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# THE MIDDLE EAST THROUGH WESTERN EYES

## Fanatics and the Filthy Rich?

*Jim Goode*

On the first day of a class in Middle East history, I often ask my students to pretend they are conducting an interview at a local shopping mall, where they must ask shoppers what characteristics they associate with people from the Middle East (or Muslims, or Arabs). Then I ask the students what they think they would answer.

The list seldom varies: "veils," "submissive women," "oil wealth," "extremists," "terrorists," "religious," "fanatical," and so on. Then, we discuss where these images come from. Through this exercise I hope to alert students to many of the stereotypes concerning things Middle Eastern in our society—some of which, obviously, lurk in their own minds.

Given the recent bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City, one of the most fashionable stereotypes associates the Middle East with terrorism and violence. Such views abound in feature films, cartoons, sitcoms, and articles about the region.

Strangely, in more than twenty-five years of living and traveling in different parts of the region, I have personally witnessed deadly violence only once, and that was being exercised against Arabs in West Jerusalem. My summer experience in Egypt and Syria in 1994 revealed none of the violence, terror, and mayhem that provide the focus for a recent article in *The New Yorker* ("The Novelist and the Sheikh," January 30, 1995). Was I lucky? Naive? Typical? It is hard to say. But given my experience, I tend to be skeptical about the predictions of doom that flood American media.

The stereotype of violence is not limited only to the region. Since the Iranian revolution of 1978, the West has rediscovered Islam and has associated that religion with terrorism everywhere in the region. Here are some recent headlines:

- "PASSIONS AND PERILS: AN ANXIOUS WASHINGTON STUDIES THE FEVER IN ISLAM"
- "ISLAM IN FERMENT"
- "THE ISLAMIC EXPLOSION"
- "ISLAMIC FANATICISM THREATENS WORLD SECURITY"
- "ISLAM MILITANT"

This association has become more pronounced since the end of the Cold War, and Samuel Huntington's major article in *Foreign Affairs* ("The Clash of Civilizations," Summer, 1993) has led the way, warning that Islam may become our new global enemy.

Even less emotion-packed headlines manage to convey the supposedly sinister nature of Islam. The front cover on the November 1991 issue of *The Atlantic*, for example, featured a trackless desert landscape and these words: "A Sahara Journal, Travels Through a Parched Islamic Land so Vast, so Wild, so Desolate, so Complex, that it defies Comprehension or Measurement." What might such a title have conveyed to magazine browsers across the land?

How ironic that Islam, about which so little is known in the West, has become the key to deciphering everything that happens in the Middle East. This is not to argue that religion is not a factor, because it frequently is, but it is never the only factor and often not even the most important key to understanding a situation. It is reductionist to explain every problem in the Middle East by a casual reference to Islam, but this is exactly what many authors do.

So-called Islamic "fundamentalists" are usually represented as the "other," as part of "the mad dog syndrome," as people who put "absolutely no value on human life," who "fight without conscience," and "revel in divisiveness, disillusionment and despair." Seldom are we reminded that Islamic activists often do good, that they provide such services for the poor as health clinics and schools in areas neglected by their governments.

Such narrow views overlook the complexity and variety of Middle East culture. Islam has never provided the sole key for understanding any Middle Eastern people (nor has any other religion). For that we need to examine a variety of factors, just as we would if we were trying to explain our own country to strangers.

Even if one focuses exclusively on Islam, we should remember that there are as many Islams as there are Christianities or Judaisms and that "fundamentalist" does not transfer from our own culture as a descriptive term for some Muslims, because *all* Muslims are fundamentalists, in that they accept the fundamentals of Islam—the five pillars of their faith.

We can see great variety even in Egypt, supposedly one of the most uniform of Middle Eastern states. Here we find no simple uniformity of belief. To begin with, ten percent of the population, representing approximately six million Egyptians, is Christian. Among the remaining ninety percent, who are Muslims, we can discern secularists, modernists, traditionalists, and radicals. Then, we have to consider the brotherhoods of sufis or mystics, who are numerous in Egypt. When we look at different socio-economic classes, contrasts between rural and urban Egyptians, gender differences and so forth, we begin to glimpse the rich mosaic that is Egypt.

We can find similar variety almost everywhere in other countries. For example, Lebanon is forty percent Christian, sixty percent Muslim and Druze; Iraq is sixty percent Shiite, forty percent Sunni (both Arab and Kurd).

There are serious problems in many parts of the region, but it would be misleading and dangerous to dismiss them all as being rooted in Islamic fanaticism. These problems have many causes; we ought to do our best to understand them.

Let's look at another common stereotype: the issue of Arab wealth. All Arabs are rich—right? Of course not. There are great disparities in wealth, both within and among nations. There are certainly well-off states, those with comparatively small

populations and large amounts of oil. This description fits especially the states in the Gulf region, such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. These are the so-called "have" nations of the Middle East.

But more numerous and often with larger populations are the "have not" nations: for example, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Yemen. Often, they have higher birth rates and other demographic factors contributing to instability. Some examples:

**% Annual Natural  
Population Increase                      % Under Age 15**

<b>GAZA</b>	<b>5.0</b>	<b>60.0</b>
<b>WEST BANK</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>
<b>YEMEN</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>51.0</b>
<b>UAE</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>32.0</b>
<b>QATER</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>23.0</b>
<b>USA</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>22.0</b>

**Average Annual Incomes (\$US)**

<b>EGYPT</b>	<b>\$430</b>	<b>SAUDI ARABIA</b>	<b>\$10,000</b>
<b>YEMEN</b>	<b>\$500</b>	<b>QATAR</b>	<b>\$25,000</b>

Such differences exacerbated divisions among the Arab states long before the Gulf War brought them to the attention of the world.

Within the have-not nations there are also important class differences. In Egypt an upper class family might spend \$150,000 (U.S.) on a daughter's wedding, while millions have barely enough to eat. Ever since these nations abandoned socialism in recent years, the gap between rich and poor has been widening.

Even the have nations today face serious economic crises. Saudi Arabia, for example, has had a series of staggering budget deficits over the past five years: 1994 revenues \$30 billion (U.S.), expenditures \$40 billion (U.S.) These states face the problem of high expectations on the part of their citizens at a time when the price of oil has dropped from \$40/barrel (U.S.) in late 1990 to \$13/barrel (U.S.) in 1994.

Again, we see complexity and nuance where we might expect uniformity.

Perhaps this information will help "deconstruct" a few of the stereotypes expressed by our "mall shoppers." But as members of a university community, we need to do more, to read books such as Jack Shaheen's *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*, to take classes and attend presentations about non-Western cultures and, whenever the opportunity arises, to study and travel abroad. There is no substitute for experiencing other cultures firsthand.