Muslim-West Relations: Past Problems and Current Challenges

While historical antecedents have not completely doomed Muslim-West relations, there remain sharp divisions between the East and West along cultural fault lines that can trace their roots back to medieval times. This historical context makes current reconciliation and future prospects for peace a major challenge.

With the advent of Islam in the seventh century, the world witnessed the emergence of a new religion that would bring about enduring sociopolitical and cultural transformations. Following the death of the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, Muslims embarked on a comprehensive military expansion that would stretch as far east to the modern-day border of China, across Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, into southern Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, and all the way to the Pyrenees. With the territorial conquests of the Islamic Empires, the Western empires of Rome and Byzantium declined, ushering in an era during which Islamic culture flourished in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, which ultimately set the stage for the First Crusade.

The dominant presence of Muslims in the Holy Land was cited as the main reason for the First Crusade, although the greater objective was to protect Rome's interests in Byzantium. Nonetheless, Pope Urban II called for a crusade in 1095 with the stated purpose of driving the Turks out of Anatolia. This action would spark intense resentment among the Muslim population in the region as it fought against the invasion from Europe.

Each successive crusade only fueled conflict between the two sides. Furthermore, the Crusades were largely a military disaster for the Europeans. The Crusades failed to recover Anatolia from the Turks, and the sack of Constantinople in 1204 crippled Byzantium until it was finally seized by the Turkish Empire in 1453. Beyond the loss of territory, the impact of the Crusades on Europe provided the origins of the cultural fault lines that exist between the Muslim and Western worlds today. The Crusades undermined the goodwill of the Muslim world toward Europe; thus, Europe declined in prestige and military status within the Islamic world. The Crusades also emphasized the cultural distinctions between the two, as the Muslim world entered into the Golden Age, a period of intellectual enlightenment, while Europe fought to navigate through the decline of the Dark Ages that eventually gave way to the tumultuous Middle Ages.

The end of the Crusades brought the rise of the Mughal Empire in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan and the Ottoman Turkish Empire in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The Mughal Empire would fall to the British in 1857, and the Ottoman Empire would collapse in 1918 in the aftermath of World War I. With the end of Muslim imperial rule in North Africa and the Middle East, the powers of Britain, France, and Italy established Western domination over the region in the form of colonial rule.

The presence of not only foreign nations, but Western nations, in the region sparked a long period of resentment in the Islamic world,[1] which was only exacerbated by the formation of Israel after the conclusion of World War II. As a result of what was perceived as an unwelcome Western presence in the region, radical

socialism and Pan-Arabism emerged in the 1950s and 1960s within the Middle East and North Africa.

With the growing popularity of Arab nationalism, several conflicts occurred between Western powers and Muslims in the region. In his classic work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel P. Huntington discusses this period of turmoil in the Middle East between the Muslim world and the West. France engaged in a bitter war with Algerian forces for nearly a decade until Algeria gained independence in 1962; "British and French forces invaded Egypt in 1956; American forces returned to Lebanon, attacked Libya, and engaged in various military encounters with Iran; Arab and Islamic terrorists, supported by at least three Middle Eastern governments… bombed Western planes and installations and seized Western hostages."[2]

This violent and tumultuous period culminated with the militarization of Israel and forever transformed Muslim-West relations. Although Arab nationalist movements brought about the end of colonial rule in the Middle East and North Africa, the continued Western presence and the existence of Israel remained a source of contention. Further, the absence of comprehensive economic development in the Muslim world left many frustrated by the lack of progress in the region. Thus, Arab nationalist movements were soon supplanted by the more deadly Islamic fundamentalist movement that promised to bring about these transformative changes in the region; however, scholars argue that it wasn't until the end of the Six-Day War in 1967 that radical Islam, and the fundamentalist organizations driving these ideologies, began to gain popularity.[3] The defeat of the Arab nations by Israel in six days infused the region with a sense of humiliation and a sense of hopelessness. [4] As a result, the people of the Middle East and North Africa were in many ways desperate to escape the perceived dominance of Western ideals and values and find a political, economic, and social movement unique to the culture and dominant religion of the region that they could look to as successful.

Thus, drawing upon a large membership base of young males who were educated but unemployed and disenchanted with the political and economic situation in the Middle East, the Muslim Brotherhood, Fatah, and Hamas, along with other radical Islamic groups, emerged as powerful political players during this period. As the Islamic fundamentalist movement grew in size and popularity, another dynamic also emerged in the region, one that was twofold and has had both positive and negative implications for contemporary relations between Western powers and the Muslim world.

Western reliance on oil led to the formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and brought wealth to the elite in these oil-rich Muslim countries along the Persian Gulf. At the same time, it also brought about an opportunity to establish a framework for peaceful relations between the Middle East and the Western world. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan have all established peaceful relations with the Western world, either through trade, negotiations, or military support. These alliances continue today and provide a sense of optimism regarding improved relations between the West and the Muslim world. And yet, this optimism cannot replace the reality of the current situation in the Middle East.

Even as the oil trade has created a bridge between the two regions, the ensuing conflict between Israel and the occupied territories of Palestine continues to threaten this relationship. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has spanned more than five decades and, more than any single event, has been the greatest source of tension between the Muslim world and the West. Despite numerous formal talks, the most recent of which being the failed Camp David Summit in 2000 and the Taba talks in 2001, the Israelis and Palestinians have not reached any formal peace agreement regarding a two-state solution that resolves Israeli security concerns, Palestinian concerns regarding the status of Jewish settlements in occupied territory, the status of Palestinian refugees,

and the very contentious issues regarding who has a greater claim to Jerusalem. Additionally, Western economic, political, and military support for Israel has only served to further alienate the Muslim world.

The chasm between the West and the Muslim world will only grow wider and deeper with each successive conflict in the Middle East that has a Western presence. The lessons learned from both Gulf Wars support this assertion. With Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and subsequent missile attacks on Israel in 1990, the United States intervened, setting off the Persian Gulf War. Although it lasted less than a year, the war left "many [Muslims] feeling humiliated and resentful of the West's military presence in the Persian Gulf, the West's overwhelming military dominance, and [Muslims'] apparent inability to shape their own destiny."[5] The 2003 Iraq War and the occupation of Afghanistan reinforced the negative image the Muslim world has had of the West and the United States. Perceived as unwelcome and invasive, the Western presence in the Muslim world fuels resentment in the region, which Islamic fundamentalists have successfully used to further their radical agendas.

The tragedy of September 11, 2001; the subsequent attacks in London and Madrid; and even the failed bombing attempt on a U.S. airliner by a Nigerian national all illustrated the effectiveness of radical Islamic terrorist groups in manipulating negative stereotypes and fueling animosity toward the West. The actions of these terrorist groups make the realization of mediating the tensions between the West and the Muslim world a distant concept. That is because, in recent years, more and more domestic attacks within Western nations are being organized and implemented by Western-born Muslims who have radicalized and joined internationally sponsored terrorists groups. The fatal shootings in 2009 at Fort Hood Military Base in Texas, the terrorist plot to use three suicide bombers to attack subways in Times Square, and the failed car bombing in Times Square were individually planned and/or implemented by a Western-born Muslim citizen of the country they plotted against. The emergence of this phenomenon of homegrown terrorists complicates the already mired relationship between Westerners and Muslims. Beyond that, it has made Muslims in many of these countries the targets of discrimination and violence, and has led politicians to push for tougher immigration laws.

Relations between Muslims and the West were already strained in states such as France, Italy, and Germany, where racism is overt and immigration laws are inherently discriminatory and exclusionary to non-Europeans. However, discrimination and violence against Arab and Turkish immigrants has only grown more intense and widespread since these homegrown domestic terrorist incidents. The poor treatment of Muslims, Arabs, and Turks in these states only worsens the problem, as young Muslim men turn to radical Islamic groups, who further exploit these tensions by recruiting them as tools for their violent agenda.

With the presence of Muslim terrorists in the Western world, and a Western military presence in the Muslim world, the relationship between the two remains at odds. The major obstacles that stand in the way of improving the relationship between the West and the Muslim world are, first and foremost, the continued conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the United States' presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the increasing radicalization of Western-born Muslims. Each obstacle is in some way connected to the other, and a solution to one would certainly make resolving the other two possible. However, centuries of conflict, mistrust, and resentment will not simply be erased overnight, no matter how much effort is put into addressing the current problems that exist between the West and the Muslim world. Furthermore, some scholars characterize the interaction between Islamic civilizations and the West as an enduring clash of civilizations, doomed from the very beginning and fated to continue along these rigid fault lines, no matter what, even if there was a fair and equitable resolution to the greatest source of contention—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his essay "The Roots of Muslim Rage," Bernard Lewis makes this point very clear:

> The French have left Algeria, the British have left Egypt, the
> Western oil companies have left their oil wells, the westernizing
> Shah has left Iran—yet the generalized resentment of the
> fundamentalists and other extremists against the West and its
> friends remains and grows and is not appeased. The cause most
> frequently adduced for anti-American feeling among Muslims
> today is American support for Israel. This support is certainly a
> factor of importance, increasing with nearness and involvement.
> But here again there are some oddities, difficult to explain in terms
> of a single, simple cause. In the early days of the foundation of
> Israel, while the United States maintained a certain distance, the
> Soviet Union granted immediate de jure recognition and support,
> and arms sent from a Soviet satellite, Czechoslovakia, saved the
> infant state of Israel from defeat and death in its first weeks of life.
> Yet there seems to have been no great ill will towards the Soviets
> for these policies, and no corresponding good will toward the
> United States [and the West].[6]

While Huntington and Lewis certainly believe working to improve Muslim-West relations is a hopeless endeavor, I am a bit more optimistic. While Muslim-West relations are undoubtedly strained, with the seeds of contention planted almost 1,000 years ago with the onset of the First Crusade, to say Muslim-West relations are forever doomed is a harsh and narrow statement, one that leaves no room for progress, compromise, or innovations on either side that could one day bring about a peaceful resolution and long-lasting reconciliation.

Notes:

[1]   Sabin Streeter, *The Road to 9/11* (London: Kundhardt Productions, 2005), film.

[2]   Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 31.

[3]   Richard Chasdi, *Serenade of Suffering: A Portrait of Middle Eastern Terrorism 1968–1993* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999).

———, *Tapestry of Terror: A Portrait of Middle Eastern Terrorism 1994–1999* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002).

Hilal Khashan, "The New World Order and the Tempo of Militant Islam," *British Journal of Middle East Studies* 24, no. 1 (1997): 5–24.

R. C. Martin, "Religious violence in Islam: Towards an Understanding of the Discourse on Jihad in Modern Egypt," in *Contemporary Research on Terrorism*, ed. P. Wilkinson and A. Stewarts (Aberdeen, U.K: Aberdeen University Press, 1987).

[4]   See note 1 above.

[5]   See note 2 above.

[6]   Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 3 (September 1990): 47–60.

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