

## **THE WEST VERSUS THE ARAB WORLD: DECONSTRUCTING THE DIVIDE<sup>1</sup>**

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The main geo-political and historical roots of the sense of divide existing between the Arab world and the West do not originate in any kind of clash of religious and cultural differences of an essential nature, but become rather from the different historical traumas suffered by the Arab world, both in their own specific history and in their thorny historical relations. Any attempt to reduce tensions should first recognize these different traumas. Too often in the media and the academic world different religious arguments are advocated to analyze purely political issues. It is only by recognizing the complex historical plight suffered by both groups that hostility and tensions can be diffused and reduced. This requires restraint in the media and the academic world, so that the political changes needed on both sides of the divide to reduce tensions and clashes can be encouraged.

### **Introduction, globalisation and the resurrection of mega-identities**

The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth were dominated by the nation-state system and the secular nationalisms associated with it. But the Cold War recreated the forgotten sense of belonging to what could be called a mega-identity structure, as the Soviet bloc and the Western democracies confronted each other, with their respective institutions<sup>1</sup> and ideologies<sup>2</sup> in a hostile face-off. Such a confrontation between groups of diverse societies and nations had not been seen since the end of the Middle Ages, when Christendom and Islam constituted two different and opposed worlds. Its modern reincarnation was the East/West confrontation.

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As the Soviet bloc crumbled in 1989, a major power vacuum emerged in the international system. However, contrary to optimistic expectations, the generalization of the democratic system based on the rule of law and the respect for individual human rights did not take place<sup>3</sup>. Rather, what emerged was a new divide between the 'Muslim' World (centered on the Arab countries) and the 'Judeo-Christian' World. This divide has become central in international relations. It has been constructed on various old and new cultural and historical backgrounds belonging to the respective new mega-identities<sup>4</sup>. Globalized communications augment the perception of threat on both sides of the divide, as epitomized by Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations' thesis based on religious identity<sup>5</sup>. Recently, President George Bush has lent credibility to the Huntingtonian vision by describing what he sees as an all-out war in which the United States is pitted against Islamic militants supposedly attempting to establish a radical Muslim empire from Indonesia to Spain, with the aim of destroying 'civilization'.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter will attempt to deconstruct the mutual feelings of hostility between the Arab World, Europe's next-door neighbor, and the Western world, whose self-definitions allude increasingly to Judeo-Christian values. It is to be hoped that uncovering the roots of hostility and fear may contribute to easing the tensions now being fueled by most official political discourse.

### **Israel in the perspective of radically different historical traumas**

All too often, Western decision-makers presume that Arab public opinion has the same feelings and emotions concerning key issues in international affairs as Westerners do. In so doing, they forget that the Arabs (as well as people in other non-Western nations, whether Muslim or non-Muslim), have not experienced the same historical traumas and have been only indirectly exposed to European history. These traumas should be clearly identified because they continue to influence considerably the 'Western' view on the conduct of world affairs, particularly in the Middle East.

The terrible Wars of Religion between Catholics and Protestants were one of the first European traumas of modern times, followed later by the explosion of secular nationalisms and the conflicts that devastated Europe, culminating in the two World Wars<sup>7</sup>. Narrow nationalism and anti-Semitism grew together in European culture.<sup>8</sup> The Zionist Movement, launched at the end of the nineteenth century, was a reaction to this monstrous alliance.<sup>9</sup> And when the horrors of the Nazi incarnation of European anti-Semitism were fully revealed at the end of World War II, it was understandable that Europeans were convinced that the Jews should be given a State of their own in Palestine as a compensation for the tragic fate of the European Jewish communities.<sup>10</sup>

The Arabs and other non-Western peoples who were not exposed to the same trauma could not develop the same kind of political culture and sentiment. There is no way the Arabs could ever feel the same emotions about the Israeli endeavor as a European or an American does. Of course individuals may develop considerable sympathy for the suffering of the Jews during World War II. But the Arabs and other non-Western

nations cannot collectively respond in any comparable way to this very specific European trauma.

### **Long-standing European historical traumas vis-à-vis the Arab East**

Europeans have accumulated a succession of historical traumas in their relations with their Arab and Muslim neighbors. Chief among them has been the fear of Muslim invasion and domination, as occurred first when the Arabs conquered Spain, Sicily and Southern Italy and later when the Ottoman Turks conquered the Balkans and Hungary and twice set siege to Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg Empire. These old traumas were refreshed and aggravated when, under the pressure of guerrilla movements and armed resistance, Europe was forced to relinquish its colonial possessions in the Arab and Muslim world. And in relation to the Christian-Jewish trauma mentioned above, is there not a clear link between implicit or explicit Western support for the expansionist settlement policies of the State of Israel in what remains of Palestinian land and memories of the Crusades that failed to secure the permanent settlement of European Christians in the Arab East?<sup>11</sup> And isn't nostalgia for lost French or British colonial possessions involved as well?

As regards the invasion of Iraq by the United States, Britain and the symbolic battalions of a few other Western countries, one could also argue that the old historical background is still an active, albeit unconscious factor in shaping Western policies in the Arab East. This is not to deny the existence of other geo-political factors that motivated President Bush (the control of oil, the security of Israel, the encirclement of China, etc.), but might help to understand why this invasion took place in spite of massive popular opposition and the condemnation of the Pope. Controlling the Arab East and controlling Islam are dreams anchored in the unconscious that has shaped the Western mega-identity. And reverse traumas are to be found in the Arab East.

### **Arab historical traumas**

The Arabs for their part have entirely different historical traumas. For centuries, they lived in a state of peace within various non-Arab empires (first the Mamluks and then the Ottomans). While they lost their political power at the beginning of the tenth century, they were not exposed to either invasion or war after the end of the Crusades and the Mongol invasions. Although tensions certainly existed among various different Muslim creeds, the Arab lands remained at peace except for minor internecine wars between feudal lords. Relations between Kurds, Berbers and Arabs were multisectional and did not pose specific problems. Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, namely Christians and Jews of Arab or Berber or Spanish origin were not characterized by violence, except very sporadically and locally. There was no displacement of population, no genocide, no systematic persecution as was the case in Europe since the beginning of the Wars of Religion.

The Arab trauma was in fact created by European colonial policies (the invasion of Algeria beginning in 1830; the invasion of Egypt in 1882; the troubles between the

Maronites and the Druze in Mount Lebanon between 1840 and 1861 because of the confrontation between the British and the French empires).<sup>12</sup> Arabs witnessed the crumbling of their protector, the Ottoman Empire, in the face of the greed of the colonial powers, their rivalries over how to divide up the Arab lands among themselves and influence the different religious and ethnic communities. The trauma was amplified by the creation of Israel in 1948. Arab decision-makers and public opinion could not understand why Palestinians should be evicted from their ancestral land to compensate for Jewish suffering in Europe, in which they had played no part. In their view, such compensation, if it were to consist of territory that would become exclusively Jewish, should take place in Europe and not in Palestine, where the holy sites of the three monotheistic religions are located and where the local Jewish communities had always lived at peace with their Muslim and Christian neighbors.

In relation to Palestine, as the Arabs had absorbed so many different types of migrants in their history, public opinion could have accepted individual Jewish migration. The historical reference for the Arabs was not an homogeneous nationalist State of the German or the French type; rather it was a pluralistic society organized along the lines of the Ottoman millet system, under which different religious or ethnic groups coexisted; each religious community was autonomous in managing its own civil affairs (education, marriage, inheritance, religious endowments or wakfs). Lebanon was cited as an example of the modernization of the millet system and served as a basis for the functioning of a parliamentary system along the liberal European model of consociative democracy.<sup>13</sup>

Hence the idea of a State exclusively based on one religion in Palestine appeared totally irrational and inconsistent with Arab social and cultural historical experience in religious and ethnic pluralism. Displacing the Palestinian people to realize the Jewish National Home in Palestine appeared unfair, unjust and politically unacceptable.

The recent invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies has not only revived the trauma of the occupation of Arab land by the European colonial powers; it has also revived other, older historical traumas such as the Crusader invasions of the Arab East or the expulsion of the Arabs from Spain (*Al Andalus*) and Southern Europe. This dramatic and painful event has reinforced the feeling that the divide between the Arab East and the West is in fact permanent. It has caused Westerners to be seen as essentially hostile to the Arabs, interested above all in dominating them. Moreover, the Arabs feel that the West wants full control of Arab oil in its own strategic interest.

### **Why the West assumes that Arabs are anti-semitic**

The Arab attitude vis-à-vis Israel is not well understood by many in the West who, influenced by their own traumatic experience of anti-Semitism tend to believe that the Arab so-called rejection of Israel is the result of a deeply rooted local anti-Semitism and that it should be repressed and suppressed by all means available, including wars such as those waged by the State of Israel in 1948, 1956, 1967 or

1982, with the invasion of Lebanon, or by the re-occupation of large tracts of the West Bank and Gaza in 2001, or the invasion of Iraq by the United States. Moreover, Western governments tend to pressurize Arab officials, intellectuals and civil society organizations to fight this 'local' variant of anti-Semitism. In spite of the fact that Israel still occupies Arab and Palestinian territories in violation of UN resolutions, Western decision-makers persist in pressuring Arab governments to establish diplomatic and economic relations with it. What is more, these officials, whether American or European, are imprisoned in an implicit or unconscious prejudice: guided by their own history, through which so many forced displacements of populations took place, they do not understand why the Palestinians should stick so hard to their land and why they insist on the right of return.<sup>14</sup> After all, in Europe, the displacement of populations had long been a solution to many intractable problems. This was the case during the Wars of Religion, from which emerged the famous Westphalian principle *cujus regio, ejus religio*, as well as during various nationalist wars of territorial expansion in the nineteenth century, culminating in the two World Wars. The design of new national borders after 1945 provoked the displacement of millions of Europeans. As for North and South America, the large-scale, displacement and shrinking of native populations was at the heart of the modern history of both. This we believe is the reason why the Israelis as well as parts of Western public opinion cannot understand why the Palestinians do not simply migrate and settle in neighboring Arab countries, so as to enable the Middle East to live in peace at last.

### **Why some Arabs see Western support for Israel as a continuation of the Crusades**

On the other hand, many Arabs and Palestinians are puzzled by the moral pressure brought to bear on them by the West. It is as if the latter wants them to regard Israel as a normal and peaceful country simply addressing its problems of security and terrorism, as if the occupation of Palestinian land did not exist. Against this, what the Arabs see is prolonged occupation and the suffering of Arab populations in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, as well as the continuous expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, in addition to three Israeli invasions of Lebanese territory (one of which lasted for 22 years). They cannot understand what logic can justify depriving them of their ancestral land where they have lived since Biblical times or depriving Palestinians who have been refugees for the last years of any right of return, while any citizen from any country in the world can migrate to the same territory provided he can prove his Jewish origin.

Naturally, Arab public opinion tends to rationalize the Western bias vis-à-vis Israel in the light of the last two historical traumas - the Crusades and, colonialism. For the vast majority, who have no detailed understanding of the history of Europe and its traumas, the emergence of Israel and the support it receives can be explained only as a new colonial and religious Crusade. This perception is reinforced by the fact that the Western powers do not implement the universal values contained in international law fairly in the region.

## **Credibility and double standards in the Middle East**

This existence of double standards is the second issue on which Arab and Western public opinion can only diverge and which must be seriously debated. Unfortunately, however, most Western decision-makers do not grasp the destabilizing impact of the misuse of international law and the United Nations in the management of the Middle Eastern conflicts. These double standards are apparent in the following areas:

### **On Palestine and Israel**

- The large number of US vetos on draft resolutions presented to the UN Security Council that condemned Israel for violent and disproportionate acts of reprisal against Lebanon (invasion in 1978 and 1982) or against the Palestinians in the occupied territories.
- The non-implementation of Security Council resolutions asking Israel to withdraw from occupied territories (the opposite was true when Iraq occupied Kuwait).
- No international sanctions have ever been adopted against Israel (except when the European Union barred products from Israeli settlements in the occupied territories), while so many sanctions have been applied against other countries (Rhodesia, South Africa, Argentina, Libya, Sudan, Iraq, China and Russia during the Cold War).
- While the international community has provided military protection to suffering populations as in the case of Namibia, East Timor, Bosnia or Kosovo, nothing of the sort has been envisaged for the Palestinians, despite their suffering over the past 75 years.
- Contrary to what happened in other places (Chechnya, East Timor, Bosnia, Sri-Lanka,<sup>15</sup> South Africa, etc.), resistance to occupation doesn't appear to be recognized as legitimate either on the part of Palestinians, or on the part of the Lebanese in resistance to the Israeli occupation of large parts of South Lebanon between 1978 and 2000. In both cases, the occupied population has in fact been asked not to resist.
- In 1947-1950 the United Nations produced the best possible compromise on the Palestinian issue between universal values and principles embodied in modern secular international law on the one hand, and the need in the Western view to create *ex-nihilo* a state for Jews on the other hand. This compromise included, *inter alia*, the right of return or compensation for Palestinians evicted from their ancestral land and the need to make Jerusalem an open international city, since its many holy places belong to the three monotheistic faiths. This international legislation appears to have been forgotten in the West. In sharp contrast, UN

resolutions on Iraq were promptly implemented and backed by military force, including the economic embargo that created so much civilian suffering.

- The policies of the UN Atomic Energy Agency are firmly implemented with regard to Arab countries and Iran but not as regards Israel; policies concerning weapons of mass destruction are only applied to Arab countries (and, as is well known, it turned out that Iraq in fact had none).
- When Security Council resolution 1559 recently ordered Syrian troops to withdraw from Lebanon, international pressure was put on the two governments to implement it forthwith. Although most of the Lebanese are rightly satisfied to see their country free of the Syrian military presence, how can we forget that Security Council resolution (425) of 1978 asking Israel to withdraw its army from the south of Lebanon was implemented only 22 years later and that only as a result of the armed resistance of Lebanese to Israel? The same could be said of the 1982 resolution demanding all foreign forces to leave Lebanon after the invasion of Lebanon by Israel. More recently, under the pretext of resolution 1559, the whole of Lebanon has again been targeted by Israel, together with a maritime and air blockade, in reprisal for the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah. This has led to massive destruction of Lebanese civilian infrastructure and tragic loss of innocent lives. This is a repetition of its major aggression of 1982 under the pretext of eradicating Palestinian terrorists operating from southern Lebanon.

Arab public opinion perforce concludes that for most Western decision-makers international law does not have to be enforced on the State of Israel, but only on the Arab States, as if they implicitly believe either that Israel is always right in its military actions, or that the specificity of this State and its historical origins justify the waiving of internationally-agreed principles and values, including those embodied in the Geneva Convention and in numerous UN provisions for the settlement of the Arab/Israeli conflict. The recent ruling of the International Court of Justice that the separation wall being built by Israel on Palestinian land is totally illegal<sup>16</sup> has already been forgotten by Western decision-makers and, unfortunately, by all Arab governments as well. The construction of the wall continues unabated.

## **On Iraq**

- In response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a military force under a UN resolution went to war, whereas no other military invasion anywhere in the world during the last decades has been dealt with this way.
- The economic embargo of Iraq, again under UN auspices, was one of the cruelest acts of the international community. It savagely punished the Iraqi population,

mainly children, while reinforcing the grip of the dictator. In spite of the fact that Kuwait had been liberated from the Iraqi army a few months after its occupation, this cruel embargo was maintained until the US-led invasion of Iraq.

- North Korea, although it has acknowledged that it is developing nuclear weapons, has never received the same harsh treatment as Iraq, either politically or militarily.
- There have been, and still are, many terrible dictators in the world, but never - with the exception of the tiny island of Grenada invaded by the United States in 1983 - has a major Western power invaded a country to liberate its population from oppression or to search for weapons of mass destruction (whose existence was in any case questionable, as we now know).
- No link has been proven to exist between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda terrorist group. True, there was an alliance between this group and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but nothing of the sort regarding Iraq.
- As in Palestine, the right to resist a foreign occupation is denied by the United States and all its Middle Eastern policy sympathizers.

To convince the Arabs that Western decision-makers are fair in their management of the international system and earnest in preaching democratic values to the Middle Eastern countries, there should be a fair and just implementation of international law and of UN decisions and body of laws on all concerned countries.

The practice of such double standards destroys the credibility of the democratic values that are so badly needed in the Middle East. If there is to be a stable regional order in the Middle East, the core principles and values embodied in international law must be implemented consistently with regard to every country. But many Western decision-makers do not even appear to be aware of the double standards they practice in this part of the world. This is one of the biggest threats to the future of international peace, for it leads Arab public opinion to consider that the 'West' merely manipulates general principles of law and justice against the legitimate interests of the people of the region. A minority Arab radical fraction is thus reinforced in its belief that Muslims should reject all modern political principles originating in the philosophy of the European Enlightenment. This same fraction preaches the most rigid of the many interpretations of the Koran dating back to the time when the world was effectively divided between Christendom and Islam.

### **Muslim double standards**

By exactly the same token, the reluctance of many governments in the Islamic world to recognize the importance of key ethical and political standards promotes the growing sentiment in the West of a civilizational 'clash' with the Arab and Muslim world. Respect for minorities, gender equality, freedom of expression, freedom of



creed and to change religion, judicial guarantees against arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, are key values that originated in the Enlightenment but have all become universal, accepted by people throughout the world. Unfortunately, the human rights record of the Arab world in the last 50 years has been very negative and political liberalization has been slow and superficial.

To make things worse, secular Arab nationalism has been embodied by political parties of the Nasserist and Baathist type with a very poor record in terms of human rights. Arab nationalism has failed to secure order, stability and freedom in the Arab region, while various kinds of fundamental Islam that have tried to replace it have also failed. The so-called 'Islamic revival' has produced various forms of cultural alienation from the modern world, as well as the creation of an international entity based on religion (the Organization of the Islamic Conference) which comprises countries with large Muslim populations. The OIC has adopted an Islamic Declaration of Human Rights which is not really compatible with the Universal Declaration.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, this 'revival' encouraged as a tool to fight the extension of various forms of Marxist ideology, takes a closed view of the world, creating an artificial feeling of deep division between Muslims and non-Muslims. Many components of this revival have degenerated into violent political movements opposing both Western culture and local political systems. This violence exported first to Europe and then to the United States in 2001, is largely responsible for aggravating the divide between the Arab World and the West.

Moreover, a few regimes (Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan - a non-Arab country - and the late Taliban regime in Afghanistan - also non-Arab) implement Islamic law according to the strictest and most rigid criteria:<sup>18</sup> gender inequality, physical punishment, forced separation of the sexes in all aspects of public life, refusal to acknowledge liberal and modernized interpretations of the Koran. This contributes to creating a very negative image of Islam in public opinion worldwide, thus increasing the divide, although many other Arab regimes do not implement Islamic Sharia in this brutal way.

### **How to bridge the divide?**

#### **The need to go back to a coherent secular view of the world**

The simplistic traditional view established by European philosophy and sociology is that democracy and individualism originate exclusively in Judeo-Christian monotheism. It is however rather simplistic to differentiate Islam from the two other monotheistic faiths and consider it alien to the values produced by the latter. Islam too is a monotheistic faith originating in the same Biblical roots that are fully acknowledged and honored in the Koran. Western secularism and recognition of individual rights originate in the cruel and extended religious wars between the Church of Rome and the various protestant creeds that contested its autocratic and monopolistic rule, as well as in the English, American and French revolutions. In the

Islamic world, there was no Church to impose its control on political matters; rulers were always laymen free of the tutelage of a religious establishment.<sup>19</sup> Secularism as it emerged in European history has no historical meaning in a non-European context, whether Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu. However, the most hotly debated issue in the Arab and Islamic worlds is the extent to which the text of the Koran and its well-established interpretations can evolve and adapt to new economic and social conditions. This issue was actually debated in the first centuries of Islam before being abandoned. It has been reopened during the last 150 years concomitantly with institutional and political modernization, but Muslim conservative movements reject any evolution of this kind.<sup>20</sup> They focus largely in fact on non-political issues such as the restriction of women's rights, polygamy, adultery, etc. On the political front, their views are geared to promoting Jihad against the infidels, i.e., any Muslim or non-Muslim who does not adhere to their rigorist approach to Islam. The various Israeli occupations as well as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq lend credibility to their call for Jihad against the 'new Crusaders'. Unfortunately, as secular Arab nationalism has failed, the Jihadist call to fight the occupation of Arab land by Western infidels is the only current expression of nationalist anger.

The key issue here is the way, in a certain historical context, political decision-makers can misuse religion to encourage conflicts and wars, while the same religion can inspire the highest moral values in a setting that encourages peace and development. Suffice it to recall that 50 years ago secularism was a universal value, even in the developing countries. The Non-Aligned Movement in its heyday of the 1960s and 1970s never made any allusion to moral or religious values in explaining the differences between the developed and the developing worlds.

It is also to be remembered that secularism is a basic principle of modern democracy and political life. It should be so in international life as well. International law cannot be subverted by religious or ethical considerations; it should remain secular, based on humanitarian principles that have developed since the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, since religion was heavily mobilized against the Soviet Union and socialist or Marxist segments of public opinion during the last phase of the Cold War, secularism appears to be on the retreat everywhere.<sup>21</sup> Discussions are now heavily focused on religious revivals in different parts of the world. So called conflicting Islamic or Judeo-Christian values are in the foreground for most people and top the political agendas internationally.

### **For a moratorium on discussing Islam in the West**

The pervasiveness of this discussion is an enormous obstacle to clear thinking about the real political issues at stake. In our view, what is really needed today for positive dialogue to take place on the historical and legal issues underpinning them is self-restraint, or a kind of self-imposed and voluntary moratorium on discussion of the religious issues. In reality, current dialogue all too often solidifies existing sentiments

and positions and thus deepens the artificial sense of a clash of religious values. What is urgently needed is a common attempt to grasp real objective issues within the secular framework of Enlightenment values and principles - all of which had a major impact in the Middle East after the French Revolution, leading Arab, Iranian and Turkish clerics and intellectuals to adopt most of them in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The diffusion of these principles to broader segments of the population was hindered by the colonialist excesses of the French and the British, which contradicted the principles they preached. Conservative elements in our Arab societies were thus reinforced in their opposition to adopting and adapting these values locally.<sup>23</sup>

Conditions are similar today. The Western powers preach democracy, reform and the rule of law, but their behavior in the region directly or indirectly contradicts these basic principles. Secularists and democrats in the region are thus looked upon with suspicion by conservative or Muslim radical fundamentalists; in addition, they are not considered sufficiently representative by Western decision-makers or the media who always prefer to dialogue with or speak to conservative religious personalities or tribal chiefs. Moreover, some of the latter have abandoned any critical view of US policies in the region and are vocal critics of secular Arab nationalism, which is considered to be old-fashioned and to have inspired autocratic regimes. This attitude denies them a solid popular base in their own countries: the more they are admired and promoted in the Western media, the more they are looked upon, with suspicion by their own people.

### **A code of conduct for media and academic research**

The presentation of the confrontation between the West and the Arab world by the media - and by academic researchers popular with the media - needs to be changed. Stereotyping and cliché-mongering should be more closely monitored. This is valid for both the Arab media and the Western media. A good example of media misuse is the way the issue of the Islamic veil in France has been dealt with on both sides of the divide. On the Western side, whether French or not, the issue is dealt with in a highly politicized way; secularists and multiculturalists have entered into furious battles between themselves and have used young Muslim girls or Muslim intellectuals to approve or disapprove of the very restricted measure taken by the French government to ban the wearing of any religious sign in the public school system. The American press attacked the French government as if it was taking revenge for the French disapproval of the war in Iraq. The Arab media were no better. They confused their audiences by not explaining that the veil ban was restricted to government schools, letting ordinary Arabs believe that the veil was banned everywhere. This contributed to the general atmosphere of hostility. Western and Arab media did not care to report to the public the very lively and democratic debate that took place within and around the work of a special Commission appointed by the French Government to explore the issue in consultation with various interested parties (students, parents, teachers, and religious institutions). The media mishandling was as big in the West as it was in the Arab East and incited many demon stations and rallies against the French decision in the streets of Paris and many Arab capitals, including

Baghdad. The same mishandling is apparent with regard to the nuclear issue. For years, media talked about the 'Islamic' bomb when reporting on Pakistan's efforts.<sup>24</sup> Would anybody have ever termed the Western nuclear arsenal 'Christian' or called the Israel nuclear capability 'Jewish'?

Self-restraint should be promoted in the media so that religion is not implicitly or explicitly mixed up with political issues.<sup>25</sup> If certain violent radical and anarchist groups in Arab countries pretend to act on the basis of Islam does this necessarily imply that Islam as a religion is the culprit? Did anybody in the Western media accuse the Christian faith or the Marxist view of history as responsible for the violent anarchists or leftist movements or for the violence of the IRA or the Basque ETA movement in Spain?<sup>26</sup>

And academic research should not focus exclusively on radical anarchist movements advocating Islam or on the rigid and dogmatic expressions of the Islamic creed advocated by fundamentalist movements. Instead, it should try to give a full view of the intellectual life in the Arab East. More translations of books written in Arabic by eminent Muslim reformists or by Arab secular nationalists of both yesterday and today should be made available to Western readers.

After all, the world is now confronted with a resurgence of fundamentalism in religious faith. This phenomenon is not a monopoly of Muslim societies. Islamic fundamentalism is paid much greater attention because of the violent acts committed by anarchist groups advocating Islam, but people forget that many more acts of terrorism are perpetrated *within* the Arab world or in countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan than in the West. Furthermore, the Arab East itself is devastated by conflicts and wars and its huge oil reserves are a magnet for the interference of the major powers.

The Arab media and academic researchers also need to heed the lesson of self-restraint. They should cease to treat the 'West' as a single unified bloc that wants to dominate the Muslim East at any price. More focus should be placed on intellectual trends in the West that have strongly condemned colonialism and more recently the invasion of Iraq and that support the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. Western secularism needs also to be discussed more objectively. It is high time that the history of secularism is properly explained in the Arab and Muslim world. The recent wave of Muslim fundamentalism has propagated the idea that secularism is equal to atheism and thus antagonistic to Islam, and that the West wants to impose it on Muslim believers so as to dilute the strength of Islam. This simplistic view should be confronted, and secularism should be explained as having been the solution to endless religious wars in European history and the means to promote democracy and individual rights without suppressing religion and religious liberty. Properly understood and adapted to the historical background and specific problems of Arab societies, secularism could ease many internal tensions within them, where different kinds of Islam must coexist (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Yemen) or where Christians and Muslims must live together (Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon,

Syria and Iraq). Secularism might also become an appropriate solution in the future for a bi-national State or federated State in Palestine/ Israel where Jews, Christians and Muslims could live peacefully side by side.

An additional key issue to be addressed in the Arab media is the growing view that the Jews are conspiring collectively against the Arabs, in association with the West. This view, as already mentioned, results from the wholesale import of the Western anti-Semitic tradition and writings into the Arab world. It is also attributable to Western writings about the pervasive influence of the so-called Jewish lobby in the United States. In this sense, there is also a Western responsibility for the view that the Arabs are now developing. In the 1950s and 1960s Arab secular nationalism used to make a distinction between the Zionist creed advocating the conquest by force of the Holy Land and the Jewish religion. Today this distinction has disappeared. This is not only due to fact that this brand of Arab nationalism has been totally marginalized by the ascending trend of political Islam, but also to the fact that Zionism in the West is now considered to be an essential element of the Jewish faith, despite the fact that it is contested within Judaism itself.<sup>27</sup> The only way to counter this expanding view both in the West and the Arab East is to stop analyzing tensions and conflicts as being the mere expression of religious mentalities and psychologies. In the case of Israel, no doubt there exist powerful American sympathies based on the religious feeling that America was the 'promised' land three centuries ago and that Israel is the archetypal one today, legitimately re-conquered by its ancient founders.<sup>28</sup>

But more important is the non-religious and exclusively political belief that because Israel supports US imperial policy in the Arab East it should not be made to implement UN resolutions and hand back land conquered in 1967. The fact that most Arab governments have now become so supportive of American policy in the region allows the US Government to pursue its almost blind support to Israel regardless of the cost to its real national interest in the region.<sup>29</sup> The Jewish lobby in the US is certainly powerful, but its influence stems not from 'Jewish' power as such, but rather from an American context that is extremely favorable to its views.<sup>30</sup> As a result, very few people both in the West and in the Arab and Muslim world resist the view that US policy in the Middle East is exclusively dictated by the Jewish lobby.<sup>31</sup>

There will be no way to reduce the divide between the West and the Arab East without media restraint in coverage of Middle Eastern and Arab affairs and without a much needed diversification of academic research to analyze the complexities of Arab societies and report the lively debate taking place in the intellectual and political circles of these societies. There should also be more awareness that the American geo-political agenda should not become the agenda for dialogue between the two parties. Rather, such an agenda should discuss the real issues that we have attempted to identify here as a basis for reducing tensions. Only by so doing may we attain a better understanding of what really divides East and West and set aside inadequate anthropological and religious conceptualizations that are of little help for conflictresolution in our time.

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<sup>1</sup> The Warsaw Pact and COMECON on the one hand and NATO and the OECD on the other.

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<sup>2</sup> See the very interesting book by Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, New Press, New York, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, New York, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> For the colonial cultural heritage that has shaped discourse on Islamic societies see Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1978 and *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf/Random House, New York, 1993; for an historical enquiry into the roots of this new divide, see Georges Corm, *Orient-Occident. La fracture imaginaire*, La Découverte, Paris, 2003 (paperback edition 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel R Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> See the text of the President's speech in October 2005 at the National Endowment for Democracy ([www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/print/200510063.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/print/200510063.html))

<sup>7</sup> The best description of the trauma created in European culture by the long wars between Catholics and Protestants is in Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1956; see also the famous book written in 1852 by Edgar Quinet, *Le christianisme et la Révolution française*, Fayard, Paris, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> See the classical study of Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, New York, 1951.

<sup>9</sup> See Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel. Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State*, Princeton University Press, 1999 and Alain Dieckhoff, *The Invention of a Nation: Zionist Thought and the Making of Modern Israel*, Columbia University Press, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, Homes & Meier, New York, 1985 and *The Politics of Memory: Experiences of a Holocaust Researcher*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> One French writer did not hesitate to make the comparison between the Crusades and the emergence of the State of Israel, stating that this time everything was done to secure an eternal Western presence in the Arab East through the State of Israel. According to this writer, while the Crusades failed, the West should not allow the Israel' experience to fail. See Jean-Claude Guillebaud, *Sur la route des Croisades*, Arlea, Paris, 1993. This book is a reprint of a long reportage by the author that had appeared in a series of articles published by the French daily *Le Monde*.

<sup>12</sup> See the classical book about the emergence of modern Arab nationalism by George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*, Capricorn Books, London, 1938.

<sup>13</sup> See Albert HOURANI, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age. 1798-1939*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967 and Georges CORM, *Histoire du pluralisme religieux dans le bassin méditerranéen*, Geuthner, Paris, 1998 and *L'Europe et l'Orient. De la balkanisation à la libanisation ; histoire d'une modernité inaccomplie*, La Découverte, Paris, 1989 (pocket book 2004).

<sup>14</sup> We have explained lengthily these types of misunderstanding between Arab and Western decisions makers and intellectuals in the last reprints of our history of the contemporary Middle East, *Le Proche-Orient éclaté; 1956-2005*, Gallimard, Folio/Histoire, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> It is to be noted that it is in Sri Lanka that the first suicide bombers emerged in 1987 as a new form of guerilla by the Tamil Tiger armed revolt against the Government of this country many years before the Palestinian resistance. The Tamil rebels say 240 of their members have carried out suicide attacks over the years (see Frances HARRISON report to the BBC on July 5, 2005 available on BBC website: [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/2098657](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2098657)). It is also to be noted that Chechen resistance to Russia includes also very bloody suicide bomb attacks against civilians. However, in both cases Western public opinion is not as moved or revolted against these attacks as is the case for Palestinians or Iraklis.

<sup>16</sup> 'Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory Advisory Opinion', International Court of Justice, General List No. 131, 9 July 2004.

<sup>17</sup> This Declaration states that 'Islam is the natural religion of human beings' and that nothing should allow 'changing of religion' (article 10); see the text in [www.oic-oci.org/index.asp](http://www.oic-oci.org/index.asp) It also states the equality of all in dignity and responsibility, but refrains from stating equality in 'rights'. There are other official Declarations on Islamic rights as the one adopted by the Islamic Council of Europe ([www.aidh.org/Biblio/](http://www.aidh.org/Biblio/)) in 1981 and the Decca Declaration adopted in 1983.

<sup>18</sup> It is to be noted in this respect that Iran is not an Arab country.

<sup>19</sup> It is to be noted here that the recent Iranian experience of *Wilayet Fakhir* introduced by Imam Khomeini whereby Moslem clerics would control and scrutinize the acts of secular political power is quite new even in the Shia brand of Islam. It is also contested by many eminent Shia religious scholars.

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<sup>20</sup> There are very lively discussions in the Arab world about the flexibility in interpreting the sacred text. Brilliant Arab scholars have continued to write extensively on this delicate issue producing books that have a big impact, e.g. Mohammed Shahrour in Syria or Nasser Hamed Abou Zeid of Egypt that was forced into exile due to its teaching and writings at Cairo University. Western media and academic work on Islam ignore almost totally the work of these Scholars to concentrate exclusively on Islam radical movements and their propaganda pamphlets. See the (unpublished) text of the lecture given at the Library of Congress in Washington on April 7, 2004 by Ziad Hafez, *The New Arab Thinkers in Islam*. A prior condensed French version of this talk was published in France under the title 'Les nouveaux penseurs de l'Islam' in *Manière de Voir*, July/August 2002, special issue on Islam published by *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Paris (e-mail of Dr Hafez: [Zhafez@aol.com](mailto:Zhafez@aol.com) to ask for the full text).

<sup>21</sup> However, for a precise and well informed worldwide view of the state of secularism, see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, 2004. See also their contribution on religion in this volume.

<sup>22</sup> See Albert HOURANI, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> On this point, see Georges CORM, *La question religieuse au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Géopolitique et crise de la postmodernité*, La Découverte, Paris, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Steve Weissman and Herbert Krosney, *The Islamic Bomb: The Nuclear Threat to Israel and the Middle East*, Times Books, New York, 1981 and D.K. Palit, *Pakistan's Islamic bomb*, Vikas, New Delhi; 1979

<sup>25</sup> See Edouard SAID, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts How We SEE the Rest of the World*, Pantheon, New York, 1981.

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, see the very interesting article on the nature of the various jihadist movements by Mary Evans under the title: "For jihadist, read anarchist", *The Economist*, August 18, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> On anti-Zionist trends in the Jewish faith see the very detailed and documented book by Yakov RABKIN, *Au nom de la Torah. Une histoire de l'opposition juive au sionisme*, Les presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, Canada, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See on this point, Elise Marienstrasse, *Nous le peuple les origines du nationalisme américain*, Gallimard, Paris, 1988 as well as Richard E. Wentz, *American Religious Traditions. The Shaping of Religion in the United States*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003 (chapter 2 titled 'Myths, Legends, and the Promised Land) and Anato Lieven, *America Right or Wrong*, Harper Collins New York, 2004 (chapter 6 titled 'American Nationalism Israel and the Middle East').

<sup>29</sup> See Georges Corm, 'Avoiding the obvious: Arab perspectives on US hegemony in the Middle East', *Middle East Report*, No. 208, Fall 1998

<sup>30</sup> See J.J. Goldberg, *Jewish Power. Inside the America Jewish Establishment*, Addison Wesley Publishing C New York, 1996.

<sup>31</sup> See Stephen Zunes, 'Israel not to blame for Iraq mess' *The Asia Times*, January 11, 2006 and his article 'The influence of the Christian Right on U.S. Middle East Policy, Foreign Policy' in *Focus - FPIF Policy Report* June 2004. The author underlines different comp factors in the fabric of US policy in the Middle East and the fact that there are as many liberal Jews in Democratic Party and in the academic world in the US there are in the Administration and the neo-conserva group around President Bush.