

## Introduction

To many Americans, it seems as though the Islamic world is our enemy. But the Islamic world is not our enemy. *Ignorance* is our enemy.

It is crucial that we listen and understand one another's perspective, and not allow misconceptions to fester. This does not mean we must always agree with these perspectives. But we do have a responsibility to respect one another's opinions as part of healthy, intellectual stimulation.

Culture is like the air we breathe; it cannot be seen, but it is there--and it is essential to life. As individuals of moral character, we have a custodial responsibility to shape and protect our culture. So exactly how do we go about doing that? How do we promote a healthy culture to our children, neighbors, and society as a whole?

Step one is to admit our ignorance, recognize and dispel gross generalizations and, finally, begin to influence and inspire changed attitudes toward cross-cultural differences among family, friends, and coworkers.

Because the Middle East is such a large, diverse region, where the status of women varies significantly from country to country, as does the Islamic culture, this book concentrates on the Arab Muslims of the Kingdom of Bahrain.

When discussing Bahrain, the first question I often hear is, "Where is Bahrain? I've never heard of it."

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an archipelago of thirty-three islands located in the Arabian Gulf (also known as the Persian Gulf) that is connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway. It has been home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet for more than fifty years.

Bahrain has a total area of 688 square kilometers (275 square miles), which is three and a half times the size of Washington, DC. As an archipelago, Bahrain does not share a land boundary with another country, but does have a 161-kilometer (100-mile) coastline.

Although the first Gulf state to discover oil (1932), Bahrain's economy has diversified greatly since then. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Bahrain has the fastest growing economy in the Arab world. The 2005 United Nations World Investment report proclaimed the Kingdom as the first country to attract direct foreign investment in the Gulf, thus ranking twenty-seventh globally. Bahrain is now widely recognized as *the* financial hub of the Middle East.

In addition, the Kingdom has the freest economy of seventeen countries in the Middle East. In 2007, Bahrain was ranked the nineteenth freest country in the world, according to the 2008 Index of Economic Freedom, published by the Heritage Foundation/*Wall Street Journal* ([www.heritage.org/index](http://www.heritage.org/index)). According to these results, Bahrain became one of the Arabian Gulf's most advanced economies and most progressive political systems after gaining its independence from Great Britain in 1971.

Of the population, now greater than one million, 529,446 are Bahrainis and 517,368 represent the global expatriate community throughout the world. The ten-year population census, released in January 2008, indicates a 5.7 percent increase.

An Islamic country where 85 percent of the Bahraini society practices Islam, 60-65 percent of Bahrainis are Shia. The ruling family is Sunni. Other welcomed and practicing faiths include

Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism. Bahrain is known for its authentic Arab heritage and reputation for being relatively liberal and modern.

Bahrain has been ruled by the Al Khalifa family since 1783. The country is a constitutional monarchy that gained full independence from the UK in 1971.

His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa ascended to the throne in March 1999 following the death of his father. The government is led by His Highness Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the prime minister, and His Highness Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the Crown Prince and the King's eldest son. (Al correlates to family, bin means son of; therefore, His Highness Shaikh Salman is the son of Hamad of the Khalifa family.)

My firsthand experience within Bahrain began in December 2005 when I visited my husband who was working in the Kingdom. I had no idea where exactly in the Middle East this Muslim country was located. My "experience" was quickly transformed into "emersion." I came to Bahrain with no preconceived expectations. I viewed that initial two-week trip as simply an adventure and an experience that I probably would never have a chance to repeat. Since then, however, I have made eleven trips to the Kingdom staying four to five weeks at a time. By no means an expert on its culture, I have nevertheless listened, observed, asked questions, read voraciously, and met and made new friends.

Some aspects of this culture's social fabric remain confusing, such as its ongoing debate over whether Muslim women should or should not be veiled and cloaked (and in heat-absorbing black yet!), while others are merely unfamiliar religious customs, such as Ramadan, that are better understood while living in Bahrain. I am reminded nevertheless that many Muslim Arabs in Bahrain share a similar confusion about Americans and some of our social practices and behaviors.

With more than one billion Muslims, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and, undoubtedly, the most misunderstood. The average American is unfamiliar with how the Arab Muslim culture is integrated within its religion. The Bahraini Arabs mistakenly assume American views are controlled by special interest groups that are opposed to Islam.

In our post-9/11 world, damaging stereotypes and false generalizations swirl. Despite the fact that public polls indicate Americans' new willingness and interest in learning about Arab Muslims and their fabric of society, many myths and misconceptions thrive.

There is profound ignorance on both sides between what we know to be true and what we choose to believe. I will address the most prevalent generalizations, which arose through interviews with both Americans and Bahraini Arabs, and try to dispel the most rabid inaccuracies.

History has shown that a lack of knowledge breeds ignorance; ignorance breeds mistrust; mistrust breeds fear; fear breeds strife, and strife breeds hatred. Life is just too short and precious to be held captive by hatred.

Since humanity continues to be persecuted in the name of religion, region, nationality, and language, it is a commendable contribution to strive toward harmony. Despite the significant differences in religion, politics, and culture, America and Bahrain share the most common desires for humanity; peace, respect, love of family, aspiration, and sustenance. How wonderful it would be if we all extended an olive branch of harmony and respect, regardless of cultural and religious beliefs, when meeting and discussing one another's society.

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