

Introduction

THE ARAB FAMILY IN TRANSITION

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Learning about Arab culture is a dual process of unlearning the static, oversimplified views that have guided Western thought, then relearning by following a dynamic, analytical approach to a highly complex and contradictory reality ... Unlike mainstream Western scholarship, Arab critical approaches are deeply embedded in a sense of Arab belonging and a commitment to the transcendence of the prevailing order (Barakat p.181).

The intensely transitional nature of contemporary Arab society makes generalization difficult. Arab society today is neither traditional nor modern, old or new, capitalist or socialist or feudal, Eastern or Western, religious or secular, particularistic or universalistic in its cultural orientations (Barakat, p.22).

Halim Barakat's words echo the concerns and interests of a new group of intellectuals who have studied the structure and dynamics of Arab society during the last decade. The importance of this new strand of thought stems from the continuous search for an authentic, more realistic, and dynamic approach that could be useful in the analysis of Arab society. The most salient features of this approach include the following:

- it is multidimensional, that is, it takes into consideration complex and diverse socio-economic conditions, of which the conflicting and contradictory relations have been neglected for too long;
- it provides a critical discourse based on the scientific scrutiny of the present conditions that is needed to change the prevailing order;
- it places Arab society in today's highly transitional context of external and internal contradictions and challenges.
- it is dynamic, since it views society as being in a state of constant change.

This approach has emerged in contrast to the prevalent orientalist attempt to study Arab society, which uses a static, deterministic, ahistorical, and uni-dimensional framework. This framework is problematic because it results in "oversimplified generalizations," ethnocentric value judgements, and a sweeping distortion of reality. This view emphasizes similarities of characteristics among Arab countries despite the wide diversity in social and historical conditions and thus ignores the importance of difference. While it is true that Arabs share some basic common characteristics, wide variations do exist between countries, regions, social classes, religious sects, and other social configurations. Society throughout the Arab world is characterized, indeed, by the contrasting images that peoples hold of their present and future, and these images are greatly influenced by conflicting polarities. The contrasts between the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the religious and the secular, the conservative and the liberal seem to pull the Arabs in opposing directions as their true modes of behavior and thinking vary on a continuum between two poles. Moreover, while existing social institutions tend to reproduce themselves over time, they are nevertheless subject to incessant transformations both in their structures and functions. Not only does this situation show the ubiqui-

tous nature of social change, it also serves as evidence that social institutions in the Arab world are going through a transitional period, which makes it impossible to reach final conclusions concerning their characteristics. Those who have attempted such conclusions have generally overlooked their complex and constantly changing nature in the present era and have delivered clichéd depictions that do not reflect the present conditions of Arab society.

This new approach should furnish the broad guidelines for any attempt at understanding, for example, the Arab family. During the last half century, Arab society has undergone drastic changes that have left their impact on all major social institutions including the family. The Arab family faced the challenge of maintaining its basic structural characteristics while it was also struggling to accommodate itself within the formidable evolutionary process in society. As a result, traditional relationships, roles, and values have been undermined to some extent. For example, the role of the father as the sole authority figure to whom all others are subordinated is being challenged. With the advent of a new socio-economic reality, women and children are assuming greater roles within the family. More women in Arab society are seeking employment outside the home. Children are pursuing their education, and more women are participating in the vital decisions concerning their lives. Throughout the Arab world, the trend is now toward a form of nuclear family and toward greater independence from the hegemony of extended ties. Yet, despite all these changes, solidarity among members of a family and their commitment to its over-all well-being as a unit still prevail. Of course, great variations and disparities do exist among social classes, countries, and regions concerning the issue of traditional versus modern-family relations. Moreover, such matters as the status of women, marriage, divorce, work, children socialization, sibling relations, and husband-wife relations, are all handled differently according to specific societal contexts.

We do not wish to oversimplify the reality about "the" Arab family by offering sweeping generalizations, nor to present a distorted image about its basic structures and functions. But we present the following file in the hope that its contents will shed some light on various aspects of family life in contemporary Arab society without aiming at a comprehensive overview of the Arab family. Thus, we will discuss selected topics, ranging from very traditional practices, such as temporary marriage, to the recent emergence of women heads of households. We hope that these papers, along with many others, will provide our readers with information, will trigger reflection on particular aspects of Arab family dynamics, and will offer realistic answers to some questions that researchers, academics, and the general public have been concerned with for some time.

References

Barakat, Halim. *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.