

**THE CONVERGENCE OF CIVILIZATIONS?
CONSTRUCTING A MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

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ISLAM IN THE EYES OF THE WEST

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The representations prevailing in the West about the Muslim world stem from a complex elaboration process where historical and political factors are intertwined.

Historical and geographical proximity always means complex and competitive relations between the geopolitical entities concerned. And this has certainly been the case between the European and the Muslim world since the Middle Ages and implied handing over an historical memory of conflicts. The rivalry between Islam and Christianity, between Al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms, between the Christian and Ottoman empires triggered conflicts of interests and ideologies tending to turn the other into the Devil. You just have to read Amin Maalouf's book "The Crusades seen by the Arabs" or to see Youssef Chahine's film "Saladin" to realize that their interpretation of such historic events is just the opposite of the one we have built in the West with a reverse symbolism. Nevertheless, the distortions brought about by such a situation did not prevent the development of mutual influence. The Bizantine Empire had close links to the Omeyas and the Abbasis in the East (even closer than with the European Christian kingdoms), there will be constant economic and cultural exchanges between Al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms just as the westernization of medieval Islam is an undeniable historic process (Sicily, the Iberian peninsula, the Balkans).

However, the modern and contemporary times witnessed the development by the West of an ideology based on western cultural superiority, which will be the corner stone of its relations with others, and more intensively so with Islam, giving rise to what apparently looked like a cultural gap but that had, in effect, deep political roots.

The time when Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain, as well as the discovery of America represent the starting point of a process whereby Europe sees itself as a close identity and proclaims it is the only one to possess the attributes of mankind, considering as a consequence other peoples as inferior. The ideological elaboration process that supports this European vision was completed during the Renaissance and is still at play nowadays. It has to do with a selective

interpretation of History, which eradicates the East from European thinking and gives birth to the myth of Greco-roman culture being its sole and only original source. In other words, the founding myth of European thinking expelled radically the oriental contribution, and within this contribution, the significant role played by Muslim thinking in the safeguard and revitalization of hellenistic philosophy as well as in the development of a rationalistic philosophy of its own. As a result, the concept of two different isolated worlds that do not have the least common heritage, flourished.

Later on, with the development of colonialism, we came to consider European culture as superior to all others and to look upon the cultures of colonized peoples as inferior. Since then, Europe is infused with a deep cultural ethnocentrism through which it looks upon other cultures in an essentialist manner (that is to say as if they were closed up, immutable and monolithic, incapable of progress nor evolution, in a way that is determinant for their future). As a result we tend to consider that the notions of progress, dynamism and innovation belong to European civilization, that was then transformed in Western, and it should be universally imitated¹. At a later stage, when the anti-colonial movement developed in Europe, it will question the legitimacy of the methods used (political domination and economic exploitation), but not the vocation of the West to serve as the cultural model that would enable the world to modernize. Progress and development could not be but the identical reproduction of what had happened in the West.

In the Arab and Muslim world, the colonial vision at work will look upon the native cultural heritage and transmit the idea that everything that came from the Islamic heritage was backward and contrary to progress and modernity. From then on, the idea according to which Islam and modernity are mutually exclusive gained more and more strength, the only valued contribution will be the one coming from Arab and Muslim intellectuals who are close to European thinking, since this is yet another way to stress their dependence vis à vis Western supremacy.

The problem is that the belief in such a supremacy prevailed also among the nationalist elites that led the way to independence and then constituted the governments of the newly born Nation-States, which were convinced that the ideal solution lied in the imitation of the West.

As a consequence, the post-colonial value system in the Muslim world turned its back on Islamic legitimacy and culture as it launched its political and economic modernization process, and thus took over the symbolic anti-Islamic vision of the Western model. Far from renovating or updating the pre-colonial legal, political and cultural framework, the principle of "Islamic authenticity", that was obsessively repeated by the

¹ Gema Martín Muñoz (ed), *Islam, Modernism and the West*. London, IB Tauris; and Sophie Bessis, *L'Occident et les Autres*. Paris, La Découverte, 2001.

official propaganda, turned into the intouchable pillar of islamic heritage, and remained completely left out of the process of building a modern State.

As a consequence, the State will leave behind, and even suppress, just as the Europeans had done, the modernist trends within Muslim reformist movements. On the contrary, it supported the more traditional ulemas, and granted them official status through the "Councils of Ulemas" that were set up by governments, so that their fatwas² could be used as devices to give islamic legitimacy to any position, opinion or decision taken by the regime. In turn, The governments rewarded these ultra-conservative ulemas by allowing them to control the social model of Muslim society. They became the censors of society and caretakers of tradition, and thus prevented any change or social reform as well as any modernist interpretation of Islam. This is how the Arab States closed the door on new interpretations or readings of Muslim tradition aimed at adapting it to the modern world, for the greatest satisfaction of the Western world, convinced that the world of Islam is incapable of producing modernity.

This concept shared both by the West and the westernized elites of the Arab and Muslim world came to a crisis in the seventies when the value system put in place by the first post-colonial generation revealed all of its failures. The value system was based on the socio-economic model of the all protecting state, on pan-arabism, socialism and anti-imperialism, focused on the fight against Israel. The overall failure of such principles (acute socio-economic crisis, corruption, authoritarian political system, loss of political influence as a regional group within the international community and striking defeat in the fight against Israel with the loss of the 1967 war as a symbolic date) created a growing gap from the seventies onward between government and society. And within society, the gap was even wider with the most relevant sector, (in demographic terms) that is to say the young people, the following generation who make up for the vast majority : over 60% of the total population in the Arab world to-day are under 20 years of age. Confronted with the overall failure of the political and ideological models derived from the West, this new generation will feel attracted by a new model, that contrary to what the first nationalist generation had done, was inspired by their own cultural heritage and would build an up-dated model based on their own cultural, historical and legal universe. This explains why, from the eighties, this part of the world has gone through a process of Islamic cultural affirmation, that politically identifies with the reformist islamist parties.

Or, to say things differently, after the experience of failure, in terms of political and economic independence, there is in the Arab and Muslim world to-day a strong feeling rising from the sphere that was long most neglected by the nationalist elites who built the State, that is to say the sphere of cultural identity and independence, which in the

² Opinion on a matter where islamic lawfulness is concerned.

Arab world is closely linked to the Islamic framework. This is where reformist islamism answers, in sociological terms, the need felt by a vast proportion of Muslim populations to build a new, modern, democratic order based on their own culture and identity. What is expected from the West is respect and acknowledgement, however this revitalization of Islam is not aimed against the West. What is questioned is the way the specificity of the Western cultural universe has been arbitrarily raised to the status of absolute universal standard. When islamists express their resentment against the West, this does not mean that they despise its values of progress and development, or of public liberties, but simply that they reject the arrogance of the West, and the double standards that it applies to question such as the fight for human rights, democracy or the ever pending Palestinian question.

In the West, instead of trying to understand the causes and depth of the social and political evolution going on in the Muslim world, we have concentrated on "islamic fundamentalism" while focusing the analysis of what happens in this part of the world on the cultural difference between "them" and "us", with no proper attention as to what consequences international politics have on the Middle East region.

The phantasm of "islamic fundamentalism" has proved useful to feed prejudice and strengthen essentialist cultural visions of Islam as well as legitimate authoritarian governments in many Arab and Muslim countries. However, the most important aspect probably is the analytical confusion around the notion of islamist fundamentalism which prevented western societies to understand the diversity of the social and political situation in the Arab and Muslim world and what the real problems in the area are. The dominant opinion on islamists in the West has been unable to make the difference – and this is where the problem lies -- between reformist islamists (the majority , respectful of law and opposed to violence), religious ultra-conservative circles (supported by governments themselves) and radical islamists (a minority, blown out of proportion by the media). This lack of insight reveals the great ignorance of Western public opinion about the Muslim world.

The cultural explanation of political situations

In the beginning of the nineties, an other historic process took place that reinforced Western superiority complex vis a vis Islam and the overall anti-islamic vision present in Western societies, I mean the legitimacy of a one-polar world and in its wake, the globalization process. With this new situation, the West set up a mechanism that tends to locate the origin of conflicts in the cultural difference between peoples, eliminating thus other relevant factors, such as the growing economic gap between various regions in the world.

Globalization means a global capitalist system but not a global market, social problems are not a priority in development programs, foreign investment mainly target developed countries, economic growth in the developing countries takes place in a catastrophic social framework and as a consequence does not have positive effects for the population. Globalization also means giving up gradually the fight for human rights since economic interests prevail over democratic political reform, it also means having to face the consequences of the ever growing depreciation towards non-Western cultures (the Muslims being at the fore front, but we should not forget other parts of the world, like the fight of native Latin American Indians).

As a consequence, the essentialist vision of the Others' culture, and especially the Muslim's, will gain even more influence. The framework of Islam is thought of as rigid, anchoring society in the past, tending to regression, as if Islam alone determined the future of these peoples. Islam is then often interpreted as the general source of History but also of the future of Arabs and Muslims, and it is seen as determinist and omnipresent. Such analysis think of Muslim societies as complete, close up entities, as if they were not in constant evolution, transforming their identities, their visions, their culture and institutions, according to new circumstances and situations. These theories easily turn in an "islamic exception" situations that in fact exist in many other parts of the world, and that can be explained by a variety of political, economic and social factors. It was not very difficult in such circumstances to convince public opinion in the West that what happens in the Muslim world is always related to an irrational wave of cultural and religious anti-western fanaticism, while in reality governments themselves, strongly supported by the West, are greatly responsible for the present situation mainly because of their resistance to democratization.

One should not forget that the Gulf War was the first instance staging this new order. It not only meant U.S. supremacy in the world, it was also used to give more weight to Western domination over others, and more specifically over Arab and Muslims. What was in theory a fight against a specific tyrant in a specific Arab country (even if it aimed at protecting other tyrants from the area), turned also into a cultural world crusade against Islam. This transformation was very useful in order to mobilize just about everybody in the West, and define with general approbation the general orientation of Western policy in the area. That is to say : to protect Israeli interests as well as the energy sources in the Gulf, to support allied Arab dictatorships that depend dramatically from the West, to build a new global concept based on the existence of "legitimate" and "rogue" states, whereby one can identify supposed and uncertain threats in order to justify enormous military expenses in the region (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Koweit alone spent 44,2 billion dollars between 1990 and 1994, for the great benefit of Western armement industries).

The promotion of democracy and human rights were left behind (read Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch reports), while the West put together an ad hoc litterature in order to avoid having to make a real political analysis and to find a justification for its policies in the region, focusing on the so-called "cultural question", that is so cherished by Western public opinion. (Samuel Huntington published his theory on the "clash of civilizations" in 1993).³

This theory will serve first of all as the ideological basis on which Western supremacy will be solemnly consecrated while other cultures, would be discriminated against in regions of the world where Western interests are dominant, at political, economic and military level, and where active forces refuse to accept such domination or superiority. The principle of the cultural threat posed by the Other being thus sustained, it becomes possible to dehumanize the sufferings experienced by civilian populations that derive from Western international policies. And more specifically, the fear around the "islamic factor" will mean as a consequence that Western societies turned insentive to the situation of the Kurds, the Palestinians, the Irakis, the Afghans,etc... a situation that is rooted in the convergence of interests of local dictatorial regimes and the West's.

The September 11th attacks in New - York and Washington gave more weight to such anti-Muslim cultural perceptions. We are confronted with the revival of a "neocolonial" type of attitude that keeps repeating that the West equals "the civilized world" and justifies therefore its action on the basis of such cultural superiority, in order once again to strengthen its control and to keep bringing to the " World of others" nothing but arrogance, oppression and dictatorships. We have recently been through an exercice of exaltation of the "virtues of our culture" as opposed to the Muslim world presented as a solid block and described as "medieval", "primitive" "archaic". Many (too many) people have come to dual conception that presents the September attacks attributed to a specific terrorist group, as a confrontation between two models, two opposed monolithic worlds, the Western and the Muslim worlds, that even are "at war".

In such circumstances, the Arab and Muslim populations resent the situation with a deep feeling of "humiliation" (a very far reaching cultural notion, since it means that one is denied respect and consideration), because of the number of conflicts where the "civilized "international community does not show a real determination to solve problems with justice and democracy . But this situation does not imply in our societies a feeling of sympathy with the victims, on the contrary, because of the anti-islamic cultural essentialist theory, the people are

³ Huntington published his theory in 1993 (*Foreign Affairs*, no.3, pp. 22-49) and is certainly now the most well known on the question, but it is interesting to note that this kind of ideas started circulating just at the end of the Gulf war: Barry Buzan (1991) "New Patterns of Global security in the Twenty-First Century", *International Affairs*, 67, no 3, pp. 431-451.

deprived of their dignity and turned into fake enemies and potential massive threat, "because they hate our civilization and our values".

All this brings us to the conclusion that the dominant view that prevails in Western societies on the Islamic threat or the civilization conflict between Islam and the West is first and foremost a tool that is used in order to justify the effects of Western policies on the Muslim world in the eyes of our own societies.

There are many arguments that say that the Muslim world has remained a prisoner of its historic memory, that it has not been able to go beyond the trauma of colonialism, and renovate through the implementation of the modern values that colonialism had revealed and the organization of an extensive social and political debate; that it has not been able to solve the question of political legitimacy because it did not succeed in developing workable models, or because intellectuals did not play their role as critics within society, and that all this is not the U.S. nor Europe's fault. But this is only half true. The Muslim world is not an hostage of the past, since foreign intervention was not limited to colonialism itself but has been ongoing up to now, and even more so since the Gulf War.

There has also been a responsibility of the West in the failure of all attempts to build political models oriented toward democratization. The first attempts to set up a constitutional order in the XIXth century in the Arab provinces of Tunisia and Egypt, or at the very heart of the Ottoman Empire with the Turkish reforms, were torpedoed by France and England. The experience of liberal government in the first half of the XXth century in Egypt, Iraq or Syria were to a great extent undermined, in their democratic exercise, by the interests of those two European powers, that wanted to keep control over their ancient colonies. In the case of Lebanon, the cause for the disaster that plunged the country in a bloody civil war for 15 years is to be found in the creation of a State that was conceived to grant political supremacy to the Maronite Christian minority (that is to say France's main clientele in the Middle East) over the Muslim majority. After the long interlude of socialist governments that were up to the Soviet autocratic model they had adopted, the neo-liberal governments that followed, implemented economic liberalization reforms coupled with a growing political despotism that is "laundered" by their European and American allies, for the great misery of the population who is submitted to a fierce repression. The most open and transparent elections held in the region, took place in Algeria in 1991 and they were reduced to ashes by a military coup that was supported by the whole of the Western world.

Regimes that are in place in Algeria, Tunisia or Egypt, (to take just the most striking examples) survive by using repression as a mean of social control with European and American support, both at economic and political level. The Western allies do not want to know of the ongoing human rights violations that are denounced by all N.G.O.s.

The Gulf War against Saddam Hussein is immediately brought to an end from the moment he could have been overthrown by the most representative opposition movement in the country, simply because the resistance was led by the Irakian Shiis, and this did not suit the strategic interests of the U.S. in the region. The tyrant thus remained in power and Irak was submitted to an embargo that only weighs on the civilian population, who is furthermore exposed to the impunity of a clannish government, unable to act as a regional power, but very capable of plundering society and the country's revenues. Double standards are used as to the enforcement of the U.N. resolutions. On the one hand, Irak is strictly required to comply with them. Whereas, Israel can go on ignoring them with respect to the rights of the Palestinians, while its strategic interests in the region are respected and its views followed as who is or is not a terrorist.

At the end of the Gulf War, the Arab countries were more divided than ever, while the dominant position of the U.S. in the region had never been stronger, partly because most countries in the area depend from the U.S.A., at economic and military level, but also because Europe does not, in the least, represent a political challenge for the U.S. in the region, in spite of its commercial competitiveness, and Russia prefers to compete with the U.S. over Caucase and Central Asia, that has been rising since the end of the XXth century as a main producer of energy sources, competing at strategic level with the Middle East.

In fact, the result of the American views and action in the Middle East, with respect to security and stability, has been to block all attempts aiming at setting up multilateral institutions, that could have given a better positioning to the region as a whole. As a consequence, it opted for the creation of strategic axes and bilateral alliances. Irak and Iran being declared rogue states, a policy of penalty (embargo and sanctions) and "double contention" as of 1993 was applied. This meant that Iran has been artificially separated from the Gulf States and that all attempts that could have led to a rapprochement in the perspective of a regional forum to set up a dialogue among all the neighbour countries, including the ostracised ones, were frustrated. As a result Irak still is ostracised, which has given rise to large scaled smuggling networks with Jordan, and even more so with Turkey. At the same time, the reformist sector in Iran, that promotes economics and political liberalization, and defends a diplomatic normalization with its Middle East neighbours as well as with the Western world, does not find enough support abroad that would enable it to solve the socio-economic crisis and to get a stronger position within the government vis a vis the "old revolutionary guard".

The influence of Israel's views on the stability of the region and its obvious refusal to be integrated in the Middle East geographic environment, as well as its role as unconditional ally of the U.S., explain for the most part these contradictions, and which is worse, is greatly responsible for the unending fragmentation of the region.

This privileged relation with the U.S. explains how Israel was able in 1995 to escape international pressure in order to become a party to the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and to take part in 1996 to the creation of the strategic military axis between Israel and Turkey, under the American umbrella, with the aim to weaken Syria's position in the region. The U.S. also opposed the institutional setting up of multilateral groups that could have had a determinant role to play in the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The countries that belong to the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia and the Gulf oil producing countries) all signed bilateral defense agreements and armament contracts with the U.S., Great Britain and France after the Gulf war with the objective to protect themselves from future threats. Since they do not trust their Arab neighbours and because of the unquestionable superiority of Western armies, the GCC members did not even consider regional security arrangements, and they even stressed further the importance of bilateral relations, since they did not conclude agreements among themselves either. Furthermore, the massive investments in military equipment and defence, the enormous expenses resulting from financing Gulf war I (1980-88 between Iran and Irak), and Gulf war II (Iraki invasion of Koweit, 1990-91), and the end of the oil prices boom, gave rise to a growing socio-economic crisis that resulted in a very uncomfortable situation for governments. The most illustrative example is the case of Saudi Arabia with its demographic rate of 3,5%, which have had to reduce social benefits since the beginning of the 90s, while the middle class is growing in numbers and importance, and is more and more dissatisfied with the regime's political "tribalism" that does not represent them in any way, with the growing inadequacies in the fields of education, health, housing, etc... as well as with Western military presence in their country. The system based on oil revenues and the socio-political balance that existed thanks to such income undergoes a crisis that in turn increases the opposition to the regime.

These regional and international political developments have had consequences for the clientelist and clannish governments in place in this part of the Arab and Muslim world that are now in a situation of growing inner and regional weakness. As a consequence, these governments depend more and more on Western support in order to remain in power, and tend to act individually, which means that they no longer have any sort of political influence as regional geopolitical and economic group on the international scene. From a Western perspective, such a dependance turn these countries in faithful allies that are incapable to counteract in front of Western dominant policies. It also enables the West to control the sources of energy that are located in the area. (For example, recently, the Arab and Muslim oil producing countries proved incapable to use oil as a a weapon to put pressure on the international community in order to stop the brutal Israeli invasion in the Palestinian territories.). The Western domination is exercised at the

expense of the population governed by dictatorial regimes that impose anti-democratic practises to societies that are moreover submitted to the enormous socio-economic pressure of economic liberal reform and its structural adjustments.

What is truly appalling in this situation is that our societies are so obsessed by the "cultural clash between Islam and the West", so convinced that there is no democracy in the Muslim world because of Islam, that the inequality between men and women comes from immutable constraints in the Muslim universe, that violence stems from an innate islamic cultural-religious fanaticism, that they are unable to see what are the deeply political causes for this lack of democracy, this inequality and this violence. And what is even worse no one asks the question of what the West does to feed such inadequacies and violence. It is true that there is no democracy, but that is not because they are Muslims, but because an alliance has been struck between the local despotic governing elites and the Western powers. It is true that there is no process of social modernization, but that is not imposed by Islam, but comes about rather because of the complicity between dictatorial regimes and ultra-conservative religious circles that preserve the patriarchal and puritan social models (just as it occurred in other dictatorships in Southern Europe or Latin America). The only way to open up the doors of social evolution would be to promote democratization and the Rule of Law . It is true that there is violence, but not because "they are Muslims" but because the State exerts its violence continuously and the feelings of humiliation, despair and neglect that prevail in these societies constitute a culture medium favorable to a social explosion and to extremism.

This is how we come to this paradox that characterizes the approach of Western societies toward the Muslim world. The cultural perspective is supposedly used to fight fundamentalist islamic attitudes, but at political level, we support those who defend and impose obsolete interpretations of Islam and suppress the modernists. We proclaim ourselves to be the representatives of civilization and of the model to be followed by all the others, while our political action promotes at the same time despotism and assents to the violation of human rights. This political stand of ours favours in the Muslim world the players that give the most negative image of Islam in the West and who even tend to a monopoly of this image, used as an overall discrimination tool against a vast social majority that does not identify with them. Because if such an unfair contradiction, feelings of bitterness and anti-western resentment keep growing to-day in Muslim societies, that see how their cultural heritage is generally despised and looked upon, while the self – proclaimed supremacy of the West is used as an instrument of political and military domination.