"The Arab Mind",
a review by Carroll Quigley in The American Anthropologist, Vol. 76 [1974], pp. 396-397, of a book:
THE ARAB MIND,
by Raphael Patai.
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"The Arab Mind"

The Arab Mind.
By RAPHAEL PATAI.


Reviewed by Carroll Quigley
Georgetown University

Raphael Patai is well qualified to write a book on the cognitive assumptions and basic personality traits of the Arabic-speaking peoples. After he took his doctorate in Near East studies at the University of Budapest in 1933, he lived for fifteen years in Palestine. During this residence, he took a second doctoral degree, in Arabic language and culture, at the University of Jerusalem, engaged in anthropological research in the area, and taught Arabic studies there. He came to the United States in 1947 on a Viking Fund Fellowship and has lived in this country since, with frequent visits to the Levant. He has written or edited some ten books on the subject, including the esteemed Golden River to Golden Road: Society, Culture, and Change in the Middle East (third edition, 1969). After 1955, he was director of the HRAF project on Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, edited the three handbooks on these countries, and compiled the bibliographical volume dealing with them.

About fifteen years ago, considerable skepticism was expressed on the value of books dealing with the "basic personality" or "national psychology" of social groups. In recent years, however, we have advanced a long way on several aspects of the subject, especially cognitive linguistics and developmental psychology, and this volume is fully aware of this recent work. After defining his subject, Patai begins with an examination of basic elements of the problem: child-rearing practices, the cognitive elements of the Arabic language, the "Bedouin Substratum," sexual values and practices in relation to family structure and behavior, the "Islamic Component," and the less rational forces in Arab personality. This is followed by two
chapters on symbolic arts of expression and the subconscious nexus of relationships among cultural ambivalence, social dichotomy, marginality, and alienation in Arab life (all related to bilingualism), and four chapters on the role played by the Arab mind in contemporary problems, such as unity and conflict in the Arab world, conflict resolution and the futility of innumerable "Summit Conferences" among the leaders of Arab countries, the problem of Arab stagnation since 1517, and the accelerating rate of Westernization in the postcolonial period.

The only weak points in this picture are the brevity of the early chapters and the fact that the chapter on art, music, and literature is largely descriptive and not fully integrated with the main theme. Otherwise, the volume is outstanding. The author displays his keen awareness of the history of the Arabic-Islamic tradition, with proper recognition of the persistent and powerful influence of the pre-Islamic period, and skillfully digs beneath surface appearances to find the deeper roots and underlying interrelations of apparently contradictory superficial traits. For example, he demonstrates clearly the role played by needless conflict in creating solidarity in a society whose social and family patterns are brittle and whose political institutions are weak, and traces it back to the pre-Islamic disruption of Arabic society in the period A.D. 300-650.

Patai uses evidence drawn from a wide range of sources over many centuries, chiefly from Arab writers, but also from foreign observers of all periods, and from his own experiences with the language and the peoples. The last few chapters of the book provide a good, but brief, survey of recent Arabic writings on contemporary problems of the Middle East, especially in international affairs, since 1948. Throughout, Patai maintains a sympathetic, objective attitude toward his subject and seeks to establish how Arabs perceive, evaluate, and react to experience by actions, words, and psychic responses. Much of the evidence is so suggestive of materials for further discussion and theory on Middle East problems that I should like to try it out with academic discussion groups. There are almost six hundred notes (some are inconvenient to use, i.e., when an "op. cit." has to be trailed backward through several chapters and several hundred notes). But the book itself is a real challenge to the piecemeal and symptom-treating approaches on narrow issues that economic development and social reconstruction experts have been trying in that area in recent decades.

Please email the editors (editors@carrollquigley.net) with corrections, questions, or if you have other works by Professor Quigley you would like to see posted.

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