An accurate and nuanced knowledge of the Middle East is important in understanding the behavior of residents there, and understanding their perceptions of foreigners. Unfortunately, both sides -- Middle East and West -- hold a number of common misperceptions about each other, informed more often by stereotypes than by facts or firsthand knowledge.
**Common Western perceptions about Islam and the Middle East**

***Perception: "Arab" and "Muslim" refer to the same people.***

Arabs are people who speak Arabic as a native language and identify themselves as Arabs; Muslims are those who practice the religion of Islam.

Many Arabs are not Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs. More than a billion people in the world are Muslims, but fewer than 15 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arabs. The majority of Muslims live outside the Middle East, in places like Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan.

The confusion between these terms may stem from the fact that Arabic is the primary language of the Islamic faith, just as Latin was for Catholicism until recently. Therefore, all Muslims are expected to know at least a few key words and phrases in the Arabic language.

***Perception: Islam is fundamentally different from Christianity and Judaism.***

Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same god. All three are [monotheistic](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/monotheism_monotheistic.html) religions, with many common doctrines, texts, and beliefs.

Muslims respect the same prophets as Jews and Christians, including Abraham, Noah, Moses, and Jesus. In fact, Muslims consider Islam to have existed since Abraham, with Judaism and Christianity being intermediate forms of the final religion revealed to Muhammad.

Jews and Christians are specifically protected in the [Quran](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/quran.html) as Peoples of the Book, since Islam considers both the [Torah](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/torah.html) and the New Testament to be revelations from God, though flawed in the process of human transmission. As an example of a difference in interpretation, Muslims do not believe Jesus is the son of God; this acceptance would contradict the Islamic belief in the uniqueness of God's divinity.

Like Judaism, Islam has a strong legal tradition that describes the rules by which members of the religious community should live. Some of these rules -- like the dietary restriction against eating pork -- are very similar.

***Perception: Islam is oppressive toward women.***

Islam was a major reform for women and granted them new rights, including the right to agree to their marriage partner, the right to education, and a guaranteed share of family inheritance.

Muslim societies, however, may interpret those rights very differently. In most Middle Eastern countries, the law allows women to vote, work outside the home, and even run for office, but -- as is the case in other countries, too -- custom and practice may not always be as liberal as the law allows.

Just as it is in the United States, the "proper" role of women is a subject of debate. Some Muslim groups consider a woman's role in the home and family primary and seek to prevent inappropriate behavior -- sexual and otherwise -- by restricting fashion choices or independent access to public life. Others believe women should have equal and independent roles in society, without restriction by the law, family, or custom.

The seemingly contradictory rights and restrictions for women in some Muslim countries may seem very foreign. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women vote, work, and have excellent access to education, but they must wear a restrictive veil and are prohibited from driving cars.

But religion is not always conservative in its attitude toward women. There are scholars today who advocate an Islamic feminism, using the basic texts of Islam as justification. These feminists demand that the rights women are given in the Quran replace the restrictive customs of society.

***Perception: The Middle East is one big sandy desert with lots of camels, populated by... men in turbans and long white robes... women in black with their faces covered... men waving long curved swords... harems with scantily clad women serving one man... husbands with four wives... rich oil***[***sheikhs***](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/sheikh.html)***... and terrorists.***

The Middle East and the Islamic world are diverse societies. More Muslims live in fertile plains and fishing villages than in deserts. Clothing and customs for men and women vary enormously in different countries and depend on variables like class, education, political structures, urban vs. rural location, and individual preference.

... "[Harem](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/harem.html)" refers simply to the family's part of the house in gender-segregated societies where strange (unknown) men were not admitted. Most families in the Middle East consist of one husband and one wife, their children, and perhaps one or more of the husband's or wife's parents.

... While there are individuals in the Middle East who have certainly become very wealthy because of oil, the majority of people in the region are either poor or middle class.

... Acts of terrorism are carried out by only a few. While there is some ambivalence among Muslims about attacks carried out by Palestinian extremists against Israelis -- since many Muslims consider this a legitimate national struggle against a much stronger enemy -- there is wide condemnation of attacks against civilians.

***Perception: Muslims hate all non-believers, and our cultural differences are insurmountable.***

Muslim societies through history have tended to be more tolerant of religious minorities -- especially Jews and Christians -- than the West has.

The Middle East has a long history of trade, communication, and cultural exchange with Europe and the United States, as well as other cultures around the world.

Some groups in the Middle East today disagree with U.S. foreign policies, but this is a political rather than a purely religious issue. While it's true that there are those in the Middle East who mistrust extremes of Western cultural influence and want to protect local cultural norms and practices, many Muslims want to adopt (or adapt) other aspects of Western culture and technology.

***Perception: Muslims are fanatics.***

While some Muslims have a very strict interpretation of how one should live as a Muslim, there is enormous diversity in the Islamic world -- just as there is in predominantly Christian and Jewish societies -- in how religion is practiced daily and how religious law should be applied.

***Perception: Islam is violent.***

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| Most Muslims condemn violence as heartily as any non-Muslim and resent being presumed violent on the basis of a shared religion or the rhetoric of a particular group. Muslims often ask, "Did Timothy McVeigh's bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City mean *all* Christians are terrorists?"News stories about "Islamic terrorism" often imply that Islam upholds the idea of jihad as a holy war fought against nonbelievers. For most Muslims, the most important meaning of "jihad" is intensely personal; it is the internal struggle to be a moral person. "Jihad" can also refer to the struggle for social justice or the defense of the Islamic community against outside attack.The Quran permits war to defend and expand the Islamic community, but it sets strict limits: No one should be forced to convert; and in battle, the lives and livelihood of noncombatants must be protected.***Perception: Muslims are all foreigners who cannot adapt to Western societies.*** |  |
| http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/images/singpix.gif |
| Muslims live normal lives in societies throughout the world -- shopping, cooking, telling jokes, going to work, raising families. They also have a long history in America. For example, a large proportion of the African slaves brought to America in the 18th and 19th centuries were Muslim. Arab immigrants came to this country in waves starting in the late 19th century; most were Christian, but many were Muslim.While it is difficult to get an accurate count, it is estimated that there are about six million Muslims in the United States. Among this six million are Muslims who were born and raised here, including African American Muslims, and others who migrated here from cultures around the globe. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States.***Perception: Muslims live in medieval times, unable to adapt to the current world.***Muslims live in the modern world. Even the most conservative Islamists are trying to work out how to live as good Muslims in the present, not how to turn back the clock.**Where do these misperceptions and stereotypes come from?**Since before the [Crusades](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/glossary/term/crusades.html), European visitors to the Middle East have often exaggerated the differences between themselves and local Middle Eastern communities, concentrating on the "exotic" rather than the similarities. The concept of "Orient" that was invented by Europeans was based on these fanciful perceptions rather than on facts. The insistence on creating and upholding negative stereotypes worked to justify wars, colonial expansion, and the exploitation of native peoples and resources. This trend, called Orientalism, continues today.Stereotypes are often perpetuated by the media. When the news media reports on violence in the Middle East, there is rarely an effort made to find quotes (or at least air them) from those who condemn the acts. For example, a few Palestinians celebrating the events of September 11, 2001, were shown on CNN, but little airtime was given to the Palestinians who were mourning. In general, fast-breaking and headline news tends to concentrate on the negative or threatening aspects of other societies in times of conflict, but to ignore the productive aspects of these cultures when they are at peace. |  |
| http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/images/singpix.gif |

Movies, travel agencies, advertisers -- the outlets and agencies that form our ideas of the Middle East and elsewhere -- generally emphasize the exotic and strange. Stereotypical images are used repeatedly as shorthand to evoke a particular reaction. A sheikh in a robe, for example, suggests the erotic and mysterious, and this image can be used to sell everything from movie tickets to cigarettes to perfume.

**Perceptions about the United States**

People in other countries, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, often have misperceptions about life in America. Ironically, they get their images of the United States from American movies, popular music, and television shows. And where the national media is run by a foreign government, particularly one that doesn't agree with U.S. foreign policies, it may choose to reinforce negative stereotypes of the U.S.

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| Consider the following common perceptions about Americans and how they have developed:***Perception: All Americans are rich.***While it is true that most Americans enjoy a higher standard of living than most people in the Middle East, many in the Middle East assume that all Americans live the lifestyle of the rich and famous reflected in popular TV series like*Beverly Hills 90210* and in movies. This perception does not take into account the many socioeconomic levels at which Americans live.***Perception: Americans have no family values.*** |  |
| http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/images/singpix.gif |

Just as there is a vast diversity in ethnicities, religions, cultures, and language groups in the United States, there are also broad differences in the definition of family values here. For some outside America, the high U.S. divorce rate and the practice of putting older relatives in nursing homes rather than caring for them in the family home are used as evidence that the American family structure has broken down completely.

***Perception: Americans have no morals; all American women are promiscuous.***

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| America is sometimes seen as a sexually permissive society, where casual sexual activity, near nudity, teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, HIV/AIDS, and drug use are common. The reality, however, is that none of these characterizations is the norm.***Perception: Women are oppressed in the U.S.***While some Americans would agree with this statement, pointing to something like the difference in wages paid to male and female workers as evidence, many Americans would not agree with the view held by some foreign societies that America's casual attitude toward sex, fashions that bare women's bodies, and commercial exploitation of images of women harm women's dignity and expose them to sexual danger. Nor would many in the U.S. agree that the American ideal of equality -- men and women taking on the same roles in the work force -- denigrates the role of mothers in society.***Perception: America is hypocritical.*** |  |
| http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/images/singpix.gif |

America's values of democracy, freedom, and economic opportunity are sometimes seen as being only for Americans, despite what American leaders may say publicly. It is thought that the United States is willing to defend these values abroad only when this defense is compatible with strategic interests. Some believe that America is the new world imperial power, supporting Israel and corrupt, oppressive governments in the Middle East and around the world for its own gain and to the detriment of the Arab people and Muslims. Furthermore, it is sometimes said that to make a profit, the U.S. harms local cultures by exporting its commercialized cultural products around the world.

**Moving beyond stereotypes**

By recognizing the stereotypes we hold about others -- and others hold about us -- we can begin to understand each other better and communicate our positions more clearly.