

Observations On the Concept of Risk and Arab Culture

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and

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ABSTRACT

Western science has developed powerful techniques for modeling and aiding important social decisions. One such technique is risk assessment. The relationship of risk to cultural context is apparent in a number of its facets, including its dependence on values and the (potential) clash between probabilistic versus deterministic views about states of the future. This paper is an examination of the concept of risk using as a lens ideas and concepts about risk that are prevalent in Western culture, and applying these concepts to existing literature (in English) on Arab culture that provides information relevant to risk. The goal of the paper is to amplify our understanding of how Arab culture conceptualizes elements of risk and its assessment as understood and practiced in the West. A background for this synthesis is an overview of the history of risk in Western cultures that traces the evolution of modern ideas about risk as both a mathematical and a social development. Current research on risk in Western literature is used to frame key risk issues in terms of their potential fit (or misfit) with features of Arab culture. The paper concludes with a number of speculative recommendations for research and practice that suggest a cautious approach with regard to applying risk-related principles in Arab cultural contexts that place a relatively high value on traditionalism.

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