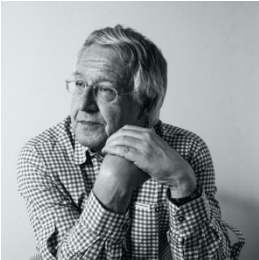


## About the author

**W**olfgang H. Reuther (1950) was born and grew up in the Ore Mountains in the Saxony region of Germany bordering on Czechia. This region is now a UNESCO World Heritage site, due to its tradition of 800 years of mining, triggering technological and scientific innovations that have been transferred worldwide.<sup>1</sup>



After graduating in international law, he began working with UNESCO in its efforts towards international peace, understanding and co-operation in education, science, culture and communication in different ways and structures, continuing for a total of 38 years until his retirement in 2012.

From 1990 to 2008 he took positions successively as the Deputy-Secretary-General of the German Commission for UNESCO in Bonn (Germany), as the UNESCO-Director and Representative for Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Russian Federation in Moscow, then for Jordan and Iraq in Amman (Jordan), and finally for Central America from Mexico to Panama in San José (Costa Rica). From 2008 to 2012, he worked at the Headquarters of UNESCO in Paris. Today he lives in retirement in Vienna, with branches of his multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious family residing in Cape Town (South Africa) and Moscow (Russia).

The subject of ‘living together in cultural diversity’ has been of great interest to him since the 1990s. With this book he hopes to contribute to a more objective public discourse in the West on Islam and the Middle East and to a better understanding between the two regions. To this end, he brings in various details and perceptions that have so far received little attention. At the same time, he allows the reader to participate in his own transformation from a romantic proponent of ‘multicultural societies’ to a more thoughtful and experienced observer who is always open, interested, caring, tolerant and respectful of other lifestyles and cultures, but also maintains a critical eye. In practice, this has earned him recognition and appreciation from partners all over the world.

Wolfgang H. Reuther is a co-author and co-editor of the ‘UNESCO Handbook’ (in German and Russian), and of the series ‘How to File Complaints on Human Rights Violation. A Manual for Individuals and NGOs’ published in several languages and editions for different countries. Besides his native German Wolfgang H. Reuther speaks fluent English, French, Russian and Spanish.

Dedicated to all friends, colleagues and other people from the Middle East  
who have given me an insight into their lives and societies  
and have made this book possible in the first place.

**Wolfgang H. Reuther**

# **What Makes the Middle East Tick**

**Insights of a Diplomat**

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## Foreword for the English edition

**T**his book was first published in German and originally written for a German speaking audience. The text may thus contain several allusions and examples concerning Germany that may seem unusual to the reader of the English edition. However, this can also provide insights into Germany and Germans, in addition to any knowledge about the Middle East.

The immediate reason for writing the German edition was the arrival of more than one million people from countries of the Middle East and other tribal societies in Germany from 2015 onwards.

Among Germans a great willingness to help and solidarity prevailed. At the same time, it became apparent that the Germans, including decision-makers, were poorly prepared. Besides organisational issues, there was and still exists a lack of knowledge about the specifics of the mentality, ways of thinking, convictions and needs the migrants brought with them from their societies of origin. This led to a high degree of uncertainty in dealing with each other, both in everyday life and in the public debate. This book was intended to assist in improving this situation.

The positive feedback on the German edition has prompted me to also publish this book in English, to make it available to a wider public. I hope it will be received just as favourably.

This book is not a research thesis, nor is it a psychological or religious analysis of a society or peoples of a particular region. This is simply a pragmatic collection of my personal experiences, observations, views and understandings gathered by living in Middle Eastern societies during my professional placement by the United Nations. I

have, in my own way, tried to find explanations by looking into historical and societal aspects and evidences, but I do not claim to be an expert in these matters.

I would also like to clearly state that it is not my intention to criticise any religion, society or groups of people, nor is it my wish to compare them with the western approach based on a belief that everything in the western world is right.

In cataloguing my experiences, I have checked with a number of friends and colleagues who lived and worked in the wider Middle East to ensure that my experiences were not a unique set of individual occurrences, but that they were part of a consistent pattern of behaviour embedded within the traditions and cultural practices going back several generations. It is reassuring to me that most of them have confirmed that they have had similar experiences, and that their observations are not dissimilar to mine.

Reading this narrative, different people may end up with different perspectives. Some might welcome the opportunity to obtain an authentic insight and learn more about their neighbours in those parts of the world, while others may find some of the issues raised here worthy of further debate and discussion or may even be offended.

Either way, if this book provokes some thought, further systematic study of these patterns and better understanding of almost a third of humanity on this planet, I will feel it has served a useful purpose.

My main purpose in writing this narrative is to enable people from the western culture to better understand the behavioural trends of Middle Eastern societies, and to adapt their approach and expectations whenever they are confronted with people from and topics about that region.

If that sounds overly ambitious, then helping international colleagues who work in this region to better understand behaviours, and

making their complex task a little bit easier, would have been a satisfactory achievement for this book. Understanding societal behaviours and generating strategies to work around these is typically a better approach than confronting and trying to transform behaviours, for whatever reason, and in the limited period available during the posting.

There is also a third group of professionals I have in mind: those involved in developing policies and strategies for dealing with refugees and migrants from Middle Eastern countries may find it helpful to consider the issues raised in this book, which hopefully enables them to create a better environment in which these new arrivals will seek integration as contributing and responsible citizens.

It is for the individual reader to decide how to look at the experiences laid down in this book. For my part I have tried to present them in an open, honest and empathetic way.

Lastly, English is one of five languages in which I have extensively worked throughout my career in the United Nations. While I have undertaken every effort to provide a true translation of the German edition, some “Germanisms” or imperfect word choices may have remained, and I kindly ask for your understanding in this regard.

Wolfgang H. Reuther

Vienna in January 2021

## Introduction

The first suggestion to write such a book came from a psychologist who became aware of my experiences in very different regions of the world. This should actually be called ‘working in foreign cultures’. In response to my objection that such reports today could be described as ‘politically incorrect’, she said that the authenticity of one's own experience outweighed preconceived opinions or even ideologies. Nevertheless, I hesitated for a long time for the reason given.

However, after 2015, when a very large number of asylum seekers from the Middle East, northern Africa and other Muslim regions came to Europe, predominantly Germany, and a great deal of uncertainty emerged in local dealings with them, it seemed appropriate and useful to me to write about my experiences in their countries of origin. I hope to contribute to a better understanding of these people and to a better anticipation, assessment and understanding of their behaviours, and any associated problems arising in western societies.

I would like to begin by saying that for many years, as an employee of an international organization of the United Nations, I have worked intensively and passionately towards fostering understanding and cooperation among peoples and nations. Throughout my life I have not only debated and discussed daily with people from other countries and cultures, but also lived and worked with them. This is only possible if one respects and accepts the other and those who think differently, those whose experiences differ from one's own experiences. In addition, both my own family and that of my daughter are international and intercultural. To this day I have friends and good acquaintances in almost all regions of the world, including the Arab region.

When I was still working for the German Commission for UNESCO in the 1990s, I devoted myself specifically to the topic of 'living together in cultural diversity'. In view of several xenophobic attacks in Germany at that time, I set up special projects to help us better understand the phenomenon of cultural diversity, and to identify ways of consciously shaping it. In 1996 I initiated German-Israeli-Palestinian teacher-student seminars, which took place from 1997 onwards, and which earned high level recognition from all sides.

I was then a follower of a 'multicultural' vision of society and had almost boundless tolerance and the belief that the world at large and the life of every single person could be improved by such an approach. At the same time, I felt rather uncomfortable with the view, widespread in certain intellectual circles locally, that any foreigner must be preferred to any German. For me, this fundamentally contradicts the principle of equality of the dignity of all people(s); it is discriminatory and pure nonsense.

My transfer as an international official of UNESCO in Paris to a country in the Middle East, Jordan, in May 2003 became a turning point in my life. I was still surprised by a statement an Italian friend made to me shortly before my departure. It was only then that he informed me that he had also spent three years in the Middle East. When I asked him in amazement why he had never mentioned this in the years of our acquaintance, he said: 'I developed a principle in this respect: to only talk about it with people who themselves have worked and lived in the region for a few years. My experience is that, at best, there is total incomprehension, but in many cases one is accused of racism as soon as one truthfully and authentically speaks of one's experiences in this region to people in Europe who do not have first-hand experience of this part of the world'.

I found this difficult to understand, because I knew him from years of acquaintance, even friendship, as a cultivated, tolerant and cosmopolitan person. However, I remembered his words shortly after I arrived in Amman. There I managed the UNESCO office, which employed international staff originating from countries as diverse as Papua New Guinea and Belgium, but above all a large contingent of local staff, both Arab Muslims and Arab Christians, including Muslim and Christian Palestinians.

Despite my many years of experience in dealing with multicultural and multinational teams on international postings, I quickly realized that I had arrived in a completely new world, and that most of my previous experiences and important aspects of my beliefs were in some way worthless or needed to be questioned. I had been sent to Jordan without any cultural preparation, and now had to struggle to find out in daily practice how this world functioned and how to deal with it. This also included the realization that there are thought processes and behaviours which were completely outside of my own imagination and logic, the latter determined by my German and European roots.

In a painful process I often had to fight and act against my inner convictions. I had to realize that there is a logic and a way of thinking that is fundamentally different from the one in which I had grown up, worked and lived, and which I realised was essentially limited to the European region.

I have learned - albeit with great difficulty - to recognize many specifics in the thinking and behaviour of people and the societies in which they live, and to look behind the façade. In addition, I had many debates with experts of this region, hailing from all over the world. A young man from Russia, originally from its Islamic province Tatarstan stood out. He was fluent in Arabic, had many years of experience throughout the region and innumerable contacts on all levels of these

societies. This man had even been consulted by U.S. officials, along with others, before the Iraq war, on the possible effects thereof. He had predicted exactly what would eventually happen.<sup>2</sup>

With the benefit of those insights, I was ultimately able to work very successfully in the Middle Eastern region - in terms of the demonstrable results of the office and the relations with my staff, governments and non-state actors in the entire region (notably Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and the UAE). This does not mean, however, that I was always able to fully understand or sympathise with all the ways of thinking and behaviour prevalent in the region, let alone accept them inwardly or even internalise them - I would have had to throw overboard many of my previous values, convictions and experiences.

Nevertheless, I have treated people with an open mind and interest in their (from my point of view) peculiarities, without denying my own principles, values and differences. I have tried to find out and analyse why they behave in certain ways and the historical, social or cultural reasons for it.

It was probably because of this approach that I was accepted and appreciated by many colleagues and partners from the region - although this was not obvious from the beginning. Some of them have even encouraged me to continue working in the Middle East. Last but not least, the Jordanian Queen Rania herself thanked me in a letter at the end of my mission for my contribution, a rather rare and by no means routine gesture which I am still proud of today.

In any case, I became very much aware during this time that tolerance is based solely on reciprocity and can only exist in everyday life in this way. If tolerance is only granted and practiced one-sidedly, then it ultimately undermines and destroys the very foundation upon which it is built. At the same time, it was helpful that I could always refer in my work to the universally recognized norms and values formulated within the framework of the United Nations.

On the following pages I will report honestly, and without ideological blinkers, on my experiences and ensuing conclusions. In this context, I would like to address the argument from the outset that any behaviour, or mentality, on which I am reporting also exists in western societies.

My position on this is as follows: There are similarities in human ways of thinking and behaviour everywhere. The big difference is the extent to which this behaviour or mentality occurs in a society or in a country, whether such behaviour is exhibited by a tiny minority or an overwhelming majority, or indeed whether it exceeds a critical point or not. Since I have also worked in other world regions, including Latin America, I have had many opportunities for comparison, which confirm this view. At the same time, this does not rule out the possibility that individual people may behave completely differently.

For example, we know and accept that the average Italian in his everyday mentality is strikingly different from the German, as is the Greek or the Spaniard. These differences are all too obvious, while at the same time they exhibit very many general human similarities. Strangely enough, such statements regarding people from the poorer countries of the world are often strictly rejected, probably for reasons of a misunderstood taboo or alleged 'political correctness'. I do not think that is consistent. In my experience the majority of mankind is quite close to each other in terms of mentality, and it is the Germans, and possibly also the Scandinavians and North Americans, who differ quite strongly (and not necessarily positively) from the rest, *inter alia* through an extremely moralizing and missionary zeal coupled with excessive self-doubt. A rather dangerous mixture.

One often also hears the reproach of 'generalization'. I contend that any description of a social system and even of a state in nature - be it biological, physical or chemical - requires a certain amount of generalization, otherwise rational communication is no longer possible.

Common sense dictates that there are always deviations or exceptions. As the proverb says: The exception confirms the rule. Therefore, this publication is also based on certain generalizations.

In this context, it can be said that the following experiences and findings essentially refer to Jordan and the Middle East region, where countries are very similar in most of the fundamental characteristics that are of interest here. However, they also largely apply to Muslim societies in countries outside the Middle East region, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, parts of India, the former Soviet Central Asia, large parts of the Caucasus (including Chechnya) and northern Africa, but also in countries of southern Europe such as Albania or Kosovo. In addition, the observations are - with corresponding nuances - also characteristic of many non-Muslim, but tribal, countries, for example in central and southern Africa. The reason for this will become apparent in later discussion.

The arrival of a person from Europe in the Middle East or *vice versa* is a huge cultural shock for both the new arrival and hosts, because of the serious differences in societies, patterns of thought and behaviour that I have mentioned. This book has achieved its purpose if it can help to provide some useful insights, knowledge and experiences about Middle Eastern societies to people in Europe or elsewhere who (like me when I arrived in Amman) have no, or only very vague, ideas about them.

This does not mean that all problems will be resolved and that one has to accept all behaviours and ways of thinking. This would only mean the import of the social norms of thought and behaviour of the migrants' societies of origin. But with improved understanding one obtains more reassurance in dealing with one another, which can contribute to the reduction of irritations in everyday life and the avoidance or settlement of conflicts. If hosts understand why the other person acts, or reacts, in a certain way, they can better adjust and make the

new arrivals understand, in a respectful and expedient way, which of their patterns of thought and behaviour are unacceptable in the host country. At the same time, a better understanding of the migrants' habits and ways of thinking and acting can also lead to better acceptance of them, and can even be enriching in certain respects, provided that they do not directly contradict the ways of thinking and acting in the host society.

I would be pleased if politicians, members of the judiciary or all those who deal with migrants professionally or through their voluntary commitment could also take important information for their work from these remarks and derive appropriate outcomes. Surely this book can also be helpful for those often very idealistic people who intend to work in these countries or who want to provide support in some way to the people of these countries.

In this respect, this book is intended for all those who want to understand those backgrounds a little better or who would like to feel more secure in dealing with people from the Middle Eastern region and far beyond.

In the following chapter I would like to explain why the – from a European perspective, peculiar – characteristics of the Arab world and beyond should be viewed and analysed primarily from a developmental historical perspective, and only secondly from a religious or cultural point of view.

## A predominantly historical perspective

To better understand the characteristics of societies and the ways of thinking and behaving in the Middle East and beyond, one must, first and foremost, take a historical approach, i.e. put a historical perspective before all other perspectives. Cultural and religious factors certainly play an important role - as in all comparisons of societies or civilizations - but in my opinion and experience they are rather subordinate to the historical and developmental background in this case.

Therefore, my assertion is that the fundamental lack and error of public discourse in Europe and elsewhere about the Middle East (and about migrants coming from there or other countries with Islamic or tribal societies) lies in the fact that this discourse focuses primarily on religious and cultural aspects (and, in relation to the former Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus, on Soviet ideological aspects as well), and completely ignores the historical development backgrounds. In addition, the entire topic is often strongly ideologized instead of soberly analysed.

Unfortunately, historical understanding, i.e., to view an event *within the historical context* (and preferably from the perspectives of the different forces involved, according to UNESCO rules), is being taught and appreciated less and less today. All too often the entire history is measured statically against the present social conditions in western societies, which themselves are ultimately only the result of a historical development, or against fashionable ideological guidelines. This also leads to the idealization of the present state in the West, and a temptation to regard it as the pinnacle of achievement and end of history, as done by the US-American scholar Francis Fukuyama in 1992<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, the great philosopher Hegel thought similarly in

the middle of the 19th century when he regarded the Prussian state as the *general ideal of humanity and the end point of social development*.

To not take the historical perspective primarily holds the danger of not only avoiding the true causes and problems of ‘otherness’, but also of alienating the ‘other’ even further, and of increasingly distancing oneself from them, instead of ultimately becoming aware of the common human foundations.

Both dominant sides of the political spectrum, of the political establishment and of public discourse in the West commit this mistake equally: those who reject everything foreign in principle, as well as those who, for purely ideological reasons, approve of everything foreign from the outset and thus, albeit rather indirectly, even emphasize what separates them and conceals what they have in common. From both approaches, the well-known ‘parallel worlds’ of immigrants in western countries emerge: either from rejecting immigrants in principle (leading to an internal union of migrants as a means of self-protection), or as a result of an exaggerated multicultural approach (and the derived immigrants’ ‘right’ to distance themselves from the society to which they have migrated, instead of gradually adapting to it). The exaggerated multicultural approach essentially encourages migrants to continue to adhere to all the ways of thinking and behaving brought along from the society to which they earlier belonged (and which are wrongly referred to as ‘cultural identity’), without taking into account the rules and traditions of the society where they have arrived.

The term ‘multicultural’ ultimately means nothing more than that everything should exist *side by side*, without answering the question of how these different groups of native people and immigrants from different places should communicate and live *together* (in practice often in parallel, without integration into an existing host society).

The basic problem here - and this is where the historical approach comes into play - is, however, to recognise that very many patterns of

thought and behaviour in the region are primarily neither religious nor cultural but are predominantly (I estimate to 85%) developmental in nature. The term ‘multicultural’ is therefore in this context misleading from the start.

Here I would like to briefly explain and justify my historical approach, which I further illustrate and detail in the following chapters, on the individual peculiarities I observed in the patterns of thought and behaviour in the Middle East.

In general, and for the most part, it can be said that the societies of the Arab countries concerned are at a stage of development which I would like to call ‘pre-modern’. From a European or western perspective, they are more typical of periods of social development that date back 700-2000 years.

This assessment in no way affects the dignity of the people who live in these societies - their dignity is in no way inferior to that of any other inhabitant of this planet. It also deliberately refrains from external signs borrowed from modern society (for example the use of modern technology such as smartphones or airplanes or houses instead of tents or palm huts)<sup>4</sup>, as these have so far not significantly changed the internal functioning of these societies. This assessment concerns only the question of how these societies function internally, according to which rules and on the basis of which institutions. It is precisely this aspect, which is very difficult for the outsider to access, that is of decisive importance for the thinking and acting and thus for the mentality of their population.

Without claiming to be scientific, which would go beyond the purpose of this publication that is based on personal experience, I would like to briefly refer critics or doubters to the following practical aspects of the development of human societies, which I have dealt with

on three continents. Today it is often inopportune to speak of ‘under-development’ or ‘backwardness’ (which is what the term ‘pre-modern’ actually means), and it is pointed out that not all countries and civilizations have to follow exactly the western path of development, which could possibly be a false one.

I fully agree with the second aspect and therefore also reject the views and policy of the West to judge all countries and peoples solely on the basis of their own postulations, and to impose on them the western models, which themselves are quite diverse and, in practice today, do not always correspond to the postulations. The West itself has repeatedly gone through many trials and tribulations in its development and must also concede these to other societies. In particular, I believe that all societies must find the strength and vision for their further development, and the possible overcoming of social obstacles, from within. As an aside, according to my own experience and knowledge, development should not be measured in years, but in generations.

All human societies are relatively slow to develop, especially their spiritual and institutional progress, and especially before progress takes hold of the masses. As a rule, progress and reforms are accepted and enforced by a new generation. As such, social progress should generally also be measured and appreciated on a generational scale. Against this background and taking into account the many external acceleration factors that exist today, Middle East societies likely need at least five, if not more, generations to fully arrive at modernity - or what we currently understand by that - if that is what they want.

However, with all the different models of development and their historical, cultural and religious backgrounds, I also believe that all human societies go through certain uniform stages of development and self-organisation. Organization into tribes and families, for example, is one such stage that applied to all human societies without exceptions. Particularly with economic development, certain forms of social expression (such as tribal society, slavery or feudalism and their