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# Perceptions of Time and Their Impact on Negotiations in the Arabic-Speaking Islamic World

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*This article examines how perceptions of time affect Arabic-speaking Islamic negotiators and how their attitudes about time, and their corresponding behaviors, may differ from those of their Western counterparts. We begin by identifying cultural differences in the conceptualization of time and then comment on the role of time in negotiations, discussing how time influences bargaining, trust, and negotiation tactics. In the section on tactics, we discuss stall-and-delay tactics, the use of the past as an objective standard, and limits on negotiating the future. Our purpose is to encourage negotiators from the West to be knowledgeable about the way they, as well as negotiators from Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures, conceive of and use time in negotiations. We believe that understanding that the very concept of time is often quite different in these two cultures is an important step in facilitating negotiations that cross these cultural boundaries.*

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**Key words:** negotiation, time, culture, Western culture, Arabic-speaking Islamic culture.

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## Time, Culture, and Negotiation

Time provides a framework for social interaction.<sup>1</sup> Negotiation, a social process of decision making in which parties are mutually dependent on each other (Pruitt and Carnevale 1993), is no exception.<sup>2</sup> Negotiation is temporal in at least two important ways: it is a process that unfolds over time, and time itself is an element that can be manipulated as a negotiation tactic. Although there has been substantial research on negotiation as a process (see Weingart and Olekalns 2004 for a review) and on the use of time as a tactic within negotiation (see Moore 2004 for a discussion of the use of deadlines), most of this research — with the exception of Ian MacDuff's recent discussion of culture, time, and negotiation (MacDuff 2006) — has focused on negotiations in which the participants are from Western cultures.

Our purpose in writing this article is to encourage negotiators from the West to be more knowledgeable about the way they, as well as negotiators from Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures, use time in negotiations. We believe that developing an understanding that the very concept of time is often quite different in these two cultures can be an important step in facilitating negotiations that cross these cultural boundaries.

We begin with a conceptualization of culture, turn to a description of cultural differences in the conceptualization of time in Arabic-speaking Islamic and Western cultures, and then comment on the role of time in negotiations in these different cultures. We discuss how time influences bargaining, trust, and negotiation tactics, including stall-and-delay tactics, the use of the past as an objective standard, and limits on negotiating the future. We conclude by addressing the practicalities of negotiating across the conceptual time divide between Arabic-speaking Islamic and Western culture negotiators.

We do not claim that all the aspects of time identified here as characteristic of Islamic culture are unique to Islam, but we do suggest that they are characteristic of Arabic-speaking Islamic culture. To develop this description, we have utilized sources ranging from the oldest and most authoritative, namely the Quran, to the most modern, for example, the Camp David negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis. Our sources include written texts in law, history, memoirs, and literature, as well as oral texts, such as proverbs. Our analysis is built on two premises: the conceptualization of time is culture dependent and the conceptualization of time in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture varies in important ways from the conceptualization of time in Western culture.

### *Defining Culture*

Culture is the unique character of a social group that distinguishes it from other social groups (Lytle et al. 1995). Culture emerges from the patterned behaviors (customs) that people in a group develop to respond to the

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fundamental problems of social interaction (Trompenaars 1996). It is manifested in a group's values, beliefs, and norms; in the typical behavior patterns of group members; in their choices and use of rituals and symbols; in their social, economic, political, and religious institutions; and in the ideology underlying those institutions (Brett 2001).

Because culture is a group-level concept, when describing cultures, scholars refer to cultural prototypes. A cultural prototype, which implies a distribution around a central tendency, is different from a cultural stereotype, which implies all members of a culture act alike. As we discuss the conceptualization of time in Arabic-speaking Islamic and Western cultures in this article, we refer to cultural prototypes, not stereotypes, as we explicitly recognize that some cultural members will act more and others less like the prototype.

Why then study a cultural characteristic like time if we cannot use it to correctly predict the behavior of everyone within that culture? We argue that knowing cultural prototypes is useful because if we assume that a cultural characteristic is normally distributed, then the behaviors of many members of the culture will likely fit the prototype. When a negotiator understands another's behavior in a cultural context, there is less chance the negotiator will misinterpret the behavior, which might otherwise damage relationships and threaten the negotiation.

Our purpose in this article is to describe what negotiators from Western cultures might encounter when meeting with Arabic-speaking Muslims at the negotiating table. (By Western cultures, we refer to the national cultures of Western Europe and North America; by Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures, we refer chiefly to the national cultures of the Middle East.) Note that our analysis does not extend to many nations and regions where Islam is the dominant religion, such as Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and East Africa.

## Concepts of Time in Arabic-Speaking Islam

### *Earthly versus Heavenly Domains*

Time as conceived in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture integrates the domains of man's earthly existence, which has a beginning (birth) and an end (death), and man's heavenly existence (*dabr*), which does not. These two domains are mutually influential: from the heavenly to the earthly by revelation, reward, and retribution, and from the earthly to the heavenly by faith, duties, and rituals (Omar 1995). Moreover, the two domains share temporal units, sometimes in a fixed ratio to one another: one earthly day equals 50,000 days (Quran 70:4) in heaven (Quran 32:4-5, 70:4-5).

In Islam, the heavenly domain dominates the earthly domain: believers must act with the knowledge that they will stand trial on Judgment Day (e.g., Quran 2:85). Of course, both domains also exist in the

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conceptualization of time in Western culture, but the emphasis in these relatively more secular cultures is more often on the domain of belonging to the world, at least in such secular realms as business.

### ***Event Time versus Clock Time***

Like many other non-Western cultures, Arabic-speaking Islamic culture is more event-time oriented and less clock-time oriented.<sup>3</sup> In clock-time cultures, people schedule events according to the clock; in event-time cultures, events schedule people. Pierre Bourdieu (1963) described event time in the Arab world as follows: "There are not precise hours for meals; they are eaten whenever the preparation is complete and eating is leisurely. The notion of an exact appointment is unknown; they agree only to meet 'at the next market'" (59).

This event-time perspective is manifest in many aspects of the culture, including the ways in which people mark the passage of time, the way the culture measures events, and the way the law imposes sentences. Walking-distance, for example, was sometimes measured by the event of cigarette-smoking,<sup>4</sup> and Islamic law sets the imprisonment time of robbers not by units of time, but by the time it takes for the robber to repent his crime (Hanif 1999). Thus, time in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture has historically been measured by the pattern of the task, not by the recorded day, hour, or minute (Goldman and Rojot 2003). There is consequently little emphasis on haste, which makes for a distinct separation between time and money (Levine 1997). Because modern organizations and states can no longer function efficiently in a globalized, digitized, industrial world on event time alone, however, this attitude has begun to change in the Islamic world

In contrast, Western culture is usually classified as a clock-time culture (Levine 1997). The genesis of Western clock-time culture appears to parallel the industrial revolution of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. With industrialization came the reliance on clock time not only for defining the beginning and ending of work, but also for monitoring the speed of work activity, as well as managing the interdependence of different stages of work. This developing link between time and work may be one factor contributing to the Western cultural concept that "time is money." Furthermore, as working lives began to be organized by clock time, then nonwork also became more controlled by clock time.

## **The Impact of Conceptions of Time on Negotiations**

### ***Bargaining***

Bargaining is "the system of activities instrumental to the attainment of one party's goals when they are in basic conflict with those of the other party" (Walton and McKersie 1969). The Western public, by and large, is not very comfortable with bargaining, which is viewed — especially by those who dislike negotiation — as an inefficient means of decision making (Dicky

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1991), and by negotiation theorists both as a reason why negotiations fail (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991) and as the manifestation of a “fixed-pie” mentality and thus of a failure to create value in negotiations (Thompson 2005).

Bargaining typically opens with aggressive offers. When Western culture negotiators see how far apart their positions are, they may ask the other party to make a unilateral concession to replace the opening with a reasonable offer. They may also become discouraged and move to impasse prematurely (Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001). Western culture negotiation texts (e.g., Thompson 2005) often recommend that negotiators engaged in distributive bargaining open first and open extreme because research indicates there is a significant first-mover advantage (Galinsky and Mussweiler 2001) and that they make concessions reciprocally to the point of agreement or of reaching one’s pre-set bottom line or reservation price.

From a Western culture point of view, however, bargaining is often seen as a process that many would forgo even at the risk of forsaking financial gain. There seem to be at least two reasons for this (Gopinath 2002). The first is time: bargaining requires extensive human interaction. In contrast, fixed-price buying is clinical and efficient: what you save financially by bargaining might be offset by the time you lose in the process. The second is the fear of being taken advantage of, of paying more than the next bargainer, which, of course, is not a risk in fixed-price buying.

In Arabic-speaking Islamic circles, bargaining is viewed in a more favorable light. The Prophet Muhammad himself bargained with God over the number of daily prayers imposed on the Muslims, reducing it from fifty to five (Alon 1997). In Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, bargaining is not viewed as inefficient, but rather as a trust-building mechanism, whose essence is its lengthiness (Khouri 1968). A Syrian proverb encourages bargaining and yet emphasizes trust: “Haggle as smartly as you wish, but do not cheat on the scales!” In the marketplace, haggling is a highly contextual process — it takes place between two particular individuals in particular circumstances.

Bargaining in any culture obeys a set of temporal rules: like a conversation, it is conducted in turns, perhaps initiated by the buyer in a commercial transaction, usually in the form of the question, “How much?” In markets, the various quoted prices carry distinct and known messages. The seller will give an extreme price and wait for the buyer’s counteroffer. If the buyer leaves, the seller may make a unilateral concession (not dropping to his reservation price), sending a signal that “my price is flexible.” When the buyer comes back with a counteroffer, she is signaling, “I’m interested.” And so the process unfolds.

Another temporal rule of bargaining in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture is that the length of the bargaining is proportional to the value of the commodity (Khouri 1968). One manager, Darren Wee, told us of his

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experience representing a major U.S.-based global corporation in negotiations with an important Saudi company. While this was a relatively small deal for Wee's company that would normally have taken about a month to negotiate with Westerners, it was a big deal for the Saudi company, and negotiations with them lasted for six months (Wee 2005).

Negotiations in the Middle East may also be prolonged when parties have not established sufficient levels of trust. In the experience of a French attorney we interviewed who has extensive experience negotiating business transactions in North Africa and the Middle East, bargaining does not begin until some trust has been established, which, she pointed out, could take many months and many meals. You will know when trust is established, she explained, when your counterpart starts asking for things. He will not willingly engage in reciprocity of information or offers, she told us. Instead, once he has gained one thing from you, he will move on to seek something new. She went on to explain that if she is unwilling to give more on an issue, she may have to create an event (rather like walking away from a seller in an Arab *souk*) to underline the point that she is at her limit. Otherwise, the bargaining can go on and on and on. She also pointed out that this process of bargaining may be repeated multiple times because issues are usually bargained one at a time.

In sum, in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, bargaining can be an efficient tool for gathering information, creating empathy, and assessing another party's needs (Goldman and Rojot 2003). Limiting the length of the process is considered less important in bargaining in Islamic than in Western cultures (Hendon, Hendon, and Herbig 1996), and prolonged bargaining is viewed as the price paid for building trust, developing relationships, and gathering information.

### ***Building Trust***

In any negotiation, the outcome is frequently highly dependent on building trust (Bazerman and Neale 1992). In Western cultures, commentators talk about "quick trust," the willingness to trust the other party until he or she proves to be untrustworthy (Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer 1996). In Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, speed and trust are seen as contradictory. Trust and trustworthiness are qualities that are held in great esteem and not easily earned, but rather must be built gradually.

A consultant in the oil industry has written about the Al-Tameer Project negotiation between Bechtel Corporation and the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) for rebuilding Kuwaiti oil fields and production facilities after the Gulf War. He describes the process of trust building over time as follows:

Embedding a negotiation in a series of repeated dealings can induce trust in the relationship. In the KOC negotiation, the negotiation process was broken down into many meetings or stages.

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Culturally, the Kuwaitis enjoy getting together, drinking tea, developing interpersonal relationships, and finally discussing the business at hand. Bechtel would often be brought to the negotiation table to discuss a single issue. They might discuss this issue at several meetings before the Kuwaitis felt comfortable enough to move on to the next issue or group of issues. This meaningful repetition was conducted over a fairly lengthy period of fifteen weeks so that by the end of the entire negotiation process each side was satisfied they had negotiated in good faith and could report with reasonable certainty to their owners (sic) that they had achieved the best deal possible for their respective companies (unpublished paper, 1996).

As these comments suggest, one of the most important ways to build trust in Islamic culture is to conduct a leisurely conversation prior to discussing the issues themselves. Such conversation fulfills yet another objective of the early stages of negotiation, which is information gathering. If the trust-building conversation is successful, the particular information needed may be made available in a rather short time.

The French attorney told us about her company's interest in developing business in Morocco. Local managers identified a local partner and began developing a relationship with him. He wanted assurance that the American company was serious, so local managers arranged to bring in the regional European manager for a meeting. However, the regional manager's expectations about what was going to be accomplished at the meeting were very different than those of his potential Moroccan partner. The partner greeted the regional manager upon arrival, they engaged in social conversation, then departed for a lunch that took three hours and pushed the regional manager up against a flight deadline. He was furious; he had come to Morocco to talk business. From his perspective, nothing had been accomplished. But our attorney speculates that the Moroccan partner was *also* disappointed in the meeting because no relationship was built with the high-status manager.

Conversation in the Arabic-speaking world follows strict conventions with regard to the length of statements, order of speakers, and use of language and quotations. Engaging in conversation that follows these rules can be expected to strengthen the negotiation relationship. Westerners may mistake such conversations for empty, time-consuming small talk, but in the Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, such conversation may serve to consolidate knowledge about the extent to which the other follows the conversation protocols and therefore is or is not to be trusted to follow other protocols. Such conversations can be expected to take time and increase the length of negotiations.

The importance of conversation in Arab-speaking Islamic culture is emphasized by the existence of a whole literary genre called *adab al-muhadatha* (the manners of conversing), in which issues such as



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moderation, respect, choice of words, and speaking order are addressed and taught. One rule, which applies especially in formal statements, requires that speakers open with the *basmallah*, a verbal formula that states that everything that follows is done in the name of God, which can sometimes be rather prolonged.

Many Westerners, particularly in a negotiations context, may see conversation without goals as a waste of negotiation time. Yet, in many quarters of the Arab-speaking Islamic world “the worst discourtesy [is] . . . to come to the point and express oneself in as few words as possible” (Bourdieu 1963: 58). One such *faux pas* was committed by Moshe Dayan when he served as Israel’s foreign minister in 1978. Eager to “get to the point,” in a conversation with Anwar al-Khatib, the former Palestinian governor of Jerusalem, Dayan used the Arabic expression, “*amma ba’d*,” (Dayan 1981: 150), which in this context meant “enough already.” In Islam, any address or significant statement must be preceded with a mention of God and a blessing of the prophet Muhammad. Often, this formula is long and elaborate, and, at its conclusion, the above expression is uttered as a way of making a conversational transition toward the matter at hand. Dayan’s use of the phrase disconnected from its religious context was thus inappropriate.

Similarly, Arabic’s elaborate system of greetings and blessings, in which reciprocity is a prime requirement, can also contribute to the sense among non-Arabs that time is being wasted. In Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, this system of conversation is not viewed as a “waste of time” but rather a critical step in the building of relationships.

## **Time as a Tactic**

Although the manipulation of time as a negotiation tactic seems to be universal, this may be accomplished somewhat differently in negotiations involving Arabic-speaking Islamic participants than it would be in negotiations in which all participants are Westerners. In this section, we examine such time-related negotiation techniques as stalling and delaying, using the past as a standard, and negotiating the future.

### ***Stalling and Delaying***

“How much time do we have?” is a common negotiation refrain. Should we negotiate now, take another action, or wait? The Western culture clock-time perspective encourages actions such as negotiation or litigation; while the Arabic-speaking Islamic culture’s orientation toward event time may encourage inaction. This may stem in part from Islam’s basic belief that time is on its side, both universally (because God will turn the entire world Islamic<sup>5</sup>) and individually (because he has promised a future reward, sufficient for satisfaction) (Quran 93:5). Because a believer’s time is not restricted to this world, but shares in eternity, negotiations may be



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unnecessary (Naufal 1996) because eventually God will provide an intervening event.

Time can be used as a negotiation tactic in Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures in two ways: one can delay and/or one can patiently absorb a delay. Perhaps the crudest and the most universally employed means of temporal control is to let one's opponent wait: at one time, the Palestinians did it to the Jordanian prime minister for ten hours in the Amman airport (Naufal 1996). When dealing with Westerners, these tactics of stall and delay are sometimes calculated to take advantage of the proverbial Western short patience and tendency to reach hurried decisions (Goldman and Rojot 2003).

Some negotiators stall as a way of asserting their autonomy. For example, Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yasser Arafat claimed that to quickly give in to American demands during the 1991 Washington negotiations would mean writing off the PLO (Naufal 1996). On another occasion, he proudly referred to the Palestinians as "the difficult party," which meant, apparently, that they were expected to break the (temporal) rules (Naufal 1996: 86). On the other hand, the Palestinians noted Israel's delay tactics (Naufal 1996), which they characterized as slow and gradual, aimed at studying the Arab intentions, so as to reach partial and consecutive agreements (Naufal 1996) or "to kill time" (Naufal 1996: 127). On the eve of the opening of the eighth round of talks (Naufal 1996) in Cairo in 1993 the Palestinian's slow pace caused Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres to accuse them of missing the great issues for the petty ones (Savir 1998). Earlier, the approaching Israeli elections of 1992 made Arafat decide to slow down negotiations to "gain time" (Naufal 1996: 135), and, on another occasion, he apparently slowed down negotiations as a way of demonstrating leadership (Naufal 1996).

In a contemporary management example, the consultant working with Bechtel attributed the Kuwaitis' apparent stalls as face-saving measures designed to cover their inability to immediately provide the information Bechtel was seeking. The countermeasure to stalling and delay is patience, which in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture is a most important asset (e.g., Raiffa, Richardson, and Metcalfe 2002). Patience enables the negotiator to resist making concessions on matters of substance because he or she is feeling time pressures. Patience is prized especially by the religiously devout: as the truest waiting in Islam is that for the world to come, any other waiting shrinks to insignificance.

Patience in Islamic culture is universally recommended and is valued to a far greater extent in Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures than in Western cultures.<sup>6</sup> It is promoted by theology, ethics, and popular wisdom, although, or perhaps *because*, it is "more trying than death." This value, *Sabr* in Arabic, arises from the strong belief that time works for the believer and suggests the importance of perseverance against adverse circumstances.

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Patience is thus often hailed by Arab political, and Islamic religious, leaders (Naufal 1996), who stress that cultivating it in this world under dire conditions is a sign of faith.

By contrast, speed is viewed negatively. In Arabic, the root 'jl connotes both speed and quickness, but also rashness. Winning in haste is inferior to losing slowly or patiently (Ibn Abd Rabbihi 1997). But again, these precepts are not absolute; speed is indeed recommended for specific purposes, such as feeding the hungry, tending the dead, exercising the law, repenting from sin, encouraging the performance of righteousness (Ghazali n.d.: 11, 16) and, in general, doing the right thing.

Deadlines and ultimatums can be used to limit the use of stall-and-delay tactics. When Western negotiators find themselves under time pressure, they are often willing to make more concessions (Moore 2004; Stulmacher and Champagbe 2000). Arabic-speaking Muslims may also do so (Bashmil 1971), although less frequently. But deadlines and ultimatums are not well-received among Arabic-speaking Muslims, given the event-time orientation of their culture. Nevertheless, deadlines and ultimatums have been used: the very early Caliph Umar recommended that a time limit be set by the judge for producing evidence (Hamidullah 1956). Custom, too, has it that in the Bedouin *sulha* (i.e., the institution of conciliation following a severe crime), the length of time allowed for the process's various stages is not unrestricted, and there are consequences for exceeding the time allotted (Wartman and Gabai 2000). During their 1991 Washington peace talks with the Israelis, the Palestinians sent the following memo: "Are you ready to start direct, bi-lateral negotiations with no pre-conditions . . . (1) this morning; (2) afternoon; (3) this evening; (4) tomorrow; (5) any time during the rest of this week or the next week?" (Naufal 1996: 318).

In sum, in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture there is usually less rush to negotiate. Delay and stalling may be used deliberately as tactics against Western negotiators. Westerners are not expected to respond with the same degree of patience as Arabic-speaking Islamic negotiators when faced with these tactics, thus giving the Arab negotiator a possible negotiation edge.

### ***Using the Past as a Standard***

The importance that Islam accords to the past gives historical precedents great weight in negotiations. In the words of an important Arab thinker:

The Islamic trend . . . viewed history and the West in ideological terms and could see the past only as the embodiment or repository of the Truth of Islam and its golden age, and the West as the negation of both (Sharabi 1988).

In negotiations in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, historical precedents are widely used, sometimes even to achieve two opposing negotiation goals.

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Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, for example, relied in 1978 for his peace initiative with Israel on a *fatwa* (religious legal verdict) that authorized his actions based on the force of the Hudaibiyah negotiations that had taken place between the prophet Muhammad and his polytheistic Meccan enemies.<sup>7</sup> However, in 1993, following the Oslo agreements, Arafat used the same historical case to reassure his constituents that even Muhammad had signed an agreement that did not prevent him from achieving his goal of conquering Mecca.<sup>8</sup>

Many political conflicts arise from historical events, which makes history an inescapable component of the negotiations that follow them. And using standards from the past is certainly not unheard of in Western culture. Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton (1991), for example, recommend that negotiators rely on objective standards, which can include precedent and past practice, to reach agreements. However, these same authors emphasize that an effective way of resolving conflict is to negotiate a new future relationship. In fact, in resolving disputes, Western culture negotiators focus on the future more than negotiators from other cultures who rely more on precedent and rules of past action.

Past-oriented negotiation behavior is consistent with the importance the past holds for the Arabic-speaking Islamic culture at large. Of course, the past plays a role in any culture (see Evans-Pritchard 1961), but in Islam, it seems to play an even stronger one. In Arabic-speaking Islamic culture, the past is often glorified (e.g., Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi 1997: 186; Husam al-Din 1991: 49), and with few rare exceptions, the older is of greater value than the recent, not only with reference to the Prophet Muhammad, but also to his companions and their followers.<sup>9</sup> For example, in the traditional *Qasida*, the highly culturally influential paradigm of ancient Arabic love poem, emotions are expressed that are strongly connected to one's personal past, such as, longing for the departed beloved or to one's homeland.

The importance of the past is also seen in the emphasis on traditionalism in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture. Perhaps the clearest and strongest manifestation of this traditionalist perspective that emphasizes using the past as a standard is the requirement of Muslims to model their behavior and worldview on those of the Prophet's (*Uswab*) in the minutest matters (Quran 33:21). For example, it is a *badith* (a story or quotation about the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad) that established the foundation in Islamic law for the prohibition of sales on credit, which has a tremendous influence on business practices in the Islamic world.

Another important manifestation of Islam's emphasis on the past is that the only legitimate legal methods are those that respect the authority of the past. The sources for legal rulings that the Islamic lawyer may use are the Quran, the *Sunnab* (i.e., the corpus of utterances and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), analogy, unanimous agreement by the whole

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community (*ijama'*), and finally, discretionary reasoning (*ijtihad*) (Schacht 1960: 1026–1027) in that order. All are heavily past-oriented, except the last, which risks opening the door for unwelcome innovations. It is for that reason that its application was prohibited around the turn of the tenth century in Sunni Islam.

Acquaintance with history and its lessons enables members of a culture to use that history as an abbreviated tool for communication: knowledge of past events is shared and can be evoked by merely mentioning them. For example, the great esteem in which the Prophet and other early figures in Islamic history are held lends their actions the power of precedent on which the law lives.<sup>10</sup> Referring to history confers legitimacy and authority, and communicates present strategies in terms that listeners can understand.

For negotiators, developing a knowledge of history relevant to the particular negotiation is an essential intelligence-gathering task, both before and during negotiations. Even if the history that is relayed by the other party may be more myth than historical truth, it provides the negotiator with important information about the image the other party wishes to convey.

Thus, in negotiations, it is sometimes advisable to incorporate the past into discussions of the future. This can be done by referring to Islamic historical, legal, and literary precedents, models, and texts. Acquaintance with Islamic history and law may, therefore, be important for conducting any degree of successful negotiations with members of Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures because when one acknowledges and shows respect for the past, one's arguments carry more weight.

### ***Looking toward the Future***

In the 1991 Oslo peace talks, the parties eventually agreed to forgo talking about the past and concentrate on the future (Savir 1998), but ultimately their attempts failed. Negotiating about the future in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture is problematic because human actions run the risk of interfering with God's plans. Discussion of the future is possible only if negotiations are focused on intentions rather than results and avoid prediction and the setting of conditions or contingencies based on future events.

Predictions are frowned upon in Islam, except when made by prophets, who are believed to have received them from God. Promises are recognized in Islamic culture and their keeping is required, as God never fails to keep his (Quran 22:47). However, it is also understood that the future is not in human hands. In practice, some argue, oral commitments that extend for a period beyond a week or so are not as firm in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture as Westerners would consider them (United States Air Force n.d.: 37) because they are frequently accompanied by the phrase *in sha'a Allah* ("If God wills"). Threats, or negative promises, are more

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frequently accompanied by the phrase “*ana wa-yyak wal-zaman tawil!*” (“I and you, and time is long!”), which means a commitment with no particular point of time for carrying it out.

Intention is critical in Islam: it is acknowledged and authorized by the law and is the basis for how God is believed to judge man. In addition to expressing their intentions or any other verbal links to the future, believers must utter the expression *in sha’a Allah*. In theory, one is required to utter this statement before proclaiming *any* future action, although in practice some adhere to this rule more strictly than others. The Prophet himself once erred in omitting it and was punished by a failure to have revelations for fifteen days (Fiqqi 1995). Oaths and vows<sup>11</sup> are more acceptable than other utterances about the future, perhaps, because the responsibility for carrying out the action is laid on God, rather than on one’s self, thus reducing the risk of offending God by trespassing into his domain. According to one of the leading Muslim jurists ever, a vow may omit the *in sha’ Allah*, but one may add it to the expression. If the intention of the person making the vow is to obey the duty to add the expression whenever the future is addressed, then not fulfilling it is pardonable. If, on the other hand, his or her intention is to avoid fulfilling it, then this is punishable (Shafi’i, 1983: vii, 65). It is intention that is the decisive element: in the Quran, even false vows are pardonable if the intention was different (Quran 2:225): “Allah will not call you to account for thoughtlessness in your oaths, but for the intention in your hearts.”

Interestingly, one author has argued that “*in sha’ Allah* has become a meaningless phrase” that was once used to “stress the intention of fulfilling promises” but is “now used to escape them.” Used this way in a negotiation, the phrase could be the speaker’s way of avoiding “yes” without explicitly saying “no” (Egyptian Society for Spiritual and Cultural Research 1999).

Such an orientation toward the future can have important implications for planning for negotiations because some Arabic-speaking Muslims will consider statements that imply that the speaker controls or knows the future to be inappropriate, hence the use of “God willing.”

Some Muslim scholars have argued that these restrictions are responsible for that civilization’s failure to modernize in comparison to the West (Fiqqi 1995) and that they reflect incorrect interpretations of the Quran. These scholars interpret the Quranic verse that encourages the believer to think about “the morrow” (59:18) as referring to the mundane and immediate future, which would indeed allow believers to plan for it, rather than exclusively referring to the world to come, which would prohibit such planning (e.g., Fiqqi 1995).

In fact, planning does indeed take place in Arabic-speaking Islamic cultures, not only on the personal, but also on the collective level. This is very much apparent in economic and national strategic domains,<sup>12</sup> and, on the surface, seems to occur in Arab nations much as it does in the West

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(e.g., Fiqqi 1995). The difference might reside, however, at a deeper level: whereas in the West, planning is done in probabilistic terms, in Islamic culture, the perspective is deterministic, for example, “things will either happen or not” (United States Air Force n.d.: 37).

Thus, negotiation that involves future events can be complicated within Arabic-speaking Islamic culture because negotiators must constantly avoid the implication that human actions will interfere with God’s actions. Predictions and contingencies are consequently viewed negatively, and promises and threats are less certain to be carried out because they are seen to be “in God’s hands.”

### **Bridging the Gap: Some Recommendations**

Negotiations between Arabic-speaking Islamic and Western entities and individuals are unavoidable. Bridging the gap in perceptions of time that are endemic to these two cultures will significantly increase the likelihood that such negotiations achieve success. Doing so requires understanding and dealing with differences in fundamental worldviews, such as the perceptions of time that are examined in this article.

Such differences include:

- The Arab-speaking Islamic world has a stronger “event-time” orientation whereas Western cultures operate more on “clock time.” Consequently, negotiations in the Middle East may appear to Westerners to be prolonged.
- Although the domains of earthly and heavenly life are central to religions in both the West and the Middle East, the “world to come” plays a stronger role in the religious Middle East than in the more secular West, in which the present and near-term future are of comparatively greater concern than they are in the Arabic-speaking Islamic world and in which time is viewed as a more scarce commodity.
- Precedents based on the past, while used in both cultures, carry significantly greater weight in Islamic cultures than in Western cultures because of the emphasis on the historical past, which is known, as opposed to the future, which is unknown and in God’s hands.
- Human agency in bringing about future events is considerably less central to Arabic-speaking Islamic than Western culture, resulting in deterministic as opposed to probabilistic predictions of the future.

With these differences in mind, how might the Western culture-oriented negotiator better prepare to negotiate with Arabic-speaking Muslims?

Of course, one’s Arabic-speaking Muslim counterpart could, in fact, be “Western” in many significant ways. He could have earned degrees



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from an American or European educational institution, may speak excellent English, and have had significant experience living, working, and negotiating in the U.S. or Europe (or South America, Australia, or Japan). So, of course, one should not be surprised if the Arabic-speaking Muslim negotiator fails to act in the “prototypical” way. Even so, developing the ability to recognize some negotiation behaviors as reflecting different cultural attitudes toward time should increase the Western negotiator’s strategic flexibility and even minimize cultural barriers to reaching agreements.

These, therefore, are some of our recommendations:

1. *Spend extra time preparing for cultural differences.* In addition to doing all the standard planning regarding issues, positions, interests, priorities, Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA), reservation price, and target, collect as much information as possible about the other party ahead of time. You will want to know if the party at the table has the authority to make a commitment or is acting as an agent. You will want to know the other negotiator’s experience in the West. If possible, talk to someone who has negotiated with this person or the person’s organization in the past. Make use of a cultural expert who can help you understand what you will likely be experiencing at the negotiation table in the context of Arabic-speaking Islamic culture. Learn about Islamic and Arab culture at least enough for a genuine appreciation of the events of a day (prayers), a week (holy days), a month (high holy days). Ask your cultural expert about historical precedents that might be relevant to your negotiation.
2. *Commit the time to building and to maintaining relationships.* “Build relationships” is good advice in any negotiating situation, but it takes more time in cross-cultural negotiations, which usually occur away from home. Plan to engage in casual conversation to begin the relationship-building process, but be sure to check with your cultural expert about which topics are appropriate for conversation. Mr. G., a Middle Eastern regional manager for a Swiss chocolate producer who was interviewed by one of our researchers said, “It would be regarded as arrogance and may seriously damage a relationship if one focuses too much on business and too little on the person.”
3. *Plan your actions according to clock time, but allow for wide margins to accommodate for event time.* If they miss a deadline, they miss a deadline. Refrain from automatically interpreting time behavior as a deliberate offense. Be as punctual as possible, but allow your negotiation partner some margin. Never make concessions because of time pressure. Avoid committing to a tight time schedule in the first place. Talk to your cultural expert about what auspicious events may be occurring at the



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same time as negotiations: these may serve as a basis for building relationships, but they may also serve as milestones for progress in negotiations. Two of the people we interviewed mentioned that finalizing negotiations was associated with events. It was the onset of Ramadan that seemed to motivate finalizing negotiations with a Saudi partner, while the success of the democratic elections in Iraq seemed to spur an Iraqi partner to ask for a final contract.

4. *Prepare argumentation in advance, using precedents, models, and history.* As we have noted, Western negotiators may use standards based on precedent or past practice to justify a position in negotiation. However, the preferred style of argumentation in the West seems to be a reference to alternatives, for example, my good ones and your poor ones. In contrast, argumentation in Arabic-speaking Islamic culture is much more likely to rely on precedents, history, metaphors, and models. Arrive prepared with a few precedent setting tales of your own.
5. *Try to avoid language that might suggest that the parties have full control over future events.* Use deterministic language not probabilistic language. Avoid trying to negotiate contingencies based on the likelihood of the occurrence of future events, as such eventualities are viewed as in God's hands. Thus, instead of saying "Because we both expect higher volumes this year than last, we expect you will benefit from a 10 percent price reduction next year," you might say, "God willing, we will grant you a 10 percent price reduction in year two, if, with God's help, your volume this year exceeds last year's."

## Conclusion

Understanding some fundamental differences between Arabic-speaking Muslim and Western negotiators regarding the concept of time may help bridge gaps between negotiators and produce more effective negotiations. However, time is just one construct fundamental to negotiation theory that has different implications in Arabic-speaking Islamic and Western cultures. Clearly, future research examining conceptual differences in such critical areas of negotiation as power and influence and information sharing as they affect negotiations between parties from the Middle East and the West is needed.

## NOTES

The authors wish to dedicate this article to Uri Sagi and David Shatner who know the importance of culture in negotiations.

1. For a good review of the literature (albeit fourteen years old), see Munn (1992).

2. About the connection between social time and conflict, see Lauer (1981: 102): "Social time can be a source of conflict, particularly where the people interact who come from groups with the disparate systems of social time."

3. Social time, in contrast to clock time, is described as “[t]he patterns and orientations that relate to social processes and to the conceptualization of the ordering of social life” (Lauer 1981: 21 ff.).
4. For similar instances in other cultures, see “the time of rice-cooking” (Madagascar), or even “pissing while” in an old *Oxford English Dictionary* version (Levine 1997: 92).
5. “We have been ordered by God to fight with people till they bear testimony to the fact that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger, and that they establish prayer and pay *Zakat* (money). If they do it, their blood and their property are safe from me” (see Bukhari, n.d. *Sabih*, Aman, Number 24).
6. For the importance of patience in negotiations, see Raiffa, Richardson, and Metcalfe (2002). For popular Arabic proverbs to the same effect, see Taimur (1970: 400)
7. Published in *al-Abram*, May 18, 1979 (see Jad al-Haqq 1979).
8. May 12, 1994. See *Journal of Palestinian Studies* 24/1 (1994) documents and source material p. 131 ff.: “I regard this agreement as no more than the agreement signed between our prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh (tribe) in Mecca.”
9. The initiative to establish this priority (called *sabiqa* in Arabic) officially is attributed to the caliph Umar (Hinds 1971).
10. Joseph Schacht (1964) argued that this does not apply to juridical precedent. See also Islam and Public Law at <http://www.soas.ac.uk/Centres/IslamicLaw/PublicIntro.html>.
11. For oaths and vows in medieval Islam, see Mottahedeh (1980).
12. See Hussain (1987) and Wilson (1984).

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