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**THE EVOLVING FRAMEWORK OF ARAB PERCEPTIONS
OF SECURITY: THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL FACTORS**

by Laura Guazzone

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THE EVOLVING FRAMEWORK OF ARAB PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY: THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL FACTORS.¹

by Laura Guazzone, IAI (Rome)

Introduction

The field of enquiry that this title suggests is daunting vast. It is therefore necessary to introduce a few preliminary considerations in view of sizing the subject matter. The first consideration regards the notion of perceptions: on the one hand perceptions are subjective by definition: as such, they elude any generalization, but, at the same time, perceptions are the result of a dynamic feed-back process between multiple actors which, by implicitly or explicitly manifesting their perceptions, influence those of others and leaves a trail of cultural evidences that can be identified, however tentatively.

In the case of today's Arab perceptions of security, the subjective and interactive nature of perceptions has two implications. The first implication is that Arab security perceptions are the result of a complex pattern, whose shape is dynamically influenced also by the security perceptions and cultural stimuli emanating from many non Arab other actors, and particularly from Israel, Europe, the United States and East Asia. This paper will focus mainly on one thread of this complex pattern and namely on some key factors which exists within the traditional and more recent currents of Arab culture, and that influence security perceptions.

The second implication is that subjectivity requires to distinguish between at least two sources of security perceptions: the elite level and the mass level. The existence in the Arab world of substantial differences, but also mutual influences between the security perceptions of the masses and the elites was most clearly manifest in their distinct reactions to the international crisis brought about by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. The distinction between mass and elites security perceptions in the Arab world will not be dealt with directly in this paper, however it has to be kept in mind to understand

¹ This is a draft text: language and content are to be revised.

the different implications of the common cultural attitudes that will be considered, as well as the current need in the Arab world for the (re)creation of a broader cultural consensus that would bridge the gap between mass and elites' perceptions.

Finally, it has to be noted that there are at least three different, but interacting levels where the behaviors affecting Arab security perceptions takes place: the intrastate level, the regional level and the international level. The level at which cultural factors appear to influence most Arab security perceptions is the international level and more specifically the level of relations with the West. However, the impact on Arab security perceptions and behaviours of cultural factors affecting the intrastate and regional level is profound.

These three different levels at which cultural factors affect Arab security perceptions are reflected in the organization of this paper: section one deals with the intrastate level; section two with the regional (and sub-regional) level; section three considers the level of Western-Arab relations. The fourth section suggests how Mediterranean cooperation can contribute in creating more positive security perceptions in new Arab world which is presently in the making.

1. Cultural Identities and National Cohesion

From the last decades of the nineteenth century to the end of the Cold-war, the political and cultural life of the Arab world has been dominated by two driving forces: Arab nationalism and Islam. Both trends have worked, and still work, as powerful identity magnets and, hence, as both rallying and divisive cultural factors.

Both Arabism and Islam define the members of the Islamic or Arab *umma* (community and nation) through a set of religious, cultural, ethnic, and behavioral attributes and give them a worldview and a sense of individual and collective purpose. However, defining who is inside the *umma* also defines by default who is outside. This demarcation of cultural fault lines produces the definition of seemingly clear external borders which, from a muslim perspective run between *dar al-islam* (house of the believers) and *dar al-harb* (house of the unbelievers), and from a pan-Arab perspective run between the Arab homeland (classically defined as stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf: *al-watan al-arabi min al-muhit ila-l-khalij*) and the rest of the world.

The political effects of the existence of these cultural external borders are evident at the international and regional level. Usually less clear outside the Middle East, is that Islam and Arabism also contributed in defining demarcation lines within national boundaries and across societies, thus powerfully reinforcing concurring political and economic factors in determining intrastate fragmentation and conflict, which today represent possibly the single most important source of insecurity for the Arab peoples.

It must be made clear that the negative effects of cultural identities on the national cohesion of Arab polities, and hence security, do not consist in racism. Islamic identity is historically multiethnic and Arab identity, according to pan-Arab ideologues such as Sati` al-Husari, is open to also non-Arabs who adhere to its ideals.

More to the point, as the Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim has convincingly argued his recent writings, the destabilizing effects of cultural identities in the Arab world depend on the political use of these unifying myths to justify the marginalization of minorities (or their unjust rule over majority) and the suppression of dissent against the ruling authority.²

Although on different grounds, both the pan-Arab and Islamic cultural discourse place priority emphasis on the value of unity and delegitimize criticism or dissent as attempts to break the strength of unity. Requests for decentralization and cultural affirmation on the part of ethno-linguistic minorities such as the Kurds or the Berbers have been systematically suppressed under accusation of seeking separatism; moreover, accusation of factionalism and collusion with hostile powers have justified the repression of confessional minorities such as the Shia communities in the Gulf, or Jewish and Christian minorities throughout the Arab world.

In the Arab nationalist republics, traditional monarchies and revolutionary regimes alike the need to build and protect national unity has been, and it is being, used as a device to legitimize authoritarian rule and prevent pluralistic expression of differences of interests.

² See Saad Eddin Ibrahim's article "Management and Mismanagement of Diversity: The Case of Ethnic Conflict and State Building in the Arab World", *The International Spectator*, vol. XXX. n. 4, October-December 1995.

Today, the most prominent divisive effect of cultural cleavages in the Arab world is obviously the political confrontation between the Islamists and their opponents.³ However, in cultural terms the divide is in fact between exclusionary cultures -be them religious or secular- denying diversity and pluralism allowing for the cultural, social and finally political integration of diversity. As Aziz al-Azmeh has stressed,⁴ this may be due to the fact that the core value of the political cultures presently prevailing in the Arab world is still a collective entity (Arab nation, Islamic umma, nation state, ethnic community) not the individual citizen.

As a consequence of the diffusion of exclusionary ideologies as the underpinning of most Arab political regimes, a long and unabated series of intrastate tensions and conflicts have taken place and the perception that cultural diversity is a source of insecurity is still widespread in today's Arab world.

2. Identity and Regional Divides

As Abdel Murim clearly spells out in his paper, cultural factors are prominent in the existing competing visions of the Arab region's nature and place in the world. Each of the three ideal types of Arab citizen he identifies -the conservative-radical, the idealist-liberal and the pragmatic-realist- has a different vision of the requirements of Arab security, and of the nature of the regional system that better serve them, which is based on nothing else but a system of beliefs.

The vision of the conservative-radical is mostly based on the traditional cultural divide between non-Arab and Arab countries and, among these, progressive and reactionary states. The pragmatic-realist is still strongly influenced by the same traditional cultural divides. For those belonging to these two ideal types Arab security still depends, although to different degrees, from traditional power politics, and hence from the relative strengths of regional states and governments and of their international allies.

³ The origins and different effects of this confrontation in the Arab countries are analyzed in Laura Guazzone (ed.) *The Islamist Dilemma*, Reading: Ithaca Press, 1995.

⁴ See Aziz al-Azmeh "Populism Contra Democracy: Recent Democraticist Discourse in the Arab World", in Ghassan Salamé (ed.) *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Arab World*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1994.

The international system do not offer the room for lucrative alignments as it used to, but the existing differentiations between and among the three poles of the Western system (America, Europe and Asia), often perceived in cultural terms, have still something to offer.

The idealist-liberal, instead, believes that Arab security at the national and regional level depends from development and interdependence. Also this security perception is a reaction to a set of cultural stimuli derived from visions of an increasingly global world where the balance of socio-economic benefits that can be reaped from cooperation and positive competition seem more relevant than the balance of political-military power than can be acquired through confrontation and denial.

The problem however is that the cultural sources of the two main ideal types -the conservative radical and the idealist liberal- are quite different. In the Arab world, the conservative values of reference are still powerfully vehiculated at the mass level, for instance through primary education and mainstream religious discourse, while liberal values reach mainly the educated elites who have access to travelling, foreign languages and modern communication technologies.

However failed in political terms, in cultural terms the conservative values have the resilience of tradition and, even under the best case scenario, it will take a generation before the new values percolate into mass culture. During this time (which is long in political terms, but very brief in cultural terms) traditional values will continue to influence heavily Arab security perceptions at both the mass and elite level.

If we take the history of the Middle East as the yardstick for predicting the future, we may as well conclude that the time of a generation may not be enough for Arab societies to assimilate the integration of Israel and the Israelis into the fabric of regional relations and alleviate cultural suspicion and animosity in their regards. In effect, neither Turkey or Iran, the two other non Arab countries of the Middle East with which the Arabs have a record of conflict and domination are culturally fully accepted as legitimate participants into the regional system and their nationalism is resented as their supposed militaristic inclinations are feared. Therefore, at the regional level, it is likely that the the deep rooted Arab/non Arab cultural divide will continue to have a strong impact for many years to come.

However persistent in defining perceptions towards non Arabs, the rallying myth of Arab unity has been definitely ruined by the traumatic experience of the second Gulf war, where the threat perceptions and cultural differentiations existing among the Arabs themselves were openly voiced for the first time.

Resentment and sometimes hate towards oil rich Gulf states and societies clearly emerged among those Arab citizens, possibly former guest-workers, that felt vindicated by Iraq's 'expropriation' of Kuwait. At the same time, the Gulf countries's expulsion of thousands of Arab migrants following the war, and the rejection of a security guarantee through the stationing of Arab troops on their soil represented also the effect of cultural contempt and suspicion among the Arab allies.

These exacerbate behaviors confirms the obvious, that is the existence of cultural factors in the national differentiations of Arab security perceptions, factors that go beyond the specificity of threats deriving from each country's unique geopolitical setting and historical legacy. These differences cannot be disregarded as a thing of the past, especially since they may be re-activated by the new geo-economic competition. Egypt diplomacy "condemnation of those who 'rushed' towards Israel" or Morocco go-it-alone attitudes towards relations with the European Union are just symptoms of a new climate which, alongside more healthy implications, may also reinforce existing inter-Arab threat perceptions.

3. Identity and Relations with the West

The history of relations between the Arab and Western worlds it's the history of endless phases of encounter and repulsion, of which each side has different cultural perceptions and records. The Mediterranean, with its smallness, common material culture and absence of strong geographical barriers remains the privileged setting for this age old interaction.

Abdel Munim's opening statements remind us what is the end effect of this long record of interactions on Arab security perceptions when he notes that: "one of the main features of Arab history is foreign domination...[and] in contemporary terms, the threats to Arab security have been defined in terms of fear of Western domination". Simply stated, this means that the West, namely Western European countries and the United States, is perceived as a threat for Arab security.

For the sake of analysis, the cultural components of the present Arab perceptions of threat from the West can be tentatively distinguished in two categories: the first category comprises general factors contributing to a diffuse sense of resentment and suspicion towards Western behaviors, the second category regards the cultural underpinning of specific Western policies and behaviours relevant to the security sphere.

The fear of Western domination and the resentment against its manifestations is the prism through which Western behaviors are mostly commonly read by Arab citizens. No matter how principled and compatible with specific Arab interests, Western direct and indirect intervention in domestic and regional political affairs is commonly suspected to be designed to weaken the Arab world in order to protect Western interests in the region, namely Israel and oil. The same goes for economics (with possibly the minoritarian exception of Abdel Munim's idealistic-liberal type), where visions of Western affluence or technology and (marxist) theories of development all contribute to the conviction that the very nature of capitalistic center-periphery relations is structured to impoverish the developing countries and enrich the industrialized ones. Of course, cultural relations are a central piece of the fear of domination, especially today when Westernization of popular culture through television is much more intrusive and difficult to resist than other forms of penetration and manipulation.

Obviously there is nothing of specifically Arab in this fear of domination. Similar manifestations can be found in every region of the world, from Latin America to the Far East, that has experienced direct or indirect forms of colonialism.

There are however some specific cultural values which are specifically Western in origin and whose diffusion in the Arab world is presently most adversely affected by their association with the still diffuse fear of Western domination. These values are the sources of the political notions of human rights, democracy, good governance. For reasons partially explained in the first section of this paper, the process of diffusion of these notions as autonomous cultural values has just begun in the Arab world and it will take a long time to consolidate.

While this cultural process unfolds, there is a lot of confusion on both the Western and Arab sides about how to distinguish between the cultural origins and the political implications of these notions. On the Arab side, even those who subscribe to these values as universal goods, resent their promotion through specific Western policies

such as humanitarian intervention (first experimented in favour of Iraqi Kurds) or aid conditionality linked to local governments' human rights record. What is commonly resented is not the active Western promotion of respect for human rights and the rule of law, but, instead, the self-interested and double-standard method in Western applications of these principles and related policies. Until appropriate mechanisms of North-South political dialogue are developed and enacted for a cooperative definition of the areas and cases of application of these principles, the related cultural values will remain suspect to most Arabs.

More in general, it is evident that the only real cure for the fear of domination and resentment which characterize in cultural terms Arab security perceptions vis-à-vis the West is to restore cultural self-confidence in a context of cooperative relations. In the following section it will be argued how the Mediterranean can provide such a context.

4. The Dialectics of Intercultural Relations in the Mediterranean

It has been stated at the beginning of this paper that perceptions in general and security perceptions in particular are the result of an interactive process. For the sake of analysis only one side of the process, the Arab side, has been explored in the previous sections.

Now, it is now time to take into consideration the broader framework in which of the cultural processes that influence today the evolution of Arab security perceptions takes place. This framework is marked by the competing effects of the two main cultural dynamics of our time: globalisation and specificity. Although these phenomena are much studied, it is worth recalling their principal effects on intercultural relations before looking at their effects in the Mediterranean region. The notion of the Mediterranean is introduced here to argue that, under certain conditions, it can represent a cultural reference for bringing together in a dialectical and cooperative mode the different cultural identities that concur in the formation of Arab security perceptions.

Processes of mobility linked to globalisation have modified the terms of inter cultural relations, multiplying the opportunities for and the means of encounters between cultures and, above all, affecting them on a qualitative level. In effect the spreading of cultural content and forms throughout the planet (globalisation) produces

interconnected networks which reach into the most peripheral contexts and simultaneously causes the loan, transfer and relocation of cultural elements on a massive scale. The continual hybridisation of culturally heterogeneous features in new and unstable configurations is becoming the rule rather than a rare example of change in supposedly pure cultural matrices.

This qualitative change in inter cultural relations does not, however, necessarily result in the dominance of a single, homologating cultural model. On the contrary, while adaptation to globalisation makes the lines of demarcation between cultures more and more blurred and unstable, it also calls forth resistance based on the reaffirmation of cultural difference. But cultural difference, or rather ethnic-cultural identity, is increasingly less a 'hereditary' attribute of autonomous local communities. It is more and more the result of a conscious strategy to re-create tradition which employs all the modern means at its disposal (from satellite television to 'smart' weapons). It is precisely because it is increasingly the result of a conscious strategy that the cultural identity is capable of unleashing tremendous resistance to the prevailing direction of the processes of globalisation.

From a theoretical point of view the tension between globalisation and specificity is a falsification based on the alleged separation of each from the other. In fact, it is evident that every specific culture and every identity which asserts itself today takes part (if only because of the techniques which it uses) in the processes of globalisation. It is equally false to identify Western modernity and globalisation; in fact the culture of modernity is in its turn the specific expression of an epoch and of a society, which globalisation only partially receives and transmits: what is vehiculated through globalisation is post-modernism, not XIX century positivism.

Nevertheless, it remains that the perception of the existence of tension between globalisation and specificity is basic to the strategies of resistance and opposition in matters of identity. In other terms, inter cultural relations are not intrinsically productive of conflict, but they can generate disorientation and tension, particularly during phases when cultural transformations are taking place at an accelerated rate.

In some parts of the world where different cultures intersect with great intensity such as the Mediterranean, or with regard to some specific questions -such as the notion of human rights, the level of tension can take the form of an *impasse* affecting the process of elaboration of forms and contents which contribute to globalisation from all

available cultural sources -a process that can be labelled dialectical globalisation.

All Mediterranean countries and societies are faced today with change caused by their increasing participation in global economic and cultural exchanges. The phenomena of socio-economic and socio-cultural destructuring and restructuring which result from this participation affect all Mediterranean societies, although differing in quality and quantity.

One cannot insist enough on the fact that the transformation of inter cultural relations and the related tensions affect societies of the northern Mediterranean as much as they do those on its southern shores. Nevertheless, dialectical globalisation and the impasse it may reach take on specific forms in the relations between the societies of the north and those of the south of the Mediterranean.

In daily life creative forms of dialectical globalisation circulate inside Mediterranean societies. These range from social customs (food, music, clothing) to worldviews and values (one example is the spread of concern for ecology and sustainable development).

At the same time, around the Mediterranean the phenomena of resistance to globalisation and multi-culturalism appears in ways which have common sources and manifestations, although their relative incidence is not the same in different societies. There is a common element in otherwise very different phenomena such as the rise of some new right wing movements in Western Europe (e.g. Le Pen in France, the Northern Leagues in Italy, the Republikaner in Germany), Islamic fundamentalism and the exacerbation of ethnic nationalism (be it Arab, Serb or Basque) all have a common element: they discriminate the others on the basis of an idealised and therefore invented tradition.

Also racism and xenophobia which causes on both shores of the Mediterranean the perpetration of violence against immigrants, workers on co-operative projects and tourists is only one expression of wider phenomena.

Just as there is a close correlation between inclusion in the processes of cultural globalisation described above and inclusion in the processes of the world economy, there is a clear correlation between the intensity of phenomena of resistance linked to identity and exclusion from economic development. And the Mediterranean area

seems to be in greater difficulty with regard to adaptation to cultural and technological innovation than other parts of the world.

So all Mediterranean societies, although to different extents, must seek ways of entering and remaining in the 'virtuous circle of development'. This necessity creates a community of interests amongst the states and the societies in the area, which forms the foundation of Mediterranean co-operation in general and cultural co-operation in particular.

The multiple initiatives presently in progress for economic, political and socio-cultural cooperation among the Mediterranean countries and societies provide the right context for setting in motion a process that may transform also at the cultural level Arab security perceptions.

UFFICIO AFFARI
MINISTRI - ROMA

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