The Arab Mind Revisited

by Norvell B. De Atkine

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Editors' preface: In the spring of 2004, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal drove headlines in the United States and the Middle East. Journalist Seymour Hersh wrote a report in The New Yorker, entitled "The Gray Zone," describing the abuse of prisoners as the outcome of a deliberate policy. Hersh also made reference to a book, The Arab Mind, by the cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai (1910-96):

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited was The Arab Mind, a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by Raphael Patai, a cultural anthropologist who taught at, among other universities, Columbia and Princeton, and who died in 1996. The book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression.... The Patai book, an academic told me, was "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior." In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged—"one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation."[1]

This mention of Patai's book (on the sole authority of "an academic [who] told me") sent journalists scurrying to read it—and denounce it. Brian Whitaker, writing in The Guardian, called it a "classic case of orientalism which, by focusing on what Edward Said called the 'otherness' of Arab culture, sets up barriers that can then be exploited for political purposes." He quoted an academic as saying, "The best use for this volume, if any, is for a doorstop."[2] Ann Marlowe, in Salon.com, called it "a smear job masquerading under the merest veneer of civility."[3] Louis Werner, in Al-Ahram Weekly and elsewhere, embellished Hersh's account with a made-up detail: The Arab Mind, he wrote, "was apparently used as a field manual by U.S. Army Intelligence in Abu Ghraib prison."[4] (Hersh made no such claim.) Only Lee Smith, writing in Slate.com, suggested that critics had misread Patai, whom he described as "a keen and sympathetic observer of Arab society," a "popularizer of difficult ideas, and also a serious scholar."[5]

No one took the trouble to crosscheck Hersh's academic source on the supposed influence of Patai's book as the "frequently cited ... bible of the neocons." A more accurate description of The Arab Mind would be a prohibited book. Edward Said had denounced Patai twenty-five years earlier, in Orientalism.[6] in academe, The Arab
Mind long ago entered the list of disapproved texts. It was easy to point an accusing finger at the book (again). Patai himself was also a convenient target. A Hungarian-born Jew and lifelong Zionist, he lived in British-mandated Palestine from 1933 to 1947, and in 1936, earned the first doctorate ever awarded by the Hebrew University. He edited Theodor Herzl's complete diaries and served as the first president of the American Friends of Tel Aviv University. For many antiwar conspiracy theorists, the idea of someone like Patai as intellectual father of the Abu Ghraib scandal proved irresistible.

The only concrete evidence for the book's use in any branch of government appeared in the foreword to the most recent reprint (2002) of The Arab Mind, by Col. (res.) Norvell B. De Atkine, an instructor in Middle East studies at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School. De Atkine wrote that he assigned the book to military personnel in his own courses because students found its cultural insights useful in explaining behavior they encountered on assignment.

While critics skimmed Patai's book for generalizing quotes, they skirted the book's premise, as restated by De Atkine: culture matters and cultures differ. The realization by Americans that culture counts explains the commercial success of several cultural handbooks, addressing the very issues that concerned Patai.[7] And while there is no reason to believe that The Arab Mind had the specific influence Hersh attributed to it, the resulting publicity has sent its sales soaring, further extending the life of the book.

The following is De Atkine's foreword to The Arab Mind, reprinted here in full.

**Incurable Romanticism**

It is a particular pleasure to write a foreword to this much-needed reprint of Raphael Patai's classic analysis of Arab culture and society. In view of the events of 2001—including another bloody year of heightened conflict between Palestinians and Israelis and the horrendous terrorist assault on the United States on September 11—there is a critical need to bring this seminal study of the modal Arab personality to the attention of policymakers, scholars, and the general public.

In the wake of the September 11 attack, there was a torrent of commentary on "why" such an assault took place, and on the motivation and mindset of the terrorists. Much of this commentary was either ill-informed or agenda-driven. A number of U.S. Middle East scholars attributed the attack to a simple matter of imbalance in the American approach to the perennial Arab-Israeli conflict. This facile explanation did nothing to improve the credibility of the community of Middle East scholars in the United States, already much diminished by their misreading of the Arab world and their reaction to the U.S. response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

To begin a process of understanding the seemingly irrational hatred that motivated the World Trade Center attackers, one must understand the social and cultural environment in which they lived and the modal personality traits that make them susceptible to engaging in terrorist actions. This book does a great deal to further that understanding. In fact, it is essential reading. At the institution where I teach military officers, The Arab Mind forms the basis of my cultural instruction, complemented by my own experiences of some twenty-five years living in, studying, or teaching about the Middle East.

Raphael Patai prefaces his 1973 edition of The Arab Mind with the sentence, "When it comes to the Arabs, I must admit to an incurable romanticism." So it is with me. I first became interested in the Arab world in an elective course at the United States
Military Academy many years ago, and my military career thereafter was divided between assignments with regular army artillery units and tours in the Middle East. It was during my preparatory study at the American University of Beirut that I was introduced to the writings of Raphael Patai. In a sociology class we used his book, *Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture and Change in the Middle East.* Since that time, I have read a number of his books and admired his careful scholarship, lucid writing style, and empathetic approach to his subject matter.

Over the past twelve years, I have also briefed hundreds of military teams being deployed to the Middle East. When returning from the Middle East, my students, as well as the members of these teams, invariably comment on the paramount usefulness of the cultural instruction in their assignments. In doing so they validate the analysis and descriptions offered by Raphael Patai.

The officers returning from the Arab world describe the cultural barriers they encounter as by far the most difficult to navigate, far beyond those of political perceptions. Thinking back on it, I recall many occasions on which I was perplexed by actions or behavior on the part of my Arab hosts—actions and behavior that would have been perfectly understandable had I read *The Arab Mind.* I have hence emphasized to my students that there must be a combination of observation and study to begin a process of understanding another culture. Simply observing a culture through the prism of our own beliefs and cultural worldview leads to many misconceptions. More often than not, this results in a form of cultural shock that can be totally debilitating to a foreigner working with Arabs. Less common, but equally non-productive, is the soldier who becomes caught up in a culture he views as idyllic and "goes native." Inevitably there will come a time (usually during a political crisis) when the cultural chasm will force unpleasant reality to resurface.

**Mines and Warts**

In writing about a culture, one must tread a sensibility minefield, and none is more treacherous than that of the Middle East. In pursuit of intellectual honesty and a true-to-life depiction of a people, some less-than-attractive traits will surface. All cultures and peoples have their warts. One trait I have observed in Arab society—which has become more pronounced over the years—is an extreme sensitivity to any critical depiction of Arab culture, no matter how gently the adverse factors are presented. In his postscript to the 1983 edition of *The Arab Mind,* Patai mentions a spate of self-critical assessments of Arab society by Arab intellectuals in the wake of the "new Arab" said to have emerged after the 1973 war; but this tendency to self-criticize proved to be illusory. While we in the United States constantly criticize our society and leadership, similar introspection is rarely seen in the Arab world today. When criticism is voiced, it is usually in terms of a condemnation of Arab acceptance of some aspect of Western culture. Criticism also often emanates from outside the Arab region and, despite the so-called globalization of communication, only the elite have access to it. This is particularly true when political systems or ideology are discussed.

In no small way, this tendency has led to the current state of affairs in the Arab world. For this reason, as well as the fact that Patai was not an Arab, some scholars are dismissive of *The Arab Mind,* terming it stereotyped in its portrayal of Arab personality traits. In part, this stems from the postmodernist philosophy of a recent generation of scholars who have been inculcated with the currently fashionable idea of cultural and moral relativism. Much of the American political science writing on the Middle East today is jargon- and agenda-laden, bordering on the indecipherable. A fixation on race, class, and gender has had a destructive effect on
Middle East scholarship. It is a real task to find suitable recent texts that are scholarly and sound in content, but also readable.

In fact, some of the best and most useful writing on the Arab world has been by outsiders, mostly Europeans, especially the French and British. Many of the best and most illuminating works were written decades ago. The idea that outsiders cannot assess another culture is patently foolish. The best study done on American society—to take one famous example—was written some 160 years ago by the French visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, and it still holds mostly true today.

The empathy and warmth of Raphael Patai toward the Arab people are evident throughout this book. There is neither animus nor rancor nor condescension. Arabs are portrayed as people who, like all people, have virtues and vices. Patai's description of his relationship with the Jerusalem sheikh, Ahmad Fakhr al-Khatib, is indicative of the esteem in which he held his Arab friends. It is a lamentable fact that friendships such as this one would be almost impossible to conceive of at the present time.

Along with his empathy for and understanding of Arab culture, Patai has a powerfully keen faculty for observation. In a passage in his autobiographical Journeyman in Jerusalem,[9] he describes in minute detail an Arab date juice vendor and the way he dispenses his juice. It is this ability to observe and appreciate detail that enables Patai to grasp the significance of the gestures, nuances of speech, and behavior patterns of Arabs. To most Americans, the subtlety of Arab culture is bewildering and incomprehensible. Yet, if one is to work productively in the region, one must have an understanding of these cultural traits.

It might legitimately be asked how well Patai's analysis bears up in today's world. After all, it has been about thirty years since the majority of The Arab Mind was written. The short answer is that it has not aged at all. The analysis is just as prescient and on-the-mark now as on the day it was written. One could even make the argument that, in fact, many of the traits described have become more pronounced. For instance, Islamist demagogues have skillfully used the lure of the Arabic language, so carefully explained by Patai as a powerful motivator, to galvanize the streets in this era of the Islamic revival, in a way even the great orator Abdul Nasser could not achieve.

**Blustery Arabic**

Patai devoted a large portion of this book to the Arabic language, its powerful appeal, as well as its inhibiting effects. The proneness to exaggeration he describes was amply displayed in the Gulf war by the exhortations of Saddam Hussein to the Arabs in the "mother of all battles." This penchant for rhetoric and use of hyperbole were a feature of the Arab press during the war. The ferocity of the Arab depiction of Iraqi prowess had American experts convinced that there would be thousands of American casualties. Even when the war was turning into a humiliating rout, the "Arab street" was loath to accept this reality as fact.

More recently, the same pattern has been seen in the Arab adoption of Osama bin Laden as a new Saladin who, with insulting and derogatory language in his description of American martial qualities, conveyed a sense of invincibility and power that has subsequently been shown to be largely imaginary. Saddam Hussein used similar bluster prior to the 1990 Gulf war. Patai traces this custom, which continues to the present era, back to pre-Islamic days. It is also an apt example of the Arab tendency to substitute words for action and a desired outcome for a less palatable reality, or to indulge in wishful thinking—all of which are reflected in the
numerous historical examples Patai provides. This tendency, combined with Arabs' predilection to idealize their own history, always in reference to some mythic or heroic era, has present-day implications. Thus the American incursion into the Gulf in 1990 became the seventh crusade and was frequently referred to as another Western and Christian attempt to occupy the Holy Land of Islam—a belief galvanizing the current crop of Middle Eastern terrorists. Meanwhile, Israel is frequently referred to as a "crusader state."

Patai's discussion of the duality of Arab society, and of the proclivity for intra-Arab conflict, continues to be revalidated in each decade. The Arab-against-Arab division in the 1990 Gulf war is but one example of a continuing Arab condition. Juxtaposed against the ideal of Arab unity is the present reality of twenty-two divided states, each with the self-interest of its ruling family or elite group paramount in policy decisions. In the 1960s, it was the "progressive states" versus the "reactionary states," which pitted Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, and Libya against Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco. Today it is secular forces versus the Islamists, a conflict to one degree or another being played out in every Arab state.

Even when facing a common enemy—usually Israel in this era, but also Iran or Turkey—mutual distrust and intra-Arab hostility prevail. In the Iraqi-Iranian war, for example, Arab support was generally limited to financial help—with provisions for repayment, as the angry Saddam Hussein learned after the war. In [1998], when Turkey threatened Syria with armed conflict if the leader of the nationalistic Kurdish movement in Turkey continued to be supported by Syria, it was very clear that Syria would find itself standing alone. Thus the Asad regime was forced to make a humiliating submission to Turkish demands. Perhaps the most telling validation of Patai's insight into the conflictual nature of Arab society relates to the Palestinians. While their conflict with Israel has been a bloody one over the years, it cannot approach the level of death and destruction incurred in Palestinian wars against Lebanese, Syrians, and Jordanians. Despite this great violence, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict retains its place as the primary galvanizing issue for the "Arab street."

**Sinister West**

Perhaps the section of this book most relevant to today's political and social environment is the chapter on the psychology of Westernization. After centuries of certitude that their civilization was superior—a belief evolving from the very poor impression the European crusaders made on the Arabs and fully justified by the reality—the Arab self-image was rudely shattered by the easy French conquest of Egypt in 1798. A declining Middle East had been far surpassed by a revitalized Europe. The initial shock among the Arab elite was followed by a period of limited emulation, at least in the form of Western political and social values.

As the Western political hold on the Arabs receded, Western cultural influence increased, which in many ways was even more irritating to the Arab elite—particularly in terms of the technology invasion that at every level was a daily reminder of the inability of the Middle East to compete. Patai's assessment of the Arab view of technology has been amply supported over the last decades. Clearly enthusiastic users of technology, particularly in war weaponry, the Arabs nevertheless remain a lagging producer of technology. Partially, as Patai demonstrates, this is a reaction to the "jinn" (devil) of Western culture as it appears to the Arab of the twenty-first century. While recognizing the superiority of Western technology, the traditional Arab sees Western culture as destructive to his way of life; hence the ever-present battle between modernity and modernism: Can
a society modernize without the secular lifestyle that appears to accompany the process? Adherents of the Islamist ideology, espousing a politicized, radical Islam, see no contradiction between a seventh-century theocracy and twenty-first century technology and would answer yes; however, history does not support such a view in the Middle Eastern context. As a Muslim coworker put it, "We want your TV sets but not your programs, your VCRs but not your movies." This will be the battleground of every Arab nation for the coming generation.

In his section on the "sinister West," Patai gets to the heart of the burning hatred that seems to drive brutal acts of terrorism against Americans. Despite its lack of a colonial past in the Middle East, America, as the most powerful representative of the "West," has inherited primary enemy status, in place of the French and British. Patai points out the Arabs' tendency to blame others for the problems evident in their political systems, quality of life, and economic power. The Arab media and Arab intellectuals, invoking the staple mantras against colonialism, Zionism, and imperialism, provide convenient outside culprits for every corrupt or dysfunctional system or event in the Arab world. Moreover, this is often magnified and supported by a number of the newer generation of Western scholars inculcated with Marxist teaching who, unwittingly perhaps, help Arab intellectuals to avoid ever having to come to grips with the very real domestic issues that must be confronted. The Arab world combines a rejection of Western values with a penchant for carrying around historical baggage of doubtful utility. At the same time, there is a simplistic, if understandable, yearning for return to a more glorious and pristine past that would enable the Arabs once again to confront the West on equal terms. This particular belief has found many Arab adherents in the past decade.

Patai also delves into the extremely sensitive issue of the nature of Islam in a particularly prescient manner. He views the fatalistic element inherit in Islam as an important factor in providing great strength to Muslims in times of stress or tragedy; in normal or better times, however, it acts as an impediment. Given their pervasive belief that God provides and disposes of all human activity, Muslims tend to reject the Western concept of man creating his own environment as an intrusion on God's realm. This includes any attempt to change God's plan for the fate of the individual. Certainly one can point to numerous exceptions. But, having worked for long periods with Arab military units, I can attest to their often cavalier attitude toward safety precautions, perhaps reflecting a Qur'anic saying, heard in various forms, that "death will overtake you even if you be inside a fortress." Just observing how few Arabs use seat belts in their automobiles can be a revelation. This manifestation of Arab fatalism is often misconstrued as a lesser value put on human life.

In the all-important area of Muslim relations with other religions, Patai sums up the differences between Christianity and Islam as being functional, not doctrinal. The proponents of fundamentalist Islam do not fear Christianity. They fear that Westernization will "bring about a reduction of the function of Islam to the modest level on which Christianity plays its role in the Western world." The quarrel is not so much with Christianity—which most Muslims see as a weak religion of diminishing importance—as with the secularism that has replaced it. Frequently in the Arab world one hears references to the [singer] "Madonna" culture and its manifestations of drugs and sexual promiscuity. Today, while Western military power has become much less of a threat, the inroads made by Western cultural values have become more of one.

My special area of interest has been the impact of culture on military structure, strategy, and operations,[10] and in this regard the assessments of Patai, although
not aimed at this area, are particularly informative. As he wrote, "despite the adoption of Western weaponry, military methods, and war aims, both the leaders and the people have kept alive old Arab traditions." The observations and studies of military specialists continue to support his conclusion. The Arab military establishment's ineffectiveness in the past century has never been a matter of lack of courage or intelligence. Rather, it has been a consequence of a pervasive cultural and political environment that stifles the development of initiative, independent thinking, and innovation. This has been commented on by a number of Middle East specialists, both Arab and non-Arab, but none explains it as well as Patai, who suggests that Arabs conform not to an individualistic, inner-directed standard but rather to a standard established and maintained rigidly within Arab society. As I noticed among the officers with whom I worked, there was a real reluctance to "get out front." The distrust of the military's loyalty to the regime reinforces a military system in which a young, charismatic officer with innovative ideas will be identified as a future threat to be carefully monitored by the ubiquitous security agencies.

**Family Cohesion**

Patai also carefully illuminates the many virtues of Arab society. The hospitality, generosity, and depth of personal friendships common in the Arab world are rarely encountered in our more frenetic society. The Arab sense of honor and of obligation to the family—especially to the family's old and young members—can be contrasted to the frequently dysfunctional family life found in our own country. Within Arab culture, old people are seen as a foundation for family cohesion, and children are welcomed as gifts from God rather than as burdens. Daughters—who traditionally are valued less than sons—remain the responsibility of their families, carrying their honor even after marriage (and it is this sense of family cohesion and honor that, in its negative aspect, results in the restrictions and controls placed on women). The idea that the state should bear responsibility for the welfare of their family would be considered insulting to most Arabs.

Finally, in his 1983 edition, Patai takes an optimistic view of the future of the Arab world but adds a caveat to his prediction with the comment that this could happen "only if the Arabs can rid themselves of their obsession with and hatred of Zionism, Israel, and American imperialism." In the eighteen years since those words were written, none of these obsessions has been put to rest. In fact, they have increased. The imported 1960s and 1970s Western ideologies of Marxism and socialism have given way to Islamism, a synthesis of Western-style totalitarianism and superficial Islamic teachings, which has resurrected historical mythology and revitalized an amorphous but palpable hatred of the Western "jinns." Nevertheless, many astute observers of the Arab world see the so-called "Islamic revival" with its attendant pathologies as cresting and beginning to recede.

Ultimately, the Arabs, who are an immensely determined and adaptable people, will produce leadership capable of freeing them from ideological and political bondage, and this will allow them to achieve their rightful place in the world.

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[2] The Guardian (London), May 24, 2004. This, despite the fact that Whitaker himself, a year earlier, had quoted an authoritative Arab source on "the Arab mind." As coalition forces encircled Baghdad, he wrote a piece on the "sense of humiliation" among Arabs and brought a quote from a Kuwaiti spokesman that could have come straight from Patai's book: "In the Arab world, there is a classical, traditional enemy. This traditional enemy has always been the west or the Americans. This is one vision that always existed in the Arab mind." The Guardian, Apr. 9, 2003.

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