

Negotiating with Arabs

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The purpose of this paper is to offer broad insights into the negotiating mentality of the Arab World. The paper will identify Western preconceptions or stereotype images of the Arab mentality and contrast those with perceptions from an Arab viewpoint.

Much of what we commonly explain as cultural/national differences in another negotiator's style may actually be behavior that we perceive differently because of the cognitive "baggage" that we bring with us into a negotiation.

A classic example of this is the misconception by many Western negotiators that all Arabs are Muslim and all Muslims are Arabs, or even that all Arabs are alike. There *are* common Arab traits, but they *are not* universal in the Arab world.

- Pride and honor are very important, but they are based on different variables such as tribal reputation, geographical importance, military power or wealth.
- While all Arabs are family oriented, not all are tribal.
- Relationships - While generally, there is little distinction between personal and professional relationships, this concept is stronger in tribal societies than pluralistic ones and can also vary depending on levels of education, experience and urbanization.
- Hospitality is greatly appreciated but it can differ in the way it is expressed. To the Arab, hospitality is an obligation, not just a consideration. Therefore, generosity should not be equated with sincerity.

An Arab is a national identification -- a person who speaks the Arabic language and is from an Arabian country (Middle East, East and North Africa). While all 21 Arab countries are governed in name by Islamic law (Shariah), few actually practice it.

At a two-week session on the negotiation of international political differences held in the Spring of 1988 in Salzburg, Austria, the 50 or so participants -- scholars and practitioners with expertise in the area of negotiation, coming from nations throughout Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas -- were formed into rough "national" or "regional" groupings, and were asked to characterize their national negotiating style, as seen by others. A cluster of Arab participants from several nations in the Middle East characterized a "Leventine" negotiating style as "inclined to violence, aggression, incohesive, indecisive, irrational, temperamental, emotional, impulsive and romantic."¹

Most of these characterizations are as a result of a prevailing Western mind-set, not so much that a person is an Arab, but that he comes from the Third World, and somehow is never equal in Western eyes. Hence, the Arab response of violence and aggression, is in most cases, a positional statement to establish themselves as equals.

According to a handbook published by the U.S. Department of State, there are two strong and sometimes competing models of how to best negotiate with an Arab counterpart. Simply stated, the two models can best be described as the Suqq model, marked by bargaining and haggling typical of the marketplace; and the Bedouin model, reflecting the way Arab tribes historically resolved their disputes through a combination of posturing, ritualized confrontation, lofty rhetoric, mediation, and face-saving arrangements that would allow both parties to save honor.²

The Suqq Model

The Suqq model is familiar to anyone with a passing acquaintance with the Middle East. To some extent, it is a stereotype, but like many stereotypes it contains elements of truth. In the market-place, elaborate rituals surround transactions. No one expects to enter the marketplace with a fixed price in mind to make a straightforward financial transaction. Instead, there should be a preliminary period of discussing issues that go well beyond the transaction that is contemplated. This involves a ritual of establishing a personal relationship. Once that has been accomplished, often after endless cups of coffee and tea, the actual bargaining can begin. The seller will start with a much higher price than he expects to achieve, and part of the game is to work toward a compromise position. Both parties probably know how much of a compromise is acceptable to them at the outset, but neither wants to reveal his final position too soon. Typically, haggling will go on for some time, both parties may threaten to break off the process, both will engage in a whole series of maneuvers to find out the real bottom line of the other party and in the end a deal is likely to be struck that will allow both parties to feel satisfaction. Alternatively, the process may seem to drag on indefinitely, a sign that the Arab is not ready for a deal but does not want to bear the onus for breaking off negotiations.

The Bedouin Model

A second model which sometimes characterizes the Arab negotiation style could be described as the tribal or Bedouin approach to matters including honor. When tribes have fought and blood has been shed, it is inappropriate to bring the parties together directly in order to achieve a reconciliation. According to this model, an intermediary

(*Wassit*) needs to be found who can gain the trust of both sides and can help bring them toward some form of reconciliation. The honor of both parties must be kept uppermost in the mind of the *Wassit*. Face-saving is more important than the details of the reconciliation. Haggling, or the model of the *Suqq* is entirely inappropriate. Instead, gestures of generosity are relied upon to change the atmosphere in the negotiations, and it is the job of the *Wassit* to be sure that if such gestures are made they will be reciprocated. The point in this style of negotiation is to let the *Wassit* explore positions carefully before either party is required to make any clear commitment. Once the intermediary has done his job, the parties to the conflict will be expected to come together, to make the agreed-upon moves, perhaps accompanied by flowery language and generous offers, and thereby to declare the conflict to be resolved. It is important to remember that a *Wassit* cannot be hired, he can only be befriended. In viewing these two models, one has to realize that they are used in different negotiations. The *Suqq* model is often used on a one time deal and usually on very low scale transactions. Personal relationship is not a major concern.

In a major commercial or government deal where a personal relationship is an integral part of the negotiation one heads towards the Bedouin model. Another consideration that distinguishes the two is the person with whom one is negotiating with. The more important the person is the more the negotiation heads towards the Bedouin model and the *Wassit's* role becomes more and more important. One has to realize that once a personal relationship has been established there is no more room for the *Suqq* model or the *Wassit* as a go-between.

Cultural considerations

For the purposes of this paper, we will define culture as the system of meaning and value shared by a community. Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reaction. These are acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values.³

The Arab not only speaks a different language, but what is possibly more important, he inhabits different sensory worlds. His selective screening of sensory data admits some things while filtering out others, so that experience as it is perceived through his set of culturally patterned sensory screens is quite different from experience perceived through another outside his culture.

Here we can draw a distinction between the attitude of individualistic, low-context cultures toward face, such as the United States and that of the collectivistic, high-context cultures of the Arab world. The American culture is particularly concerned with autonomy and personal integrity. It is all-important to be true to oneself, to be "taken as I am." Laying stress on the development and integrity of the self, members of individualistic cultures look inward for moral guidance (conscience) and are unlikely to be swayed by public disapproval from doing what they believe to be right. Conflicts, seen as the legitimate struggle of competing interests, are handled either in a problem-solving manner, minimizing subjective desires and needs ("separating the people from the problem" in the famous formulation by Fisher and Ury), or through adversarial techniques of open confrontation. Debate, challenge and refutation, and controversy carry no threat

to the ego. Provided one preserves one's personal integrity, there is no shame in disagreement or nonconformity. Articulations are low-context and direct, placing relatively little emphasis on euphemism, allusion, or nonverbal gesture. What has to be said is stated honestly and without embellishment.

The Arab world is a high-context, collectivistic culture underpinned by a quite different concept of the self. In placing the primacy on the family structure or community above all else, it defines individuals not as autonomous entities capable of self-reliance and personal realization but as links in interlocking chains of relationships. To disassociate oneself from the collectivity is a contradiction in terms under such conditions, for self-appraisal derives from one's satisfactory fulfillment of the obligations and expectations imposed by the society.

Shame, the prospect of loss of face in the eyes of the community, is one of the guides to moral choice. Conflict is handled by the avoidance of public confrontation, and no virtue at all is seen in publicly airing differences. Anything likely to disturb harmony and generate group disapproval is avoided.

Consensus, in the Arab world is the reconciliation of disagreement even at the cost of abstract justice, which is preferred to the disruptive victory of one point of view over another. Communication is high-context and indirect, preferring allusions and contextual hints to blunt and potentially hurtful articulations.

Different conceptions of face lie at the very heart of the individualistic-collectivistic dichotomy. In individualistic cultures, stress is on negative face-defending one's personal self-esteem and preserving the inviolability of one's individual space. There is less perceived need for positive face, the appreciation and approval of others and

consequently there is no special concern with others' need for approbation and possible exposure to embarrassment. Individualistic cultures resting on individual rights, freedom of choice, and that resort to conscience do not assume that interpersonal friction will threaten the fabric of society.

Collectivistic cultures present a quite different picture. The Arab concern with saving one's own face is combined with an acute preoccupation with the need to give face and, to avoid at all costs, damaging the other party's self-esteem. When family harmony and cohesion cannot be taken for granted (for reasons such as clan cleavages and the risk of endemic feuding), the sensitive anticipation of the needs of the other party overrides the Arab's consciousness of his private needs. Honoring face, and above all not threatening face, become categorical imperatives.

Saving face for example, in the context of dealing with an Arab government, should not imply that it is mainly concerned with superficial appearances rather than substance. To the Arab, appearances are important, and limiting the scope of a precedent is not superficial. Nor are many of the other variables which can be changed to make a proposed decision less painful and more appealing to another government. Arranging matters to minimize political costs to an adversary is not window dressing to be put on after the adversary has been persuaded. It is part of the process of persuasion.⁴

Assumptions About Negotiating

Listed below are 11 topics which characterize the process of international meetings and negotiations. We have set this part of the paper out in contrasting type styles to highlight the difference in attitudes between American and Arab negotiators. (The U.S. is in regular type, the Arab is in bold italics).

Conception of the negotiation process. For the U.S. negotiator, negotiation is a business, not a social activity. The objective of a negotiation is to get a job done which usually requires a mixture of problem-solving and bargaining activities. Most negotiations are adversarial with other parties seen as opponents who are trying to get as much as possible. The flow of a negotiation is from pre-negotiation strategy sessions to opening positions to give and take (bargaining) to final compromises to signing and implementation of agreements. All parties are expected to give up some of their original demands in the process of reaching an agreement. Success can be measured in terms of how much each party achieves its bottom line objectives. ⁵ *For an Arab, a negotiation is more of a social activity than it is a job or business. For an Arab, as stated above, establishing a relationship is very important, and Arabs will go out of their way in trying to establish a social relationship and understanding ones personality before they negotiate. After a first meeting, this social relationship will often take the form of an activity such as a meal, or a tour around the city, which gives both sides a chance to explore personal interests. For an Arab, this is an important criterion for setting the agenda of the next meeting.*

Type of issues. Substantive issues are more important than social and emotional issues. Differences in positions among negotiators are seen as problems to be solved or overcome, The substantive issues that are the basis of each party's position and that are the focus of the negotiation are worked on in the give and take of the negotiation process. *Substantive issues are important to Arab negotiators but within the context of the social and emotional issues. Establishing the trust to deal with substantive issues can only be gained through an understanding of the emotional and social components.*

Protocol. Negotiations are scheduled occasions that require face-to-face interactions among the involved parties. Effective use of time (efficiency) on substantive tasks is valued over ceremony and social amenities. During the give and take of formal negotiation processes, standardized procedures such as Robert's Rules of Order should be followed. Other social interactions are informal and should take place outside the scheduled negotiation meetings. *To an Arab a negotiation is a social event where he meets people and tries to work with them in a way that will satisfy both parties. To try to distinguish a negotiation from any other social event that accrues in an Arab's life is a major mistake that should be avoided.*

Reliance on verbal behaviors. Communication is direct and verbal. There is little deliberate or intentional use of nonverbal behaviors in the communication process. What is said is more important than how its said, or what is not said. Honesty and frankness are valued. Communications tend to be spontaneous and reactive after the presentation of initial positions. *The Communication process to Arabs is totally different. Instead of relying purely on written and verbal cues, they focus on body language - at every small thing from the way one dresses to the way one talks. They try to notice the most minor details and build their impressions on such sensory observations. They avoid direct statements and enjoy engaging in circuitous reasoning to an idea or phrase that will be binding.*

Nature of persuasive arguments. Tactics, such as bluffing, are acceptable in the bargaining process. Current information and ideas are more valid than historical or traditional opinions and information. Expert opinions and data are most persuasive, theory is not important. Timing is important in the presentation of positions and

concessions. *Arab's usually use any tactics during the first meeting including lying and bluffing to try to avoid making a commitment. Once a negotiation has commenced and trust has been established, bluffing and lying tactics will be discarded. If he feels offended in any way, the Arab may choose to disclose his discomfort to a trusted third party to relate to his opposing number, but he will not openly display his annoyance. Arabs place greater reliance on the historical perspective of an issue rather than current data. Arabs initially prefer to look at an issue theoretically rather than practically.*

Individual negotiators' latitude. The representatives at the table have a great deal of latitude in reaching acceptable agreements for their sponsors. Negotiators may not have a firm idea of their final positions (bottom line) until the negotiation process is well along. Whatever is not expressly forbidden by the negotiator's sponsor or the standardized procedures of the negotiation process is possible. A maximum of options is kept open. *To an Arab, authority is one of the most important things that should be established. One has to know if the Arab negotiator has authority or not. The Arab will not volunteer that information. Therefore, it is helpful to use sources outside the circle of negotiation to help determine who is the authority behind the Arab side. This is where the role of the Wassit comes into play. A common mistake among non-Arab negotiators is to assume that job title implies authority. In many cases this is deceptive, because it is not uncommon to find that many senior positions are filled as a result of patronage.*

Basis of trust. Negotiators trust the other parties until they prove untrustworthy. Trust is judged by the behaviors of others. Fair play, principled behavior, equity, and objective thinking are valued. Deception, coercion, elitism, unresponsiveness, and bribery

are not valued. Past experience with the other parties is an important consideration in trusting. *To Arabs, this is the major issue which most often affects the outcome of the negotiation.*

Risk-taking propensities. Negotiators are open to different or novel approaches to problem issues. Brainstorming is good. Avoiding uncertainty is not important in the negotiation process. Fixed ideological positions and approaches are not acceptable. Negotiators are able to go beyond sponsors' directives on some occasions. *This point can differ depending on the level of authority given to the Arab negotiator. As the level of authority increases, a negotiator can be more responsive to brainstorming ideas and reaching possible compromises without any fear of repercussions.*

Value of time. Time is very important. Punctuality is expected. A fixed time is allotted for concluding a negotiation. There may be rescheduling and a decision to work longer hours to finish a negotiation on time or the clock may be stopped. Negotiators may skip over difficult points and return to them later to keep a negotiation on schedule. *Arabs do not give much consideration to either time periods or punctuality because they equate the length of time with the depth of exploring relationships. The depth of the relationship will ultimately determine the length of the negotiation. The more an Arab negotiator knows his counterpart, the less time the negotiation will take.*

Decision-making system. Majority voting and/or authoritative decisions are the rule. Certain team members are expected to *be* authorized to make binding decisions. Those who disagree with major decisions are expected to express themselves at the time (e.g. a minority report), but to abide by the decisions of the majority. *To Arabs, group consensus is not paramount. Because of the cultural framework of authority, only one*

person makes the final decision. Opinions may be canvassed by the decision maker, but once a decision is made, the rule of collective responsibility is enforced.

Forms of satisfactory agreement. Oral commitments are not binding. Written contracts that are exact and impersonally worded are binding. There is the expectation of contractual finality. Lawyers and courts are the final arbitrators in any arguments after contracts have been signed. *To an Arab, a person's word is more important and binding than a written contract. Because of their background, based on honor and pride, a person holds himself to his word regardless of the consequences. Once a person's word is given a legal contract is merely a confirmation of the agreement.*

Related Values to Negotiation Assumptions

If most of these implicit assumptions about the processes of international negotiation seem familiar and sound reasonable, it is because they reflect dominant procedures in many Western nations and especially within the U.S. These procedures are based on some of our basic values, values that represent our ideals, goals, and norms. Again, we have contrasted some of the important U.S. values that underlie these implicit assumptions about negotiations with the Arab view point.

- Time is a precious commodity. It should be used efficiently to accomplish goals, make plans, set deadlines, chart progress, and schedule activities. There is an emphasis on the near future. *To an Arab, time is the least important thing one should consider. Most Arabs are usually insulted if a negotiator does not have enough time or if one makes a big issue out of it.*

- Specialization is desirable in work and social relationships. One has different friends and colleagues for different occasions. There is little emphasis on being harmonious or consistent. *There is no easy distinction because most of the Arab countries are going through a generational change. The older people view age and experience as a criteria to judge people. The younger generation tends to use the Western approach of specialization in work and social relationships.*
- Individuals control their destinies. One should do something about their life, environment, and social activities. *Arabs share much of this view, however, they place greater consideration on the family unit or tribe than the needs of the individual.*
- There are few absolute truths, what works is good. Problems can be solved and differences resolved through compromises. *Arabs believe the same thing..*
- Conflicts should be resolved through democratic processes. Everyone with an interest in an issue should have some say in how things are done. *Arabs take issue with this because there is no single definition of the word democracy. Even within the Arab World, the concept of democracy differs from one country to the other. Arabs view this situation as how they express their opinion. In the main, the Arab world is a authoritarian hierarchical society, in which dissent is allowed but must be expressed in a very discreet manner. All final decisions rest solely with the person with authority.*

- Everyone should have an equal opportunity to develop their abilities. *In the Arab World “opportunity” is a cultural not a legal distinction. Opportunity exists for many, but it is not a universal guarantee.*
- Authority is resisted, independence valued. Everyone has a right to privacy. *Authority is encouraged and respected based on the social structure. The code of law which determines the freedoms and rights of the individual is defined by that social interaction.*
- One must compete with others to get ahead. Achievements are rewarded through upward mobility and income. Nepotism is disliked. *The Arab world views competition as healthy as long as it is not done at the expense of others. Upward mobility is determined primarily by class structure, and less so by income. Consequently, achievement is awarded primarily through recognition which is derived through opportunity. Nepotism is encouraged as a way of creating opportunity.*

Obstacles to Achieving Face-Related Goals

When negotiators discover that their opponents view their positions as weak and they receive no other gesture of respect, they feel their personal effectiveness is demeaned and they anticipate that their opponents will try and frustrate them. Similarly, negotiators may infer that their opponents reject their competencies if the partners issue non-negotiable demands and control the bargaining process.⁶

Different obstacles make it difficult to support an opponent's image.

- Negotiators often assume that their constituencies want them to establish a position of relative strength over their opponents.

- Negotiators assume that their constituents are more concerned with impressions of strength than they are.
- When the constituency instructs its negotiator to be concerned only with the group's needs and to resist being intimidated by the opponent.
- When monitored by the constituency, negotiators evidence higher concern for appearing strong and engage in contentious behavior that attacks the image of the opponent.
- When seeking to attack an opponent's face, a negotiator may perceive the opponent's anticipated response as the primary obstacle.

Negotiators should expect that overt face attacks will prompt defensive reactions and counterattacks. In trying to pursue a tit-for-tat strategy, partisan perceptions are likely to lead to a malignant spirals in our relationships. Partisan bias will tend to cause a negotiator to evaluate his behavior as worse than his opponent's and reciprocate with behavior that is equal in his eyes, but worse than your opponent's. Since the negotiator is likely to interpret his opponents response as being worse than he either thought or intended, the negotiator is likely to reciprocate with behavior that is even worse than his initial behavior.⁷

Conclusion

This paper is the result of a joint effort of an Israeli-born, American Jew and an Arab Muslim from Saudi Arabia, who met at a negotiation workshop at Harvard Law School. After spending several days suspiciously eyeing each other, we gradually began

to talk. Over the course of our conversations we began to realize that many of our perceived differences were actually based in common heritage - the Torah and the Koran. It was with that new found understanding that we agreed to examine the differences in negotiation styles between our two cultures.

In the course of this paper we have tried to combine personal assumptions and interpretations with well known writings in negotiation and mediation theory to give a broad outline of the normative and cognitive differences between the American or Western style of negotiation and the Arab style. It is important to note that the Arab world is undergoing a major cultural transformation as it raises its educational and technical capabilities in line with the rest of the OECD world (the 24 nations of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development). For this reason, we advise caution in drawing sweeping conclusions and stereotypic methods of how to negotiate with an Arab. There are more than 20 Arab countries, and consequently, their individual style of negotiation may vary dramatically. While most of the Arab World is basically tribal, urbanization is transforming both the physical and social landscape. This phenomenon could well lead to changes in traditional cultural values and practices described above which currently shape the Arab psyche.

Editors Note: Samuel Passow is a professional journalist who holds a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the John. F. Kennedy School of Government. While at Harvard he specialized in Conflict Mediation & Dispute Resolution. Mohammed Al-Sheikh is a qualified lawyer in Saudi Arabia and holds a Master's Degree (LLM) from Harvard Law School. Copyright © 1996 Samuel Passow & Mohammed Al-Sheikh, Cambridge, Mass., USA. All rights reserved.

¹ Rubin Jeffery & Sander, Frank. Culture, Negotiation and the Eye of the Beholder, pp1, Working Paper Series 89-6, Program on Negotiation, Harvard Law School.

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