

## Unit 7: U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures

### Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

### Be aware of the following

- Goals of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East
- Perceptions of Islam held by the West
- Factors contributing to anti-Islamic hysteria
- Nature of extremist fundamentalist practice
- Perspectives which hinder understanding of Middle East culture/religion
  - Helpful values which promote good relations with Middle East cultures

### Realize

- U.S. commitment to Israel's security as a foreign policy goal
- Distorted media perceptions concerning Islam
- Depth of centuries-old animosities which still impact Middle East culture
  - Personal religious perspectives which may hamper accurate study of Middle East cultures

# Unit 7: U.S. Relations: Middle East Cultures

## I. United States Foreign Policy

As outlined in the Department of Defense report "Proliferation: Threat and Response," (released April 1996), U.S. goals in the Middle East and North Africa include:



- Securing a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace between Israel and all Arab parties with which it is not yet at peace
- Maintaining our steadfast commitment to Israel's security and well-being
- Building and maintaining security arrangements that assure the stability of the Persian Gulf region and unimpeded commercial access to its petroleum reserves, which are vital to our economic prosperity
- Ensuring fair access for American business to commercial opportunities in the region
- Combating terrorism
- Promoting more open political and economic systems and respect for human rights and the rule of law

## II. Perceptions of Islam Held by the West

Three broad categories--hysteria, appreciation, and caution--identify perspectives held towards Muslim thought and practice. While not inclusive, these categories provide an initial template for further analysis.

**1. Anti-Islamic Hysteria** Salam Al-Marayati, the director of Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles, discusses the stereotyping, scapegoating, and threat-producing rhetoric taken towards Islam by some.



In the June 1994 article entitled "The Rising Tide of Hostile Stereotyping of Islam," Salam outlines the following perspective.

**a. Contributing Factors** The World Trade Center bombing in New York City in 1993, terrorist acts abroad against Americans, the rhetoric of spokespersons for Islamic causes, and international conflicts waged in "Islam's name" raise Western consciousness concerning the role of Islam. This perspective, however, is primarily negative.

Distorted perceptions occur readily in the media. "Menacing" headlines ("The Sword of Islam," "The Islamic Bomb," "The Roots of Muslim Rage," "Bombs in the Name of Allah") can readily skew our perspective.

A more cynical slant on factors contributing to anti-Islamic hysteria is a "means to ends" callousness. Western economic self-interest, political expediency, and material interest cloud any fair or just treatment of Islam.

**b. Causes** In addition to the contributing factors listed above, causes for anti-Islamic hysteria include:

(1) Extremists



Some abuse their religion to justify, in the name of Islam, the violence they commit. Personal notoriety results. Political causes are the focus.

Many extremist/militant/fundamentalist groups fall under this heading.

(2) Misrepresentation

The stereotypical notion of all Muslims as violence-prone zealots falsifies true Islamic practice.

*"Repeated sufficiently," writes Salam, "false and hostile statements about Islam eventually will lead many Americans to question the patriotism of their Muslim fellow citizens."*

The Prince of Wales, in his address before the Oxford Center for Islamic Studies, (27 October 1993), addressed this Western tendency to misrepresent Islam. *"[O]ur common attitude toward Islam suffers because the way we understand it has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial. To many of us in the West, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extremist groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as "Islamic fundamentalism."*

"Our judgment of Islam has been grossly distorted by the extremes to be the norm. That is a serious mistake...The extremes exist, and they must be dealt with. But when used as a basis to judge a society, they lead to distortion and unfairness." (NS 3300 p. 58).

**2. Appreciation** Many view the teachings and practice of Islam with high regard.



Islamic studies departments at colleges and universities, affiliations with recent American converts, the growth of mosques throughout America, and personal associations with Muslims contribute to an appreciation for the way of life put forth by Muhammad and his followers.

**3. Caution** In the 15 February 1993 edition of Newsweek, Christopher Dickey asks, "Should We Fear Islam?" (p. 30).

His conclusion, after addressing the diverse nature of Islam and the fear it sometimes raises, states, "Should the West fear Islam? Not as such. But it is worth keeping a very close eye on those who carry its banner."



In his book, The Islamic Threat, John Esposito, professor of Middle Eastern studies at College of the Holy Cross, one of America's foremost interpreters of Islam, asks the question "Are Islam and the West on an inevitable collision course?" His final conclusion calls for a better understanding of the history and realities of the Muslim world. "Islam and most Islamic movements are not necessarily anti-Western, anti-American, or anti-democratic...they do not necessarily threaten American interests."

### III. Perspectives Which May Hinder Understanding

Depending on our education/life experiences, faith persuasions, or views on evangelism, we reason differently concerning the teachings and study of world religions.

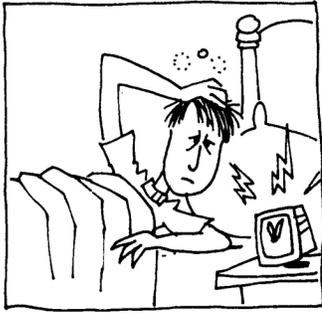


The following American religious/cultural views may inhibit our perspectives of Middle East religions.

**1. Personal Faith Commitment** For those who take their faith seriously, there can be a hesitancy to study other religions. Warnings against involvement in divergent faiths and philosophies; dangers of incorporating elements of other religions into one's own faith; limitations of time and energy resources considering the spiritual, evangelistic mission at hand; or perceptions that those who study other religions have a defective faith can inhibit our understanding.

**2. Threat** Theologian Charles Kimball, Arab linguist and negotiator during the Iran hostage crisis, observes: *"Genuine awareness of religious diversity coupled with the recognition that each of us occupies only one place on a rather large spectrum...is unsettling."* For those who are continually defensive and polemical, or who possess a nominal faith (or no faith at all), developing a relationship with other belief systems can become menacing or intimidating.

**3. Muddled Thinking** Looking at other belief systems, though rewarding and fulfilling, is often hard, difficult work.



We get out of study what we put into it. If we employ disciplined, diligent thought, our understanding deepens. If we relax, "coast" or are lazy in our efforts, confusion results.

**4. Live and let live** Generally, our American culture is extremely tolerant. Individualism and freedom often spawn a broad-mindedness bordering on permissiveness. We don't bother people if they don't bother us. We must realize however, that in most parts of the world, animosities and hatreds, cultivated over the centuries, still influence religious/political activities.

**5. The Golden Rule** "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" is a cultural norm.

We believe that if we treat people decently, they will do the same to us in return. For a variety of factors, some religious factions ignore this concept.



For many, the term religion often connotes concepts of love, harmony, and peace. In some parts of the world, this is not the case. Restraint becomes a good habit to acquire.

**6. Forgive and Forget** As evidenced in the Marshall Plan after WW II, the rebuilding of Panama after Operation Just Cause, and steps taken to normalize relations with the Republic of North Vietnam, Americans tend to forgive past antagonisms once hostilities cease. As seen in Bosnia and Chechnya today however, this forgive/forget trait is not embraced by all nations and ethnic groups.

## **Unit 7: U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures**

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## IV. Helpful Values

The following values assist in fostering good relations between U.S. military personnel and practitioners of the Middle East religions.



**1. Respect** Demonstrating civility is a helpful attribute when treating other religions. Consideration for others, fair exposition of their views, an "external and internal politeness" contribute to understanding.

Agreement is not the issue. Rather, we can agree to disagree, being open, honest, and unafraid concerning our differences. When we focus on understanding of one another, seeking to build relationships and break down hostile walls, then the risk for harm is low.

Writes theologian Richard Mouw, *"To be civil [is] to care about the larger society. It [requires] a heartfelt commitment to your fellow citizens.*

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*It [is] a willingness to promote the well-being of people who [are] very different, including people who seriously [disagree] with you on important matters." (Uncommon Decency, pp 12-13).*

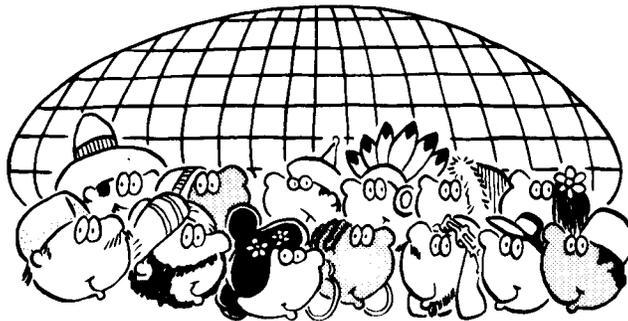
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**2. Humility** Observable reverence for others promotes respect and genuine friendliness. To quote Dr. Mouw, "[A]rrogant self-righteousness must have no place in our hearts. It's one thing to believe that God's revelation is the only sure and certain guide for our journey; it's another thing to act as if we ourselves possessed a sure and certain grasp of all the complexities of revealed truth." (Uncommon Decency, p. 166).

**3. Care** To demonstrate compassion and care involves seeing people as people. We can treat others as people, just as we are, with virtues and follies, insights and limitations which give meaning to the human condition. We can demonstrate courtesy not because we know others, but simply because we see others as human beings like ourselves.

As Charles Kimball writes, moving beyond...

*"the distorting veil of stereotypical images and numbing prejudices [to] approach one another as human beings who care about families and societies" opens "options for better relations and cooperative ventures" between us. (Striving Together, p. 120).*



Review Quiz: U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures

**Part 1--Multiple Choice** Place the letter of the most correct response in the space provided.



1. \_\_\_\_\_ Consideration of others, fair exposition of their views and politeness focusing on understanding describe the helpful value of \_\_\_\_\_, the practice of which promotes good relations between U.S. military personnel and practitioners of Middle East religions.

- A. respect
- B. confrontation
- C. personal resolve

2. \_\_\_\_\_ Humility, an \_\_\_\_\_, promotes respect and genuine friendliness.

- A. observable, being treated as a doormat trait
- B. observable reverence for others
- C. observable sign of weakness and disdain

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Author Charles Kimball writes that when we approach one another as human beings who care about families and societies, we open options for \_\_\_\_\_ between separated peoples.

- A. better relations
- B. deceptive stereotypes
- C. greater animosities

4. \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ abuse their religion to justify the violence they commit.

- A. Moderates
- B. Extremists
- C. Pacifists

## Unit 7: U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures

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5. \_\_\_\_\_ Charles, Prince of Wales, points out that for many in the West, Muslims are seen as only

- A. extremist Islamic fundamentalists.
- B. compassionate national patriots.
- C. peace loving Arabic peoples.

6. \_\_\_\_\_ Securing a just, lasting, and comprehensive peace between \_\_\_\_\_ and all Arab parties is a U.S. foreign policy goal in the Middle East.

- A. Cyprus
- B. Sudan
- C. Israel

7. \_\_\_\_\_ Ensuring Persian Gulf stability and unimpeded access to Middle East \_\_\_\_\_, which are vital to U.S. economic prosperity, are U.S. foreign policy goals in the Middle East.

- A. religious tradition
- B. petroleum reserves
- C. military hardware markets

8. \_\_\_\_\_ What is not a U.S. foreign policy goal in the Middle East?

- A. Combating terrorism
- B. Ensuring fair access for American business in the region
- C. Promoting respect for human rights
- D. Ensuring Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue in the region

9. \_\_\_\_\_ Stereotyping, \_\_\_\_\_ and threat-producing rhetoric often lead to anti-Islamic hysteria.

- A. scapegoating (blaming all Muslims for the mistakes or crimes of some)
- B. dialoguing (interchanging and discussing ideas/differences)

10. \_\_\_\_\_ "The Sword of Islam," and "the Islamic Bomb" are examples of

- A. media headlines which distort perspectives of total Muslim faith and practice.
- B. greater jihad.



## Unit 7: U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures

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11. \_\_\_\_\_ or Islamic law prescribes directives touching individual and collective life. Religion, ritual, personal character, habits, morals and laws of war/peace/international relations are included.

- A. hadith
- B. Sharia
- C. Hajj

12. \_\_\_\_\_ The \_\_\_\_\_ are reports of what Muhammad said or did. Their authenticity is carefully determined by Islamic scholars.

- A. Sunnah
- B. Sharia
- C. hadith

13. \_\_\_\_\_ According to Charles, Prince of Wales, the guiding principles and spirit of Islamic law, taken from the Qur'an, are those of

- A. terrorism and political subterfuge.
- B. equity and compassion.
- C. hate and revenge.

14. \_\_\_\_\_ Charles, Prince of Wales, argues for a distinction between Islamic systems of justice administered with integrity and those deformed for \_\_\_\_\_ reasons into something no longer Islamic.

- A. spiritual
- B. political
- C. religious



**Part 2--Matching** The following are concepts which may inhibit American perspectives on Middle East culture/religion. Place the letter of the correct response in the blank provided.







"Give off good vibes."

## Sources Used In U.S. Relations--Middle East Cultures

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