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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY INFORMATION REPORT

COUNTRY Lebanon

REPORT NO. [] (b)(3)

SUBJECT Controversy in the Daily Star between Lebanese and "Westerners" - Current Attitude of Lebanese towards US Residents - Arab Psychology

PLACE ACQUIRED (BY SOURCE) Lebanon

DATE ACQUIRED (BY SOURCE) [] (b)(1)
[] (b)(3)

RESPONSIVE TO	
1	2
CD NO.	
OO/C NO.	
ORR NO.	
DAS NO.	
OCI NO.	

DATE (OF INFO.) 11 Sept 52

DATE DISTR. 7 Nov 52

NO. OF PAGES 1

NO. OF ENCLS.

SUPP. TO REPORT NO.

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SOURCE DOCUMENTARY

[] letter dated 11 September 1952, (b)(1)
 [] in this letter the writer discusses an (b)(3)
 English language newspaper published in Beirut called the Daily Star.
 He further sets forth in detail a heated controversy which took
 place between Arabs and Westerners as to the status of civilization
 in the Near East compared to that existing in the US. The letter goes
 on to discuss the proper method of evaluation of Arab eloquence, and
 describes current Arab psychology.

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[Redacted]

"Who's uncivilized?!"

Suk al-Gharb, Lebanon
11 September, 1952

[Redacted]

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For some months now, Beirut has had an English language newspaper, the Daily Star. Published by a Lebanese citizen, the Star describes itself as an independent newspaper, like its sister publication in Arabic, al-Hayat. In its early days, at least, the Star seemed to merit the adjective scurrilous which was freely applied to it, and indeed seemed to carry over into English the intemperance and irresponsibility typical of the Arabic newspapers. This fact occasioned considerable disillusionment if not disgust among the growing colony of Americans and English in this area. But apparently the publisher is sincerely desirous of making a go of the paper, and realizes that he cannot afford to alienate his market. And under the editorship of an American, the paper has shown a steady improvement. Much of the improvement is due to the publication of American columnists (the Alsops, Lippmann) and other signed articles, but it is also due to the improvement of the local staff and its product.

If a desire to tap the English-speaking market was one of the major motivations behind starting the Star, another was to establish a means of putting the Arab point of view across to the Americans and English in this area. As for the latter, they welcomed the Star because (to quote one of them) "it would provide a wonderful forum where views of Americans in Lebanon and of the citizens of Lebanon could be freely exchanged. Those 'beefs' which each has toward the other could be aired in a climate of sportsmanship and fair play. . ."

I propose to reproduce the first such free exchange of views and "beefs" as published in the Star recently. It all began with a letter signed by one Eugene Amazon which was no model of restraint but which nevertheless pointed the finger of blame at the most infuriating (to Westerners) aspect of life in Beirut (in particular) and Lebanon: the lack of consideration and courtesy for others which seems to be almost total.

"To the Editor: With respect to Saturday's issue of your paper there is a column called "The Arab World" written by N.I. Durr in which he discusses the Arab-Israel question.

"Either he is a simple man or an uneducated one, as the conclusions he chooses to draw from the facts are based on the kind of zeal and blindness which represents exactly what it is in the Middle East that the Americans and the British do not like.

"He says that the fact that the Arab states did not show more force when Israel tried to force its way into this area and especially since then, when Israel has tried to enlarge its borders, these states stand and watch, was the reason for the decline of American and British respect for the individual Arab.

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"There is no connection.

"Nearly every westerner knows that the reason for the existence of Israel is not the U.N. nor the individual Arab nor even the strength of the individual Jew—it was simply the petty kings and rulers generally of this part of the world who squabbled over how much money was to be given to the fight; who was to direct the campaign; etc. The Jews did not win: the Arabs lost.

"With regard to the individual Arab whom Mr. Durr tries so hard to elevate, he is not respected in the west because he is not civilized.

"This in itself is far from a crime—the Zulus are not civilized either but they are respected. But the Arab pretends that he IS civilized. Ask him. But then watch him in nearly any act—particularly the act of dealing with others.

"You people in Lebanon should be aware more than most easterners of what I mean: watch the cab driver on a thoroughfare; watch boat-rowers near a beach; listen to the horns of a thousand automobiles in the heart of a city in which it is forbidden to blow a horn.

"Civilization is not measured by the number of languages one speaks or the number of books he has read—it is measured by the way he lives in society, his consideration for others.

"Consideration for others does not exist at all in Beirut and only to a very small extent in the whole Arab world. That is the reason for the lack of respect."

Next day, a Star editorial dealt moderately (if somewhat aimlessly) with the Amazon letter, concluding with this paragraph: "Mr. Amazon complains also that we do not deal with each other as civilized beings. We do not know with whom he is dealing, or what kind of people he meets. But if we were in his place, we would not generalize about personal cases to millions of Arabs he does not know. Fair judgement, moderation and courtesy are essential conditions of civilization."

So-far, honors go to the Arabs. But on the day following, the first letter from an Arab reader, a student at the American University of Beirut, indicated that Mr. Amazon was not to get off so easily.

"To the Editor: It would be interesting to know the nationality of letter-writer Eugene Amazon, who attacks the Arabs as 'uncivilized', and to learn what he is doing as a resident of this 'uncivilized' part of the world.

"Is he being restrained by force from returning to the centers of civilization, or is he making a highly profitable living at the expense of his barbarous fellow-residents of Beirut?

"What I particularly admire about him is the high degree of culture and civilization he displays toward the citizens of the country which has extended to him its hospitality. This is particularly noticeable when he compares the Arabs (unfavorably) to Zulus, and when he suggests that a distinguished bilingual Palestinian writer and scholar is a 'simple man or an uneducated one'.

"It is odd too, that he is hiding his statesmanship abilities in such an uncouth place. It appears that he alone has been able to discover that it was not the

Balfour Declaration, nor the British and American supported Zionists, nor the forcibly disunited fragments of the Arab nation, nor the disadvantageous first truce that brought near-disaster to the Arab forces in the first round of the unfinished Palestine war, but simply the squabbling of petty Arab kings and rulers!

"It is comforting to learn that all the Arabs have to do to earn world respect is for Beirut taxi-drivers and boat-rowers to show proper respect and consideration to Mr. Amazon, and I sincerely hope, in the interests of proper respect due America, that Mr. Amazon never falls into the civilized hands of New York taxi-drivers without a supply of coinage that would make Middle Eastern 'baksheesh' look like pin-money.

"But alas, I fear Mr. Amazon's highly civilized advice will fall on deaf ears. The Arabs and other Middle Easterners will probably go maddling ahead with their Shishaklis, Najibs, Mossadeqs and Kashanis, meeting force with force, intrigue with intrigue, power politics with power politics, until they have indiscriminately expelled from the land all such highly civilized individuals as the political Zionists, foreign satraps... and Mr. Amazons."

Four more outraged Lebanese raised their voices in the next edition of the Star, all rubbed raw by the charge of being uncivilized. The concluding paragraph of the first read: "Whatever the case is, the proof that the Lebanese are civilized is that they tolerate those who call them 'uncivilized' to remain in their midst." The second correspondent wrote briefly: "To my mind the person who treats others as uneducated and uncivilized must be himself of a higher strata to be able to evaluate. But when a man insults a person he never met and judges him by his own mean and low standards, these are the signs of mental deficiency to say the least. Mr. Amazon should keep to his friends the porters and scavengers (whom he takes as standards in his letter) and confine his inspirations to such an environment as the Rue du Port."

The third correspondent called Mr. Amazon "an ignorant man with a sick mentality", and concluded his remarks by saying, "If a commentator who gives his opinion on current affairs is considered uneducated and simple, I wonder what to term a fellow who insults people in their own homes." The fourth writer said:

"The least we expect from Westerners who leave their country, homes, family and friends and come to this part of world (sic) to make their own living, to be able to fill their stomachs with food they could not afford to taste in their own homes—the least and not the last we must expect from these people is to respect this country and its people.

"A certain Eugene Amazon, is quite an exceptional and amusing fellow westerner. Very frankly, he thinks we are uncivilized people and that is why we are not respected in his country. Moreover, he sees the Zulus are uncivilized but respected. Please, reader.... understand and digest.

"I will not go into details, as it is quite obvious that such a person is so civilized that Dr. Charles Malik is considered by him worse than any Zulu, and so all of us...

"You, Mr. Amazon, your place cannot be in this country, and I advise you to go back to your civilized country Chicago gangsters and the discriminating of the 'blacks'—all these things are of course the civilization you represent.

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"Persons like you can damage our relations with your country much more effectively than the whole efforts of the Communists. With respect, I tell you to go back to where you belong."

Next day, three westerners added their voices to the tumult. One man, a Pan American official, sought to pour oil—with no noticeable effect. "During my stay in this country," he concluded, "and on visits to the surrounding Arab nations I have found only an unfailing courtesy, kindness and friendship, and a hospitality that was equally warm whether provided by my wealthier or poorer Arab friends. The Lebanese are a naturally happy people living in a pleasant land. Thank you for two happy years!"

But another was more severe: "With regard to Thursday's issue, I, being a foreigner in this country, agree with Mr. Amazon in some respects. Can you deny that others' feelings are neither respected nor considered? Different examples can be forwarded in this matter, but one I must mention is: Are you yourself satisfied about this situation? Civilization is based upon faithfulness and respect, and both are ignored among the Arabs."

The third man, an English bachelor "gone native", stuck to the subject for a while, made a point, and wound up off in the bushes somewhere with a statement that seemed to indicate he believed "civilization" worth saving after all. He wrote, in part: ". . . I belong to the same 'civilized' part of the world as Mr. Amazon. Many of your indignant readers might say to him in their anger: 'If you think we are uncivilized, why do you live among us? Why do you not go away?' But I say to him: 'Come and live here with me, and soon you will see that what you leave behind in the west is what needs rectification, needs it so badly that it might well be given up, for it is a cancer that can no longer be cured'.

". . . I have seen this civilization that Mr. Amazon speaks of—in the streets of New York where men and women walk with taut expressions upon their faces, marching ahead to nowhere, and ending their days in night clubs; I have seen it in Western Europe where the struggle for power and food has turned men into animals.

"Here, in the Lebanon, from my window overlooking the valley, I see the flocks of sheep as they are taken out to pasture; once a week, on my Sunday hike, I sit with a peasant family to eat roast meat and coarse bread with sour milk. Mr. Amazon will give me up for lost. So do I, for even in this peaceful atmosphere, I am not sure that I shall be left alone. Soon there will be a war—to end all wars, to end aggression' of course—and then I shall shake my feeble bones, take a ship back home and serve in the Home Guard."

In the same issue, the broad and turgid flow of Arab ire continued as well. In a long letter, one man argued that Time and History prove that the more civilized mankind becomes, the more corrupt and selfish it becomes—i.e., uncivilized. The crude and primitive man (the noble savage) is capable of more consideration for his fellows than the civilized man. The inference is that the primitive man is the really civilized man. He does not, however, go on to say that the Arabs are primitive. Rather, he points out that the Arabs have contributed to the advance of civilization, whereas the Jews have done nothing, achieving mention only as "a minority of parasites and trouble-makers wherever they were scattered in the various corners of the earth." Mr. Amazon's anger at the Beirut taxi-drivers arises from racial prejudice, the common ailment which is the reason for the decline of British and American respect for the Arabs. "The only time," he goes on, "when the Arab world will command respect of the world is when they rise as one unified body to crush this misplaced racial prejudice, and to impose justice as the Western powers have imposed

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injustice on its people."

The writer winds up in a burst of orotund, bitter prose: "My educated friend, Mr. Amazon, if you think that books and civilization will give you the refinement of spirit and the consideration you seek so essential to civilization, you have a long way to go. All you have to do is turn and look around you at the glorious pillars of civilization, such as Great Britain and the United States, and you will behold with your own eyes the fumes of treachery, biased inclinations, and selfishness rising in great clouds—who knows, beware, you may be the next victim of one of their strategic political acts of treason, whereby they might offer you a burning sacrifice to their Golden Calf."

Mr. Wares Ishaq, Associate Editor of the Star, entered the dispute with a long signed article in the same fruitful issue. Entitled "In Defense of the West: From Kitchener to Lana Turner", the article gave the back of its hand to western civilization. Taking note of the indignant storm against the Amazon letter, the author suggests this might well serve to add grist to Mr. Amazon's mill. He continued:

"I raise my voice in defense of Mr. Amazon, in defense of western civilization and culture. Let us not, in our haste and in our anger, forget the debts of the east to the west—even in civilization and culture. For what were the people of the east, what their outlook and vision, what their horizon, before the coming of Kitchener, Gordon, Clive, Machiavelli, Ava Gardner, Lana Turner and Walt Disney?

"At the time when Confucius in China was still struggling with the intricacies of philosophy and sat with his disciples poring over manuscripts of earlier times telling of the Evolution of the Mind, the early European settler, after beating back the inroads of the beast through weapons of stone, had already just then discovered fire—his first step toward the development of the Atom and Hydrogen bombs.

"And in the Americas, several millenia before the advent of the Mayflower and civilization, the Red Indian squatted outside his wigwam meditating before the Fire, pondering over what his ancestors had taught him. It was to fall to his successors to develop other uses for fire—and also to teach him that life in segregated camps was healthier than in the wide open spaces. Ungrateful as the Red Indian was, when he fought in Korea and fell in battle, he expected to be buried in the same cemetery as his white comrade-in-arms—just because the gospel of Jesus, now patented by European-owned publishing houses, had been afforded to him out of compassion for his heathen mind. . . .

"At the time when the nomad in the Arab world was still gazing at the stars, working out astronomical and algebraic problems, Europe's caves were bustling with productive activity: newer and better weapons of stone, tin, bone and wood were being manufactured. What is more, markets were being found for them. Bartered, they could bring in return what the tribe needed—sheep, fruit, vegetables, and even women. . . .

"While the devout in the east offered goats and sheep in sacrifice to their God, in Europe they offered their first-born. Their gods were greater, and the sacrifices too had to be greater.

"Let Mr. Amazon's critics remember the debt of all backward peoples in the east to their western benefactors. In Africa—as in other remote islands inhabited by western missionaries, explorers, traders, etc.—the native dweller was lifted out of his life of darkness. From the jungle he was brought to the city. From being a

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mere nobody, he became a partner of the west in promoting the cause of civilization. The white man marked out especial pathways for his use, especial cafes and restaurants for his custom. Some, ungrateful and presumptuous (sic) among the natives, dared to use the same road as the white man and to eat in the same cafes—is white indignation unjustified? And after all that the white men had done for them—and for their souls!

"And what did the native have before the advent of the white man but the freedom of the jungle, the freedom of his crops, his coconuts, his pearls and his corals whose worth he did not know. . . . And instead of the medicine man who, at best, could throw out the devil, there are pharmacies which can supply potions guaranteed to cure everything from gout to syphilis, diseases which the native's backward mind and body had been unaware before the advent of western civilization. . . ."

Mr. Ishaq goes on to note that the east is indebted to the west for its advances in recent decades, citing as examples the progress from honorable warfare with truces, single combat and fair play to the more civilized modern type of war with its more elaborate weapons, its mercilessness, its deceit, its victimization of civilians and its approval of the stab-in-the-back. So with machiavellian diplomacy. And so with entertainment: ". . . To Hollywood goes credit, through portraying such forms and figures as those of Ava Gardner and Lana Turner, for bringing out those instincts which, through inhibitions and prejudices, the people of the east had got in the habit of controlling.

"Indeed, even the presentations of Arab life in Hollywood is more picturesque than the Arabs know it to be. Haroun al-Rashid himself would have stroked his beard in appreciation had he seen the transparent chiffon given to his slaves by Cecil de Mille. . . ." Etc., etc., etc. Still, the east has far to go, according to Mr. Ishaq. Can we afford, he asks, to check the onward hand-in-hand progress with the west?

"Our literature, in gaining popular appeal, has much to learn from the writers of the west, from such men and women as the authors of "Frenchy Florics", "Nights in Paris", "Manhattan Blonde", etc., whom many short-sighted eastern governments have banned. Our cinema industry has to learn the hard economic fact that it costs more to dress stars. It costs less to undress them and also bolsters boxoffice results. Many of our women, though rapidly coming up, still hesitate before adopting low necklines. And many of our men, in spite of reading Havelock Ellis, still adhere to their barbaric notions about the necessity of wedlock before." And on this note, the author concludes.

The dispute continued for a few more days in the same vein, though it did not again rise to the same heights of eloquence. A Captain Park told the Star to be constructive instead of being sarcastic. Several others entered the lists against Mr. Amazon, pointing out that the Arabs don't lynch colored persons in the streets, that although Mr. Amazon's letter was nasty, there were good foreigners for the sake of whom Mr. A. could be forgiven, and that the taxi-drivers were not all bad. The final letter in the series broke new ground in a sense: "Khalil Gibran was not born in the Waldorf Astoria, nor was Al Yaziji a graduate of Harvard University. The United States is not the cradle of culture. These people got their college education from nature—the nature of Lebanon. It was from the Lebanon that these world-famous men of literature emanated. It was from the shores of Lebanon that our ships sailed carrying to the world knowledge, culture, and education. It was here that the mind grew and knowledge was born. It was here that we discovered the alphabet and spread it in the world. . . . We welcome innocent orientation, but we despise insults and accusations. Perhaps it is high time that these people should know that we are fed up

with their repeated aggressions on this country that offers them thankful hospitality."

A second letter having arrived from the embattled Mr. Amazon which was longer, stronger and more detailed than the first, and convinced that no good purpose was to be served by prolonging the dispute, the American editor dropped the whole thing. He said that fifty letters had come in as a result of the Amazon letter, almost all of them from angry Arabs. He had published only the most moderate and well-written. He thought now that he should have published only the two best of the lot and then finished with it. As it was, the controversy had gone on too long to serve any useful purpose.

The American Minister thought so too; and in a circular to all the Americans employed in the Legation, in Point IV, and those in the U.N. offices who are paid out of State Department funds, he urged the necessity of discretion in dealings with the Arabs, stated that the representation of American opinion was to be left to the proper official organs and indicated that failure to comply would entail disciplinary action.

This first free exchange of ideas and "beefs" thus turned out to be unfortunate. For this result, of course, much of the blame must attach to Mr. Amazon's one-sided sweeping intemperance and his lack of tact. He started it. But if he had been similarly sweeping in praise instead of condemnation, the reaction of his Arab readers would, I think, have been just as enthusiastically unbalanced, just as emotional, just as indiscriminate in the opposite direction. They would have hailed Mr. Amazon as a paragon among westerners, a man of real culture and civilization, and the harbinger of a new era of friendship and understanding between East and West.

This lack of restraint and willingness to be carried away on a tide of feeling reflects the fact that in comparison with British and American norms, emotion among the Arabs is less subject to the tight rein of logic or of objective fact or the habit of caution. Indeed, expression in the Arabic language, the unique art form of the Arabs, seems to require a free appeal to the emotions via the liberal use of overstatement and exaggeration in order to be effective. To "get across" in Arabic, the art form, it is necessary to conform to the canons of the art, even if at the expense of logic and precision. We have, I think, an exactly parallel case in the purple advertisements of our tonier magazines: "All at once...you're lovely! Whether you pour yourself into a column of satin or surround yourself with a Balenciaga balloon dress, you can be slim as a reed but comfortable, too. That's the heavenly feeling that goes with the heavenly fit of a Warner's corselette. Like wearing a powder base—it's that light! Like slipping into a tan—it's that smooth!"

Literal translation of such passages robs them of their eloquent appeal, rendering them absurd or at best unconvincing, with the exaggerations, illogic and misstatements of fact standing out clearly; this is just as true of Arabic as it is of English. Conversely, passages in English, especially dry understatement which can be extremely effective for us, tend when done verbatim into Arabic to make little impression or even to be taken as meaning quite the reverse of what is said. As if, in an era of purple advertising, one were to say: "Warner's corselettes are comparatively light, smooth and close-fitting." Uninteresting, if true.

If a good deal of Arab eloquence on the popular issues of the day seems in translation to be rabid nonsense, we must realize that to a considerable extent this is due to the necessity for prose in Arabic to inflate itself to meet a certain level of expectation in order to be effective. I suggest the practical Arab, after an initial flush of enthusiasm, perhaps, does not take Arab eloquence at face value any more than

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a practical American woman would take an advertisement like the one quoted above at face value. We must similarly discount. And in the present case, I think the American Minister to Lebanon acted on the basis of the face value of the letters in reply to Mr. Amazon, according them an influence for ill far out of proportion to their real importance.

Given all this, one may still ask why the charge of being uncivilized should be the occasion for so much Arab eloquence, such a uniform and uniformly emotional outburst against Mr. Amazon and all he is supposed to stand for. Why wasn't anyone honestly amused? Surely, if such a letter as Mr. Amazon's had appeared in the Times (London or New York) similarly unbridled against the British and Americans and written by an Arab, the reactions would have been more varied. Some would have agreed with the charges insofar as they were true, and would have urged correction of the shortcomings in question as a matter of social desirability. Others might have composed short humorous verses in honor of the occasion. Certainly someone would have done the equivalent of writing something like: "Sir: With reference to the Amazon-Arab controversy which has lately appeared in your columns, I feel it necessary to object most strongly to the irresponsible bandying about of the name of an ancient & honorable people by uncultivated and self-appointed spokesmen of two barbarian cultures. It may be a case of the pot calling the kettle black, but, Sir, it is unfair to the Black. Yours, &c, (signed) Zulu."

The reason for the one-sidedness of the Arab reaction lies, I think, in the fact that Mr. Amazon's shaft struck home in the most vulnerable part of the Arabs' mentality: their sense of inferiority vis-a-vis the West in point of civilization. Materially, in terms of public morality and efficiency, in terms of power, they sense themselves to be inferior to the West. They see their inferiority reflected and compounded by the Westerners themselves in a host of daily examples. With their own sense of worth severely shaken, it is inevitable that they should seek desperately for some basis upon which to re-found their self-respect. They find it partly in the failures of the West to live up to its own ideals—Dr. Charles Malik, U.N. delegate from Lebanon, is one of the most eloquent critics of the West for betraying what it claims to stand for. And they find it partly by turning back to the days of Arab greatness and to Muslim and/or Arab ideals. In effect, Amazon would deny them even this. To his threat, they must react in anger. They are not secure enough in their own self-esteem to admit shortcomings, or to be amused.