
ISLAM AND THE WEST: Enhancing Understanding and Dialogues

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Since the time of September 11, 2001 tragedy and some later developments in international affairs up until today have led by and large to worsening relations between the so-called Muslim World and the West. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, New York, and the Pentagon headquarter, Washington DC, on September 11, 2001, and the US subsequent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, much of the Muslim world felt that have become the target of the US-led war against terrorism. The US war in Iraq aggravated further their resentment and bitterness towards America.

Subsequently, a number of bombings in both Muslim countries and Europe and the rise of ISIS have worsened relations between the two worlds. The failure of many Muslim countries in their transition to democracy—and thus created political and social stability—have resulted in human misery. This is clear not only in the number of people killed in the internal conflicts and wars in the Arab world and South Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh), but also in countless influx of refugees and migrant to Europe and other parts of the world.

At the public level the situation seems to be getting worse also. Goaded by the patriotic press, much of the European and American public have been afflicted by some kind of mass hysteria and renewed ‘Islamophobia’. In many parts of the Western world, mosques and Muslim community centers were attacked, and Muslims were (and are) singled out in ‘ethnic profiling’ by the police and other government agencies. Economic crises in several countries of Euro Zone also lead to increased ‘anti-migrants’, e.g., anti-Muslim migrants in some countries in Europe. At the same time, ‘ultra-right parties’ that are hostile to Islam and Muslim migrants also gained momentum in Europe as well as in the USA.

Responding to all these, Muslims in various countries conducted mass rallies and demonstrations against the US and its allies; anti-American sentiment is on the rise in many Muslim countries. The rise of Barack Obama to the US presidency in 2009 however was an important factor in the relative decline of anti-American sentiment in many parts of the Muslim world. Despite this encouraging development, an episode of Islam harsh encounter with the West continues to take place.

The surprising rise of Donald Trump to US Presidency after winning the election on November 8, 2016 seems to lead to a new tension in the world. His anti-Muslim and anti-Hispanic attitude would not help create a more peaceful world;

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Just to recall, the impression among Muslims that US-led war in Afghanistan and war against terrorism was a war against Islam and Muslims was also getting stronger when President George W. Bush called his military operation in Afghanistan with code name 'crusade' and later 'infinite justice'. Even though President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, attempted to clear the air by visiting mosques and Islamic centers and having meetings with Muslim leaders that their military operations in Afghanistan is not against Islam or Muslims as a whole, there is still strong impression among many Muslims that the West continues to show its hostility against Islam and Muslims.

The US unilateral military action in Iraq against President Saddam Hussein has only reconfirmed Muslims' perception of that renewed hostility and, furthermore, strengthened the belief among some Muslims in the so-called 'conspiracy theory; that the US administration together with certain governments of the Western world has a plot to destroy Islam and Muslims. The failure of the US and the British to find the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) has caused US its credibility not only among Muslims but also among many other people.

Worse still, much of Western media continue to report sensationalized reports that in the end only reiterate the idea that the Muslim world is in a state of perpetual chaos and corruption, unable to govern itself except through the use of force or via Western supervision and aid. The fact that demonization of Islam and Muslims is becoming more pronounced in much of the Western world now is hardly surprising, considering the problematic historical relations between the Western world and the world of Islam from the past till today.

Conflict and Accommodation

Looking at the whole recent developments, it is clear that Western's perception of Islam and the Muslim world has not changed very much; on the contrary, it is not getting worse now since Islam first became known to the Western world—or more precisely the Europeans—and the establishment of the first contacts between them and the Muslims as early as the seventh century. In the first hundred years of Islam, the extent of the physical contact reached the maximum level. Byzantium and Spain confronted the Muslims across battlefields in Eastern and Western Europe.

There is doubt that the contact was painful for Europe for much territory was lost to Muslim forces. The 'Crusade' was the European answer to the spread of Islam. Beginning in the early 11th century, the earliest crusaders under the Frankish knights made attempts to arrest the development of 'Muhammadanism'. The Crusade, as the word implies, was a struggle to save Christian Europe by warding off "barbaric" Muslims. The series of bloody encounters, which took place in the numerous Crusades that followed the first one constituted a major part of European history. Even though the Europeans had re-conquered the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims in 1492, they faced a new strong force of Muslims, that is, the Ottomans who had made their way into South-eastern Europe.

Despite these harsh encounters and contacts, and despite the Muslim allowing the European Christians to remain in the conquered territory, European understanding of Islam was minimal. In fact the Europeans launched continued propaganda to tarnish the image of Islam; this religion was held in contempt, it was condemned as false, and the Prophet Muhammad was depicted as 'anti-Christ'. This attitude went on for centuries. It is only after since the second half of the 20th century, this perception on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad had changed in a more accurate way. Other

than these, misperception and distortion of the image of Islam and the Muslims remain strong among much of the Western public.

Throughout the history of relationship with Islam and the Muslims, although generally understanding and appreciation was negative, there had been among Christian notables who tried to learn about Islam and to change the attitude of the Christians towards Islam and Muslims. One of the most prominent among them was Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny who initiated the first Latin translation of the Qur'an, Muslim legends, history and an explanation of Islamic teachings. These works contributed significantly to European better knowledge of Islam and Muslims.

During the Renaissance, a number of prominent Europeans tried to acquire a better understanding of Islam. After the Turkish defeat of Byzantium, John of Segovia pointed to the need to cope with Islam and the Muslims in other ways besides wars and conversion. He initiated a new translation of the Qur'an working together with Muslim jurists. He also proposed an international conference to exchange views between Muslims and Christians.

Also during the Renaissance, Arabic and Islamic studies were initiated in many institutions, which led to the growth of a more realistic and accurate view of Islam and the Muslims; this is the origin of 'Orientalism'. And, since the late 1970s, Orientalism (see Said 1978) has been severely criticized for remaining to have certain biases and distorted images of Islam and Muslims. As a result a new approach to Islamic and Muslim studies are introduced, and the term 'Orientalism' and 'Orientalists', have tended to become a "dirty" word; the term "Islamic studies" and 'Islamicists' have been increasingly adopted instead.

In addition to that, it is now widely recognized that various aspects of Islamic civilization had been contributed greatly to the rise of Europe and the West as a whole. The Muslims during the heyday of Islamic civilization not only preserved the Greek learning, but also made a considerable original contribution to the knowledge of nature with their research and experiments. Various kinds of knowledge and sciences that had been developed by Muslim scientists were later transmitted to Europe. The Muslims, therefore, with their intellectual supremacy in scientific discovery, and in physical and natural sciences prepared the ground for the European Renaissance. It is now increasingly recognized that the Western civilization owed its origins not only to the Greek, but also to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions.

The Muslims on the other hand have not made any significant headway. On the contrary, some kind of defensive psychology developed among Muslims. While Europe continued to progress in science and technology, the Muslim world fell prey into European colonialism and imperialism. By late 19th century, virtually the whole of Islamdom was under European domination. The liberation of the Muslim world from Western colonialism came about only after the World War II. Now, half a century has elapsed since a great number of Muslim nations gained their independence, but most of them—if not all—are heavily dependent of Western political and economic support.

There is no single Muslim country that can be classified as developed. The world today associates Islam with backwardness instead. Poverty, ignorance and instability have become such a common feature in the Muslim nations that it is assumed this is a natural consequence of subscribing to the teachings of Islam. The Muslims themselves have done very little to help themselves; they have weakened themselves more and more by their constant feuding, conflict and war among themselves.

A number of reforms has been initiated and launched in most of Muslim countries. These include reforms in theological, social, cultural, economics, educational, and political fields.

Enhancing Dialogues

It is clear that apart from conflict and hostility between Islam and the West there has been a lot of accommodation. In fact Muslims and Christians had lived in peaceful co-existence. There is a great deal of exchanges between the two civilizations. Islamic civilization in the medieval period had contributed significantly to the renaissance of Europe and the Western world as a whole. Therefore, one should not be misled by the so-called theory of the ‘clash of civilizations’ as notoriously proposed by Samuel Huntington (1997).

Dialogues are not a simple choice, but a necessity for the two civilizations and cultures. A profound, thoughtful, fair and frank dialogue between Western and Islamic civilizations undoubtedly will be very helpful and beneficial in finding the best solutions to some of the grave problems that beset the world today. The crisis of peaceful co-existence among nations, the crisis in the relationship among nations, the crisis in the relationship of man and nature, the ethical crisis that has developed in scientific research, and many more problems and crises of this nature should be among the items on the agenda of Islam and the West dialogues.

Dialogue is such a very desirable thing today, because it is based on freedom and freewill. In dialogue, no idea should be imposed on the other side; in dialogues, one should respect the independent identity, cultural identity and independent ideology of the other side. Only in such a case, can dialogues be preliminary steps leading to peace, security, and justice.

But, one has to admit that there is no easy way to dialogues. We need to quote this in order to have a better grasp of the situation: “Ten years past 9/11 surveys suggest that tensions persist and that Muslim and Western publics continue to see relations between them as generally bad with both sides holding negative stereotypes of the other. Many in the West see Muslims as fanatical and violent, while few say Muslims are tolerant or respectful of women. Meanwhile, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see Westerns as selfish, immoral and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical.

However, the latest Pew Global Attitudes Survey, for one, also finds some improvement in the US and Europe relations with the Muslim world compared to five years ago. A greater percentage of Western publics now see relations between themselves and Muslims as generally good compared to the year 2006. In contrast, Muslims in predominantly Muslim nations are as inclined to say relations are generally bad, as they were five years ago. And, as in the past, Muslims express more unfavorable opinions about Christians than Americans or Europeans express about Muslims.

What are the causes of problems for these bad relations? About which side holds the high ground on key issues? Further to disagreement, what are the points of agreement? What are the shared concerns? How are the ongoing political changes in the Muslim World impacting or potential to impact that broad picture? These are some of the questions to be tackled in this session on the basis of the presentation of the findings of the latest Pew global Attitudes Survey as well as the Report on Muslim-West relations Index by the Abu Dhabi Gallup Center” (Topics of Global Forum, p. 14).

But there are some bright spots however. On the eve of the US election in 2009, for instance, according to a number of surveys, if non-Americans were allowed to vote, then most of them would have voted for Barack Hussein Obama. Why is that? Because most of them see him as bringing a new hope in a new kind of US foreign policy; they believe that his election would bring a new approach of the US to international issues and affairs. President Obama has introduced some new approach to American foreign policy, particularly in relations with the Muslim world. Therefore, there are some hopes that there will be some significant improvement of the relations between the US and the Muslim world.

But it is very doubtful that this kind of optimism can be maintained during the Trump presidency. One has to wait whether he will stick to his anti-Muslim and anti-Latino rhetoric in the period of next four years.

Despite this worrying tendency, people with reasonable minds should continue to enhance dialogues at the level of intra-religious such as intra-Islam, intra-Christianity and the like. At the same time, there should also be more intensive inter-faith dialogues among Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Shintos and other groups of the believers. Not least important, there should be also dialogues among the believers on the one hand and media people, politicians, bureaucrats, administrators at various levels of government bureaucracy on the other.

