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Middle Eastern and North African Cultures – Barriers to Industrial Growth

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The immigration challenge to Western Europe

According to the present demographic trends it is certainly possible for Western Europe to achieve a Muslim majority about the middle of our century; indeed it is rather probable (Clausen and Lintrup 2003; Lintrup and Olesen 2002). The former president of Population Council, Paul Demeny, has recently published an analysis of this issue (Demeny 2003). He wonders why leading European politicians are so silent about this problem. But he adds that there may be no solution available, given the existing western value systems. “That which has no solution can be held to be not a problem”, he remarks. He might be right as far as the Nordic countries are concerned.

It may be necessary to go to the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies in Toronto to find a research institute that has given the growth of populations a central position in their research. The director, Thomas Homer-Dixon, has coined a term “The Ingenuity Gap” (Homer-Dixon 2001) for the critical gap between our need for practical ideas to solve the complex technological and social problems of population growth and the actual supply of such ideas. Social ingenuity is needed as well as technological ingenuity.

The American journalist and author Robert D. Kaplan has described how the state capacity in many poor states crumbles under the weight of heavy population growth. (Kaplan 2000) Lester Brown et al. call this phenomenon “Demographic fatigue” (Brown et al. 1999).

Francis Fukuyama describes in his latest book how important the process of State Building⁷ is for the developing world and how ill-timed economic help from the rich world can impede this process (Fukuyama 2004).

“All human cultures are equally worthy”

is a statement I often hear. I don't agree. If bad governance is an integral part of the culture of a people it also means that this very culture is the very problem of that people.

The statement may be right if you limit your concept of culture to the purely spiritual aspects of cultures. But that is not a reasonable limitation because the linkages between arts, religion and material culture are close.

At the time of Jesus Christ or Mohammed the total size of human populations had been rather stable for centuries at about 300 millions. The ethics of these religions were not created to cope with demographic problems. Such problems were unknown to the human societies at that time. Today the demographic situation is quite different. The population size is now unstable. The number of humans has quadrupled over the last century and it will continue to grow until it peaks at somewhat more than 9 billions in the second half of this century.

Progress in human knowledge and technology has made this huge expansion of mankind possible. But limits to growth are set by limitations in natural resources available, and the UN's campaigns to halve poverty before 2015 compete for the same resources.

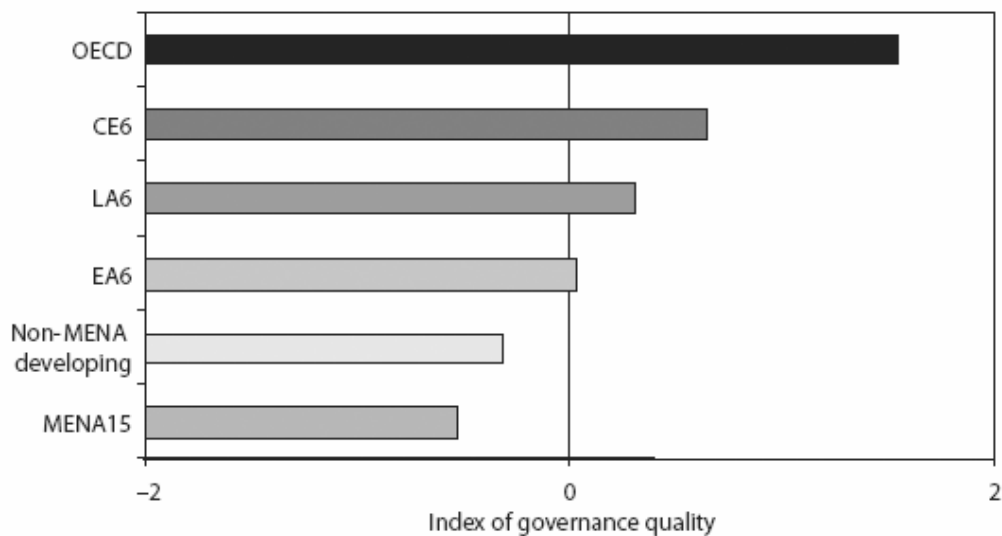
Conservative religious people do not realize this fundamental change in the conditions of human life. To think quantitatively is against their customs and dogmas. They insist that governance should follow the same lines that were ethically optimal 2000 years ago in much smaller societies with technologies much more primitive.

Weak governance throughout the MENA¹ region

“Governance” is a more distinguished word than “management” but the meaning is the same. In papers and speeches from UN and from the World Bank the importance of the two words “Good governance” is stressed again and again.

Figure 1²

Compared with Other Regions, MENA Shows a Clear Governance Gap



Good governance not only implies the absence of fraud, bribery and nepotism, it also implies the presence of professional competence behind the decisions. Good governance is equally important for the public and the private sectors. The Nordic countries are world famous for their good governance. Sad to say, the Arab countries are equally famous for their weak governance.

¹ MENA is an abbreviation for Middle East and North Africa

² (World Bank Paper September 2003) The MENA region ranks at the bottom in terms of overall governance quality when compared with countries with similar characteristics in Eastern Europe (CE6), Latin America (LA6) or East Asia (EA6), as well as with other developing countries.

Each year tens of thousands of wage-heavy jobs are being out-sourced from Western Europe to countries with lower wages. For the receiving countries these jobs come as sent from heaven. They contribute to the growth of knowledge and economy in the receiving societies. But these valuable jobs do not go to the MENA-countries. Why cannot the MENA-countries get a fair part of the jobs being exported from Western Europe? It is a remarkable fact that they cannot. It is an equally remarkable fact that this issue is never mentioned in our public media, neither the popular nor the serious media.

The reason may be obvious. Bad governance results in low productivity and products of low quality without any competitive power.

Modern industrial production requires modern principles of management. Numerous books on principles of management are printed all over the world in different cultures. But not in Muslim countries. Management principles are submitted to debate all over the world. But not in Muslim countries. The Holy Quran is sufficient for a Muslim. Every Imam or Mullah can answer any question regarding principles of management. In their eyes management is about creating the right ethical behaviour, among the staff – abstinence from pork, wine and forbidden sex. To create good material quality of products and optimum productivity are for them not of equal importance.

No wonder that the stream of jobs exported from Western Europe goes anywhere else than to the MENA region.

Productivity in MENA-countries has been on the decline for the last 30 years. This is stated in a World Bank paper September 2003. (World Bank Paper September 2003) This decline in productivity is neither caused by laziness nor incapability of the MENA populations. But bad governance is an integral part of the region's culture.

A table from UNDP (*Arab Human Development Report 2003*) shows the result of this sort of management:

Table 1

Year	Arab countries	East Asian Tigers
1970	9	18
2001	7	52

Source: UNDP, Calculations by the Human Development Report Office.

In 1970 Arab GDP per capita was half that in East Asia. By the start of the new century it dropped to less than one seventh of GDP per capita in that region. This is due to the significant improvement in economic performance in East Asian countries since the 1970's when there was a decline, albeit slight, in Arab countries.

A strange management decision

In the period 1985-86 I was in charge of laboratories in the Middle East, which used expensive electronically equipment. My own knowledge in electronics is quite superficial and the general staff of the hospital did not include an engineer with any competence in this sphere. So, the first application I had to deal with concerned the appointment of an engineer competent in electronics. That was granted, and three weeks later he stood there in my office: a young man with an education from a good Indian university. We were both happy. He had got a well-paid job and I could see the end of my worries about the maintenance of electronic instruments.

The happiness lasted for one day only. Next day the young Indian stood in my office again. He was quite depressed. The hospital library contained no books containing electronic tables. I couldn't believe that. The library of the hospital had superficially made a fine impression on me. There were at least 1000 volumes.

Now the young Indian told me that they were not professional books, they were religious books altogether!

But he had not finished his story. Neither would the hospital pay for such tables, he continued. That was grotesque. To appoint an electronic engineer and deny him his tools. Sheer lunacy! I promised to go to the director the next day and explain to him how impossible it was to do any work in the sphere of electronics without adequate tables.

My relations with the director were excellent and they remained excellent even after this event. He was an Egyptian doctor with a medical education from a respected Egyptian university. I had noticed that we had the same sense of humour. But a Muslim psyche has depths I still had to learn about. A Muslim upbringing involves a lot of rote learning – rote learning of verses from the Holy Quran. Through their adult lives Muslims retain a deep respect for ready knowledge. Of more practical importance: Muslims have a corresponding disrespect for an expert that must “cheat” by consulting his books.

The Egyptian hospital director explained to me that this young engineer had a good education and received a good salary. He should be able to do his work without consulting books. The working hours should be used for work, not for reading books. The director was almost angry with the young engineer. Was he an impostor? In the director’s understanding there was nothing to discuss. No books! This attitude meant that the hospital never gained any value for the salary paid to the young engineer. It also meant that the hospital got less value from all of the laboratories because of the insufficient maintenance and calibration of laboratory instruments. My efforts to explain these matters to the director were in vain.

I will not blame the director. He was one of the few non-corrupt administrative persons I met. He was just a product of his culture and might have been much worse. The office-holders at the Ministry of Health were even less competent and they were mostly corrupt.

Demographic and economic development in the MENA region

The years from 1965 through 1985 had been very good years for the MENA-countries. They enjoyed unprecedented levels of economic growth and social development. Even MENA-countries with no oil on their territories took part in the economic growth through remittances from migrant labourers in the oil countries. The upper classes of Arab populations became extremely rich. But a significant part of the riches were redistributed for social development. Large segments of the MENA populations experienced welfare and were happy.

This welfare triggered the fastest population growth ever seen on earth (some social scientists in Nordic countries might well have expected the opposite effect of welfare). MENA populations doubled rapidly, in some of the countries in less than 20 years. This increased the amount of capital needed for continued social development and at the end of the 1980s the growth of welfare could no longer be sustained (World Bank Paper April 2004).

In 2002 four economists from Harvard and Yale, Jonathan Isham, Michael Woolcock, Lant Pritchett and Gwen Busby proposed the theory that nations dependent on exports of natural resources have populations with larger economic inequality and less economic growth than other nations. (Isham et al. 2003) They supported their theory by a considerable number of data. Quite a few MENA-countries belonged to this category.

“Getting to Denmark”

In the same year, these words were used by Woolcock at Harvard’s, Institute for International Economics, as a name for the process of state building (Pritchett and Woolcock 2004; Woolcock and Pritchett 2002). They emphasize that the building of a strong state must precede the introduction of democracy, human rights and welfare in a society, if the introduction is to be successful. On their definition a strong state is a state that can rely on a resourceful and loyal bureaucracy to implement laws. They indicate that their choice of Denmark as an example of such a state is quite coincidental.

Developing nations have weak states and each of them must find its own way to “get to Denmark”. The route Denmark followed in the past is not available for the developing countries of today.

In his book *State Building* Francis Fukuyama follows up on this line of thought. He concludes that western aid often delays the process of state building in poor countries by solving problems for them instead of forcing them to create the necessary social structures to solve the problems themselves (Fukuyama 2004).

Demographic gift or demographic burden

Possibly the era of very high population growth in the MENA-countries is now over. The MENA-countries are left with a very advantageous age structure of their populations. Between 1990 and 2020, the growth of the economically active population (ages 15-64) will exceed that of the economically dependent population by a much greater amount than in any other region on earth, according to World Bank reports from 2003 (World Bank Paper, April 2004; World Bank Paper, August 2004). As the East Asian experience has shown, such differential - the so-called demographic gift - provides MENA with an opportunity to accelerate economic growth through faster accumulation of factors of production. The lower dependency ratios imply potentials for higher savings and investment.

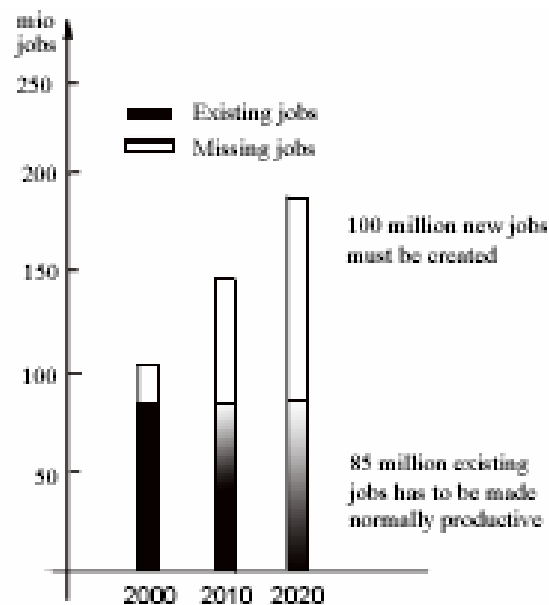
But if the demographic gift cannot be exploited for economic growth, it will convert itself to a demographic burden. By definition, if labour supply exceeds the level of employment, the unemployment rate rises. As a result, unemployment in MENA is among the highest in the world (World Bank Paper, August 2004).

The need to create 100 million new jobs in MENA by 2020 (World Bank Paper, April 2004)

In 2000 the labour force in the MENA-countries totalled some 104 million workers. The figure is expected to reach 146 million by 2010 and 185 million by 2020. Those figures are rather precise because the majority of these people have already been born. Already half the region’s young people find themselves out of work, because youth makes up a big chunk of the total numbers of unemployed, ranging from 37 percent in Morocco to 73 percent in Syria.

The creation of 100 million new jobs by 2020 is needed if unemployment is to be averted. How many are 100 million jobs? It is easily more than all jobs in France and Germany taken together. Probably England may be added. But that will not be enough. To say that the productivity is low in MENA today is the same as saying that many jobs are “overstaffed”. This must be changed if the products are to become competitive in a global market. During this process a number of workers will be “released” from their current jobs. New jobs must also be created for these workers.

Figure 2



Finally, there are the serious problems with unemployed women. Women’s portion of the labour force in MENA still ranks among the lowest in the world (World Bank Paper, September 2003). The existence of these two additional problems is illustrated in figure 2 by the expansion of the white section of unemployment columns for 2010 and 2020.

However that may be, the employment crisis in MENA is a challenge of unprecedented gravity. To cope with this menace, the World Bank has coined a strategy focusing on 5 areas (World Bank Paper, August 2004).

- 1. Public sector efficiency and governance**
- 2. Private sector development and employment creation**
- 3. Education for a global world**
- 4. Water**
- 5. Gender**

Re 1. Good governance not only means the absence of corruption, it also means the presence of professional competence in decision-making.

Re 2. The private sector is today very small in comparison with the public sector.

Re 3. Large allocations for education have not yet produced a competitive work force. (The problem may be that the current education is predominantly religious and more aimed at the Islamic world than the global world.)

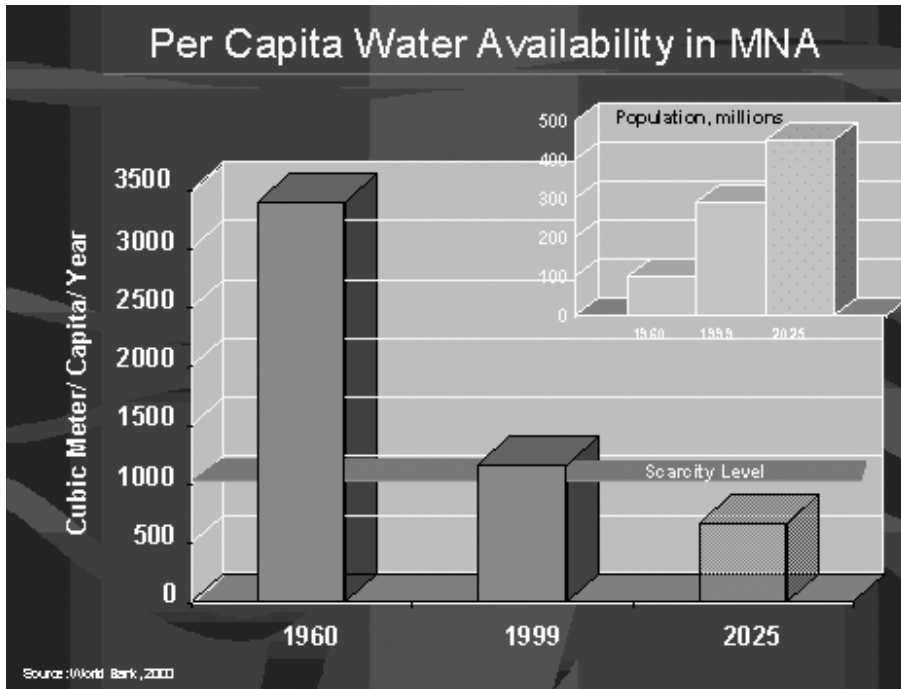
Re 4. The region's per capita supply of water stands at only one-third of its 1960 level and water availability is expected to halve over the next 30 years.

Re 5. Women's key role in the family sphere is not commensurate with their role and participation in the life of the broader society.

These are 5 areas with gigantic problems. Does the World Bank believe that these problems might be solved, even partially? I don't think so. But the bank is under obligation to continue its advice and its loans and hope for the best.

Figure 3³

Resources of fresh water are scarce in the MENA region



³ The World Bank has published this graph lately. (World Bank Figure 2000) The columns at the upper right corner show how the MENA-populations will increase four-fold from a little less than a hundred million in 1960 to a little more than 400 million in 2025. As the total resources of freshwater will be constant the availability per capita will fall to a quarter during this time span.

The amounts of freshwater in figure 3 are the total amounts available for house-holds, industry and agriculture taken together. There is no direct water consumption problem threatening the population. But there will be no water available for expanding neither industry nor agriculture.

UN Papers

The MENA countries have always been resistant to advice from outside. Therefore, any reform must be initiated and launched from within. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) is aware of this problem and has collected a team of scholars from inside the MENA region to prepare *The Arab Human Development Report 2002*. This report has been a great hit. It has been downloaded more than a million times from the internet. It is a general report. It contains at least two very worrying statements: 50 per cent of the young people want to emigrate on account of the lack of opportunities for employment in the MENA region. The very low productivity in the region is the other grave concern.

With a total population of 284 million in the MENA region, the total value of production has been lower than that of Spain with a population of 40 million. The report puts the blame on bad governance in both the public and the private sector. The main challenge facing Arab countries is that of devising an alternative education system which can provide good education at the right cost (p 56). Teachers should be prepared for profound changes in the structure, methods and goals of education (p 59).

Growth in Arab countries has been seriously hampered by low and declining labour productivity (p 87). The Arab region belongs to the richest parts of the earth because of the enormous resources of oil. Nevertheless the economic growth is so slow that it would take 140 years for the populations to double their incomes. This can be achieved in 10 years in several other places on earth.

The report covers 134 A4-pages plus an annex with 30 tables

The Arab Human Development Report 2003

is about knowledge and education. Arab economic activities remain knowledge-poor (p 135). Inherited societal status remains a more powerful value than status acquired (p 142). Arab social and economic structures are obstacles to knowledge acquisition (p 145).

Knowledge in Arab countries has been on the decline for seven centuries, while much of the world made enormous progress in developing knowledge and human welfare (p 163).

Arab countries can avert this passive fate by indigenising knowledge and technology and developing the necessary absorptive, adaptive and innovative capacities and structures, which offer them the opportunity to participate proactively in the vigorously growing global knowledge society from a position of dignity and strength (p 164).

Official and unofficial religious circles have sought to muzzle freedom of opinion and speech through censorship, banning and libel (p 165).

Educated citizens migrate towards bureaucratic, military, security and administrative occupations that provide significantly higher social and material rewards than scientific research and education can offer (p 150). The choice is perhaps most difficult in the social sciences and the humanities with their potential for manipulating minds and masking reality. Yet serious social science is a difficult profession and one that is unrewarded in backward societies (p 166).

The present state of Arab higher education prevents it from contributing effectively to the creation of a knowledge society (p 168). More attention should be paid to scientific fields and organisational structures that promote knowledge.

Such fields include natural sciences and technology development, which receive little attention in the existing Arab educational system. Higher education should provide individuals with learning opportunities for life (p 169).

Most of what is produced in the Arab world is not competitive with what international markets offer, due to quality and cost considerations (p 170).

It is the political and even commercial exploitation of religion which has contributed to weakening the quest for knowledge in Arab countries (p 173).

The Arab Human Development Report 2003 contains 13 tables with data on knowledge in the Arab world. Here are data from the report

Table 2⁴

Values of indicators on knowledge capital around the year 2000 (Some data from AHDR 2003 ²)		Quality adjusted MYS (MYS= Mean Years of School)	Daily newspapers (per million people)	Scientists and engineers in R&D (per million people)	High technology exports (% of total goods exports)	HDI value, 2000 (HDI= Human Development Index)
STATE						
ARAB STATES	Algeria	2.3	38	60	0	0.697
	Egypt	2.3	40	493	2	0.642
	Jordan	3.4	58	198	0	0.717
	Kuwait	2.9	374	214	0	0.813
	Morocco	2.5	26	119	0	0.602
	Saudi Arabia	2.8	57	730	0	0.759
	Syria	2.4	20	29	0	0.691
Tunisia	2.1	31	124	3	0.722	
MODERN DEVELOPED STATES	Denmark	4.6	309	3240	19	0.926
	Finland	5.2	455	3341	27	0.930
	Japan	5.4	578	4960	30	0.933
	Korea (Rep)	6.2	393	2139	33	0.882
	United States	6.1	215	4103	32	0.939
DEVELOPING STATES	China	4.7	76	459	21	0.726
	Russia	3.1	105	3397	3	0.781
NON-ARAB MUSLIM STATES	Iran	2.3	28	590	0	0.721
	Malaysia	3.5	158	154	52	0.782
	Turkey	2.2	111	303	7	0.742

⁴ “Quality adjusted MYS” stands for the estimates by Arab scholars of the quality of primary school. “Daily newspapers” may be a measure of the involvement of the population in public affairs. Kuwait has a lot more daily newspapers than the other countries. “Scientists and engineers in Research & Development” may be taken as a reflection of the level of technology.

Good governance in both the public and private sectors is necessary for “high-technology exports”. Its presence may therefore be an indicator of the quality of governance. The absence of “high-technology exports” may be suggestive of bad governance. There is hardly any objective indicator that is better.

High-technology exports are of course only a crude indicator of governance. The World Bank Group has developed an array of more specific methods to evaluate “governance”. They all consist of sophisticated mathematical methods to combine estimates of various aspects of a society with simultaneous estimation of the errors of calculations. These calculated indicators of “good governance” are not impressive. The fundamental problem is that those indicators are based on subjective data.

For comparison table 2 also presents the same key indicators of knowledge capital for some other countries. The first five are fully developed countries from various parts of the world. The values from these countries are rather close to each other. “Quality adjusted MYS” is at about double the values for the Arab countries. The number of “daily newspapers” is about 10 times higher and the same is the case for the number of “scientists and engineers in Research & Development”. “high-technology exports” are significantly above zero.

Two great powers, Russia and China have not yet reached the values for a fully developed country. They differ from each other in a curious way. Russia seems to have a sufficient number of scientists for high technology, but the products do not seem to have competitive power in a global market. Russia governance may not be good enough. China represents the opposite position. The number of researchers is not impressive, but the extent of high-tech exports is high. The governance in China might be rather good. The Arab states could learn a lot from China if they wished to.

The last three countries in the table are Muslim states from outside the Arab region. The figures for Iran and Turkey are similar to the figures for the Arab world. And so are the figures for Malaysia, with one remarkable exception. The percentile of high-technology exports from Malaysia is high, very high indeed in spite of the minimal number of engineers in research & development. The

presence of large Indian and Chinese minorities in Malaysia might attract foreign investments.

The “scapegoat syndrome”

The scapegoat syndrome is my own term for an ailment that is endemic in the MENA region. It is found everywhere and affects the brain to a point where sensible decisions may become impossible. This syndrome is related to the Muslim idea that justice and revenge are closely related. When something goes wrong, it is the first duty of the local manager to pin-point the “sinner” and to suggest a sensible penalty. Such a thing as an unforeseeable contingency does not exist, my director explained to me.

I was forced to discuss this matter with him several times. He shook his head at my protests and insisted that a guilty person must always exist, and that it was my duty as laboratory manager to find the guilty person and suggest a reasonable fine that could be subtracted from his salary. The fine might be quite small when the violation was trifling and forgivable. But for the sake of justice it should never be ignored. I am still proud that I never submitted anybody in my staff to a penalty of this kind.

The bad consequences of this scapegoat syndrome were sometimes surprising and far reaching. One of the laboratories used a very expensive instrument that had to be cleaned and calibrated at certain intervals. In our civilisation we call it preventive maintenance. When I saw it was time I asked the technician to do the maintenance job. 14 days later I saw that the job had not been done and asked him again. When it had not been done two weeks later again, I had to ask a third time. I think I raised my voice a bit at that occasion. Soon afterwards I was visited in my office by my medical assistant, a clever young Indian doctor. She told me that this technician had become very unhappy and didn't know what to do.

She further told me that preventive maintenance might be a good idea in Europe, but it was not feasible in the Middle East.

“WHY NOT?”, I asked.

She explained to me: If you deliberately open the cabinet of a functioning instrument, clean the inside and something goes wrong, so that the instrument cannot function after the maintenance operation, you are the guilty person. Possibly you should pay for a new instrument. But if you wait until the instrument breaks down due to dirt and filth and you can repair it then, you become the hero of the day. It was not fair of me to demand that this poor technician with wife and children in Tunisia should put his salary at risk.

For me this was a very strange situation. I decided to do the maintenance job myself. As soon as I started I had a group of technicians behind my back watching what I did and waiting for the moment when something might go wrong. Nothing went wrong and two hours later they could use a newly cleaned and calibrated instrument.

Afterwards, my wife was furious. Why had I demonstrated my capability that way? It had not been necessary to do so, and now I had humiliated the whole laboratory staff by demonstrating how much more capable we are in the western civilisation. She was right and I never repeated the show.

Why Arabs lose wars

Years later my eyes fell on an article from *Middle East Quarterly*, Dec. 1999: “Why Arabs Lose Wars”, written by retired US colonel Norwell de Atkine, who had served 8 years with different Arab armies as an instructor (de Atkine 1999). His analyses tell us that an Arab army infantry company is as good as a comparable company in any other army.

At battalion level, however, the coordination required for combined arms operations, with artillery, air, and logistics support, is simply absent. Such a battalion cannot perform any efficient operation. Coordination for combined arms operations requires a high degree of reciprocal trust that is absent in Arab culture.

Norwell de Atkine explained it by the fact that no Arab has real confidence in any person outside his own clan.

Military decisions in Arab countries are made at a very high level and rarely delegated. American instructors have developed a rule of thumb: a sergeant of first class in the U.S. Army has as much authority as a colonel in an Arab army.

Rarely does an Arab officer make a critical decision on his own. He prefers a letter with orders. Otherwise he fears the fate of a scapegoat.

The analyses of Arab military management by Norwell de Atkine continue with characteristics I could give a nod of recognition from my own experience as a manager within Arab health service. These peculiarities might then be rather general for all organized structures within Arab culture. They can explain the low productivity, the absence of competitive power, and the lack of foreign direct investments in Arab countries.

Conclusions

The cultural gap between the traditional principles of management in the MENA countries and western ideas of good governance is enormous. That gap makes it impossible for the MENA countries to establish a competitive production of high-technology goods. The severe shortage of freshwater in the region impedes any sizeable growth of agriculture. The population growth has already created overpopulation with a high pressure towards emigration. That pressure will increase and become extreme in coming years. The World Bank tells us that at least 100 million new jobs are needed for the MENA work force over the next 15 years. It is time to inform the populations of Europe, whose public media have to this day been underestimating the power of the demographic trend.

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