# Arab World Insights

Analyzing MENA culture using CARDS

by Hamid Lellou

Tell me what American culture is and I will tell you what Arab culture is. The Arab world, comprised of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries, stretches from Morocco on the Atlantic Ocean to Oman on the Indian Ocean. The element that makes this area exotic and attractive, yet raises feelings of mistrust and suspicion even among experts who continue to call for more U.S. involvement in the region, can be summarized in one world: culture. To help Marines understand the cultural differences and nuances among the people of the Arab world, I am proposing the development of an educational tool that will enhance the knowledge and understanding of operational culture: MENA CARDS (Culturally Aware Response to Dissecting Situation). MENA CARDS will consist of a deck of cards that will show Marines how to analyze situations from different perspectives (axes), and help them identify the cultural distance that must be overcome to prevent problems and/or avoid the second and third order effects (unwanted outcomes) due to cultural misunderstanding. This article will provide some insight into the content and use of these cards, and demonstrate how they can become a cultural guide to help Marines navigate the unmarked and potholed terrain of cultural variations in the MENA region.

Marine involvement in the region goes back to 1stLt Presley O'Bannon's assault on Derna, Libya, in 1804. However, for the next 150 yearsthe U.S. had almost no involvement in the region. During the Great Game, where the UK and France were dividing up the Middle East in anticipation of the collapse of the OHomen Empire, the U.S. was a mere spectator. It wasn't until the Cold War that the U.S. began developing allies and creating alliances with Middle
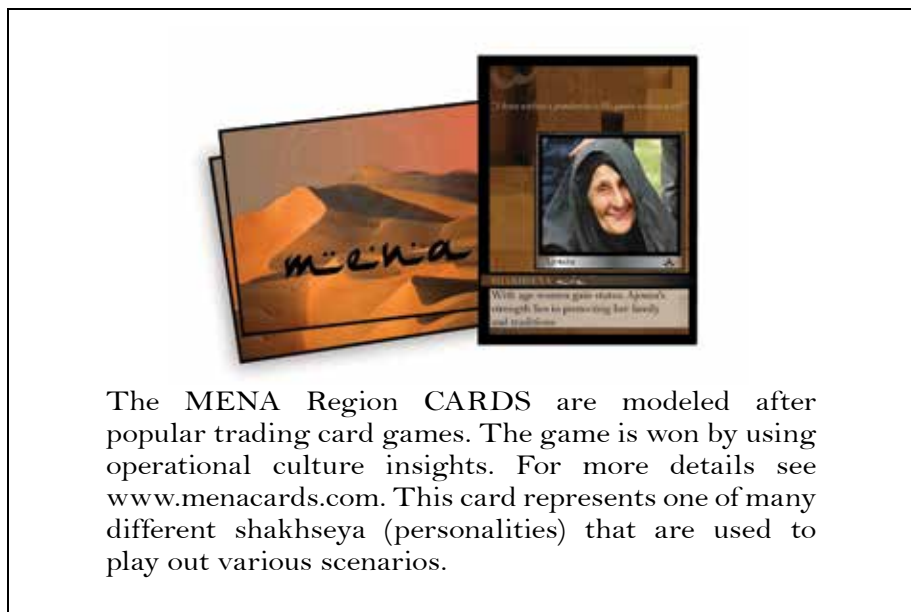
The MENA Region CARDS are modeled after popular trading card games. The game is won by using operational culture insights. For more details see www.menacards.com. This card represents one of many different shakhseya (personalities) that are used to play out various scenarios.

The MENA Region CARDS. (Graphics created by Claudia C. Lamparzyk.)

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Eastern countries to prevent the spread of Communism. Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a poll on American perception of Arabs/Muslims/Iranians showed an extremely close association of Muslims and Arabs with Iranians, labeling them as "threatening people," with "all" or "most" Muslims being described as "barbaric" and "cruel" (44 percent), "treacherous and cunning" (49 percent), and "warlike and bloodthirsty" (50 percent).[1] The events of 11 September 2001 created further distrust and a view of Arab nations as the collective hotbed for terrorism. Today, nearly 2 centuries since Marines first involvement in the MENA region, the diversity within this part of the world and the

cultural nuances that characterize its populations are still largely unknown. MENA culture is at best puzzling to most Marines, even to those who have already deployed to different countries an this region. However, Marines may also be surprised to learn that many MENA inhabitants are unaware of the nuances that characterize their respective cultures.

Origin of the CARDS Model

"You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run." Kenny Rogers' iconic lyrics remind us of the risky and challenging task of operating and cooperating within a different culture; however, Marines cannot gamble with their missions. The most deadly tactic is deception, and cultural nuance can be one of those deceptive elements. In addition, when engaging friendly partners, cultural misunderstandings can compromise hard-won

relationships. Therefore, to better understand cultural differences that are as nuanced as twins' personalities, the CARDS concept that I am proposing involves viewing culture from different axes based on Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Essentially, Einstein's theory suggests that the universe we live in includes four dimensions, the first three being what we know as space, and the fourth being *space-time*, a dimension where time and space are inextricably linked. If we apply Einstein's theory to culture, we can see that two people observing the same event in the same way could perceive the event occurring in two different ways, depending upon their cultural perspective. Just as Einstein's theory refers to the *physical distance* in which the event is observed, the CARD concept refers to the *cultural*

the axis of our own culture, it may very well resemble a Picasso painting, but if we look at it through the correct cultural axis, we may see a situation that is not so distorted or different than that which we recognize as our own.

Instead of flooding you with theoretical concepts, let's look at a few practical, concrete examples. For this article we will focus on the subject of women. The biggest cultural gap between the West and the Orient is women's role in society. It is also the most important, controversial, and misunderstood. As Hoda Elsadda, a leading scholar whose academic work focuses on women, stated, "The status of women in the Arab World has always been a highly sensitive political issue and it's always a challenge to address it."[2]

In addition, the United States'

> *If we apply Einstein's theory to culture, we can see that two people observing the same event in the same way could perceive the event occurring in two different ways, depending upon their cultural perspective.*

distance in which an event is observed and fills in the missing gaps so that the difference becomes negligible. What is valid in your culture, axis A, will be valid in the new culture, axis B, if you relate it to a specific topic and add in information that is missing from the new culture, axis B. For those who are math and science junkies, this may make perfect sense, but others may be asking, "What?" So let's look at this idea in another way. Around the same time Einstein introduced his theory, Pablo Picasso was creating what we now know as his most creative paintings. You may have seen some of Picasso's paintings and wondered what he could possibly be trying to convey. I admit, I had little appreciation for his work until I discovered that his paintings were based on Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The paintings are constructed as if the fourth dimension, "time," is passing. Therefore, if we look at a cultural situation in a rural village in Iraq through

continued security cooperation in the Middle East is, in part, dependent on the empowerment of women and girls. According to the 2002 Arab Human Development Report, women's empowerment was one of the three major deficits impeding development in the Arab world.[3] However, women's empowerment does not have the same definition in the MENA region as it does in the West, even through the eyes of educated Arab women, thus we must understand women's issues in a cultural context through multiple axes to avoid cultural gaffes.

Demonstrating the CARDS Model

So, let's begin. In the following real-life situations, we will look at the status of women and the role they have in urban Iraq and rural Yemen. Through the perspectives of multiple axes, we will analyze two Arab women's positions in their respective societies, demonstrating how the CARDS model works.

Urban Iraq. In 2009, when I was teaching Iraqi Arabic and operational culture for Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) at Camp Lejeune, one of the topics we covered was gender issues. I began by explaining the correlation between a woman's age and her status in Arab society. A young Marine officer then volunteered to tell a story that focused on the same issue, giving us a practical example from his own experience. In a previous deployment, he and his fellow Marines were investigating an apartment building in Baghdad. They asked a young Iraqi man about terrorist activities in the area, but he was not interested in cooperating. Instead, the young man ordered the young women of the house to go into the back rooms. All of a sudden, an old lady came out of her kitchen screaming at him and telling him to confirm that the terrorists were living in the apartment across from theirs. The Marines were confused by her authority and seriously concerned about the lady's safety. They removed her from the room, fearing that the young man would harm her for giving them information. What they did not realize, but would have helped in this situation, was to have an understanding of the old woman's status as viewed through the axes of customs, family, and security.

Course of action using CARDS:
- *Axis of family.* Women's status in the MENA region evolves throughout their lives: prepuberty, puberty, single, married, mother with children, divorced, widow, and postmenopause. During prepuberty, girls are viewed as children and have freedoms similar to boys their age. As girls enter puberty, families tend to protect the honor of their unmarried women by requiring them to be accompanied by a male relative and, in some families, wear a veil. This can also be based on security fears (fear of what others will do) and customs (fear of what others will think). However, after menopause, women are not at risk (sexually speaking); this state liberates them from familial and societal judgment.
- *Axis of customs.* Older women are respected because they have the potential to smear or harm the family

within the neighborhood. As an elderly woman's status shifts from that of a protected and/or hidden woman to a more expressive and outspoken central figure in the society, she gains charisma and credibility. Contrary to appearances, Arab people have always respected women, but because of the shifting status of women, that respect is now expressed differently.

• *Axis of security.* It is forbidden to harm an elderly woman, thus the woman in the scenario was not in any danger. She was instead protecting her family and the community who were at risk by having criminals living next door.

Rural Yemen. Let's travel now to the poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen, where the rural tribal areas are the most deprived, lacking education, and imprisoned by ancient traditions including revenge killings. Because al-Qaeda finds a home where youth are frustrated and conflict abounds, resolving tribal conflicts and ensuring cooperation between local tribes is essential. Let's imagine a scenario where Marines stationed in Yemen are assigned to develop training for men to promote conflict resolution. What they find, however, is that local men are suspicious of any new initiative, particularly those brought in by outsiders.

Given the fact that Yemen is the most conservative country in the world, where women are known to be the most secluded and belittled, Marines may not think it is possible to specifically empower women to help tackle two of Yemen's most prevalent social problems—tribal conflict and youth frustration (both of which are preventing rural Yemeni people from development, and throwing more and more youth into the hands of criminals). However, because Marines cannot penetrate these areas and win friends easily, established women's groups can be mediators for change in their communities. Strong, brave, and assertive women community leaders are capable of influencing the minds of men. Let's look at one example of a woman named Lima, as taken from a video documentary of an organization called Partners for Democratic Change: Yemen. Lima was the first born of 11 children:

When I was young I loved looking after the camels. I used to play and run around outside, but as I grew, my personality had to change. People started to say my behavior was unacceptable. I felt weighed down by expectations.

At age 18, Lima began attending Partners For Democratic Change: Yemen meetings in her village. "The meeting changed me as a person," she said. Her family noticed and would yell at her to quit. "My father was furious and begged me to stop working with this organization. For two months we were on bad terms." But with time she was able to recruit the men in her life to become allies in her efforts. Lima convinced her father to broker a deal with tribal leaders to reduce dowry prices, thus helping frustrated youth to marry. Her father now says:

I swear that things have begun to change in our area since this initiative. Marriage customs have changed. Now people are more aware. We realize that our children have been robbed of their education by these conflicts.[4]

Course of action using CARDS:
• *Axis of tradition.* We hear a lot about traditions in the Middle East and how they are valued. One cause of the low level of women's advancement is the complexity and rigidity of the cultural, social, and economic environments that encompass the work aiming at promoting women's progression.[5] However, as unlikely as it may seem, people are indeed rational. When you are culturally savvy, you can find ways to introduce initiatives through a traditional path, and people are more likely to change their perceptions and/or accept new ideas, even when they come from within rather than from outsiders.

• *Axis of family.* Marines are constantly told that men are dominant and within families and communities, fathers and husbands make their decisions unilaterally. Because the Arab society publically operates as a patriarchal system, wives and daughters are excluded from formal conversations. However, the reality can be quite different, particularly when women are empowered and educated. An empowered woman can approach her stubborn father and turn him into an ally. Once again, because of their charisma and the status they enjoy within their families, conservative or not, women can be leveraged to change a society's traditionally held views.

• *Axis of education.* As is true anywhere, education is the key to developing a country where its citizens respect laws that in turn defend their rights. Looking back at our scenario, the initiative was successful because women leading the organization were educated and able to train their uneducated friends, neighbors, and relatives who would later become social activists in their own right. Women were then able to identify a specific problem (dowry prices, in the example above) and educate and empower men to find a simple solution to a longstanding social problem.

• *Axis of security.* Unlike the previous scenario where Marines were dealing directly with criminals, in this case, empowered women took on a social issue that was at the root of conflict, planting seeds of awareness among the men in their community. As seen earlier, it is possible to leverage skilled women to counter criminal activity. When we say women take care of their men and children, this task is not limited just to childrearing, cooking, and laundry—it
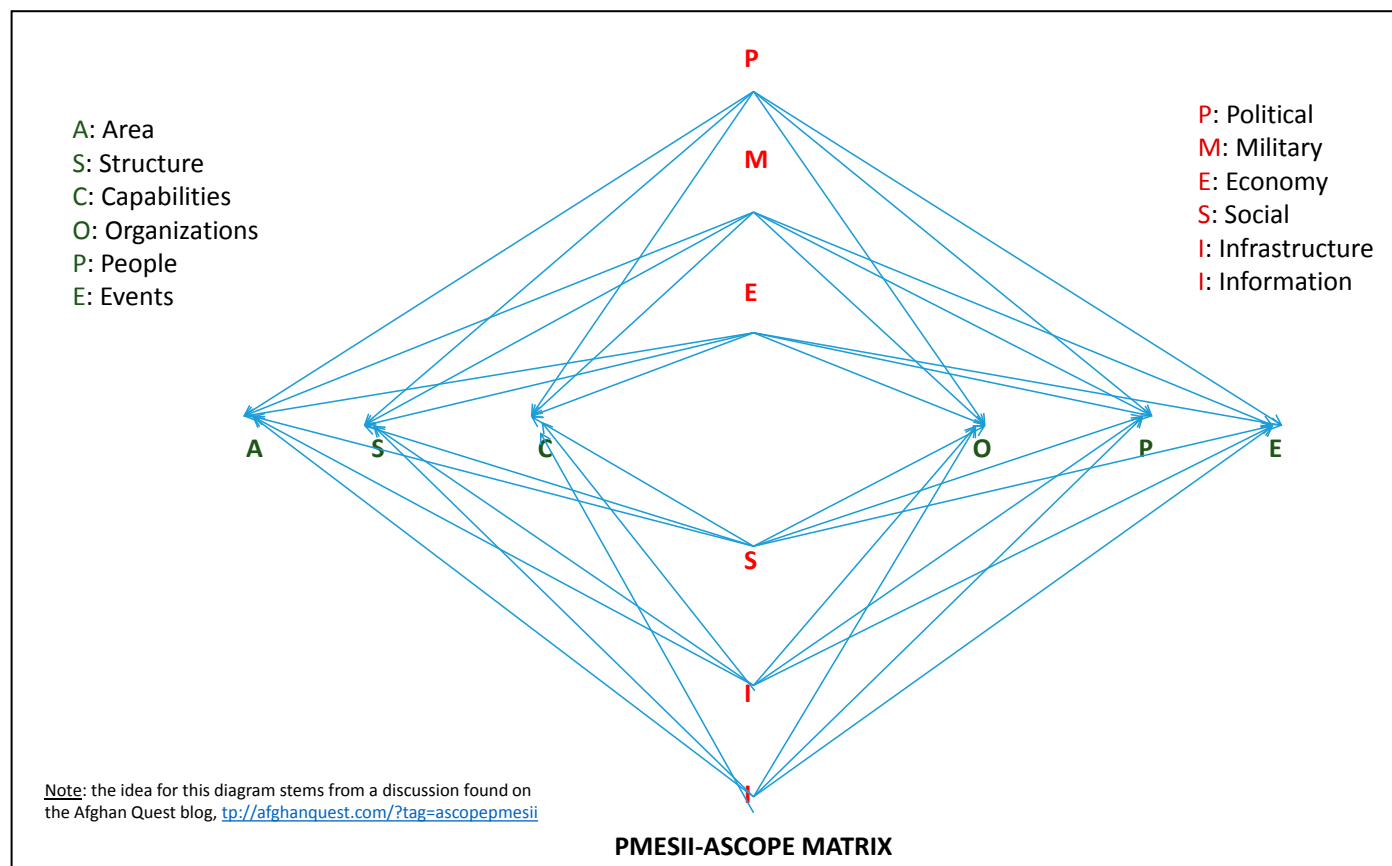
> *Marines may not think it is possible to specifically empower women to help tackle two of Yemen's most prevalent social problems—tribal conflict and youth frustration. . . .*

A: Area
S: Structure
C: Capabilities
O: Organizations
P: People
E: Events

P: Political
M: Military
E: Economy
S: Social
I: Infrastructure
I: Information

Note: the idea for this diagram stems from a discussion found on the Afghan Quest blog, tp://afghanquest.com/?tag=ascopepmesii

PMESII-ASCOPE MATRIX

Figure 1.

implies taking care of the society, bringing patience and reason to a conflict confronting the local community.

The previous examples used only a few of the CARDS methods' axes, and represent just two of hundreds of scenarios that can be analyzed through the use of this concept of combining multiple axes to analyze a given topic. Once Marines study these axes and realize that there are multiple factors at play in any given situation, they will begin to mentally and carefully layer them in order to fully assimilate the nuances. There are several anthropological frameworks used to study culture including the five dimensions of operational culture for the warfighter (environment, economy, political, social, belief systems); PMESII (politics, military, economy, social, information, infrastructure); ASCOPE (area, structure, capabilities, organizations, people, events); and handbooks that help Marines culturally analyze their area of responsibility. (See Figure 1.) While some of these tools are more

suitable for use at the tactical level, others are better aligned for use at the operational level. CARDS is not a new anthropological framework but a fusion of those listed above. CARDS will allow Marines to combine several frameworks and acquire a broader, deeper cultural analysis of a situation at any given time.

Contribute to CARDS

Marines who have deployed to the MENA region have an abundance of operational stories to share that can enhance this concept and the final CARDS product. I invite you to share some of your cultural experiences. If you would like to send a story or arrange a meeting, please contact me at hlellou@menacards.com. Your input, from your rich experiences, is invaluable in developing the best product to achieve culturally accurate responses.

Notes

1. Gerges, Fawaz A., *America and Political Islam*, Press Syndicate, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England, 1999, p. 7.

2. Elsadda, Hoda, "Women in the Arab World: Reading Against the Grain of Culturalism," *International Politics and Society*, University of Manchester, Manchester, England, 2004, p. 41, accessed at www.fes.de on 10 January 2014.

3. Published by the United Nations, Regional Bureau for Arab States, Development Programme Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, 2002.

4. Partners in Change, "Empowering Local Change: GE and Partners for Democratic Change," June 2013, video accessed at youtube.com.

5. Abouzeid, Ola, *Project of Arab Women Empowerment Current Status and Future Prospects*, Arab Women Organization, Cairo, Egypt, 2008, accessed 26 January 2013.