

By Lana Jarsdell

Arabs are a proud people, and as one would thus expect, a very stubborn people. We've lived following the same rules and practices for over 1400 years, and no matter how much one criticises, no one outside is going to understand... it's an Arab thing.

When the Western media speak of Arab culture, it is implied there is a single united society. In fact, there are many differences between the Arab countries, differences so diverse that Arabs from one country can be entirely alien to the customs, traditions and dialects of another. It is more appropriate to speak of Arab cultures, shaped by the individual political histories of each country. Obviously there is a common heritage. The Arab Muslim civilisation of past derived from the most advanced empire of its time and laid the foundations for subsequent civilisations (including much that was absorbed by Western/Christian societies). But the modern history of the entire region has been plagued with conflict that unites the states against a perceived shared adversary.

Whilst Arab states, especially in the Gulf, have become almost as technologically advanced and saturated with popular culture as their Western counterparts their social, political and religious customs have not adapted so successfully. Arab culture has almost reached a standstill. Certain statistics can emphasise this point, for example, according to the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair Conference in 2009, only 5910 books were written and published across the entire Arab world in 2008. This has had significant implications for the prospective 191 million readers. As a result, no successful social or political movements emerged for over 2 decades, until recently. It could be said that the renewed strength of radical Islamist groups is a result of the strict inhibiting tendencies of Arab culture.

Since the late 1970's those in Middle Eastern and North African countries have looked to Islam for cultural assurance. Radical Islamists originate from the small gaps in society that modernisation of the modern-day Arab Muslim world has produced, a world that is far removed from traditional Islamic principles. Having said that, there is still a strong conservative movement, especially in the Gulf and in some North African countries. This religious conservatism has allowed members of the younger generations to discover an outlet that allows them to become politically involved whilst at the same time help to ensure their religion continues to play an active role in society.

There can be no doubt that every religion has its own significance in its society, but for one to govern society by compelling it to resign itself to a particular doctrine can only sentence its citizens to ruin, as could be seen in Taliban controlled Afghanistan. The success of most modern Christian civilisations lies in the separation between the Church and the government. In the Muslim world cultural identity is one and the same as religion. In these circumstances, it is easy for one to see how radical groups, with their own political agendas, can use religion to garner support from disillusioned members of society. Radical Islamism therefore becomes a

response to changing societal attitudes to Western influence on Arab culture and political spheres.

The modern Arab world has been shaped by many years of imperial rule by one foreign power or another. The region had always been relatively stable during the time it was under Ottoman, then British rule, or as is the case in Northern Africa, French rule. During the 20th century, the entire region was reshaped by the departure of imperial powers. What was established was a new world, with new borders and many diverse ethnic identities. These differences immediately became apparent. Tensions soon arose, and it became clear that religion would not be enough to unite warring factions causing destabilisation in the region that would continue to this day.

Following the discovery of the abundant natural resources, foreign powers quickly reasserted their interests in the region. Such is the scale that the entire world is to some degree dependent on the Middle East. The continued instability means that there is reason for the West to interfere, maintaining that an outside force can help to effectively control the resources without bias. This interference has led to many in the Arab world to feel that they continue to be dictated to, which has led to a growth of resentment of the West. There is an inherent yearning of every native people to fight off foreign interference. This accounts for the growth of many groups who have used violence as a means to meet their desired ends. Many people in the Middle East feel that there is a non-present occupation by the West that is controlling the region. Therefore, as they see themselves as the oppressed, they feel that terrorism, long known to be a weapon of the weak, is an acceptable, if not the only tactic to employ. Their leaders can see examples of yesterday's terrorist becoming tomorrow's statesman. Hence the rise of Jihadi-inspired terrorism (JIT).

The elites in Arab countries are partly to blame for the increase in radicalisation within their Muslim societies. They have not effectively been able to deal with the key issues faced by their societies that arose once the Imperial powers had gone. Notably these include restricted personal freedoms and the practice of censorship. This leaves people looking for other means than the established systems.

It is here that radical Islamists preach to convert people to their beliefs, representing Islam as the answer to their troubles and some go on to JIT. It is clear to see where the link between Arab states and terrorism is made, as countries that contain their people's liberties and political rights are more prone to breed and harbour international terrorists. That said; a distinction must be made between Islam and terrorism. Islam strictly condemns any act of terrorism. If there are murmurs from the Islamic world that convey a bitterness directed to the west, it is not for a lack of respect for the values that are widely accepted by its people, but rather for the evident double standards it has shown when it comes to protecting such liberties in the Eastern world.

Western states have long shown support of the corrupt and repressive leaders in the Arab Muslim world. When the imperial powers left, they cooperated with the incoming elites, to ensure that those in power would maintain the status quo. This continued interference means that the West is also partly responsible for the state of political affairs in the region. Their continued involvement means that the Arab nations have found themselves at a crossroads where there is a growth of religious fundamental movements that clash with the more reformist

actors.

The problem lies in the fact that whilst the Western world looks to the future, the East always looks to the past. For Arab states to overcome this block, they need to look to the future using the examples they have learned from the past. Especially eras when Arab and Muslim civilisations flowered.

Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilisations theory, proposed in 1992, presupposes that future sources of conflict would be caused by religious and cultural differences. Nation states have continued to be the most influential actors in world politics, but the major conflicts today arise between the nations of these civilisations. He identifies 8 main civilisations, and highlights the Islamic civilisation as one that poses the greatest threat.

Huntington contends that the prevalent western conviction in the universality of their values and liberal political structures is mistaken and that insisting on democratisation as a collective norm will only alienate other societies. The West needs to stop believing that it has a duty to save the rest of the world by imposing its own adaptation of liberal democracy. The East and Arab states in particular, have existed and thrived for centuries before democracy was established as a norm, so there is no need to force it upon them. The liberal democracy model of the Western world is an intrinsic part of its culture. In the Arab states, culture is not shaped by the political realm, but rather tradition and religion. Radical Islamists are just as wrong as their perceived enemy when they criticise the Western way of life. This fundamental difference should be accepted, and the relationship between the two should be based on an understanding by both that their political practices should not be based on trying to impose each other's customs on the other.

Using Huntington's logic, the perceived conflict between the West and Islam is a continuation of centuries old rivalry between the two monoliths. The idea of a grand clash of civilisations between Islam and the West serves as a rallying cry to arms from their supporters for very different reasons. While the Western states fight to save the freedoms and liberties they feel are in danger at the hands of Islam, the radical Islamist groups call for a protection of the Ummah that they feel is being persecuted. Rather than a clash of Islam versus West, we are in fact seeing a conflict between two political cultures. One side is represented by governments dominated by religious practices, whilst the other consists of governments who prioritise civil liberties as the foundation of their societies.

The political movements that took place throughout the 20th century have had lasting impressions on their modern day societies. Arab states have always had different political climates to their Western counterparts, and in part, this is a result of Islam. Aside from Sharia, an all-encompassing law of the land, Islam has played a great role in shaping the political climate. Islam teaches the importance of charity and sharing wealth amongst the population. Consequently the impact of socialist and communist parties in the region following the end of the cold war has been a point of contention for political relations between East and West.

The Middle East's geographic position in the world, between the West and the East has also had a strong impact on political relations. Arab states have the blessing and curse to lie over the

biggest natural resources on earth. Palestine continues to be an ever open wound for the Arabs that only further drives people towards the radicals and the role of them embracing JIT. The reason that many Palestinians remain living in camps throughout the region is not because they are being used like pawns as part of a political game, rather the acceptance of these settlements would be seen as an acknowledgment of the foreign settlements that drove them out in the first place. So the struggle continues and the resulting conflicts have a profound effect on Arab culture. Arabs have a strong sense of unity and the struggle for one is a struggle for all. So aside from other social problems that are present in all societies, the feeling that Arabs are being manipulated for their resources, and the bias shown to other states has fuelled many disenfranchised Arabs to turn to radical Islamism. If the status quo continues, it is to be expected that there will be a continuing trend towards radical Islamists.