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An Introduction to
**MODERN
ARAB CULTURE**

BASSAM FRANGIEH

An Introduction to
MODERN
ARAB CULTURE

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An Introduction to
**MODERN
ARAB CULTURE**

BASSAM FRANGIEH

إرضاء الناس غاية لا تدرك

Pleasing People is an Impossible Task

ARABIC PROVERB

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PREFACE

MARY JANE PELUSO, YALE University Press publisher, once suggested that I write a book about Arab culture. She was surprised at the lack of comprehensive studies in the English-speaking market about modern Arab culture despite the great geopolitical importance of this region and the attention given to the Arab world following the tragic events of September 11, 2001. The idea of writing a book on Arab culture is frightening, a formidable task that carries great responsibilities. The first challenge that came to mind was: How could I capture and embrace Arab culture, so massive and multifaceted, in a single volume? How can any writer, for that matter, hope to capture a people's rich culture in one book? I began my work, and Mary Jane Peluso graciously continued to be my advisor on the project.

Early on, I decided the book should serve as a wide-ranging yet comprehensive introduction to Arab culture's rich, distinct, and sophisticated aspects for general readers and students alike. It is my wish to provide a deeper understanding of what Arab culture is and how recent events have shaped it. My hope is that *An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture* will help readers to better understand the main characteristics of the Arab people, their culture, and society. This book neither intends to praise Arab culture nor to condemn it. It presents Arab culture from a point of view based on my knowledge of the region in which I was raised, and from my experiences on many personal levels. This book examines Arab origins, identities, values, family, thought, and language, as well as the tremendous developments taking place in poetry, music, and the novel.

An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture also looks closely at subjects that some readers may have some familiarity with, but not a deeper understanding of how these topics are shaping the region and impacting the world. These include the Arab Spring, the Syrian refugee tragedy, and contemporary social, intellectual, and political issues connected to modern Arab culture and thought. The book covers Islam and Islamic communities throughout the ages in an effort to connect and highlight the most significant aspects and features of Arab culture.

It is my sincere hope that this book will be helpful for several different audiences: students of Arab thought, politics, history, and literature; those who are interested in languages, anthropology, sociology, and cultural issues; and general readers who recognize the value and importance of being better informed about the Arab world and its culture. Specialized or non-specialized students of Arabic

or the Arab world in the context of Middle East Studies programs may also find this book useful. Finally, this book may benefit people residing in the Arab world who want a broader understanding of the region.

I am indebted to many individuals who helped me in producing this difficult and comprehensive project. Their contributions have greatly improved the quality of this book. Nachy Kanfer, a graduate of Yale University and a dedicated young man, was the first person to help with this project. He enthusiastically provided research and editorial support for the manuscript.

Edward P. Haley, professor of government and international relations at Claremont McKenna College (CMC), read the entire manuscript and offered useful comments; Jamel Velji, a professor of Islam at CMC, read the chapters on Islam and offered helpful comments; the Gould Center for Humanistic Studies at CMC supported the book with a summer research grant; Pomona College alumnus Jake Scruggs read the chapter on the origin of the Arabs and offered comments and editorial assistance; and David White, my research assistant at CMC, provided useful research, particularly on the Arab Spring and the Syrian refugee tragedy.

Retired US diplomat Christopher McShane provided essential support throughout the project, proofreading, editing, and conducting research for the manuscript. I have known Chris since we met in Cairo over twenty years ago, and I am thankful for his dedication and contributions. We had many lively discussions about the book until its completion. He was one of my closest collaborators who shares my love and respect for the Arab world. Chris served at US embassies in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain, and currently teaches at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey in California.

I must also thank Nick Owchar, who was extremely helpful in proofing the final draft of the manuscript. The former deputy book review editor of the Los Angeles Times, Nick carefully polished and edited the manuscript prior to its production. I am grateful to him and to many other individuals whose names are included elsewhere in this book for spending time with me, and agreeing to lengthy interviews on certain aspects of Arab culture.

At Cognella Academic Publishing, this project was met with great enthusiasm by Seidy Cruz and Bassim Hamadeh. They are delightful and dynamic publishers, and I appreciate how hard they work to keep in close contact with their authors and offer help and support.

Leah Sheets is a hardworking young editor who provided quick support; senior editor Jamie Giganti was supportive and thorough. Jess Estrella, senior graphic

designer, produced a beautiful cover for the book. Gem Rabanera, a conscientious project editor and a pleasure to work with, strived to ensure the quality of the manuscript. Alia Bales, a bright and gifted production editor, was a guiding light throughout the production process; she worked hard to support the project and coordinated its conclusion with perfection. Licensing coordinator Trey Soto tracked all third party content with precision. It has been a joy to work with the highly qualified and motivated team at Cognella.

Professors Patricia W. Cummins of Virginia Commonwealth University, Suheir Abu Oksa Daoud of Coastal Carolina University, Shakir Mustafa of Northeastern University, Mostafa Ahmed of Emporia State University, and Mohamed Esa of McDaniel College read the final manuscript and offered useful comments.

To them, and to all those mentioned above, I offer my salutations, gratitude, and love. Any shortcomings in this work are my responsibility alone.

INTRODUCTION

MY SINCERE HOPE IS that *An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture*, the first extensive book published in the United States about modern Arab culture written by a single author, will help readers better understand the main characteristics of the Arab people, their culture, and their society. This book closely examines Arab origins, identities, and values as well as the importance of family and language. It examines many other things, including: classical and contemporary poetry, music, Arab thought, and the novel. I also include discussions of the Arab Spring, the Syrian refugee tragedy, and the contemporary crisis of Arab culture, including the social, intellectual, and political issues connected to modern Arab culture and thought. In addition, an understanding of Islam and Islamic communities is necessary to fully appreciate this region of the world and its peoples. Consider this book a moveable feast—moving from one vital aspect of Arab culture to the next but without forgetting that they are all interconnected.

Exploring these interconnections does not require total comprehensiveness: The culture of the Arabs, or of any nation, is too vast to be adequately captured by a single volume. Entire books have been written on some aspects to which I have had the audacity to assign a single chapter (and not a very long chapter at that). Encyclopedias have been compiled about others, such as Islam and the Qur'an. Ultimately, this book makes no pretense to compete with these works. Instead, what this book hopes to address are the gaps existing between generally excellent academic scholarship and ill-informed popular approaches to Arab culture.

It is my sincere hope that this book will be received with interest by several different audiences: students of Arab history, thought, politics, literature, and religious studies; those who are interested in languages, sociology, and cultural issues; and general readers who wish to better understand the Arab world and its culture. Specialized or non-specialized students studying Arabic or the Arab world in the context of Middle East Studies programs may find this book useful, too. A final group who may benefit are the expatriates and ever-more serious individuals residing in the Arab world who want a broader understanding of the region.

It is sad—and understandable—that much of the considerable interest and curiosity that the West currently displays toward the Arab world stems from the attacks of September 11, 2001, and from the emergence of extremist radical movements such as ISIS in recent years. The vast Arab world, spanning Morocco to Oman, with millennia of history and deeply-ingrained cultural values, is more

complex than the simplistic reporting that many have used to form their judgments and opinions of this region of the world. What is most often overlooked is the fact that the vast majority of Arabs themselves feel threatened by, and reject, the militant fundamentalist movements threatening their region.

Arabs are warm, sociable people. They express their feelings and reveal their affections for each other easily and simply. They do not hide their emotions; they consider hiding emotions to be misleading to others and untruthful to themselves. Instead, they look for signs of emotion in verbal expressions and in non-verbal cues in the course of normal human interaction. When they don't find them, they feel puzzled or even hurt by the reserve that many Westerners maintain with people they do not know well, interpreting this as coldness and unfriendliness. By the same token, Arabs can be easily misunderstood by non-Arabs unprepared for the familiar warmth and friendliness so openly displayed upon a first meeting. Warmth and friendliness are default settings for Arabs in their social interactions; it is a value that Arab children receive from their families early in life.

Politics is a more complex cultural phenomenon in the Arab world than in many other places. It is rare for Arabs to decline to discuss politics, and the Western idea of politics making for impolite dinner conversation is not widely held in Arab society. This is especially visible during the holidays when multi-generational Arab families stay up late in the night eating, talking, and laughing, with politics traditionally making up a large part of their conversation. On such occasions, even small children get into the act, staying up past their bedtimes and listening to their family members argue about politics. This is a deeply-rooted cultural pattern in Arab society. The book explores how a sense of political exclusion combined with the desire for openness and participation have been at the very heart of most Arab political movements—one hears these themes openly and passionately discussed in many Arab homes.

Along with politics, this book addresses the important role that Islam and the Qur'an play in Arab culture. Arab culture is undeniably a Qur'an-centric culture. Regardless of their own personal religious beliefs, Arabs regard the Qur'an as a book of exceeding literary beauty and power. It has informed, influenced, and inspired Arab poetry, literature, and music, and Islam itself has been the primary shaping force of Arab society and culture for more than a millennium. For that reason, *An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture* includes a chapter about basic Islamic political history throughout the ages. The book would be incomplete without it: For Arabs, the historical weight of their civilization is an indivisible component of their culture.

There is a need for a book based in the respectable academic traditions of Western and Arab scholarship and providing accessibility to readers who are not

specialists and who desire a comprehensive overview of the Arab world. Mindful of that, this book examines fundamental aspects of Arab culture and their development over time and brings them up to the present. In the process, it also includes the perspectives of respected intellectuals in the Arab world, many of whom do not have a single work translated into English. In that sense, then, this work seeks to serve both Arab and Western scholarly traditions in a spirit of humility and respect.

The 1967 defeat of the Arabs by Israel cannot be overlooked by this introduction. Many chapters in this book deal with the aftermath of that defeat, a military and political phenomenon that may seem, at first glance, to hold only tangential historical significance. But that defeat's effects have been widespread and lasting: It exposed the profound failures of the political, economic, military, social, and technical systems of the modern Arab world. It also revealed, to the humiliation of Arabs everywhere, the bankrupt, hollow nature of the slogans used extensively by Arab governments prior to the defeat.

Events triggered by the 1967 loss produced a significant rupture in the lives of Arabs at all levels. The course of modern Arab reality and thought shifted; these events overshadowed Arab intellectual communities and left their mark on every form of intellectual expression—not only poetry, novels, and plays, but political, social, and cultural debates as well. A defeat of this magnitude put an end to Arab hopes for a better future, a vast Arab revival, and dreams of Arab nationalism and broad Arab unity. It also strengthened Islamic ideologies and movements in the Arab world, thus triggering the emergence of radical movements existing in Arab culture today.

To fully appreciate the impact of the defeat, first consider Arab sentiments in the decades leading up to 1967. At the end of the Second World War, after the emergence of newly independent Arab states, political national movements developed and focused on the themes of Arab nationalism, Arab unity, and Arab glory. The Egyptian revolution in 1952 further generated and inspired powerful nationalist sentiment throughout the Arab world (discussed in the chapter about modern Arab thought). That revolution stirred Arab hopes for a brighter future. Following the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal and Egypt's political victory against a tripartite military attack by France, Britain, and Israel, that hope grew stronger. National and political inspirations led to grandiose visions of a region-wide rebirth of power and a new promising Age. Arab secular, nationalist, and socialist ideologies saw their influence grow; Arab populations believed they could truly unite and expand their influence. Serious and expensive economic and social development projects were launched around the region.

Egypt played a central role in these years of hope supported, in large part, by the vision of its president, Jamal `Abd al-Nasir. Born in 1918, he ruled Egypt from

1952 until his death in 1970. He was a charismatic visionary, an ideologist who set the tone for Arab popular nationalism. Fueled by the assumption that the Arab states would unite and emerge to take their rightful place in the world, he promoted genuine social revolution. Nasir called for social democracy as a prerequisite for political democracy, social reform, and secular policy, and he became a symbol of Arab unity and revolution. The 1950s and 1960s in the Arab world were marked by social and economic progress, although disparities and corruption created friction. These years also saw a flourishing of arts and culture—from poetry, prose, and music to cinema and theater—as nationalistic themes became more common and embraced.

The Arab world's renewed sense of itself was further inflamed by the Ba`th nationalist political party, which seized power in Syria and Iraq in the same year, 1963, under the slogan of “unity, freedom, socialism.” In Syria that party is still in power today; in Iraq it was dissolved in 2003. The Ba`th Party promoted the formation of a united Arab nation based on nationalistic and socialist politics, and economic and cultural principles, and it theorized that the creation of one progressive and harmonious Arab nation could achieve social justice through a redistribution of wealth and the nationalization of industry and economic development throughout the Arab world. Together, with Egypt, these ruling parties in Syria and Iraq formed the most significant Arab nationalistic sentiments ever found in modern Arab history.

On June 5, 1967, the Six-Day War broke out, ushering in the collapse of the collective hopes of the entire Arab world. The military forces of the Arab states bordering Israel suffered complete defeat in a matter of days. In the months leading up to the war, Egypt under Nasir's leadership took a number of dramatic steps, including expelling the United Nations Emergency Force from the Sinai Peninsula and building up military forces along the Israeli border. Israel responded by launching a preemptive attack on the Egyptian and Syrian air forces—between June 5 and June 10, Israel defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights. In the aftermath, the governments of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan lost credibility in the eyes of their people and the world.

Nasir (as well as the leadership in Syria and Iraq) had promised the Arabs a great victory against Israel, proclaiming that the Egyptian military was the strongest and most effective force in the Middle East. Instead, he led the Arabs into an embarrassing defeat that scarred the spiritual and moral psyche of the Arab world.

The 1967 defeat was followed by a period of soul-searching and resentment as the Arab peoples came to view the promises and proclamations of Nasir and leaders in Syria, Iraq, and other Arab states as false illusions and empty words. Arab

populations struggled with a range of emotions and responses as they realized that their leaders had been feeding them propaganda, cover-ups, and misleading reports about the grim reality of their situation. For the Arab world, the defeat of 1967 created an open wound from which it has never recovered.

But the Arab sense of humiliation, helplessness, and anger also stems from other causes in addition to the 1967 defeat. Ironically, after the defeat, Arab leaders remained in power and became more brutal against their own citizens, increasing censorship, suffocating freedom, and employing terrifying tactics with secret police to silence them. Deprived of democracy, economic development, and basic freedoms, Arab populations have come to realize that the greatest obstacles to moving their society and culture forward are the leaders themselves and their authoritarian governments. If the leaders of a country are corrupt, brutal, and unjust, how can change come about?

Conditions in the twenty-first century do not bode well for Arabs, either. This book includes narratives and information about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the subsequent war against Iraq, and the signing of the Oslo Accords by Israel and the PLO in 1993. I also review the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring from 2010 to the present, the emergence of ISIS and other extremist organizations, and the attack of September 11, 2001, on the United States. Historical, political, and international events are threaded throughout the book's narrative.

An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture begins by tracing the emergence of the people who became the Arabs, defined by a common language, culture, and identity. It introduces one of the book's central themes: With the emergence of Islam and its subsequent religious, cultural, and political power in the Arab world, Arab culture became inextricably linked with Islamic culture. The two are not identical; Arabs enjoyed a unique culture before Islam ever existed, and other forces have also shaped Arab identity. However, inside the Arab world, it is impossible to speak of Arab culture without acknowledging the role Islam has played in defining it, even for Christians, Jews, and other groups in the religious minority.

Chapter 1 concludes with a brief overview of the many religious and ethnic minorities that exist in the Arab world and discusses their contributions over the centuries to Arab-Islamic civilization and heritage. The chapter also describes some of the values and attitudes that define Arab society from a cultural perspective. On several occasions, I contrast an element of Arab culture with an element of American or Western culture; this is certainly not meant as a critique of the latter but simply as a way of highlighting and enhancing the comparison. I dedicate a section of this chapter to a set of Arab beliefs that I feel Western readers will find interesting: The chapter catalogues the many incidents and trends that have combined to fashion Arab views of themselves and others.

Chapter 2 discusses the Arab family and the fundamental role it plays in the Arab world, supplemented with a series of interviews I conducted with Arab individuals on the role that family plays in their lives. The importance of family to Arab culture and identity cannot be exaggerated; not only do most Arab cultural conventions, traditions, and values originate within the family, the structural phenomenon of the Arab family also closely mirrors and influences the structure of Arab society at large. As crucial as rituals and customs of marriage and divorce are to Arab culture, equally important is the extent to which the close-knit nature of Arab families influences the psyche and outlook of individual members.

Chapter 3, on the Arabic language, is also intended to serve as an introductory chapter, and its material informs much of the rest of the book. Arabs are probably more conscious of their language than any other people in the world. The chapter starts by explaining the origin of the Arabic language and some of its most prominent linguistic characteristics. It moves to a discussion of the successful attempts to modernize and reform the Arabic language over the last two centuries and its current vibrant, living form. The differences between colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic are examined, along with the critical role that each plays in contemporary Arab culture. The chapter concludes with a survey of the current criticism and anxiety in the Arab world and abroad over a perceived, measured decline in general Arabic proficiency, from schools and educational facilities to everyday life.

Chapter 4 introduces classical Arabic poetry, one of two chapters on Arabic poetry in this book. I emphasize the centrality of poetry to Arab culture and identity throughout its history, dating to the very emergence of the Arabs as a people. The chapter opens with a description of the role that the poet and his craft played in pre-Islamic and early Islamic society and examines the evolution of poetic content and form in the Arab world. Though no translation of classical Arabic poetry can capture the unique structure that lends it power and rhythm, I have included some of the best translations to illustrate for the reader the formulaic nature of the poetry of this era. The chapter concludes with a look forward to the nineteenth century and the Arab renaissance, when a group of poets and writers set out to revive this great classical art form.

Chapter 5, on Islam, constitutes a brief guide and introduction to this essential part of Arab identity. Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century, Islam now counts more than 1.6 billion followers, representing nearly all races and nations of the world. The chapter discusses how the Qur'an for Muslims is the word of God revealed in the Arabic language to the prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. The chapter explores the importance of the Islamic *umma*, which established a new social order, and how the Prophet Muhammad

asked his followers to unify as one group in order to bind and connect all believers. The idea of the Islamic *umma* was demanding and revolutionary because, prior to its introduction, Arab society was highly fractured—divided into tribes whose members were fiercely loyal to one another. The chapter also offers a short biography of the Prophet Muhammad’s life and the early years of the growing Islamic polity.

The chapter also discusses the Qur’an, the first book of prose in the Arabic language. Though it is a great source of pride and inspiration for Muslims and Arabs alike, for Muslims it is also a source of spiritual strength. The Qur’an is relatively brief, approximately four-fifths the size of the New Testament. Muslims believe Arabic is the language of God and that the Qur’an was created by God, and thus the Qur’an is perfect, eternal, and unchangeable. In other words, the Qur’an is inimitable in its language, style, and ideas. I also introduce the five pillars of Islam and discuss the structure of Islamic belief and practice. The chapter concludes with a section on Islam and the West, providing an analysis of how Muslim intellectuals and academics have frequently disputed the West’s description of Islam as a fanatical and violent religion.

Chapter 6, on the Islamic community throughout the ages, begins with the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632, which brought about an instant political crisis within the Islamic community. At that time the community consisted of three main groups: the prominent men in Medina who had entered into a treaty with the Prophet; the leading Meccan families; and the Prophet’s earliest companions, who had followed him from Mecca to Medina in 622. The chapter discusses how the influential Rightly-Guided Caliphs developed the cities of Mecca and Medina, strengthened the Islamic communities, and concentrated on continuing to unify the *umma*. With their combined military efforts, all of Arabia came under Muslim control. The Umayyad caliphate (661–750) established in Damascus was characterized by secular leaders who developed an effective administrative system of government similar to that of the Byzantine Empire. The chapter discusses the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258) and continues with a history of the final caliphates.

The chapter traces Islamic history and communities from Muhammad to the present day, including eras of great scientific and cultural innovation and achievement, including the Arab expansion to the Iberian Peninsula. The material in this chapter and the preceding one on Islam are crucial for an understanding of the long development of Arab culture, from the days of the tribal Bedouins in the Arabian desert to the twenty-first century. It also covers the distinctions between Sunnism and Shi`ism in Islam, the religious and legal Sunni schools of thought, the political differences between Shi`ites and Sunnis, the revival of Islamic identity, and the emergence of ISIS.

Chapter 7, on Arab music, explores the history of Arab music from pre-Islamic times to today, and shows the intertwined connection between music and poetry. Music was based on song, and song formed the core of meters, rhythm, and melody. The Arab poets of pre-Islamic time were compared to singing birds and their verses to birdsong. The chapter discusses how Arab music possesses significant differences from Western music and explains the essential notion of *maqam*—“scale” or “mode.” The chapter highlights Arab instruments, including perhaps the most well-known, the *oud*. It also explains the notion of *tarab*, “trance” or “ecstasy,” which is also fundamental to Arab music. Regional variations of Arab music, including *Ma'louf*, *Rai* and *al-Andalus* are explored. After highlighting a few of the Arab world's most famous and influential composers and singers from the twentieth century, including Umm Kulthum and Fairuz, the chapter concludes with a look at the increasingly diverse contemporary Arab music scene.

Chapter 8 introduces some of the main figures of modern Arabic poetry and discusses their political, social, and cultural influence. Poetry has not lost the status and influence it enjoyed in the pre-Islamic world. But in the modern era, its role has shifted: Poetry now questions, challenges, and provokes the status quo. The chapter explores both political activist poetry and love poetry, the two most prominent genres of the modern age. It is difficult to overestimate the influence of modern poets in both these fields; political poets have inspired the Arab people to desire political change, while love poets have stimulated a reexamination of traditional views on love and sexuality. In this chapter, I also discuss how Arabic poems and songs inspired and motivated protesters during the Arab Spring. Finally, the works of leading Arab poets of modern times, including Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, Nizar Qabbani, Abdul Wahab al-Bayati, and others, are discussed and reviewed.

Chapter 9 details how the modern novel mirrors modern culture and the close connection existing between the novel and society. More can be learned about the Arab world through the novel than through all of the other studies combined. This chapter traces traditional narration styles in ancient Arabic literature and covers the biography genre, folkloric narration, and travel literature. I explain the development of the *Maqamah* (picaresque tales) genre in the ninth century, the *Saj`* style of rhyming prose, and delve into the pioneers who revived the classical Arabic narrative in the 19th and 20th centuries. The chapter traces the birth of the Arabic novel in 1914 and its development in the hands of Nobel Prize winner Naguib Mahfouz more than two decades later. The chapter traces the novels of Mahfouz post-1945, analyzing six of his great masterpieces, including the three comprising *The Cairo Trilogy*, which established him as the ‘master *par excellence*

and the chronicler of twentieth century Egypt, and its most vocal social and political conscience.’

Chapter 9 also introduces, after Mahfouz, a second literary giant, the novelist Abd al-Rahman Munif, and discusses two of his greatest works. His masterpiece, *Cities of Salt*, is a remarkable work that tracks the evolution and transformation of Arabia after the discovery of huge petroleum reserves. The works of other leading novelists also analyzed in the chapter include: Ghassan Kanafani, Al-Tayyib Salih, Hanna Mina, Halim Barakat, and Mohamed Choukri. Leading Arab women writers examined in this chapter include: Nawal El-Saadawi, Ghada al-Samman, Hanan al-Shaykh, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Joumana Haddad.

Chapter 10, on modern Arab thought, explores the chronological journey into the Arab renaissance, which started in the early nineteenth century, a time coinciding with the European colonization of the Arab world. The Arab renaissance was a time of vigorous attempts to simultaneously revive the Arab past’s cultural glory and innovate in areas in which Arab culture lagged behind Europe’s advances. The chapter describes the many schools of thought that occurred during the two centuries after the Arab renaissance and discusses the most significant intellectuals, pioneers, and scholars of this pivotal era. I review the developments of the leading schools of Arab thought in the twentieth century with a focus on Arab thought following the Second World War. This includes social and political ideologies, modern political Islam, the rise and fall of Arab popular nationalism, and, finally, the vision of modern Arab intellectuals for contemporary social and cultural change.

Chapter 11 introduces the Arab Spring with a look at the historical background leading up to the events that shook the foundations of oppressive dictatorships and ruthless regimes in the Arab world. The Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia in 2010 when dissent and frustration fused into a new sense of power and possibility to create changes that no one thought possible. The chapter analyzes how, within a year’s time, dictators fled, resigned, or were caught and beaten to death by their own citizens in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The chapter follows the uprisings in Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf States, and examines a sad reality—that many of these countries are now worse off than they were before the uprisings. Still, this seminal event in modern Arab history has led to positive results. The Arab Spring destroyed the legitimacy of the Arab dictators’ regimes and shattered the walls of fear and submissiveness that fostered decades of passive silence. The genie has been released from the bottle; people will not forget that their voices can be heard and will continue to demand freedom along with social and economic opportunities.

Chapter 12 covers a difficult subject, the Syrian refugee crisis. This tragedy, a result of the civil war in Syria following the Arab Spring, presents the most challenging crisis in the region. Syria, which had served as a beacon for refugees across the region since the Second World War, today has become one of the world's leading sources of refugees scattered across the world. In this chapter, I discuss how the Syrian refugee crisis has created, by far, the largest mass migration in the region in modern history. Its implications extend far into the future, with serious consequences not only in the Middle East but throughout the entire world.

This chapter highlights the suffering of Syrian children under the age of eighteen who represent more than half of the Syrian refugee population. These innocent children lost parents, siblings, and friends and saw their homes, schools, and entire communities destroyed by warfare. The refugee experience is a bleak one: They suffer miserable living conditions and have little hope for the future. I also explore the strain of Syrian migrants on neighboring countries, impacting Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. The economic and financial repercussions are serious for the countries that host them; they also present severe political threats in some of these countries. The chapter also discusses the impact on European countries and explores several possible solutions to this crisis.

Chapter 13, on the crisis of modern Arab culture, serves as the culmination and conclusion of *An Introduction to Modern Arab Culture*. The chapter opens with a discussion of the role of the Arabs in history and their contributions, including the genius of their language, the majestic and inimitable Qu'ran, and how they brought the religion of Islam to the world. They emerged from the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and became kings and leaders of a civilization that shone brightly while Europe was plunged in the gloom of the Dark Ages. The chapter lists the contributions of the Arabs to the world in science, literature, and other fields that reflect the diversity and sophistication of the region.

The chapter also identifies the deficiencies and related predicaments facing the Arab world today—taken together, these challenges constitute what I regard as the crisis now confronting Arab culture. These challenges include governance, cultural modernization, the role of Arab media, class inequality, the conditions of youth, and education reforms. The Arab people are still fighting in political, social, and cultural arenas to create a better future. The generation rising during the Arab Spring has unleashed a strong new sense of possibility; that generation now possesses new tools and the knowledge that change is, in fact, possible.

It is my humble aspiration that this book serves as a helpful guide for everyone wishing to better understand the most important features, and challenges, of Arab culture today. In addition, it is my modest goal that this book bridges the gap

between specialized and popular scholarship and supplies readers with an accessible, accurate picture of a complex, vibrant, and endlessly fascinating region of the world.

I am indebted to the late Oxford historian Albert Hourani's writing on Arab thought and to the late Princeton historian Philip Hitti's writing on the origins of the Arabs before Islam. I draw from Hitti's work on Arab origins and from Hourani's work for a chapter on modern Arab thought that examines the Arab renaissance of the nineteenth century. It is also important to me to recognize and pay respects to the many authors I have drawn from for their learned reporting and insightful analysis of the many facets of Arab culture covered in these chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

The Arab Family

“Your lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to your parents. Whether one or both of them reach old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them but speak to them noble words. And lower to them the wing of humility out of kindness, and say: ‘My Lord, have mercy upon them as they cherished me when I was small.’”

The Qur’an 17:24–25

AS THE RICHEST RESOURCE of Arab culture, the Qur’an teaches that the family is the cornerstone of Arab life and society. It strongly reinforces the interconnection and cohesiveness of the family and instructs children to take care of their parents, offer them support and respect, and provide them with dignity in their old age. The Qur’an never ceases to stress the importance of solidarity between family members, even in an extended family. One scholar draws a meaningful analogy: if the Qur’an could be said to be the soul of Islam, the Muslim family as an institution is the body of Islam.¹ Many Qur’anic verses emphasize the ideal bonds that exist between family members; it is considered a sin to sever connections with relatives, and forgiveness and unity are necessary attributes for any Arab family.

Not only does the Qur’an provide a model for the family, the Prophet Muhammad is quoted in endless sayings about the family. Muhammad gave the mother the highest importance of all, saying those who honor their mothers will end up in Paradise. In another instance, the Prophet describes Paradise itself as lying at the feet of mothers. Arab Christians also embrace the mother in highest honor and hold the Virgin Mary, mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, to be a saint. Arab Jews hold the mother with the greatest respect of all family members. No matter the religious affiliation, the mother of an Arab family is held in the same esteem as saints and martyrs. She enjoys a kind of holiness both within her family and in society as a whole.

Islam considers the family the most essential component of Arab social organization and the most solid of all social institutions. Even in pre-Islamic times, the

family served as the basis of Arabian tribal society; this ancient role was adopted and preserved by Islamic tradition, which added a religious aspect and further strengthened the position of family in the Islamic community. Before and after the arrival of Islam, the Arab family has always been the place where an individual finds the basic needs of life, security, emotional support, and a reliable personal and professional refuge. It is the center where Arab values, traditions, costumes, diet, beliefs, and religion are preserved. In addition, the Arab family protects the identity of the individual, his or her religious principles, and social and political affiliations.

This chapter describes the nature and makeup of the Arab family, including its patriarchal structure, close-knit members, and processes of marriage and divorce. The applicability of changes in Arab society to family structure will be addressed, together with personal testimonies from contemporary Arabs on the importance of the family to Arab culture and identity.

THE CORNERSTONE OF ARAB SOCIETY

Because the Arab family is the basic organizational unit of society, Arab social structure is concentrated around the family as a group, not around its individuals. Those in Arab society who for whatever reason are disconnected from their families live in isolation, alienation and insecurity. They lack the protection and personal connections needed in order to survive in a group-centered society. One main reason the family has remained so crucial is because Arab society has proven unable to provide for its citizens any other way, whether through general economic prosperity or government-run social safety nets. In traditional Arab culture, it is the family that supports individuals in need and not the society. The carpenter, the street sweeper, the baker, and the government official all must be connected to families; the alternative is isolation and marginalization. The emotional support that families lend to their members may be the principle reason for the universally low suicide rates among Arabs worldwide.

An individual's need to be part of a family is far more significant to Arabs than his or her economic survival. The social, emotional, and moral resources provided by the family are most important; it is the family that grants social status and connects the individual to ancient Arab principles and traditions. Since pre-Islamic times, the family has been the major institution of Arab culture.

Arab family values developed in the harsh environment of the Arabian desert, where individuals simply could not survive without relying heavily on their immediate families and extended tribes.² The interconnectedness and unity of the group was the only way for individuals to secure food, water and security for themselves

and their families. It was also the only way to fend off attacks by other tribes. Defending one's family and tribe was a great honor for pre-Islamic Arabs, not only ensuring the survival of their family members but preserving the family's distinct tribal identity. The close bonds among clan members were enhanced by strong feelings of loyalty; individuals did not fight to defend their survival as much as to defend the survival and honor of the group. Individual consciousness was in fact melted into the group, the collective, the community, and the family. When Islam appeared, a new dimension was added to the already tight cohesiveness of families and tribes, as the concept of tribal loyalty shifted to include religious loyalty. In reality, of course, few adopted loyalty to Islam in place of family loyalty. During the period in which Arabia became Muslim, the entire family or clan would convert to Islam at once, thus preserving family and tribal unity but also becoming loyal to Islam. This made the family even stronger.

History does record some individuals who abandoned their tribes and families for the sake of the new religion, as the Prophet Muhammad himself did. Sooner or later, however, the entire clan would inevitably convert to Islam. With Islam, the same family structure persisted, with the addition of a new religious identity. Tribal solidarity and family organization remained essentially the same, but Islam further defined the regulations and laws of the family, especially those regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance. Marriage was already practiced for social and economic reasons at an early age, but Islam reinforced marriage and made it a religious duty. In the words of the Prophet, "marriage is half of the Islamic faith." Arab society consists of families, groups and clans. It is this network that provides for individuals in all aspects of life, from finding a job to finding a wife or husband. Most importantly, the family provides unquestioned solidarity and total involvement in solving any crisis an individual might encounter. It is a close-knit system of inter-reliance and interdependence; the family shelters aged parents and serves as center for the welfare and safety of all individuals associated with it.³

Families mediate with other families to locate and secure access to careers for their members. Job opportunities across the Arab world rely heavily on family connections. The family provides all the social needs of its individuals, particularly when public social services are lacking or absent. Because Arab society is unable to provide the economic, social, professional and psychological support needed for its citizens to cope with life, only the family can fill this role. While offering physical protection, it also imparts emotional warmth and love. Traditionally, members of a single family or several related families have worked together in the same profession or service for generations. This practice is the origin of such common Arabic surnames as *sabbagh* (one who works with dyes), *najjar* (carpenter), and *khayyat* (tailor).

Members of Arab families routinely deprive themselves of comfort in order to provide for the needs of other family members. Men, for example, delay their marriages or even cancel them in order to look after aging parents. Similarly, girls may delay or cancel marriage in order to care for their younger brothers and sisters, if no one else can fulfill this role. A brother might work long hours away from home, or work a second or third job at night, in order to pay for schooling for his siblings or health care for his parents. Each person's salary is typically shared by the entire family; those who work provide for and support those who do not have jobs. Everyone within the family unit depends on each other for survival and success in life.

Of course, self-denial and self-sacrifice for the family's sake is not peculiar to Arab culture. But it is one of the unique and defining features of the Arab family. The deep level of inter-attachment among family members, their openness with each other, and their strong sense of belonging and unity are amazing and admirable qualities. An Arab individual could be alienated from his society—and many are—but not from his family. Individuals carry not only the tribal identity of their families, but also their religious and political affiliation, social class, and status in society. To preserve the family's reputation is a collective responsibility of all family members; the family is honored inside the community if one of its members acts honorably, and feels ashamed if one of its members commits misconduct or acts in a dishonorable way.⁴

SELF-SUPPRESSION AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

The Arab Human Development Report notes that Arabs seek refuge in the family and other narrowly defined loyalties because of the general lack of freedom and absence of civil and political institutions that protect the rights of individuals.⁵ The report also points to a wide phenomenon of “submission” created in Arab individuals, apparent in educational institutions and curricula. Once children enter school, pedagogical methods and evaluation tend to focus on dictation and submissiveness. In this, the report is slightly off the mark, because the observed submission is not the result of family loyalty and connections, but rather due to the patriarchal structure of the Arab family. This will be explored in greater depth later in the chapter.

It is certainly true, however, that the educational environment in the Arab world does not tend to permit free dialogue or active intellectual exploration, contributing to the restriction of free thought and criticism from an early age. This environment weakens the cognitive competence of individuals and discourages them from entertaining contrasting opinions and points of view. It is a learning

method designed to reproduce and regenerate control over its subjects, beginning early in children's elementary school education. The lack of freedom and constant prevention of free thought create "internal constraints on the self," and as a result, Arabs learn to practice censorship upon themselves. This process of constraint causes citizens to live in a state of fear and submission marked by the "denial of their subjugation."⁶

Leading Arab poets and writers have always depicted the Arab in such a psychological state of siege, profoundly penetrating the conditions of fear, submission and resignation of the Arab individual in society. They have written continuously on this subject. Arab novelists offer a comprehensive understanding of the Arab family in their novels. Their writing richly describes the Arab family and its relationships, structures, values, beliefs, conducts, patterns of marriage and divorce, links with society and, finally, its social transformation. This will be explored in greater depth in chapter 9 on the modern Arabic novel.

MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN THE ARAB FAMILY

Even the process of marriage in the Arab world becomes a mass family project in which all members involve themselves. Though marriage technically consists of a union between a single man and a single woman, an Arab marriage is, culturally speaking, a union between two families. Individuals rarely act independently from the family in arranging their marriages; in fact, the family is traditionally more influential than the bride and the groom themselves in making the selection. The family of the potential bride or groom must be approved as the very first step in endorsing a proposed marriage. This is a cultural phenomenon that complements Islamic religious practice but is not derived from it, and thus applies to all religions and all sects in the Arab world.

Usually, the most successful marriage is the one that reinforces family ties. The selection of the bride is usually made inside the extended family, both to maintain group identity and for other considerations as well. After all, any marriage means two families have to decide on issues of inheritance and maintenance of the property and business of the extended family, clan and tribe. But marriages between two individuals from different families and tribes also occur; these are usually arranged for political or economic reasons, and traditionally are also very common, as they strengthen interconnections between tribes and families. Even in the twenty-first century, Arab tribes are still very strong, particularly in the Arab Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Yemen and Jordan. It is common practice in these countries for an important person of one tribe to marry a woman from another tribe, for the sake of political alliance or personal interest. Sometimes, individuals

from certain tribes marry several women, each from a different tribe, to multiply the political benefits. Marriages of this type still take place in the Arab Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries.

Usually, however, individuals are encouraged to marry within their tribe or clan; it is very common for first cousins to marry. In certain tribal and peasant traditions, in fact, it is obligatory for a man to marry his first female cousin. The time-honored pattern of arranged marriages is still strong in Arab culture, though society is changing rapidly on this point. But arranged marriages are still very common, despite the increasing number of opportunities for single men and women to meet and mix in the workplace and school.

Many marriages also take place today based on love and mutual admiration, especially in large urban areas. Even during pre-Islamic times, and throughout Islamic history, the phenomenon of marriage based on love rather than family connections has always existed. In ancient Arabia, men used to see unmarried women in groups at springs of water, as it traditionally fell upon single, young girls to bring home water from the wells. These springs would serve as a meeting place where men could talk to girls, although such conversations were usually brief and took place in the presence of others. After an innocent relationship of love or mutual admiration was established, the man would seek the girl's acceptance of his marriage proposal. If she accepted, he would discuss his marriage intention with his parents and other family members. Then his father, along with a delegation of tribal dignitaries, would pay a visit to the girl's family and ask her father for her hand. After consulting with his daughter to verify her approval, the girl's father would accept the proposal, and the marriage would be arranged shortly thereafter.

Still, the arranged marriage is very common in Arab culture, simply because men and women do not usually mix in social circumstances. This long-established policy of gender segregation is now declining in certain areas. Because Arab society is currently undergoing rapid change due to the spread of university education, the employment of women in mixed-gender workplaces, and many other societal innovations, arranged marriages have declined somewhat in urban areas. Even in cities, however, they are still frequent.

Ultimately, whether or not the marriage is an arranged one, the families of the bride and groom are heavily involved in the process. Permission from the father or guardian of the girl is the first essential and legal step in any marriage process. If a woman gets married without obtaining the permission of her father or guardian, she would be acting against the will of her family. In some Arab communities, especially Arab villages, such a girl would likely be punished by a male member of her family, either her father or one of her brothers or cousins.

In some extreme cases, she could be killed, though mainstream Arab society rejects such measures. Similar punishments could be brought to bear for running away with a man or marrying a man from a different sect or religion. Arab culture does not encourage marriage between a man and a woman from two different religions or sects. According to Islamic law and tradition, a Muslim woman is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim. Any potential non-Muslim bridegroom must first convert to Islam.⁷

The custom of providing dowry, or an amount of money or property given by a man to his bride when they marry, is practiced by many cultures around the world, including those of South Asia and the Arab world. It is a powerful ritual tradition and forms an integral part of the marriage arrangements. Dowry is practiced by all sectors of Arab society and is a long-established cultural component in many marriages, especially arranged marriages. The size and type of dowry can sometimes be very important, as it reflects the social status of the groom, the social class of the bride, the prestige of the bride's family in society, and the degree of closeness in kinship between the two families. The age and physical beauty of the bride can also be important factors in determining the size of the dowry.

Dowry is traditionally given to the bride by the groom in two installments, an advanced portion and a deferred portion. Payment of the advanced portion is legally required for endorsement of the marriage contract. The amount of both installments is usually determined by negotiation between the two families at an early stage in the process. The family of the groom presents the advanced portion of the dowry on the day the marriage contract is signed to the father or guardian of the bride; this part of the dowry may consist of money, goods, or real estate. It is usually spent on the bride and for household and wedding needs before the marriage even takes place. The deferred portion of the dowry is given to the woman if her husband dies or if the marriage ends in divorce.

If the groom's family does not present the advanced portion of the dowry on time, or if its value turns out to be less than what was agreed upon, this is considered an insult to the bride and her family. Such a thing rarely happens, but when it does, it constitutes grounds for the cancellation of the marriage contract by the bride's family. The advanced portion is a basic requirement for the legality of the marriage, and is intended not only to empower the marriage but also to strengthen and consolidate friendship between the families. Many Arabs, especially among traditional tribes, spend extremely generous amounts of money in dowry to the bride and her family out of respect and appreciation. Some also carry out gigantic and profligate wedding ceremonies; this is very common among the influential and wealthy, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states. Meanwhile, an enormous number of young men across the Arab world delay marriage indefinitely

due to their inability to afford a dowry, even if their intended brides and families of brides accept the marriage proposal in principle. This contributes to widespread feelings of frustration in the Arab world, as the inability to get married strikes a blow at the cornerstone of Arab society, the family unit.

THE MARRIAGE RITES

Other rites and rituals precede the actual wedding in addition to the dowry; a very important one is the official engagement of the man and woman. After the groom's father and other family members and friends officially ask for the hand of the bride, and after her father and family approve, they all agree immediately on a certain day for an official engagement. On that day, families, relatives and friends gather in the bride's house for the engagement ceremony, when the proposed day of marriage is announced publicly to the guests and relatives in attendance. The period of engagement is meant to prepare the couple for the actual marriage. The man and woman are allowed to visit each other's homes during that period, but only in the company of others, and they are not allowed to be alone or go out by themselves. These precautions are meant to protect the woman's reputation and the reputation of her family in case the marriage does not go through. Some families, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Gulf States, do not allow the man and woman to meet or see each other during the engagement period. In these cases, the couple remains separate until the day the marriage contract is signed, usually no more than a few months later.⁸

On the day of the marriage contract, the groom, the bride, their fathers or guardians, and two male witnesses all attend a religious ceremony conducted by a certified religious cleric, or *sheikh*. The *sheikh* verifies the acceptance of the woman and man to the marriage, and the bride's family acknowledges receipt of the advanced portion of the dowry, essential for the legality of the marriage contract. The deferred portion of the dowry is also specified at this time.

Upon signing the contract, the *sheikh* declares the man and woman lawfully married and affirms the completion of all legal marriage processes. After the religious ceremony has been completed, of course, sexual intercourse between the bride and the groom becomes legal and permissible. But this is not usually the end of the story. The marriage now enters another phase, and the date of sexual consummation is postponed for another ceremony, to be mutually decided between the families. This is the wedding ceremony, which follows the contract signing within a few weeks or months at the most.

The wedding day is like a festival, full of excitement, song and dance in an enormous feast and celebration. Some weddings last for three days. All the

friends and relatives of the bride and groom are invited, and even people who are not invited often come and participate, as the wedding is traditionally open to all. At the end of the wedding night, the last and most important ritual of all is performed. While the guests continue celebrating, the bride and groom consummate the marriage with sexual intercourse to prove that the bride remained a virgin until the moment of consummation. This is done in private, of course, but all soon know the news.

A close relative, usually the new bride's mother-in-law, waits with associates outside the bridal chamber while the bride and groom consummate the marriage. Eventually the groom emerges and hands her a sheet of the marriage bed stained with the blood of the bride's hymen, proof of her virginity and virtue. Upon verifying that the sheet is stained with blood, the mother-in-law passes along the good news to all the guests, relatives and participants in the marriage ceremony. Proof of virginity brings great pride and honor to the bride and her family.

Conversely, a non-virgin bride is considered to be disgraced, bringing shame and disrespect to her and her family and causing a scandal inside the community. Technically, the lack of virginity constitutes legal ground for the groom to dissolve the marriage immediately. He is entitled to ask the bride's family to return the advanced dowry in full, and he may also demand compensation for all marriage and wedding expenses. As a result, the bride and her family suffer not only dishonor but also financial ruin, eliminating the woman's chances of receiving another marriage proposal in the future. Because the wedding has ended in total disaster and the bride's family is humiliated, some families punish the girl, perhaps severely. In rare cases, the father or brothers of the girl might even kill her to restore the family's honor within the community.

THE *MISYAR* MARRIAGE

In the last two decades, a controversial new type of marriage known as *Misyar* has emerged, authorized by religious authorities because of worsening economic conditions in the Arab world. Widespread unemployment and increased inflation have resulted in an increase in dowry amounts for traditional marriages, and real estate prices have increased with inflation while wages remained stagnant. All these circumstances have made it increasingly difficult for Arab youth to live, work, and marry. Two new phenomena have emerged to facilitate marriage by reducing cost. One is the group wedding; some people, in order to save on expensive wedding ceremonies, arrange for several weddings to be held in one day at one place and time. Up to twenty marrying couples can all share the expenses of weddings in this way. These arrangements are encouraged because they provide opportunity

for men and women to get married, even during harsh economic conditions. Some group weddings are even fully sponsored by wealthy individuals.

A more controversial development has been the new *Misyar* marriage of the past two decades. Also known as the religiously sanctioned temporary marriage, the *Misyar* is simply a marriage contract between a man and a woman who propose to continue to live separately but get together for sexual relations. It is a legal and alternative marriage arrangement for men and women for whom marriage costs are unaffordable. *Misyar* has been authorized by religious authorities in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, among other Arab countries. Like regular marriages, it requires the consent of the two parties involved, the approval of the woman's father or guardian, the presence of witnesses, and the officiating of a religious cleric. Very little cost is involved, if any. The husband is not required to provide a home for his wife or be financially responsible for her. Nor does the *Misyar* even require that the man and woman live together. The wife usually lives with her parents or guardians, while the husband visits her regularly or at scheduled times.

The *Misyar* marriage was officially authorized by some Egyptian Sunni authorities in 1999, followed by religious figures in other Arab countries. Some see the *Misyar* marriage as perfectly acceptable because it is legal and meets all religious regulations. The *Misyar* is also seen as helping women who are unable to find husbands. Indeed, most women who choose this type of marriage are divorced, widowed, or beyond the customary marriage age, and many men who take on such marital arrangements are unemployed with little or no money. Critics point out that some men are already married but take advantage of *Misyar* to get an extra wife that costs them nothing. For this and other reasons, many Islamic scholars in the Arab world oppose these types of arrangements.

Sociologically, there are advantages and disadvantages to *Misyar* marriages. It was originally justified by religious scholars intending to help those who are financially unable to get married. Just because it is abused by some does not cast doubt on the good intentions behind its creation. However, the *Misyar* does deprive women of the rights they would normally enjoy in a traditional marriage. It is arranged and conducted in secret, and the husband acts as a guest who pays only occasional visits to his wife. The wife also cannot participate with her husband in public life or social activities. Some men and women, therefore, are faced with the difficult choice of remaining unmarried or marrying according to *Misyar*.

Traditionally, Arab women used to marry at a very young age. Today, marriage in Arab countries is occurring significantly later in life for both men and women. Algeria, for example, has a large percentage of unmarried women; and in the Arab Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, about 30 percent of women have passed up the

opportunity to be married. In addition to the high costs of marriages and harsh economic conditions, a new factor has emerged that slightly contributes to the rising percentage of unmarried Arab women. In many places throughout the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf, women are completing higher education degrees more often than men, holding higher positions as a result. Many therefore refuse to marry men who are less educated and thus of lower social status. As the gender difference in education increases, so does this phenomenon.

POLYGAMY IN ARAB SOCIETY

The pattern of polygamy in Arab culture traditionally existed to help fix the demographic balance between men and women during the times of early Islam. Constant war and the resultant death of Arab men caused the number of females to rise above the number of males in society. Polygamy emerged to prevent the prospect of a large number of women being deprived of marital life. It is possible that the concept of dowry itself comes from the practice of polygamy, when the dowry was considered a central value of the bride to her family. Since then the dowry has remained an essential ritual of marriage, but instead of representing a price, it has come to symbolize respect and appreciation toward the bride and her family as well as the husband's commitment toward his wife.

Polygamy in Arab culture was established for many reasons, including the provision of single women with husbands and the prevention of adultery. Islam allowed one man to marry up to four wives at a time; legally, a man cannot marry a fifth wife unless he divorces one of his previous four. Polygamy is legally recognized among all Muslim sects, and is still practiced today, particularly in villages and among Bedouin tribes and peasants.

Although the Qur'an permits a man to marry up to four wives, many restrictions and conditions apply to such a practice. Islamic scholars confirmed that the Qur'an meant to make it so complicated to marry more than one wife that polygamy would become practically difficult. The Qur'an commands the husband to be fair and treat all wives equally, and if the man cannot meet the conditions of fairness, he is not permitted to marry more than one wife. Many argue that it is essentially impossible to treat two or more wives in a truly equal and fair way, establishing a *de facto* prohibition of polygamy. In some Arab countries, polygamy is governed by state law as well as religious law. A potential husband needs to appear before a judge to prove his suitability and financial ability to support a second wife. The man must also prove his legal reason for seeking a second wife; if his first wife is unable to have children or if she has a prolonged illness, he must submit such proof before a judge. Only if his request is approved can the judge then grant permission

to marry a second time. In some Arab countries, it is very difficult to have a second or a third wife. Tunisia, for example, has strictly forbidden polygamy. It is much easier to marry multiple wives in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states than in Syria, Iraq, or Jordan.

In the Arab world, religious law governs all cases of marriage and divorce, as well as issues of child custody and inheritance. A Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man, though a Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim woman as long as the children are raised as Muslims. Marriages are beholden to religious rituals and ceremonies; religious marriages are highly respected in the Arab world and considered to be blessed by God. Most marriages in the Arab world are religious marriages. Civil marriages are permitted in some Arab states, but they are not generally accepted and therefore remain fairly uncommon. All Arab religious sects, including Christians and Jews, generally marry according to religious law and traditional practice.

ARRANGED MARRIAGES

Due to the traditional separation of men and women, the matchmaker has always played an important role in Arab society. A woman who possesses wide knowledge of the families in her geographic district, the matchmaker has a wide network of friends and relatives who help her collect information. She may work on behalf of a man in search of a wife, or vice versa. This ancient practice is still used in the Arab world today, and it will continue as long as young women and men lack the opportunity to meet. In fact, the arranged marriage is not only perfectly respectable, but seems very appealing in traditional societies. Refusing an arranged marriage could limit for many the chance to marry at all, as the opportunity to interact with the opposite sex in a conservative society is quite slim.

In some Arab countries, and particularly in the cities, the pattern of arranged marriages has declined over the last two decades, as new social and economic factors have emerged. Often, women who achieve higher education no longer accept marriage to arranged husbands, or even men they meet in person who are not their educational, social or professional equals. For men and women who are unable to marry for economic or other reasons, or those who do not use the arranging services of a matchmaker, marriage is often delayed. Sociologists note that Arab society has today a high percentage of celibacy, particularly among women.⁹ All this has made the *Misyar* marriage seem a more attractive option for few.

According to the Arab Human Development Report, Arab women enjoy increasing opportunities socially and economically, and have also achieved important success in education.¹⁰ Many women hold high positions in government and

the private sector, and others have been recognized in science, literature and other academic fields. Growing numbers of educated women squarely reject arranged marriage, and would not even consider polygamy or the *Misyar*. This is a sign of the growing liberation and self-confidence of women across the Arab world. At the same time, however, this contributes to the high and growing percentage of unmarried women in the Arab world, as well.

DIVORCE

Divorce traditionally was not as common in the Arab world as it is today. Although Islam does permit it, the Qur'an strongly discourages men from divorcing their wives, calling divorce the most hateful of all permissible practices in Islam. Divorce cases in Arab society have increased over the past few decades, however, and continue to rise. Divorce is most common during the first few years of marriage.¹¹

The right to divorce a spouse is not exclusive to the man. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women could divorce their husbands if they presented good reason; in certain communities and tribes, the woman could even marry more than one man. In the modern Arab world, however, it is much easier for a man to divorce his wife than vice versa. While a man can divorce his wife for any cause or even no reason at all, a woman must present very serious reasons for divorce, such as the sexual impotence of the husband, severe physical abuse by the husband, or the husband's indefinite absence. She cannot file for divorce because she does not like him or because their relationship is unbearable. If a wife leaves without going through the legal divorce procedure, her husband has the right to order her to return and resume her marital duties. If she refuses to return to him, the husband can file a lawsuit against her as a disobedient wife, forcing her to return.¹²

In Islamic law, a "disobedient" wife is deprived of any financial support from her husband, and she cannot marry another man because she is still legally married to her first husband. Of course, these excessive divorce cases are rare, particularly among the educated class. Once a divorce is granted, child custody law demands that the husband receive custody of the children. Children in these cases remain with their mother until a certain age before moving to live with their father, age seven for boys and age nine for girls.

Over the last few decades, progressives in the Arab world have demanded reform in divorce and child custody laws. These men and women activists advocate for women to be given the same rights to divorce as their husbands, taking the power of divorce out of strictly male hands. They also have demanded that all divorce procedures be processed inside courts and before judges of law. Women have achieved several victories in legal reform; Jordan has passed a law granting

the wife the right to divorce her husband, and other countries are in the process of passing similar reforms. The child custody law has undergone change, as well, raising the age of children in their mother's custody from seven to nine for boys and from nine to eleven for girls.

Demands are also afoot to reform inheritance law to ensure that men and women are treated equally. Islamic law differentiates between men and women on the issue of inheritance, entitling women to half the inheritance of men. Islamic reformers, however, argue that law was applied under social circumstances when men, not women, were the only source of family income, and that as circumstances have changed, the law should change as well. Islamic law also requires inheritance to remain within the same family, by not permitting individuals to leave more than one-third of their property to a beneficiary outside the legitimate family. The idea behind such law was to preserve family property. With increasing activism, however, and the ongoing transitions of Arab society, it is inevitable that changes in family law will eventually be made.

THE PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURE OF THE ARAB FAMILY

The Arab family is extended and patriarchal in structure and organization, following genealogically the male figures that represent family identity and preserve the family members' connection to past generations. Today, it is still common for several generations within a family to live together in the same house, run one business, and share profits and property.

The father stands on the top of the Arab family pyramid as master and undisputed authority of the house. Traditionally, the father served as sole protector of his family, taking care of his wife and children and providing for their survival and safety. From this position he naturally assumed control of daily family affairs, and his is the final word in all family decisions. In keeping with his role of authority, he expects respect and obedience by his wife and children. In Arab culture, children take their father's last name as a patronymic and use his first name as their common middle name, so all the family's children have the same middle name. Not only does this practice preserve the family genealogy, it also has value for legal reasons during inheritance procedures. The Arab woman keeps her last name even after marriage.

It was traditionally expected that the eldest son in a family would name his own firstborn son after the grandfather in order to keep alive the grandfather's first name, and this practice continues today. After a man gets married, or even before, the community addresses him by the name of his (actual or anticipated) firstborn son; if the man's father's name had been *Shadi*, for example, his firstborn

son would be named *Shadi* as well, and the man himself would be nicknamed *Abu Shadi*, or “the father of Shadi,” throughout the community. The same applies to the woman; she would be called *Umm*, or “the mother of,” *Shadi*.¹³ It is the community itself that encourages individuals to drop their personal identities in favor of the family. This is considered a very positive value in Arab culture, and anyone who did not follow such tradition would be defying powerful norms and conventions. There are exceptions, of course; in fact, this tradition is not as commonly practiced in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.

While the father provides for the family financially, the mother assumes the role of the housewife and takes care of the husband and her children. The Arab family follows a traditional hierarchical structure: the young subordinate to the old, females to males, and everyone to the father. Behind the scenes, however, the mother controls the family in reality. She makes most of the decisions, supervises the children, and above all manages the affairs of the family in the way she sees fit. In many cases, decisions are made by the mother but announced by her husband, in order to maintain the father’s image of being the ultimate decision maker. The wife is not as powerless as she seems from the outside: she makes most important decisions, manages the family’s finances, and generally wields most influence within the family.

The father often spends most of his time outside the home, a largely absent figure who works all day, comes home after work to have dinner, then leaves again to spend the evening with men in cafés and other places.¹⁴ His habitual absence further strengthens the role of the mother in handling all family matters. Along with other economic and social transitions in the Arab world, however, fathers are now spending more time with their children and families, due in part to the increased employment of women. The patriarchal family structure is changing, as well; the wife contributes financial support along with the employed children, with everyone cooperating to overcome economic difficulty. The father has thus begun to lose his controlling power and absolute authority over the family.

The Arab woman is emerging from her previous seclusion. Many Arab women today are highly educated, hold important positions in government and the private sector, and provide for their families financially. Traditionally, of course, Islam has always given women the right to education and work. Muhammad’s wife, Khadijah, was a successful entrepreneur who owned her own business and even employed the Prophet himself. In general terms, women are not as oppressed, powerless and marginalized within Arab and Islamic culture as they are often depicted and portrayed. It is true that Muslim women inherit half the sum of Muslim men, but this religious law is rooted in the economic and cultural context of the bygone era

in which it was formulated. Today, there is a wide range in the status of women's rights among Arab countries.¹⁵

Patriarchy in Arab society involves both the father who sits atop the social structure of the family and the leader who sits atop the social structure of the nation. Some commentators see the father's archetypal influence in any source of societal authority, hence children's fear of the policeman, security guard, army officer, teacher and government official. The Arab child is inflicted from an early age with the fear of authority and domination, an embodiment of the father's authority and domination at home. His is the force of authoritarianism that represents overwhelming power, and it is he who metes out punishment. The entrenched fear of father figures is therefore one reason Arabs are so obedient to their rulers.¹⁶

As a result of these fear-based relations of obedience, originating in the patriarchal Arab family structure, all relations in Arab society have become based on authority, domination, and dependency. The only concern of the Arab child is to be obedient and to behave appropriately and politely toward the father. As a result, these values are now reflected in the society as a whole, including the values of dependence, repression and authoritarianism. The Arab individual is oppressed within the family as well as within society. He or she is fearful of any authority and is concerned only with satisfying and pleasing the authority. As a result, individuals live in closed horizons, dominated, oppressed and terrified.¹⁷

Sociologist Halim Barakat noticed that an analogy can be drawn between the Arab family microstructure and the macro institutions of Arab society; to a certain extent, the same relationships that define the family are duplicated in educational, religious and political institutions. Arab political leaders, teachers and employers all act and behave as authoritarian fathers, even commonly referring to citizens as "children." This oppressive relationship is reinforced by a general repressive ideology, based on either terrifying the citizens or using methods of simple enticement and reward. Society as a whole lacks the phenomena of discussion and persuasion. And the educational system in the Arab world, from elementary school to university, is based on memorization rather than on understanding and analysis.¹⁸ Cultural critic Hisham Sharabi emphasized that the obedience since early childhood, along with the strong cultural value of self-sacrifice, led to such widespread dependency in the Arab psyche.¹⁹

HOW ARABS FEEL ABOUT THEIR FAMILIES

These general observations about the family are certainly true. The Arab world of course has its share of dysfunctional families and serious intra-family feuds. Also, the family's powerful domination of individual lives can be seen as negative.

But most Arabs have very positive opinions of the connections and values their families provide. From my own personal experience and observation, as well as from dozens of interviews I have conducted with individuals from various national, social and educational backgrounds, I have found that most Arabs still consider their families among the dearest aspects of their lives. Not even religion comes before family in terms of importance. Christians, Jews and other non-Muslim Arabs tend to feel the same way.

In conducting research for this book, I met and conversed with youth from many different Arab countries, including Bahrain, Qatar, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt.²⁰ Some of the men and women I met were college graduates, had studied in the West, traveled to many countries, and spoke several foreign languages. Others had not continued their education and found work in various skilled or non-skilled professions. Strikingly, all emphasized that their families are among the most important aspects of their lives, certainly more important than any job, wealth or opportunity in the world. They all agreed the entirety of Arab culture is concentrated around the family. All of those who were unmarried still lived with their families. All of those who now had wives and husbands had also lived with their families until their marriage day, and even some married individuals I spoke with still lived in the same houses as their families.

When asked why the family is important, all told me their families allow them to feel loved and protected, thanks to a strong emotional attachment between family members. Some had lost their fathers at a young age, but were raised by other family members. One man told me he could not imagine life without his family, and, in his words, would certainly commit suicide if he lost them. I cannot reproduce all and every single interview in full; here, I present a number of my conversations with some nationals of diverse backgrounds.

Fatima, whose friends call her Fifi, is a young woman from the Gulf with a master's degree from the United Kingdom. Fatima told me her family is the most beautiful thing in her life, offering real personal connections and strong relationships. Her family provides a peculiar warmth beyond description: a supportive group of individuals who are all related by blood or marriage, who live and break bread together, and who celebrate each other's joys and condole with each other in times of sadness. Fatima does not want to see her family change, and she suggested that any loosening of family ties in general would cause Arab culture to lose its cohesiveness, strength and uniqueness. Family relationships, Fatima said, represent the most honest, pure and wonderful human connections in the world; if this strong family honesty were lost, Arabs would lose the most beautiful part of their culture.²¹

Fatima did describe some negative aspects of the Arab family, such as its control over her independence and personal life. For example, the marriage or divorce of a family member becomes a project for the entire family, all of whose members get involved. A marriage or divorce becomes a family, rather than an individual, decision. No breathing space exists between an individual and his or her family: even if a woman and man love each other, if the woman's family does not like the man's family, the marriage cannot take place. If a woman decides against the will of her family to marry whom she loves, her family may reject or disown her. Because of the segregation between men and women in many Arab countries, especially the Arab Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, Arab women cannot meet Arab men outside of the family, for fear of acquiring a bad reputation. And finally, Fatima affirmed that retaining virginity until marriage remains a very important issue both for girls themselves and for their families.

Hadiya is another young woman from the Gulf who has received degrees in the United States and the United Kingdom; after living and studying overseas for several years, she returned to Bahrain. Hadiya told me that Western values can be very destructive to the Arab family. Western technology is the channel through which western ideas and values reach the Arab world, but Arabs misunderstand the West through this filter and therefore adopt only bad Western values, harming Arab culture and identity. Hadiya described Arab culture as full of beautiful and fascinating rituals, including those of weddings and funerals, whose traditions embody closeness and warmth. For Hadiya, there is a purity in these rituals that does not exist anywhere else, making Arab individuals feel they are part of a group and participants in a community larger than themselves. Family-based communication and ritual is beautiful, meaningful and important, both for the individual soul and for society as a whole.²²

Finally, Hadiya added that belonging to a family and tribe also means belonging to a particular political party, ideology or national identity. Even within the Arab Gulf states, for all their cultural similarities, there is a strong sense of belonging to a certain country. A Bahraini woman may not want to marry a Kuwaiti man, because this means her children will be Kuwaiti citizens; this further applies to a Kuwaiti woman who does not want her children to be born Bahraini. The issue of citizenship and nationalities is perhaps more sensitive in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states than the rest of the Arab world. The Bahrainis, for example, do not want non-native Bahrainis to become citizens, even if they were born in Bahrain. Hadiya described predominant Bahraini sentiment toward other nationalities thus: they are very welcome to reside and live in Bahrain, but not to become Bahraini.

Majda is a Syrian Christian woman from the city of Latakiyya, who works at Yale University. Majda described the family as "wealth", to the extent that a

person feels she is an emperor when living with her family. There is no joy similar to the joy of spending time with family, especially extended family. Moreover, Majda said, the family provides individuals with security. Strong family ties lead to improved social health. Problems with the Arab family certainly exist, but they seem insignificant when compared to the strong, loving bonds that family members provide.²³

Majda, whose family immigrated to the United States thirty years ago, has two grown sons. Her relationship with her children is based on love and respect: “I am very close to them. I am very proud of them. They still come to me when they have problems. They ask my advice and my opinion on personal matters. My children have always lived with us.” However, Majda did not like the fact the Arab family generally favors boys over girls, and the older over the younger. She remarked that the Arab family should give individuals more freedom in making their own decisions, such as what to study in college or when and whom to marry. For example, when a family decides it is best for someone to study medicine in college or to marry from a certain family, this is very harsh on the children.

Among the most positive aspects of the Arab family for Majda is how friends and loved ones gather around the sick or the person who is in need, but even these admirable qualities can sometimes become negative. Visiting the sick is a great thing, but it does not leave the sick person alone for a minute, as he or she is constantly showered by unlimited visits. All in all, however, Majda would feel very depressed and extremely ill without her family. She lives in Connecticut with her children and husband, but calls her parents every day.

Finally, from her own experience of being raised in the Arab world and raising her children in America, Majda downplayed the cultural differences between Arab society and American society:

“I think the American woman is like the Arab woman. She takes care of her children, and she takes her children to places of worship. My children are Arab-American; they are integrated into American life and society, but I see them every day and they call me up to several times a day. My youngest son, who found a job recently in Delaware, comes every week to spend the weekend with us, and he takes back with him Arabic food that I prepare for the entire week.”

Ibrahim, a young Bahraini university graduate who has worked as a journalist for a daily Arabic newspaper, told me the family represents Arab tribal heritage. Ibrahim has visited the United States and believes that Arab culture in reality is a tribal culture, and this is something about which Arabs feel very proud. The family represents belonging, an extremely important concept in Arab culture. Ibrahim

described the feeling of real belonging, whether to the family, religion or tribe, as powerful as nuclear energy, and that which remains when everything else is left behind. The feeling of belonging, for Ibrahim, is the only thing that protects Arab culture and identity.²⁴

In the Arab Gulf states, Ibrahim added, there is a concept called *faz`a*, which means to be united with your family and fight for it against others, whether your family is wrong or right. Particularly common to the Arab Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the concept of *faz`a* is based on an ancient Arab tribal proverb: *my brother and I against our cousin, my cousin and I against the stranger*. Such a practice could be wrong, Ibrahim said, but it is an immutable part of Arab life, and it reflects the spectrum of an individual's loyalty—first to the immediate family, then the extended family, then the tribe, and finally the society. Ibrahim does not want to see the Arab family change, despite its drawbacks. And he described Western influence over Arab culture as an invasion that, if not stopped, will harm and spoil Arab culture.

Rashid and Ja`far are two young Bahraini journalists with university degrees and extensive travel experience in Europe and the United States. Like others I interviewed, these individuals confirmed that the Arab family represents Arab identity and vice versa: The Arab individual carries the name of the family, the family carries the name of the tribe, and the tribe rules the country. The two young nationals spoke the same on the concept of *faz`a*, saying this still represents reality for many Arabs. The individual feels he belongs first to his immediate family, then to his extended family, then to the tribe or religious sect, and only lastly to the country at large.²⁵

Shadi, a Syrian who works in the private sector, describes his family as his treasure. He notes that in Arab culture, individuals stay and live with their families far beyond the age of eighteen. This arbitrary year in which children leave their families in other cultures has no meaning for Arabs. Arabs are very attached to their families, and therefore children stay with their parents long after they turn eighteen. Shadi himself is thirty years old, and he plans to live with his parents until he gets married.

Like the others, Shadi notes that the positives of the Arab family outweigh the negatives:

“One of the negative things is that everyone gets involved in everyone else’s business. Decisions are mostly made by the group, not by individuals. Family members never leave the individual alone. Despite this, I cannot live without my family. When I get married I plan to move out, but will continue to be very close. I must see or call my family daily, especially my mother and father. I could wait

to see or talk to my brothers and sisters every few days, but I have to see or talk to my parents every day. I cannot live without Arabic food, especially the food that my mother cooks. Even when I am in the U.S., I always eat Arabic food. Also, I prefer to marry an Arab woman because I feel she would understand me better, coming from the same culture. Girls in the Arab family are not oppressed at all. On the contrary, the girl in the family is spoiled, because all her brothers take such good care of her. She certainly does not have the personal freedom that the American girl has, but she is still very spoiled and loved by all her family. And everything I have said applies to Arab families regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliations.”²⁶

All of the young adults that I spoke with criticized the educational system in the Arab world and rejected methods based on memorization and repetition rather than critical analysis. Without free thinking and criticism, they stressed, schools do not teach anything useful. The educational curriculum is imposed. Students can only receive ideas, not initiate them. They also described family traditions and values as getting even more conservative.²⁷

The Arab family remains a mirror for Arab culture and lends Arab culture its positive and distinct character. Through their families, individuals are united in times of happiness and misery alike. The solidarity and special care given to the elderly is particularly admirable: nursing homes rarely exist, for lack of customers. In recent years, a handful of nursing homes have been established for the elderly in large Arab cities, but it is not widely accepted to have elderly parents sent there. The new nursing homes in the Arab world are for those elderly people who either have no families, or whose families are small and unable to provide the care they need.

Sending an elderly person to a nursing home is against the traditions, values and the customs of Arab culture; it is a severe social stigma, and the family who resorted to such a measure would lose the respect of the community. The Arab family is known for taking very good care of the ill and elderly, cooking for them, bathing them, giving them medication, and most importantly, paying attention to them and entertaining them. Aged and ill individuals are never left home alone. Not only do family members take turns to cater to their needs, relatives and friends also join in to offer services. Those close to the family increase the frequency of their visits. All this is guided by family traditions, social conventions, steadfast personal relationships, and the encouragement of the religions.

Finally, it is due to this intense association and warm openness among family members on a daily basis that individuals feel free to consult with their families

about their private concerns and worries in truthful and frank discussions. This practice is emotionally rewarding and often touted as more effective and useful than psychiatric visits. Many Arabs attribute the popularity of psychological treatment in the West to the fact that individuals there have no one with whom to share their deep personal problems save during one weekly hour in a therapist's office. A common impression in the Middle East is that Westerners lack the time to make warm, personal connections. In Arab culture, as well as many other cultures worldwide, it is the family that sits, listens, supports, consults, and consoles. It is the family that happily walks the extra miles needed.
