ability to maintain and increase herds and to defend graze lands and watering holes, all play a role in creating a viable family group. Because resources are so scarce, a family or tribe must see to its own needs first and, if necessary, take the

needed resources from those who cannot hold on to them. For similar reasons, the idea of sharing with other "outside" people beyond small-scale situations such as hospitality to a guest or individual supplicant on religious grounds simply isn't part of the Bedouin mentality.

Women, especially those who bear children, are seen as a significant source of power inasmuch as they produce plenty of males needed to defend a tribe's interests. This is one reason why endogamy is permitted among the Bedu; allowing a woman to go to another tribe makes no sense in this context, and only happens if there are significant overriding considerations, such as forming alliances. For this reason, they tend to be "hoarded" as a source of potential power, and not given away or bartered as with other forms of material goods.

In spite of the life-or-death stakes in raiding, certain conventions prevailed that gave the activity an almost sporting aspect. For example, it was considered bad form to take all of the camels or other herd animals from a victim. Women and other non-combatants were not hurt, even if they counterattacked. Moreover, for reasons given, a successful raider still must dispose of excess (and therefore useless) booty in a way that will enhance his reputation. This can have interesting outcomes as in this account:

"The Rwala are ever at war with one tribe of another. Without war a Rweijli could not live. War gives him an opportunity of [sic] display his cunning, endurance, and courage... The booty itself he will give away without thinking much about it—even to the wife of the very man he has just robbed."¹⁹

Because human populations grow, and the desert environment imposes a hard limit to the number of persons who can live there, rivalries and hard luck take their toll. Those who do not manage are "sloughed off" from the rest of the tribe, making their way to the periphery of the desert or more commonly, into towns and villages. This has two important effects. First, it explains the flow of Bedouin cultural values and norms into villages and other settled populations of the Middle East.²⁰ Once these former nomads find themselves in their new environment, they must essentially start over in an effort to make a place for themselves in a social context informed by the rules they once knew, but with differences and new economic pressures.

Dealing with Rivals

The recommended course of action for dealing with rivals in the Middle East has generally been to act swiftly, decisively, and ruthlessly. The Bedu, in spite of traditions of blood vengeance and feuding, devised a number of conventions to keep such conflicts from spilling over. One reason for this is that if one member of a tribe kills someone from another tribe, it can embroil members of both tribes who would rather not be bothered with such things. In fact, the Rwala Bedouin went to such lengths to avoid bloodshed for this and other reasons that they developed a reputation for cowardice.²¹

The history of violence of the Bedouin forms the larger pattern of destroying one's enemies and rivals as a matter of both state policy and personal vendetta in Mideast culture. The ultimate solution to the problem of political rivals goes back to the dimmest antiquity; in an otherwise enlightened list of advice to his son and heir to the throne, Meri-Ka-Re's father gave him the following advice on dealing with a rival: "...remove him, kill [him], wipe out his name, [destroy] his faction, banish the memory of him and of his adherents who love him."²² But removing a rival involved more than merely killing him. There was the need to add an extra show of utter domination of and contempt for the fallen foe. Dispatching a highly visible and once-powerful enemy had to include a clear and unmistakable message for any who might try to succeed where he had failed. Rulers understood that if they added a dash of atrocity to their triumph, word would get around faster and have the desired effect to burnish their reputation.

Numerous examples of eliminating political rivals comprise some of the more colorful bits of Middle Eastern history. There was the Ottoman Sultan Murad I who, when his hated son Cuntuz tried to overthrow him one too many times, personally tore out his son's eyes before handing him over to a headsman. Moreover, he insisted that the fathers of all the other co-conspirators do likewise. All but two complied; they died alongside their sons. Another famous sultan, Bayazid II was taken alive after his disastrous campaign against Tamerlane, who himself was famous for leaving pyramids of severed heads beside the cities he conquered. After he was captured following the fateful battle of Ankara, Bayazid was taken back to Samarkand caged like a beast, where he served as Tamerlane's footstool. His favorite concubine was forced to serve her new master naked. Bayazid died shortly thereafter, probably by his own hand. Yet another example is the death in 750 C.E. of the last Caliph of the Umayyad

Dynasty who was tracked by his Abbasid foes to a small church in Egypt's Nile delta. After decapitating the Caliph, his tongue was cut out and fed to a cat.²³

Even with the presumed gentling effects of modern statecraft and western influence, this attitude toward rivals persists in the Middle East. The killing or imprisonment and torture of political rivals by the repressive regimes of Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad, Muammar Qaddafi, and Hosni Mubarak among others are already well documented. One need only recall the fate of the neighborhood of Hama in 1982, then a hotbed of dissent by the Muslim Brotherhood. Syrian President Hafez al-Assad cordoned off the area, allowing none to leave. The Syrian army bombarded Hama with an extended artillery barrage. Remaining buildings were pumped full of cyanide gas, razed to the ground, the rubble steamrolled into gravel, and a new housing development built on the site. Ghengis Khan could hardly have done better. The message was received; the Muslim Brotherhood was virtually unknown in Syria for decades afterwards. It is ironic that in the current uprising against Bashar al-Assad, the site of Hama is once again a center of anti-government resistance.²⁴

Religion

Religion informs politics in the Middle East to a degree difficult to imagine in Western societies. Clearly, much of the reason for this is because, as Bernard Lewis once put it, Islam's Christ was also its Constantine.²⁵ It is natural to assume that the values of the desert nomads and Islam mesh together to create a consistent cultural substratum for Middle Eastern leadership culture. Such an assumption would be incorrect.

Although Westerners tend to equate the Bedu with Islam, a closer look at the respective cultures makes it clear that the Prophet's vision was very much at odds with the prevailing culture. In fact, Bedu culture embodies both Muslim and pre-Islamic *jahiliyyah* values.²⁶ To take one example, Muhammed explicitly rejected the tribal *jahiliyyahasabiyyah* of favoring one's own kin over all others. Islam emphasized equality and justice among all peoples as one Hadith put it, just like the teeth of the comb are equal.²⁷ While this was welcomed on one level by the Bedouin, for whom equality and egalitarianism defines their normal interactions, extending this to granting political power to non-tribal members did not catch on as readily. That said, other desert values of generosity, protecting the weak, simplicity, and rule by consultation with others were accepted.

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The reigns of the first four Caliphs (*Khulafa Rashidoun* or Rightly Guided Successors) embraced these values strongly. Each new Caliph was selected by the consensus of a *shura* or council. The Caliph was accessible to all, and anyone could see the Caliph directly. The Caliphs had a reputation for listening carefully to all when making a decision, ensuring that all viewpoints informed the discussion, and having the good grace to admit error.²⁸

All this changed when the last of the Rightly Guided Caliphs died in 661 CE. The Caliphate was taken over by the Umayyad tribe, which ironically had been one of Muhammed's staunchest opponents. The new Caliph, Muawiya, abandoned both letter and spirit of Muslim governance by placing numerous bureaucratic barriers between the Caliph and his subjects. The *shura*, while still used, became little more than a rubber stamp dressed in rituals of sycophantic flattery. When Muawiya declared his son Yazid to be next in line for the Caliphate, it marked the return of favoring of one's own kin. This was not lost on the *umma*, the community of believers, but Yazid proved to be adept at crushing those who objected, even ordering the murder of the Prophet's grandson Hussein at Kerbala.

As Islam continued to expand into lands and cultures beyond the culture of Arabia, Muslims struggled to balance the old traditions of favoritism, first of kin, and eventually that of Arabs over other ethnic groups, even though the Quran and Hadith are clearly against such favoritism. Gradually, the original vision of Islam more or less won out and, in those times and places where a semblance of ethnic and cultural diversity took hold, the Muslim world became one of the most vibrant, innovative, and dynamic civilizations of this or any age.

Shar'ia Law

A major contribution of Islam to the leadership culture of the Middle East is, naturally, its legal codes of *shar'ia*. The word means "path" but more specifically, a path that leads to water. For desert dwellers, the implication was a path to salvation. But the popular (and grossly inaccurate) picture of *shar'ia* law as a harsh, brutal, and primitive legal code bears almost no resemblance to its roots. *Shar'ia* grew out of the teachings of the Quran, which gave only general guidelines for dealing with crime and punishment. Most infractions were addressed by consultation, persuasion, and inviting the miscreant to repent. Punishments are almost completely lacking; in all the Quran there are only four mandated criminal punishments. *Shar'ia* evolved four separate schools of jurisprudence, plus a separate Shi'ite school, each emphasizing different methodologies for evaluating cases and developing legal theory.

Historically, there has been a significant disconnect between the punishments mandated by the Quran and the Hadith, and what was actually handed down by religious courts. Jurists and judges typically went to great, even absurd lengths to actually avoid employing harsher penalties even for "crimes against God" (*hadd*) offenses found in the Quran. Muslim populations, contrary to how they are portrayed in the West, consistently demonstrate distaste for brutal, corporal punishments for religious crimes. Pakistan attempted in the late 1970's to officially "revive" a more punitive "traditional" form of Islamic criminal law. In fact, such brutal punishments, and especially carrying out such sentences in large public spectacles was seldom if ever practiced historically. While large crowds gathered for the open-air whippings and executions at first, the public soon grew disenchanted and executions were being canceled for want of an audience. In the face of quiet but resolute public disapproval, these public judicial punishments formally vanished from Pakistan in 1979, and have not returned.²⁹

Since the end of the Ottoman Caliphate in the early 20th Century, the administration and development of shar'ia law has proven to be problematic. Not only was there no Caliph or "Shadow of God" to administer and oversee such matters, but secular leaders of Muslim nations have steadfastly refused to step into the vacuum left by the loss of the Caliphate. Perhaps the most significant example was the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in 1979. For various political reasons, most of them variations on the theme of self-preservation, the surrounding nations refused to declare jihad in defense of their Muslim brothers and sisters facing Soviet aggression.³⁰ This led others to step into the vacuum and take upon themselves the task of issuing *fatwas* and calls for jihad. When these calls led to thousands of Muslims going to Afghanistan, it created an entirely new wildcard factor that has led to a form of shar'ia completely different from its form only a century before. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this is the concept of *takfir*, or the right of one Muslim to declare another Muslim to be an infidel based on differences in belief of practice and, hence, worthy of death. Once an obscure idea meant to allow a Muslim army to fight another army that included Muslims on a battlefield, this idea is one of the key enabling concepts used to justify violence by Islamist radicals against fellow Muslims.

Islam has added another cultural factor to daily attitudes that most Westerners find difficult to grasp, and that is the belief in the total omnipotence of Allah. In other words, Muslim theology tends to view everything, even the smallest or most insignificant act as being under the complete, deliberate control of God and, if something goes a certain way, it is the will of Allah. To Western eyes, this appears as a kind of fatalism, a surren-

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der to forces too large and too powerful to control. However, this characterization is insufficient. More accurately, it is a nod to the general uncertainty of life and a mental paradigm that allows one, in spite of one's best efforts, to face misfortune with equanimity. That said, there are believers who point to Allah's omnipotence as a reason to not prepare or train for certain events; if Allah wishes, all will turn out well. If not, no amount of preparation will suffice.

Muhammed the Archetype of Middle East Leadership

Given the towering stature of Islam's founder it is easy to understand why he is a model for emulation by others in positions of leadership. The extensive hagiography surrounding the life and character of the Prophet uniformly portrays a certain behavioral and moral standard that non-Muslims will find unsatisfying. But those values are still of interest since, even if they are not strictly historical according to Western standards, they do reflect the expectations that grew out of the life and ministry of the Prophet; however, much that legacy has been idealized by his followers. Given the strength of those traditions, there is little reason to doubt that there is at least a kernel of truth behind these traditions.

When one places the values ascribed to Muhammed alongside those of his less pious but politically successful successors, one encounters the same friction that one finds between the open, egalitarian access to the Caliph versus the more bureaucratic approach taken by the Umayyads. The Quran is quite clear that the Prophet much preferred to work through persuasion, moral example, and goodwill. He is uniformly depicted as kind, generous, humble, godly, and charitable, traits that can apply to very few of those who succeeded him to the Caliphate. For modern Mideast leaders bound by the demands *realpolitik*, this can translate into a delicate balancing act that cannot help but draw accusations of hypocrisy or worse if their attempts to mimic the character of the Prophet are too far removed from their political actions.

National Leadership Cultures: Egypt vs. Libya in the Arab Spring

A comparison of the actions taken by the Egyptian and Libyan governments faced by the Arab Spring upheavals illustrates the impact of national leadership cultures in the Middle East. While many other examples could be cited here, including countries undergoing upheaval in the

Levant, Libya and Egypt pose a convenient dichotomy in adaptation of different values and cultural norms that influence national leadership organization and decision making in their respective governments. Specifically, the Libyan regime under Qaddafi was focused on personal power, where the state apparatus was based on family and cronyism, and accumulation of personal power. By contrast, Egypt had a Western-style government built to support the national leader's personal power base, but whose military was trained more as an agent of the state rather than the tool of any one person or junta.

In the case of Qaddafi, many of his top commanders and ministers were members of his Ghaddafa tribe, or consisted of others who had various ties to him personally.³¹ Qaddafi also maintained an "Islamic Legion" of foreign soldiers who were pledged to Qaddafi personally. The manner of how Libya's inner circle was constructed also bore a striking resemblance to the use of outside forces by the Abbasid Caliphate as it slid into decline before its annihilation by the Mongols. The caliphs made extensive use of mercenaries and slave soldiers, or sometimes soldiers who had somehow become obligated to the caliph to form private armies that foreshadowed the Ottoman Janissaries. Such armies and government structures were very much in keeping with the norms examined already; the need to preserve personal power and the power of one's tribe at the expense of others. It is also very consistent with the use of overwhelming force to deal with rivals, be they pretenders to the throne or angry protesters. For these and related reasons, Libyan forces had few qualms about opening fire on protesters, sparking the civil war that ended with the death of Qaddafi and the destruction of his power base.

Qaddafi insisted that power remain in his hands, a professional military under a unified command would be anathema. Leaders like Qaddafi tend to build their military forces in layers or concentric circles, with the inner layer consisting of well-trained, well-paid, and equipped soldiers who are have tribal or other ties to the ruling family. As one extends out from the inner circle, the army is less professional, less competent and has lower morale. Inner circle units often have grand names such as "Presidential Guard" or "Republican Guard" and make up a vital part of a ruler's public image. They will also reflect his personal ambitions—or delusions.

The Egyptian army, by contrast is one of the more modern, egalitarian, and even progressive components of Egyptian society today. "Inner-circle" units of the kind found in Libya are unknown. The closest parallel to the Libyan model in Egypt are the Central Security Forces, a badly-trained, poorly equipped paramilitary force composed mostly of conscripts. After the end of the Cold War, Egypt shifted its military away

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from the doctrine it acquired from the Soviets as a political force and took on a more Western role in the affairs of state; not so much loyal to any one person, but definitely loyal to its own interests, as well as to the continuity of a functioning Egyptian government. That said, Egyptian officers are graduates of Egypt's very respectable Egyptian Military Academy, and they have also received training at top military institutions around the world, including in the United States.

The irony is that it took a great deal of effort to convert the military from a loose cannon (it was a military coup that overthrew King Farouk in 1952) to a more professional, modern army has long been regarded as one of President Mubarak's more notable achievements. Not only did the Egyptian army prove unwilling to fire on civilians when so ordered by Mubarak, they played "referee" in the ensuing uncertain climate after Mubarak stepped down. They continue to play an important, if controversial, role in the direction Egypt will take as it forges a new future.

Conclusion

Many factors impact the culture of leadership in the Middle East and influence how decisions are made and how others view those decisions. Such factors include the value of reputation, which carries far greater weight in the Middle East than it does in Western societies. Wealth is a function of one's reputation, and has little to do with material possessions. Hospitality and gift-giving are key tenets of leadership culture, and played a role in the Taliban refusing to surrender bin Ladin to the United States because he was their "guest." Tribal, clan, and familial ties in the Middle East matter a great deal to leadership culture, and this primer explored the impact of such values on the military structures of Libya and Egypt as brief case studies. Finally, Islam has had a profound influence on Middle East culture, imparting new ideas while also absorbing—and balancing—the traditions of the desert nomads that preceded the Prophet.

This primer concludes with a warning similar to the one that started it; namely, that cultural norms provide a context in which leaders choose to act. Reputation, tradition, history, and religion play important roles in shaping decisions of leaders in the Middle East and the desired perception. A deeper understanding of the salient elements of Mideast cultural enumerated in this primer can do much to inform those tasked with analyzing and evaluating leadership in this historically volatile region, especially during one of the most precarious periods in its recent history.

About the Author

Dr. Sheldon Greaves is an independent scholar and part-time faculty member at Henley-Putnam University, where he teaches courses in religious extremism and covert organizations. He is a founder of Henley-Putnam University, and the Founder of the *Journal of Strategic Security*. He holds a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California at Berkeley and lives in San Jose, CA.

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- 2 Fairholm, Gilbert W., *Leadership and the Culture of Trust* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 7.
- 3 Ibid., 9.
- 4 Barakat, Halim, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 48 ff.
- 5 Lancaster, William, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 73. Lancaster's excellent study of one of the largest surviving Bedouin cultures informs much of what follows in this paper.
- 6 Ibid., 140.
- 7 Norvell B. De Atkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars," *Middle East Quarterly* 6:2 (December 1999), available at: <http://tinyurl.com/19kp> (www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/AD_Issues/amdipl_17/articles/deatkine_arabs1.html).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Lancaster, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, 139–140.
- 10 An example of this more familiar to Judeo-Christian readers is that of Abraham in Gen. 14:14–23 who, leading his own personal "trained men" in a daring raid surprises the kings that had plundered the five cities of the plain, capturing the booty for himself. He then turns around and returns it to the feckless local kings, "lest you should say, 'I made Abraham rich.'" This episode was doubtless intended to explain why Abraham was such a significant local and regional presence. It is certainly the stuff of which high reputations would be made in a nomadic or semi-nomadic desert culture.
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- 13 Omar Tsalich El-Barghuthi, "Rules of Hospitality (QanûnYd-Diyâfeh)," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 4 (1924): 192.
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- 18 Trebilcock, "The Seven Modern Pillars of Iraq," 26ff. The Arab Spring, of course, is a democratic movement that caught Middle Eastern leaders. As a rule, the more traditional the governments facing these uprisings, the less capable they appear to be in dealing with them.
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- 22 "The Instruction for King MeriKa-Re," trans. John A. Wilson, in James Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edition) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 414–5.
- 23 Kadri, 49.
- 24 Thomas L. Friedman, "The New Hama Rules," *New York Times*, August 2, 2011, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/03/opinion/the-new-hama-rules.html?_r=1.
- 25 Bernard Lewis, "Western Civilization: A View from the East" (Jefferson lecture, Stanford, CA, 1990).
- 26 The term carries with it the connotation of something that is pagan, corrupt, and ungodly, long since superseded by Muslim teaching.
- 27 Yasin Khalaf Sarayrah, "Servant leadership in the Bedouin-Arab culture," *Global Virtue Ethics Review* (July 1, 2004): 1ff.
- 28 Ibid., recounts this charming anecdote concerning the Caliph Omar behavior in council. "In one of his speeches, Omar suggested 40 dinars as an upper limit for the dowry a man pays to his bride, and said that any amount above that limit would be allotted to the state treasury. A woman from the audience stood up and recited a verse from the Quran that contradicted what Omar said. Omar smiled and in a widely quoted saying replied: "The woman is correct and Omar is mistaken." From Nawafleh, Mohammed, *The Personal and Leadership Characteristics of Omar Bin Al-Khattab* (Amman, Jordan: Majdalawi Publishing, 2000), 118.
- 29 Kadri, 224–5.

- 30 One of the important points of Jihad is that in the past a *fatwa* of jihad had to be formally declared by the recognized religious authority. Lower level clerics or jurists could not so presume.
- 31 Syria's ruling family, the al-Assads, also make up a significant portion of that government and military, as did people from Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein.

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