

Knowing the Cultural Context of our enemy in the Middle East

To properly configure any counterinsurgency operation, one must first understand the nature of the enemy's insurgency—without exception. Each insurgency is different from the last and the next, and so each counter-insurgency operation should be as well. Thus, understanding the cultural context of Arabs, Persians, Islam, and the Middle East is critical in a large percentage of this current global war.

A lot of students have asked me for recommended readings about Islam, Arab Culture, etc., for their own personal and professional edification. I have made a lot of recommendations, but I have recently tried to wrestle this list down to five books that I think are good starting points. If you know me well, then you also know that I want to select books that will not just empower broader understanding, but also possess militarily scientific value as well, especially as it pertains to insurgency, counterinsurgency, and our current war. Experts may disagree with my choices, but I like them, especially if one approaches these reads with a "So what does this mean to me in this war?" attitude. I provide only five books because nobody has unlimited time, especially professional military officers in a wartime army. You may find some of the chapters a bit dry, but if you keep your "so what?" analysis fresh, you will find all of it very engaging. Finally, keep in mind that this list is not comprehensive, and neither are the perspectives or acuity of the authors: these books represent a starting point. I hope you enjoy them.

1. Kepel, Gilles. *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Translated by Anthony F. Roberts. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

The name says it all. Closest thing that I know of to a one-stop-shop for understanding this key tenet of our enemy's mobilization strategy.

2. Denouex, Guilain. *Urban Unrest in the Middle East: A Comparative Study of Informal Networks in Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.

A real zinger. Great scholarship. Powerful analysis. If you understand the power of understanding networks in clandestine organizations (like insurgencies), then you will love this work's insights. If you recognize that the Middle East has a multitude of very idiosyncratic cultural structures, then this book provides you one lens through which to view them.

3. Wiktorowicz, Quintan, editor. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004.

Hot off the presses and highly acclaimed, this work applies the newest form of revolutionary theory (the theoretical study of how and why people revolt)—social movement theory—to Islamic-specific movements. Social movement theory examines revolutions from the organizational perspective, and since the key "organization" in revolutions is the resistance movement (within which resides the insurgency), I love this book's scope and analysis for what it offers today's army.

4. Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001.

Bottom line: Israel is an issue everywhere in the Arab world. This book provides a great history and analysis of the conflict with what I think is a relatively objective presentation of both sides—something that is both very difficult and extremely rare in today's world.

Knowing the background behind the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is important to understanding the social and political claims of all Arabs against Israel—whether you agree with them or not.

5. Gunaratna, Rohan. *Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Sloppy, unorganized, but still extremely solid, this book provides an outstanding review of our enemy's organization early in this war. Rushed to press after the 9/11 attacks, Gunaratna, who was a serious scholar of AQ and terrorism before 9/11 made it hip, didn't have time to put the polish on it. Though success against AQ is quickly making some of this book less applicable, it remains an excellent resource for anyone trying to understand this organization. Its biggest shortcoming is some of his unsubstantiated claims: for whatever reason, he doesn't always cite the exact origin of how he knows something, but readers shouldn't dismiss those claims as untrue, even if it does run against the grain of quality scholarship, especially given the pressure to get the book printed in the fall of 2001. His follow-up book should be even better...it's way late and I can't wait to get my hands on a copy.