

The Arab Mind

Raphael Patai

Long Island City, New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002.

rev. ed. 466 pages.

It is Raphael Patai's ambition to chart the fundamental components of the Arab worldview that most compels the reader to leaf through the 400 pages

of *The Arab Mind*. In one text, in less than 20 brief chapters, he seeks to provide the elements that define the culture and mindset of the entire half-billion-strong Arab world. For many readers, this enormous goal provokes enough skepticism to prevent any hope for objectivity before reading a single word. In this new printing, however, Norvell B. DeAtkine (director of Middle East Studies, JFK Special Warfare Center, Fort Bragg, NC) provides a foreword that offers the highest praise for Patai's work. For instance, he acknowledges that this book provides the foundation for his own instruction and coursework.

Hatherleigh Press, the publisher of this revised edition, is known for its *Body Sculpting Bible* series, its *Living With* line of health books, and its *Flex* series of athletic books. A more unlikely pairing reveals itself when we discover that the original edition of *The Arab Mind* appeared in 1973, the same year as Clifford Geertz's groundbreaking *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Though Patai republished this book a decade later, and this new, current edition appears less than a decade after his death, it is clear that despite his familiarity with Geertz's writings, he chose not to embrace Geertz's methods. Though none can deny the width and depth of Patai's insights, his own methods provide more problems than solutions.

To define "the Arab," Patai cites Gamal Abd al-Nasser's three circles: language, geography, and Islam. Although he dedicates nearly a tenth of his book to analyzing the Arabic language, he states – to the reader's shock – that culturally, Islam is meaningless to the Arabs. Moreover, he manifests this opinion by providing only one 13-page chapter on Islam's role in the Arab mind. The amount of effort that he spends on Islam here and in other negligible references throughout the book is squandered by narrating a few theological (*kalam*) arguments, occasional references to ethics, some mention of language, and erroneous citations from Islamic law. Islamic history is absent, save for a few citations to Prophet Muhammad and his generation. The Umayyads and `Abbasids boast one reference each ... in quotations from other writings.

Furthermore, Patai states that Bedouins comprise less than 10 percent of the Arab population, and then dedicates the largest sections of his book to analyzing their psyche. His approach reveals more methodological problems. In his opinion, Bedouins are a foundation for Arab society, ethos, and mythology. However, he does not distinguish between what is authentically Bedouin and what is part of the myth that the Arabs may be imposing on their memories of the Bedouins. If Bedouins, as Patai asserts, represent the

Arabs' "heroic age" (as opposed to any of the Arab-Islamic empires that dominated the region), then he needs to distinguish between romanticism and reality. He does not.

Instead, Patai's analysis mimics his analysis of every other aspect of the Arab psyche. He relies on anecdotal evidence to support sweeping universals. Perhaps the most memorable (and humorous) anecdote involves a series of conversations between President Nasser and King Hussein during the Six Day War. Nasser repeatedly responds to Hussein's inquiries with lies, pretending that Egypt is dominating the Israelis, while the opposite is happening. Patai uses this dialogue to show that Bedouins – and consequently all Arabs – must always save face in their dealings. The reader may consider it an odd choice to have a politician's wartime statements represent the worldview of an entire population. The reader must also wonder if, following the same logic, the rest of the world defines the American psyche as being based on any of the memorable Bushisms. Most of all, the reader must wonder why Nasser's deceitful statements represent all Arabs, while Hussein's inquiry (representing a search for information and truth) does not.

In selecting this anecdote, I have perhaps used Patai's own method to refute his entire text. This anecdote reveals that Patai's book is less of a scholarly work in cultural anthropology and more of an ideological tract driven by a particularly antagonistic agenda. I found myself wondering if his paragraphs containing unnecessary information (like listing all of the letters in the Arabic alphabet and then explaining how they are pronounced) were anything but filler. I was puzzled by his repeated practice of twisting every single trait in the Arab psyche into something manifested as a flaw. For example, he notes the importance placed on self-respect, but then states that Arabs lack self-respect, that an Arab must respond to any unfavorable comments made against him with greater insults, and that Arabs somehow base their own self-respect on their women's chastity. In his section on language, he cites the importance placed on language as something that forms a personality that partakes in making empty threats.

I have not discussed the largest sections of his book, his portrayal of the savage intensity of Arab sexuality and his reductionist analysis of Arabic stagnation, because the former is the most famous aspect of his text and the latter contains little analysis and many quotations. What is most troubling about this book, however, is not its contents or that he seems to disregard both Geertz and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (as illustrated in a childhood anecdote about his meeting with Ignaz Goldziher), but, as DeAtkine mentions, that this

book is the Bible for military leaders and laypersons seeking to understand Arabs. In our era of war, can the result be anything but trouble?

Omer M. Mozaffar
Ph.D. Candidate, Islamic Studies, University of Chicago
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
Chicago, Illinois