Arab/Muslim and Western cultures: 
From clash of civilizations to open dialogue

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Abstract:

This paper tries to examine how conflict advocates and dialogue advocates articulate their opinions and views about the clash and dialogue of civilizations. It also sheds light on how pro-dialogue mediate the intercultural conflict by bridging the gap between the Arab/Muslim culture and Western culture. In other words, how they try to create avenues for communication between the two cultures in order to foster true understanding and to encourage dialogue between them.

Keywords:

Arab/Muslim - Western cultures – dialogue - intercultural conflict – understanding - pro-dialogue mediate.
Introduction

Much of what Westerners and Arabs/Muslims perceive and believe about each other has been determined by politics and mass media in general. The media and the experts determine the way we see the rest of the world (Said, 1981). The global political and cultural climate in the aftermath of 9/11 is replete with the idea of clash. Clash of civilizations or cultures in media and political discourse is overwhelming every Arab as well as American/Western public and private spheres. Similarly, there has been a tendency in academic circles, in both sides, to focus more on conflict and confrontation than on cooperation and understanding.

Huntington (1993 and 1996) places culture as the source of conflicts between civilizations. He predicts that the fault lines of future conflicts between civilizations will be cultural. He argues that Islamic culture has posed the greatest threat to the West. But there are other scholars who have disagreed with the inevitability of conflicts between cultures, particularly between Islam and the West and have focused their attention, instead, on dialogue and understanding between them.

This group of dialogue advocates, and in spite of the myriad differences between these two cultures and the negative images they hold for each other, recognize how the dialogue paradigm in a new globalized world environment opens new opportunities for understanding and intercultural communication.

This paper tries to show how Arabs and Westerners articulate their opinions and views about each other and how culture influences these views and attitudes. The main objective of this paper is its call to create avenues for communication between Arab and American people in order to foster true understanding between them.

The Clash of civilizations paradigm (the Huntington paradigm)

E. Abrahamian (2003) states that Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilization’ widely criticized by the academic community when in 1993 was first published, became all of a sudden important when 9/11 attacks took place. Huntington’s thesis outlines a future where the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural (Huntington, 1993). He asserts that world’s history is dominated by conflicts between civilizations and predicts that the next several years will witness a clash between Western civilization and Islamic civilization. He writes:

*The fundamental conflict in the next millennium will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and*
groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will be the battle lines of the future (Huntington, 1996, p. 208).

He adds:

*So long as Islam remains Islam (which it will) and the West remains the West (which is more dubious), this fundamental conflict between two great civilizations and ways of life will continue to define their relations in the future* (Ibid, p.212).

Although Huntington paradigm was widely criticized in academic circles, it was adopted by the US/Western mainstream media which explained and framed the whole crisis in terms of cultural conflict that of western culture threatened by “the uncivilized other”, Islam. Huntington (2002) himself returned after 9/11 to witn[0x0]ess the triumph of this paradigm and even to reinforce it when he argued that September 11 was merely “the Muslim wars into America; that these wars rooted in the rise of Islamic consciousness” (Abrahamian, 2003, p.532).

The 9/11 bombings came as a rescue to the broadly criticized Huntington’s thesis. Those attacks force upon the American people the realization that civilizations do clash, that different values produce many different ways of life, and that their way of life is preferable to others, then it must dominate. Worse yet, a number of prominent academics and media pundits (Huntington, Pipe, Lewis, Freidman among others) believed that “a barbarian, uncivilized other”, the Islamic culture, had declared war on US not because of our policies in the Muslim world, ‘but for what they stood for-democracy and freedom’ (Ibid, p.533).

**The construction of Arabs as enemies in post 9/11 media discourse**

In the weeks following the 9/11, tragedy, the American media rhetoric built on stereotypical words and images for several past years (Said, 1978, 1981; Suleiman 1983; Hashem, 1995; and many others), found it easy to construct all Muslims and Arabs as terrorists (Merskin, 2004) making of them a common US enemy.

Terms such as “Islamic fundamentalism”, “Islamic terrorism”, have become ideological constructs, allowing Islam and Muslims to be defined as a threat to western values (Said 1981 in Oshagan 1995).

Merskin (2004) states that to make of Arabs and Muslims a common enemy, US media have resorted first to stereotypes to build a negative image of them, then have employed words and expressions such as ‘us’, ‘them’, ‘demons’, ‘those people’ to characterize them. She adds that US media has generated and sustained stereotypes of an evil Arab; these stereotypes constructed all Muslims as Arab and all Arabs as terrorists. Using negative representations and images and cultural stereotypes, the media have constructed an enemy Arab stereotype that reduces a wide variety of people, ideas, and beliefs to a highly negative image of violence, cruelty and danger.

C. E. Smidt (2005) remarks that with the profound alterations in the international arena following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks, militant Islam may well have come to be viewed as ‘the new enemy’. Said (1997) reinforces this idea by stating that
after the dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, America needed a new enemy, a global bad guy, ‘a new foreign devil’, and that cultural, political, educational and media environments were all prepared to make of Arabs and Muslims their common enemy.

**Making Islamophobia mainstream**

The term ‘Islamophobia’ as defined by FAIR (2008), refers to hostility toward Islam and Muslims that tends to dehumanize an entire faith, portraying it as fundamentally alien and attributing to it an inherent, essential set of negative traits such as irrationality, intolerance and violence. In 1997, the Runnymede Trust, a UK-based independent think tank on ethnicity and cultural diversity, coined the term “Islamophobia, to describe what they saw as a two-stranded form of racism rooted in both the ‘different’ physical appearance of Muslims and also in an intolerance of their religious and cultural beliefs” (Esposito, 2006).

Kofi Annan at a UN conference on ‘confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding’ held in December 7, 2004 addressed the international scope of its impact, ‘[when] the world is compelled to coin a new term to take account of increasingly widespread bigotry- that it is a sad and troubling development. Such is the case with Islamophobia’ (in Esposito 2006).

Islamophobia, writes Esposito (2006), leads to hate crimes, cases of harassment, violence and discriminatory treatment targeting [Arabs] Muslims and which increased by a 49 percent from 2003 to 2005. Islam and Muslims who were almost invisible in America before 9/11 events, have all of a sudden dominated the negative news in mainstream media that has demonized them. For El-Amine (2005) “it is easier to justify control of a region when you demonize and dehumanize its people and culture” (El-Amine, 2005, p.3).

It is widely acknowledged that American/Western media has played an important role in perpetuating and amplifying islamophobic ideas. Media has been criticized for perpetuating Islamophobia. Islamophobia is closely linked to media portrayals of Islam as barbaric, irrational, and primitive.

Aslam Abdullah, director of the Islamic Society of Nevada, Las Vegas and acting president of the Muslim Council of America, published an article in 2005 in which he points out that since 9/11, 2001, Islam and Muslims have been exposed to harsh criticism in the American media that no other religion or religious groups have ever been exposed to. He said that although almost every religious community has produced its own terrorists, hate speech promoters, and extremists – such as Tamil Tigers professing Hinduism, The Irish Republican Army involving Catholics, Ulster Union followers practicing Protestantism, and Jewish Defense League proclaiming Judaism as their faith- in all these cases, however, American media rarely used terms such as Hindu terrorists, Catholic killers, Protestant violent mongers or Jewish extremists to report events that involved the followers of these religions. (Abdullah, 2005 retrieved in December12, 2007). On the other hand, Muslims since 9/11 are associated with such religious terms as ‘Islamic terrorist, Muslim fundamentalist, Sunni bombers, Shia
extremist’ and are used extensively in the media. “Since September 11, 2001, these terms”, he writes, “have entered the popular vocabulary as both the print and broadcast media have increased their usage exponentially” (Retrieved, Ibid).

**The construction of Westerners as enemies**

Some Arab satellite TV channels portray Americans and Westerners in negative ways. US and the West is always viewed to support Israel and to be interested in Arab oil. American people, for instance, are depicted as selfish, arrogant and ignorant about what is taking place outside US.

There is no doubt that anti-Americanism/anti-westernization is woven into the fabric of pan-Arab all news satellite television channels, Al-Jazeera channel remains perhaps the most charged channel to report unjust and unfair stories against U.S and the West. (Nisbet, 2004).

Centering coverage on the themes of war, conflict and all that is negative and bad, Arab television satellite channels inculcate feelings of hate, negativity and enmity against other people and cultures. Americans tend to be the most people to receive negative views and attitudes from Arab audiences due to Arab media negative portrayals. The overall sense is that Arab media is biased against them.

**Anti-Americanism/anti-westernization in the Arab and Muslim World**

Anti-American resentment in the Arab world is not cultural but the roots of this anger lie in US political manipulations and policies in the region not only at present time but during the 1950s and the 1960s.

Talbot (2003) states that several polls conducted in the Arab region by both Arab and American Research centers have shown that anti-Americanism in the Arab world is related to the Arab perception of US bias in favor of Israel and its preoccupation with Arab oil. Edmund Ghareeb (2004), a Middle East expert, cited the US invasion of Iraq as a further source of anti-Americanism in the Arab world. “They [Arabs] look at Iraq and ask if this a war of freedom and democracy or a fight for oil and hegemony”.

**The dialogue paradigm**

Dialogue is an important aspect of human life and a significant category of social activities. It is a form of social interaction, a means of communication to avoid or to moderate conflicts and confrontations (Shen Qurong, 2001).

The dialogue among cultures and civilizations paradigm is a rejection of the paradigm of confrontation and conflict, namely, Huntington’s clash of civilizations paradigm which is based on the premise of practical external enemy in existence or imagined.

*The new paradigm on dialogue among civilizations’ reported the ex-
UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan ‘had to make clear that diversity was not a synonym for enmity and that globalization was not the opposite of individual identities; the new paradigm of international relations should include elements of accommodation, equality, search for generality, participation, recognition of the value of every single human life in each society’ (Ibid, p.10).

Advocates of dialogue among civilizations believe that peace and cooperation can be realized through mutual understanding derived from dialogue. Dialogue for them is an effective approach to eliminate differences, remove confrontation and avoid conflicts in modern times.

Using cultural dialogue as an alternative model [a new paradigm] suggests a broad range of assumptions about the social foundation of communication. First, meanings are conceived as open and fluid, rather than closed and fixed. Second, identities are simultaneously and continuously constructed (Palmer & Gallab, 2002, p.2).

The World Council of Churches and other partners, including Islamic Organizations and specialized journals published a document about the Muslim-Christian meeting held in the Netherlands in November 2000. In the meeting, Muslim and Christian religious leaders, educators and activists have discussed the divisive issues among them and have drawn on their questions, reflections and conclusions and have called for reflection and action. They believe that interfaith dialogue is a must and call for Christians and Muslims to strive together in dialogue. They also recognize that, although, Christian-Muslim relations were historically marked by confrontation and suspicion, they have known fertile encounters in different walks of life and have had many common and shared principles.

The dialogue they call for implies a recognition of, and respect for, differences. “Differences”, they acknowledge, “are inherent in the human condition and manifestation of divine wisdom. In recognition of such differences, interreligious dialogue is based on mutual respect and understanding” (The World Council of Churches, 2001).

The dialogue is motivated by the teaching of their religions. For Christians, they recognize the deepest meaning of what their scriptures say to them about neighbors and love of others. “What does the Lord require of you” the prophet Micah asks, “but to do justice, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”(Micah 6:8). Muslims enter dialogue recognizing the Qur’anic texts concerning diversity and God’s purpose which says: “O people, we created you from a single [pair] of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other” (49:13) (Ibid, 2001 Retrieved in June 09,2008).

Participants of the meeting urge the media to play a positive role in bridging the gap between the two religions and to make a more creative use of the Internet and other mass media channels to help counteract the effect of sensational, simplistic and stereotypical images and their manipulation.
From clash of civilizations to open dialogue

Concerning dialogue between Western and Arab/Muslim cultures, some scholars and media pundits in both camps try to bridge the gap between the two cultures and bring to an end the hostile Arab images and stereotypes in western media as well as anti–American feelings and resentment about the US and the western world in general in the Arab world. In this respect, J. L. Esposito’s book, (1992) *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, compiles a comprehensive analysis about Islam and Muslims not as confronting the West and threatening its peace, but as accommodating with it. Esposito’s book is an answer to the question ‘Are Islam and the western world on an inevitable collision course?’ And his clearest answer is that “Islam and most Islamic movements are not necessarily anti-western, anti-American, or anti-democratic…they do not necessarily threaten American interests. Our challenge is to better understand the history and realities of the Muslim world and to recognize the diversity and many faces of Islam” (Esposito 1992, p.252-253).

Concerning the issue of the nature of the Islamic religion, Esposito argues that the problems Arabs and Americans/Westerners face lay not so much in a lack of a cross-cultural understanding as in the inability of both sides to preserve this communication. He proposes, thus, that Arabs and Americans should establish and encourage public diplomacy spheres to keep ties of communication between peoples in both camps.

Western and Arab people have held stereotypic views and perceptions about each other for a long period of time. Media in both sides have played a major role in this negative portrayal of both cultures and values. In mainstream western media, Arabs have been presented as ‘enemies’ mainly in Post-September 11, 2001 American media discourse. Mainstream American media tend to stereotype Arabs and reinforce pre-established views about them for the American audiences. In other words, all the voices made heard by the media call for clash between America and Islam, a clash which takes a cultural shape (Huntington and Lewis). But with the advent of more moderate voices (Esposito, 1992 and 2006; Gerges, 1999; Halliday, 2001, among others) open dialogue, intercultural understandings and dialogue among civilizations were words and phrases for the first time introduced to American media and public spheres.

It should be pointed out, however, that these voices have met a stubborn resistance and have even been charged of betrayal and of taking the enemy’s side. But these voices should be given credit, nonetheless, for paving the way for a more fundamentally-oriented dialogue.

Indeed, a gigantic work in this direction was made by these scholars. In their attempts to bring the two cultures together and bridge the gap between their differences, they showed that the conflict between US and the Arab-Islamic world is not real but it is propagated by Western/American media.

Halliday (1996) rejects the interpretation of some western media and scholars who have directed attention to confrontation between Islam and the west which they call “clash of civilizations”. Myths of the Islamic threat to the west is, he states, propagated from two contradictory sides- from the west that seeks to turn the Muslim world into another enemy, and from those Muslims who stress the contradiction with the western world in order to
remain in power. Halliday asserts that the idea of a perennial conflict with the west is just an invention of western demagogues:

*As communism collapsed, and with it the range of parties and movements in the Third World that associated with it, some in the Islamic world appeared to confirm western prejudices by affirming that they would indeed replace Bolshevism as the major challenge to the West, and would do so more effectively because their challenge was inspired by God* (Halliday 1996, p.111).

Halliday’s ideas are consistent with other prominent scholars, such John L. Esposito and Fawaz Gerges, who have asserted that the Islamic threat to the West is just a myth (Esposito, 1992) and that the clash between Islam and the West is a clash of interest and not of civilizations (Gerges, 1999).

Halliday also maintains that Islam as a religion cannot be blamed for the lack of liberty, justice, democracy and human rights. Barriers to democracy are constructed from other social and political features that some Arab and Muslim societies share and not from the view that Islam is incompatible with western democracy.

Many dispute the idea that civilizations will be the basis for international conflicts in the post-Cold war era (Jonathan, 2001). Some scholars, like Ajami (1993) and Gray (1998) argue that most conflicts will remain at the state level. Many others, including Rosecrance (1998) and Yamazaki (1996), argue that the majority of conflicts will be within civilizations. In fact, there are several arguments opposing Huntington’s predictions with regard to the Islamic civilization. Esposito (1995) and Gerges (1999), argue that Huntington mistakes conflicts caused by other factors with civilizational conflicts. They stress the fact that inter-civilizational conflict is driven mainly by geo-political factors rather than cultural differences. Others, like Hunter (1998) argue that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism is not unique to the Islamic civilization and that conflicts can run within the same civilization. She rejects both the dichotomy between culture and religion and the assumption of a monolithic Islam and holds that the Islamic religion itself is akin to an ideology. She asserts that asymmetrical power relationship is the basic reason for contention between Islam and the West. She concludes that for Islam and the West, the future holds a relationship of coexistence that includes both conflict and cooperation.

**Conclusion**

All in all, there is a definite emphasis on the violence and conflict between the Arab/Islamic culture and the West. It seems that the American/Western mainstream media and some academics and intellectuals tend to portray and represent Arabs and Muslims negatively. The Western media narrative is built on negative discourse, images and stereotypes. This media treatment of Arabs and Muslims, according to many researchers, hinders true understanding and fails to bridge the divide between the two cultures. In fact, most Western media tend to associate Islam with fundamentalism and view Muslims/Arabs as
terrorists. This correlation of Islam and terrorism is described by Bassam Tibi when he states that “…most western journalists…lack professional training on the subject at issue and therefore know very little about the cultures and languages of Islam… western media suggests terrorism is the expression of Islamic fundamentalism” (Tibi, 2001, p.212).

The construction of Muslims and Arabs as enemies in post 9/11 mainstream media discourse raises many questions. Islam teaches peace, love and mercy and like other members of any other religion, Muslims can commit acts of violence. The emphasis on religion comes only when the enemy is Arab or Muslim (Said, 1981; Tibi, 2001; and Abdullah, 2005; among others).

The Arab media has played a critical role in shaping the hearts and minds of Arab publics. Stereotypes and negative images of Americans and Westerners have become common after the so called "War on Terror" and the invasion of Iraq. Anti-American/anti-Western feelings have rapidly emerged across all social groups in the Arab World - including educated and Arab liberals. The United States and the West, in general, is seen to represent a potential threat and danger to the Arab culture and Islamic values.

The Arab and Muslim perception of US and the West has been dominated by confrontation and negativity. From the clash of civilizations thesis to 9/11 events, and from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the relationship between the United States and the Arab-Muslim world appears as a story of conflicts.

The Western news media is placing a greater emphasis on religion, Islam, to talk about the threats to Western safety instead of the people themselves. Arab media, on the other hand, especially pan-Arab satellite television channels, show ‘hateful propaganda’ or political, economic and cultural factors that generate anti-American/anti-Western sentiment. All in order to give the conflicts between the West and the Arab/Muslim world a cultural dimension.

In a nutshell, cultural conflict between Arabs/Muslims and Westerners is not real or natural, but it is built, hosted and propagated by media of both parties. Cultures of the world are supposed to cooperate and mutually understand each other. Arabs and Americans/Westerners-, and in respect of the richness of converging points between them, should establish and keep ties of communication between each other. An intercultural dialogue should involve mutual respect of both cultures. This intercultural communication would pave the way for future cooperation and mutual understanding; and if preserved, will certainly serve as a basis for a lifelong conflict resolution strategy. Therefore, intercultural dialogue and understanding should receive adequate media and scholarly attention.
References

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