



Seeking

UNDERSTANDING

How We Relate to Muslims and Arabs

By Madison Lunnen

In 1975 in Indonesia, a newly arrived LDS missionary climbed into bed around four in the morning, exhausted from his journey and ready for sleep. However, that rest was met with an interruption. Down the street, the cry of “Allahu Akbar!” (“God is most great!”) was being piped through loudspeakers. Muslims were being called to dawn prayer. That night the young missionary received his first lesson in Islamic culture.

That missionary was Chad Emmett. Forty-three years later, he has a PhD in geography and is an associate professor at BYU. Still affected by his missionary experience, he continues to study Islamic culture.

Mormons and Muslims

In 2016, Emmett published an article in the *Arab World Geographer* titled “Living and Traveling in the Arab and Moslem Worlds.” This article was written in response to what Emmett calls the “anti-Islamic contagion” triggered by terrorist attacks around the world in recent years. According to Emmett, Latter-day Saints share a vast array of religious similarities with Muslims. For example, both religions pray, help the poor, and fast. Hanif Ibadurrahman Sulaeman, a Muslim student at BYU, confirmed these similarities. Among these commonalities, he cited a focus on family values and prayer—in fact, his parents allowed him to study in the United States because of the standards that BYU students are required to live by.

Americans and Arabs

While the connections between Mormons and Muslims are not hard to see, the similarities between the general American population and the general Arab population are less obvious. “There really is a gulf between the two civilizations, and it’s mainly because they don’t know each other,” Emmett said in an interview. “They’ve never interacted at a personal level; all they know is what they’ve seen in the news, in the movies, [and] from political leaders.”

From his years of travels, Emmett has drawn four conclusions in regard to the two cultures:

1. Americans and Arabs are alike in more ways than not.
2. Arabs are generally friendlier and more hospitable than Americans.
3. Even when they disapprove of US policies in the region, Muslims and Arabs usually recognize that individual Americans do not represent the US government.
4. Both Americans and Arabs can be quick to rely on stereotypes and suspicion, but their opinions can change in a positive way once they get to know each other.

What Can You Do?

With terrorism, foreign aid, and oil, the Middle East has a large impact on American lives. However, the rise of ISIS and President Donald Trump’s perceived discriminatory stance on Muslims through the travel ban have pushed our relationship with the Middle East into the public arena.

“You can’t be a citizen of the world and not be impacted by what’s going on in the world—in the Middle East or in the Islamic world,” said Emmett. He said it is crucial that we form positive connections with the Arab and Islamic cultures.

How do we do that? First, we have to understand the people. Dr. Emmett offered several options for familiarizing

ourselves with Muslims and Arabs:

- Travel to safe Muslim or Arab countries such as Morocco, Jordan, Malaysia, or Indonesia.
- Visit a mosque and ask Muslims about their faith.
- Take Dr. Emmett’s Middle East geography class.
- Read the Koran.

And, according to Sulaeman, the Muslim BYU student we spoke to, one of the best things we can do is quite simple—be open to other religions and people.

We must learn to separate a handful of extremists from the rest of the Muslim world. Take the time to get to know the Muslims and Arabs in your area. Talk about religion; talk about culture; form a connection with them. In our increasingly tumultuous world, our positive relationships with Arabs and Muslims will prove essential. □

“There really is a gulf between the two civilizations, and it’s mainly because they don’t know each other.”

—DR. CHAD EMMETT