

Cross-cultural Particularities in the Middle East

Ionel Sergiu Pirju

Danubius University, Romania

pirjusergiu@univ-danubius.ro

Danut Boiciuc Modest

A.I. Cuza University of Iasi, Romania

modestboiciuc@yahoo.com

Abstract: The term Middle East has started to be used in the nineteenth century when referring to the region that included the Ottoman Empire, the Arabian Peninsula and the Balkan area. In contemporary the Middle East cluster (according to Globe's research) consists of: Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Turkey, although the number of countries in geographical terms that is identified with this region is much higher. From the ethnical point of view this area is characterized by a relative homogeneity predominated by Arabs, lately in some countries (Kuwait etc.), appearing a large number of foreign immigrants attracted by the oil industry. This article will present the intercultural values that characterize it, the leadership style, as well as tracing the main macroeconomic considerations that characterize them. The research is synchronic, analysing the contemporary situation of these countries, and the analysis will be interdisciplinary exploratory, identifying elements with regional cultural specificity.

Keywords: traditions; economic growth; religion; rules

1. Introduction

The Middle East cluster consists of the following countries: Egypt, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar and Turkey.

In terms of intercultural values, collectivism in group is the only cultural dimension in which the Middle East has a high score. For assertiveness, human orientation, institutional collectivism, performance orientation and power distance has an average score and for future-orientation, gender egalitarianism and uncertainty avoidance the score is low.

These countries dominated by the Islamic culture and civilization, put great emphasis on the role of a leader with increased responsibility, the charismatic leadership and the team oriented one are considered positive and widely accepted in this region. (Chhokar et alli, 2008, p. 833)

Life business in Middle East is dominated by private groups but also by state companies. Middle East companies are dependent on financial incentives provided

by states, and they often interfere with unpredictable policy changes that lead to uncertainties in the business area. Although there has been liberalization in certain areas such as the financial sector in international trade and some privatization of state companies, the state remains the main actor in the economy and the distributor of resources.

Middle Eastern society is characterized by a high performance orientation. The general indicators show a rather low level regarding the economic production, foreign investment and competitive strength in the global zone.

In Middle East the education is at a moderate level, primary schools are required. University students are encouraged to learn in moderation, instead upon graduation, universities grant degrees and awards to those who have had remarkable results. Public education is free at all levels, including university. The emphasis on education has created a group of highly trained professionals in the labour market, this fact being one of the main reasons why Middle East was able to attract investments.

Table 1. Significant values of cultural specificity for the Middle East cluster

Country	Egypt	Kuwait	Qatar	Moroco	Turkey
Surface (km ²)	1 010 000	17 820	22 014	446 550	783 562
Population (mill. in.)	80,000	2,8	0, 250	32,000	75,627
Ethnic structure	Egyptians Berbers Nubians	Arabs Immigrants	Arabs Immigrants	Arabs Berbers	Turks Kurds Syrians
Languages	arab	arab	arab	arab	turkish
Climate	mediterranean and desert	dry, desert	dry, desert	mediterranean and desert	mediterranean, continental
Political and economic specificity	Constitutional republic	Monarchy constitutional	Monarchy absolute	Monarchy constitutional	Republic
Main export partners (%)	USA-8, Italy-7, Spain-6,	Japon-20, South Korea- 17,	Japon-30, South Korea- 13, India-8	Spain-22, France-20, India-4	Germany-9, France-6, Italy-6
Main import Partners (%)	USA-10, China-9, Germany-6,	USA-12, Japon-8, Germany-7	USA-15, Germany-9,	France-16, Spain-14, China-7	Russia-14, Germany-10, China-9

Power distance	Ns ¹	80	80	70	66
Individualism	Ns	38	38	46	37
Masculinity	Ns	53	53	53	45
Uncertainty avoidance	Ns	68	68	68	85
Long / short term perspective	7	23	23	14	46
Indulgence / Restriction	4	34	34	25	49

*Sistematization apud Gavreliuc (2011), Hofstede & Hofstede (2004), Wikipedia. Com, CIA World Factbook.

2. The Particularities of the Social Culture in Middle East Countries. Future Orientation

The Arabic fatalism and the literally interpretation of the Quran made people in this region to accept life events as they are, without planning them beforehand. The social practice that encourages and rewards acceptance of a state of fact which mustn't be countered, can be explained in part by the Islamic religion (Culianu & Eliade, 1993). The concept of "destiny" in Islam is considered a factor that may be associated with the acceptance of life events and predetermined social order. Many passages of the Quran indicate that all the facts which have happened in the past and will happen in the future are pre-arranged by God.

Future-oriented practices have low levels and are perceived as having effective plans for the states. Although a large part of the Middle East is at risk of earthquake, public offices and individuals avoids planning activities. One of these reasons is attributed to fatalism, because one third of the participants, who did the interview organized by the Globe team, stated that they feel they do not need to do anything to prepare for a future earthquake, and nearly two-thirds believe that destiny and luck plays an important role in their survival. (Chhokar, 2008, p. 843)

Assertiveness

The "male/female" dimension in Hofstede's study (2004) overlaps with the GLOBE's one regarding assertiveness. Following Hofstede, in male culture, men are the ones who should be assertive, strong, and women should be modest and gentle. In women societies, both women and men should be humbles and gentles.

¹ Unknown values.

Compared to Hofstede's study, the GLOBE study points the fact that Middle East has become a more assertive society over the last two decades.

The assertive and authoritarian practices of society can be seen in contexts relating to tasks. Government officials usually behave in an authoritarian and assertive way towards the population, such as police, courts and other bureaucratic institutions. The private sector organizations are also characterized as promoting an authoritarian relationship between superiors and subordinates

Gender Egalitarianism

In Middle East women are expected to undertake activities that take place inside the residence or the organization with a supporting role, while men are engaged in activities that take place outside the domestic sphere; in one word women are in charge of the domestic tasks, while men have positions involving the use of power and decision-making. Men in the Arab world are valued based on the following qualities: ambitious, analytical, powerful, insistent on rights (both personal and others). A woman is appreciated when: loves children, is elegant, but within the classical Muslim canon, housewife, being condemned those who are coward, insecure and naive. It is possible that because of this study, femininity is associated with more negative attributes than masculinity, and therefore lower Gender egalitarianism, this being constant in the Arab world strongly guided by the Quran and the traditional interpretations of it (Durkheim, 1995).

Despite the attempts to improve women's status in Middle East society, the reform was not well implemented in rural areas and lower social-economic groups. A significant success, however, was found in education, the justice system, although there are still some features that are contradictory to the Islamic religion that considers the woman only at a wife and mother level. (Constantinescu, et alli., 2002).

Human Orientation

In the Middle East, family helps her neighbour. Family neighbours and close friends help people who need it both in rural and urban areas (Coman 2008). As part of the employer's relationship, leaders of Middle East organizations look after the welfare of its employees in many personal problems. In addition, many parliamentarians spends a significant amount of time to solve the problems of their supporters, such as job searching, health problems and bureaucratic problems, so leaders of Middle East society helps its supporters in many aspects of life. (Chhokar et alli, 2008, pp. 848-849)

Power Distance

In distant societies such as the Middle East ones, employees are afraid to express disagreement regarding their managers. In parallel with the definition of Hofstede

(2004), of power distance, managers of the Middle East expect a total obedience from employees, while the latter are quite reluctant to express disagreement with their managers. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner' study demonstrates that companies in Middle East have the steepest hierarchy between companies in 38 nations. They indicated that the company's family culture of Middle East have exaggerated hierarchies in their organizations. In such societies, leaders take their power from the trust in their employees, but also their submission to leader as a father-son relationship. In an intercultural study conducted by Schwartz, Middle East was declared as one of the most hierarchical societies, being in the 6th place out of the 38 cultures with preference for a power distance and a great influence and authority. (Chookar, p. 849)

Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede has labelled Middle East as a culture with high uncertainty avoidance, but it seems that over time society has become more tolerant in terms of uncertainty. He presented an important link between leadership orientation and job stability, indicating that both factors serve as mechanisms to reduce uncertainty.

It can be said that people of Middle East have developed survival skills to withstand adverse conditions which they have experienced in recent decades than relying on order and law. (Crammed, 2006)

3. Leadership in the Middle East

Communities with high uncertainty avoidance, such as the Arabic ones, are characterized by the fact that hierarchical positions are for people who usually inherit the position and do not have exceptional skills in a specific area. In such societies the link between leadership and society is quite obvious perceived at the subordinates level (House RJ 2004). Where there are low uncertainty avoidance scores the hierarchical system inherited is rejected and the relationships between managers and employees have a paternalistic character, progress being naturally subject to performance.

For masculine cultures the emphasis is on achieving labourer objectives, it also calls for assertiveness, admiring the most successful example in business. Where the male values are lower are preferred leaders who maintain good relationships with staff and the performance level is not defined at an organizational culture level as a main goal individually.

In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance there is a tendency to show total obedience to authority and always follow classical models, any new changes from the management may cause mistrust and reduce the feeling of safety. Societies with

low uncertainty avoidance are open to new ideas and not always comply with the rules of the past.

Leaders in Middle East society are seen on one side especially by Westerners, with scepticism, their integrity being often questionable, and, on the other side they are evaluated by some compatriots as the supreme model of conduct.

Political and industrial leaders display a combination of autocratic, paternalistic and consultative leadership styles. In a study conducted by T. Esmer, approximately 4,824 individuals, each living in different areas of the Middle East were asked to assess the style of managers they are familiar along with their preferred management style. (Chookar, p. 851). They showed that the dominant style is authoritarian (53%), followed by paternalistic (25%), consultative (13.6%) and democratic (8.5%). Most preferred style was the consultative (32.5%), followed by paternalistic (28.9%), democratic (25.6%) and authoritarian (10.3%).

As a result of harsh political changes occurred in the area in the past two years appears the necessity of new leaders. This is quite difficult because politics is quite disorganized especially in the East, and the right to innovation (social and political) is limited mainly by the Islamist parties that repress any innovative resistance. To achieve this, it is necessary, in our opinion, a transition period which must first of all organize the political life and the choice of leaders (political and economic) of trust who are able to achieve goals under a more imminent pressure of the public opinion.

4. The Economic Characteristics of the Countries in the Middle East

The Middle East or where is located the Promised Land, is part of the past and a part of the future culture and world civilization, resembling through religion and mentality, but differing by the form of government: Republic (Egypt, Turkey) or Monarchy (Morocco, Kuwait).

Egypt, the country that occupies the north east of the African continent, is recognized by the Nile valley since antiquity, its business centre. Although in recent years the country has benefited from a slight economic growth due to internal political instability, the government spent much of its reserves on social issues, thus decreasing the reserves, considering that tourism and most of the manufacturing industry has been hit hard by the existing economic realities. Egyptians intertwine business with appreciation and cultivation of personal relationships with interlocutors, the negotiation policy being an open one, except in particular cases. Hierarchy prevails in decision making, approval being obtained quite difficult in typical Islamic tradition, after long negotiations, the lack of direct response being synonymous with refusal.

Kuwait, one of the richest countries, relies strictly in economic terms on oil reserves (7% of the world's reserves), this representing a 95% of the country's income. Although the oil price boom lately brought an increase of 20% of the budget, it was invested rather less in diversifying the economy. Businesses in this country must consider specific traditions, one of them being the reduced work schedule of only six hours. Society, as in all Islamic countries is hierarchical, companies are focused around family, problems are usually discussed in private and not on official meetings, even if negotiations are conducted in English, contracts are written in Arabic; in case there are both versions the one that prevails is the Arabic text. (CIA World Factbook).

Morocco, the African country with the most effective collaboration with the EU and U.S., due to its strategies, has obtained in recent years successes in the economic market developments, but this progress hasn't been sufficient to reduce unemployment and poverty. Negotiations are to be avoided during Ramadan and on Fridays when most businesses are closed because of the prayer program. Hierarchy is high, are preferred long-term businesses without public criticizing the interlocutors, and in the case of an agreement due to bureaucracy, it takes several approvals for validation.

Qatar, one of the most prosperous economies in 2012, in addition to raw and gas reserves, constantly invests in non-energy sectors, and also attracting a large number of investors.

Turkey is characterized by a free economy, who constantly invests in industry and services, although a significant sample of the population is dedicated to agriculture. Its strategic position gives it an important role in the way of oil from Central Asia to Europe, Turkey undertaking a large number of economic and legal reforms with the intention to join the group of 27. Despite the influence of Western culture and the significant influence of multinational companies, businesses in Turkey have a personal character in addition to written information presented, an important role is held by oral and visual communication. To get as many as possible concessions business ends slowly, the deadline being excluded from the start, in a business besides material benefit is sought the accumulation of power to the attraction of collective appreciation.

From the text above it is clear that the countries of this region are based, particularly those from the Persian Gulf on a strong oil resource exploitation, while Egypt, Turkey and Morocco that don't benefit from such resources tries to obtain benefits from tourism, craft or agricultural industry. In these communities, persons performing in cultures with a high score in collectivism tend to prefer the kind of leadership that complies best with paternalistic hierarchical prototype, while in cultures with low scores, such as the European ones, the managers' effectiveness is assessed on the basis of achieving the proposed performance.

5. Conclusions

The soil reserves of this region are very rich in minerals, many of which are less studied and exploited, with the exception of oil, this area being the main global exporter. The political situation in recent years caused a rise in oil prices worldwide, and this was accentuated even with riots in Egypt, although this country is not an exporter, but has the Suez Canal whose strategic importance in the area is tremendous.

New investment and development projects in this region may favour only those economies that are most prepared and are more efficient in terms of capital reserves; they can become political, economic and technological regional leaders. In the new global economy is necessary a more complete approach by the international community, to attract both foreign investments and loans in order to achieve geostrategic alliances.

The cultural components in this area have often originated in hatred and ethnic discrimination, segregation and various civic and moral values. Such impediments affect greatly the trade between Israel and Arab countries, or other states.

To settle their differences, at least for the international companies seeking profits beyond ideological differences, it must involve an additional mediator, in this case a person with thorough knowledge of intercultural management, able to address traditional formulations of both sides, (Bercovitch, 1996) synchronizing conflicting conventions for negotiating and offering solutions that transcend cultural nuances which provided the misunderstanding.

6. Bibliography

- Bercovitch, J. (1996). *Resolving international conflicts. The Theory and practice of mediations*. Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner.
- Burdus, E. (2006). *Management Comparat Internațional/ International Comparative Management* București: Economica.
- Chhokar et alli (2008). *Culture and Leadership Across the World, The Globe Book of in Depth Studies of 25 Societies*. London: Publisher Taylor & Francis Group.
- Coman, M. (2008). *Introducere in antropologia culturala - Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. Iasi: Polirom.
- Constantinescu, D.A. et all. (2002). *Management Comparat/ Comparative Management*. Ed. Colecția Națională.
- Durkheim, E. (1995) *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York: Free Press.
- Eliade, M. & Culianu I. (1993). *Dicționar al religiilor/Dictionary of Religions*. Bucharest: Humanitas.

Gavreliuc, A. (2011). *Intercultural Psychology*. Iasi: Polirom.

Hofstede G. & Hofstede, G.I. (2004). *Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Mind, Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival*.

House, R.J. et alli (2004). *Culture, leadership and organization*. CA, Sage: Thousand Oaks.

CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

Comtrade <http://comtrade.un.org/>.