

## The 7 Citi-Val Values from an Arabic Perspective

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Dear Colleagues,

It is one of the major advantages of the pluralistic societies of Europe that we do not consider values to be one-dimensional. The Arabic perspective should not replace the European perspective but should complete and enrich it. This will broaden our horizons and may prove helpful for the mutual understanding of our different cultures.

Although not all Arabs are Muslims the values of the twenty-two Arabic states are closely connected to the ideas of Islam. Without knowledge of Islamic traditions it is impossible to grasp the meaning of specific values from an Arabic perspective.

Let me shed light on the CITI-VAL values from an Arabic perspective.

### **Freedom**

The term freedom is nowhere to be found in the [Quran](#). That does not imply that freedom is not of religious significance. The companions of the prophet made several important statements:

-You should not treat other human beings as slaves, because they were born free. (Omar bin Al-Khattab)

-You should be no other person's slave, because Allah created you as a free being. (Ali bin Abi Taleb).

Many Arabs are called Abdallah (that is "Allah's slave") or Abdelmasieh (that is "Messiah's slave"). Muslims and Arab christians are convinced that they free themselves from all worldly powers and authorities by serving Allah or Messiah.

The craving for freedom led to the revolutions of the so-called Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. The rich, oil-exporting

**countries** have paid their citizens lots of money so that they would not follow suit. Money instead of freedom. In other countries the doctrine is: Security instead of freedom.

Freedom has been demonized and vilified as a form of chaos. The focus lies more on the limits of freedom than on freedom itself. Religious authorities that have been paid by their governments have issued fatwahas that demonize individual freedom. You have to obey the ruler, even if he is a dictator or an oppressor.

There have been several efforts of individuals and initiatives to propagate freedom in the past and at present. They do not have great impact but they keep the discussion in Arabic societies going.

We are in need of a factual, unprejudiced interpretation of the term freedom. It has to be made clear that living your personal freedom in a responsible way does not imply chaos and immoral behavior. The transition period may encompass bad experiences. Perhaps you can view it as the period of puberty in a society of change.

## **Respect**

This value is of major importance in Arabic culture. **Respect your parents is required by the Quran.** The same applies to elderly people and religious authorities. In Arabic we use not the term self-esteem but self-respect. You should respect other people without demeaning yourself.

If you do not show the proper respect you have to face serious consequences for your life on earth and beyond. You could lose your position in your community and be send to hell in the afterlife.

Misunderstandings may occur because of different cultural upbringings. In Arabic countries you show respect to a woman by avoiding eye contact, even by looking in another direction. It is advised to look at the ground.

If you treat an Arab youth like a child it is seen as a violation of his honor.

It is a problem that many Arab youths observe these rules only in regard to fellow Muslims. This is clearly not compatible with Muslim beliefs.

The [Quran](#) gives clear directives that the Gods of other denominations should not be ridiculed so that in turn nobody should scorn Allah.

## **Solidarity**

This value is of life saving importance in the Arabic world. Many people are dependent on others. You are bound to share your flat and your income with other members of the family that cannot sustain themselves.

One of the five pillars of Islam is the charity tax. 2.5 per cent of your savings are for the poor.

The prophet Mohammed made a comparison between Muslims and the parts of a body. If one part is sick the others help to get well again. [In Addition a Muslim that has enough to eat while any of his neighbors regardless of religion are hungry is not considered to be pious.](#)

The solidarity among the members of a tribe or a community, among the population of a village or a country is huge.

To help a person in need is the duty of any Arab. Whoever declines his help is considered a traitor and a coward.

## **Peace**

Arabs greet each other with the words: “Salamu alaikum”. This is translated: “Peace be with you!” The greeting is comparable to the Hebrew “Schalom”. Both the Arabic and the Hebrew are semitic languages and have the same root. In Arabic there are 99 different names for God. One is “As-Salam” (Peace). Paradise is called “Dar-es-Salam” (Dwelling of Peace).

Unfortunately there is no peace in the Arabic world, among Palestinians and Israelis, in Syria, in Yemen and Lybia. There are conflicts among Algeria and Morocco, among Yemen and Saudi- Arabia and many more countries.

Many Arabs interpret these conflicts as the outcome of an international conspiracy. Others find refuge in their religious belief. They expect peace not on earth but in the afterlife, in Dar-es-Salam.

To an Arab peace stands for more than simply the lack of war. To live in peace means to feel accepted, not alienated. It means to be respected and taken seriously.

Many Arabs feel offended by the political situation in their countries, by poverty and other grievances. They have not found their peace of mind. That makes it more difficult to them to live in peace with each other.

### **Critical thinking**

This value does not belong to Arabic culture. From the beginning the Arab is taught that everything is distinct. It is either halal or haram, accepted or forbidden, black or white.

The close connection between Arabic culture and Islam has permeated everyday life.

Allah is all-encompassing. There is only one truth. There is no room for ambiguity. To put this consensual worldview into question is considered a major sin.

Even in scientific studies Arabic scientists **usually** only describe. They **typically** do not put forth arguments or criticize. Philosophers were **often** considered as non-religious because they brought forth arguments describing different points of view.

The question “Why?” prompts students to think about different issues more intensely. Personal contacts are of great importance. If you meet

an Israeli, a homosexual or an atheist you will question traditional ideas and preconceptions. It may be painful to realize, that you have been wrong all the time. But it is important to learn, that the truth is not one-dimensional.

### **Sense of duty**

Arabs act very responsibly towards their own family. But they **often** lack responsibility concerning public issues. Nobody feels responsible for anything that does not concern him directly.

Mosques in Europe are lacking proper funding because everyone is assuming that this is the task of the respective government.

Even politicians in high offices fail to understand why they are held responsible for their office's performance. If anything goes wrong they blame the predecessor or the lack of money or other circumstances.

If the national **sports** team loses, they have been under the spell of the opponent. It is never the players fault.

A teacher never feels responsible for the (bad) performance of his pupils.

If a president wants to resign from office, because of catastrophic mismanagement, the masses flock to the streets and request him to stay in office. This happened after Egypt's defeat in the war against Israel in 1967 and it happened in Yemen, when Ali Abdallah Salah, a dictator and corrupt president, declared that he wanted to resign.

That is the reason why so many young Arabs wait for their governments to provide them with jobs. If you are living in a rich oil-exporting country you earn lots of money for doing next to nothing. That does not promote the **sense of duty and responsibility**.

### **Loyalty to the constitution**

In many Arabic countries the constitution is seen as a mere piece of paper listing theoretical principles that have not much to do with reality. The worst dictatorships may have the most promising constitutions.

In Arabic culture loyalty to a constitution is sometimes even seen as blasphemy. The term used is al-wala wa-l-bara, that means loyalty and disavowal. Al-wala wa-l-bara is referred to as holding fast to all that is pleasing to Allah and opposing all that is displeasing Allah.

You have to convey the value of a constitution to Arabic people by showing that it is a precondition for a peaceful life in mutual respect in the respective society. The constitution grants everybody the same rights and demands the same duties. It does not replace the [Quran](#) and actually embodies many common values.

They must realize that the [Quran](#) actually gives the directive to live in accordance with the local constitution. Whoever wants to live in a certain country has to be loyal to the national constitution.

The Arabic culture is not better or worse than the European, it is simply different. Millions of Arabs that have lived peacefully in Europe in the last decades are proving that a harmonious coexistence of both cultures is possible.