

Wolfgang H. Reuther

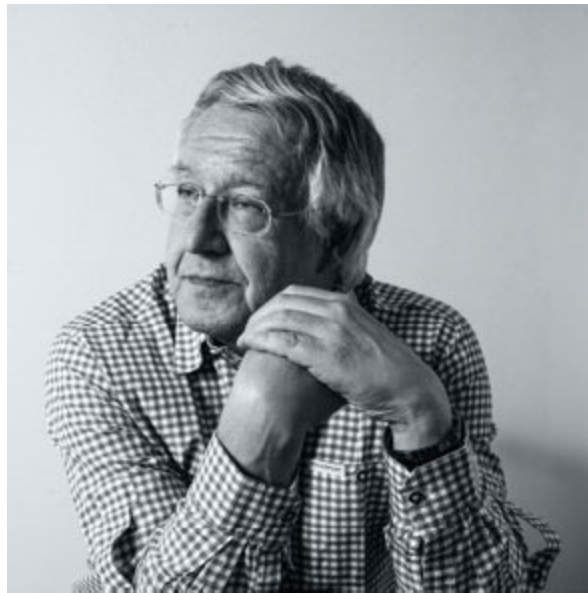
What Makes the Middle East Tick

Insights of a Diplomat



About the author

Wolfgang 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.¹



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

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Foreword for the English edition

This 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 firsthand 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.