

COMMENTARY ARE ARABS FATALISTS?

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As a professor who teaches Middle Eastern politics I endeavor to advance intercultural understanding. A recent encounter makes me believe that a great deal of work lies ahead.

Orientalists – those European academics of the 19th century who studied the Middle East to confirm their own cultural superiority – often referred to inhabitants of that region as “fatalists.” In their view, the followers of Islam had remained untouched by the Enlightenment that had swept Europe. While Europeans had learned to lift their traditions into the light of reason and critically examine them, Muslims continued to practice their faith with naïve submission to the will of Allah. Five times a day they turned to Mecca, invoking God, the Merciful. Because they placed their fate into the hands of the Almighty, they had little drive to accomplish things by themselves. As a consequence, they remained untouched by material or political success. The nations of Europe therefore had to step up and introduce modernity into the Arab world. The British tended to Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. France, in turn, took care of Syria and Lebanon. Libya fell to the Italians, and in Northern Africa, France looked after Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria.

I had always thought that labeling people of the Middle East as “fatalists” was a thing of the past, an error of European imperialists. That Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* had corrected the notion of the childlike Arab who sat under a palm tree, fanned himself, and waited for God do to his job. If anything, I believed, 9/11 had steered academics in the opposite direction, because the vast literature on militant Islam and holy war depicts Arabs as active militants who envy the West for its progress and seek its destruction. The notion of Arab fatalism – I was convinced – was no longer in currency.

Well, I was wrong. The old stereotype is alive and well, and it floats through the hallways of American universities. A few weeks ago I attended a faculty luncheon. A military historian from the Hoover Institution delivered the keynote address. The night before he had given a lecture about the war in Iraq, because he had just returned from the ravaged country and been invited to discuss his insights.

During the luncheon, he shared with the assembled professors his thoughts about American politics, prospects for the global commons, and the state of higher education. Members of the audience asked informed and interesting questions. At some point the door opened, and two late arrivals joined the gathering. One of them raised his hand and asked: “What are we going to do about the fatalism in the Middle East? A while ago I was in Jordan, and I took a ride with this taxi cab. The driver drove the car at breakneck speed. I told him to slow down, but instead of doing it, he just said ‘*In sha Allah* – if God wills it – we will still be alive tomorrow.’ So I want to know: what is to be done about all this fatalism?”

Taken aback, I turned to the guest next to me, who taught at a Pennsylvania institution. With a subdued voice I commented: “How can this man generalize from one taxi driver to millions of people?” My neighbor whispered back: “It’s because Arabs always say ‘*In sha Allah*.’ My Arab students do that a lot. They say ‘*In sha Allah* I’ll see you in class tomorrow,’ but instead of being there when class starts, they are late. So I’ve started to tell them ‘*In sha Allah* you’ll come to class on time from now on.’” I could tell that my neighbor also considered Arabs as fatalists. To my surprise, our keynote speaker did nothing to correct the teller of the Jordan anecdote either. Instead of pointing out that the idea of Arab fatalism is an ideological remnant of imperialism, he bought into the terms of the question and suggested ways in which U.S. foreign policy might help the Middle East overcome its deficiencies.

I find all of this unsettling, and for three reasons. First, that I witnessed three scholars from three different institutions agree on the image of the fatalistic Arab makes me believe that the image is widespread in American academia. Second, the United States is deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs, and students may have questions about the Arab world that they will ask their professors. I am convinced that as teachers we inflict damage if we pass on stereotypes about a foreign culture. For by doing so, we ensure that its bearers are viewed as less than our equals, and true dialogue becomes difficult. Third, such stereotypes have a profoundly negative impact on our Arab students, and since they are in our care we must ensure that they are treated with respect.

So let me share my comments. First off, the gentleman who told the anecdote of the Jordanian cab driver generalized from the behavior of one person to the inhabitants of an entire world region. The Arabic-speaking Middle East is home to at least 170 million people. Add to that eighty million North Africans, seventy million Iranians and just as many Turks. As any research methods book admonishes us, it is improper to generalize across a large population unless we do so by carefully devised rules of inference. In commenting on his experience as he did, the faculty member resembled a foreign visitor to the United States who saw a speeder and concluded that Americans were breakneck drivers. Such an inference is fallacious and does not apply to millions of Americans.

Second, the Jordanian cab driver does not exemplify a fatalistic outlook on life, because he exhibited a great deal of agency when he put his foot on the gas pedal. Had he been a true fatalist, he would have leaned back in his seat and waited for God to drive the car for him. After all, what does fatalism mean? It means that an individual has an extrinsic locus of control. In the given Arab example it means giving up responsibility for one’s fate, and laying all decisions into the hands of the Creator. And this in turn means saying good-bye to one’s agency.

The gentleman at the luncheon may have arrived at his interpretation by combining two facts. First, the cab driver stated that he would live another day if God chose that he should. Second, there was a high probability that the taxi would hit an object and that the taxi driver would die. And so my colleague concluded that his driver was emotionally prepared to give up his life at God’s behest.

This could perhaps be interpreted as semi-fatalism, because on the one hand the driver took action and tried to shape his fate, while on the other hand he left it up to his Creator to decide whether he should perish. I offer an interpretation that is more mundane. Borrowing vocabulary from rational choice theorists, I refer to the driver's behavior as "risk-taking behavior." Such demeanor is widespread in American society, and who does not believe it should take a trip to Las Vegas. The statistically expected loss from betting on a single number in European roulette amounts to 1/37 of the bet. So why do so many of us flock to the roulette table anyway? We do so because we are convinced that we will beat the odds and get lucky. Many of us place a bundle of chips on a number and ask God or fate or coincidence to decide whether we will leave the gambling hall richer than we entered it. Our hope, of course, is that fate will side with us. Is, then, the interpretation correct that all gamblers are fatalists? Are all Americans who invest money in the stock market and risk losing it fatalists?

To me the cab driver's behavior looks a lot like that of a hedge fund manager (as we all know, managing hedge funds is risky business). The driver is not paid by the hour, but by the number of customers he delivers to their destinations at any given time. So the more customers he delivers in the same window of time, the more income he generates. With that in mind, he took the risk of a crash because he thought his driving skills would help him avoid obstacles even at great speed and make more money. So maybe we might accuse this man of suffering from inflated self-confidence. Convinced that speeding was safe, he probably did not want to discuss his actions with his passenger. So, when he said "*In sha Allah* we will still be alive tomorrow," he did not express true willingness to lay his fate in God's hands. Instead, he chose a polite way of avoiding an unpleasant conversation.

The third point I want to make is a generalization that I base on years of interacting with Arabic speakers. When Arabs say "*In sha Allah*," they normally do not imply that they are ready to die, should God choose to let the sky drop on their heads. It is a formula that acknowledges God's sovereignty over all things. Used in day-to-day conversations, it means "I will do my best to make this happen." So, if someone says: "*In sha Allah* I will come tomorrow," this should be read as meaning: "I am going to come tomorrow." So why do Arabs say "If God wills it I will come tomorrow" if all they mean is "I am going to come tomorrow?" This is a good question. My simplest answer is to counter with a question: Why do we say "how are you doing?" suggesting that we are interested in a person's medical history, when all we mean is "hello"? "*In sha Allah*" and "how are you doing?" are expressions that form part of society's cultural repertoire. They are signs that should not be translated word for word, but as part of a whole web of meaning.

Fourth, I have never seen an Arab who has waited for God to do her work. Those Arab citizens whom I have met all have interests. Just like our interests, theirs are defined by cultural context. And just like we do, they pursue their interests within the constraints of the doable. That we perceive people of the Middle East as "not getting anything done" may have to do with the fact that we do not understand what their specific goals are and that we tend to devalue any objective that we do not fathom for ourselves.

Moreover, in societies that are marked by poverty, illiteracy, and authoritarianism, individuals have little social mobility, no matter how much desire for personal advancement they have.

Now what about the interjection that my neighbor's Arab students are late for class? That, in my view, has less to do with lack of agency or religious prescriptions than with socialization. These students come from cultures that embrace an understanding of time quite unlike ours. Time can be measured in many ways. Some of us rely on a digital clock that cycles through the hours of the day and advances through the days in the calendar. Others measure time by the location of the sun and the moon. Again others count the rings in the trunk of a tree or the layers of sediment in the soil. Some look to the forest's cycle of growth and decay, others become aware of the passage of time when they see their children grow up.

Trite as they sound, these examples capture the fact that time is what we learn it to be. Most of us in the United States experience time as monochronic and linear. We look back at the past, because it furnishes us with a history and an identity, and we look even more towards the future, because it forms the canvass for our aspirations. Our society values persons highly when they are in their working years and contribute to the economy, and it devalues those who have passed retirement age. Our days are defined by a schedule, and we are serious about punctuality. Personal relationships are less important than the schedule – if we have an appointment at work, conversations with friends or family time will be cut short.

Other cultural communities - and this includes Native American, Latin American, and Arab societies – tend to favor a polychronic understanding of time. In their communities, older human beings are held in high esteem. Personal relationships matter a great deal, and deserting a guest for an appointment that is coming up is considered rude. Appointment times are viewed as negotiable. For a person who has been raised to honor personal relationships and subordinate schedules, it must be difficult to abide by a cultural regime that privileges schedules and subordinates personal relationships.

I am, of course, aware that students who study at an American university need to abide by the rules that govern the institution. I also acknowledge that students who are late may simply be so because they felt like skipping class. However, adjusting to our perception of time may be more difficult for Arab students than we acknowledge, for even though our time perception influences deeply how we act, most of us are unaware that we hold a culturally specific notion of time. Imagine you visited a foreign country, spent time with a local resident, and were asked to stay with him for an hour longer even though you have another appointment coming up and will be late for it. Would it be easy?

In conclusion, there are numerous ways in which we can choose to interpret the conduct of human beings from another culture. Some of these ways are demeaning, because they portray these persons not only as different, but also suggest that they are inferior. Once we give into the notion that those who differ from us are not our equals, two-way dialogue ends, and the one-way imposition of values begins. This in turn has pernicious effects for the persons who suffer the imposition. In the spirit of intercultural communication I therefore suggest that we do not resort to the fatalism metaphor, if we can interpret conduct in ways that are less pejorative.

God willing, we will succeed in ditching those stereotypes.