

FORUM BARCELONA 2004 - THE EAST WEST DIALOGUE, July 1st to 3rd - A dialogue on religion and ethnicity or a dialogue on implementing international law without double standards?

Introduction: the changing framework of East/West dialogue and conflict

The dialogue between East and West has changed considerably during the last decades. Its content and partners have also changed.

For a long time East/West dialogue and confrontation trends were those related to the opposition between the liberal democracies of the Western World under the leadership of the United States and the socialist dictatorships under the leadership of the former Soviet Union.

There has been also a dialogue between Islam and Christianity during the time of French colonialism in the Mediterranean area. Lebanon with its pluralistic society used to be a major centre for such a dialogue. But this dialogue was soon to be replaced by another one related to dialogue and reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity.

The success of this dialogue and the full support granted to the newly created State of Israel by Western powers in the Israeli refusal to implement UN resolutions on Palestine have progressively conducted to the new confrontation between the Arab and Islamic World on one hand and the Western World on the other. The events of September 11, 2001 have crystallized this confrontation that was theorized by an American scholar in 1993 in a popular book that is still very controversial.

It is clear however that the notion of East and West remain very confused. Geographically, the Eastern part of the World should be the Asian Continent whose core are the Indian and Chinese sub-continent and large islands like Indonesia, Japan and the Philippines. This part of the world is in fact called Far East as opposed to Middle East and Near East. If one speaks of East and West as two different parts of our planet, then East should include the Far as well as the Middle and the Near. It should not be restricted to Moslem and or Arab countries as it is the case to day when most people would use the concept of clash or dialogue of civilisation. This why this gathering is of extreme importance as it really represents Eastern countries, some of them not being directly affected or concerned by the conflicts of the Middle and the Near part of the East.

It is true that some major Asian powers like Japan, the Philippines and Korea are considered as strong political allies of the United States and the Western "bloc". In this sense they could not be included in a purely political definition of the East where most people would consider that political Islam is to be considered as the exclusive pillar of "East" and the source of "terrorism" as defined by the United States. But this is an advantage if the East/West dialogue is designed to diffuse international tensions and to show to political opinion that there is no clash of civilization as advocated by some in both the East and the West. This is why we will conclude our intervention on the key importance of associating Far Eastern governments and civil societies to any East West dialogue that should not remain exclusively focused on Islam and the so-called Judeo-Christian World.

Middle Eastern conflicts at the core of the problem

This being said it remains that the two main Middle Eastern conflicts in Iraq and Palestine remain at the core of strong cultural and political disagreements between Arabs and other Moslem societies on one hand and the United States and its main allies on the other hand in the new global conflict against terrorism under the American definition.

Here again some clarification is needed. Not all Moslem societies are antagonistic to the US and the West. Bosnians, Albanians, Chechens are helped or supported by the US. Many States and Government in so-called Muslim countries are very close allies of the US even if their population is becoming more anti-American due to the persistence of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by Israel or the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US army or the presence of American military bases in their own countries.

In the fight against the Soviet Union and Marxist political parties and constituencies all over the world, some of these States, like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt during the presidency of Anouar Sadate, Morocco, Sudan, Nigeria, Indonesia during the time of Suharto, have been extremely active in allowing or even promoting Islamic political creeds and movements and in securing political ties and cooperation between Islamic countries. They have been part of the US led campaign to mobilize Islamic fundamentalism in the war against the Soviet Union and the Marxist culture. The terrorist groups of today are the remnants of this policy that have turned against their masters. Other countries, like Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, having suffered from Islamic political violent activism, have remained close allies of the US even during the period when the US Government had an attitude of benevolence towards Islamic violent movements that were implementing anti-Soviet and anti-Marxist actions.

Whatever nuance, however, we would introduce in the opposition between East and West, it remains that the main source of clash as perceived mainly by the Arabs – Moslems and Christians alike-, but also by other Moslems in non-Arab countries, in particular in Iran and Pakistan, is the US/Israeli policy that is now totally dominating the Middle East with more or less open approval by many Western countries. Whatever disagreements can be expressed by certain European countries like France or Germany or Belgium or by Russia, the feeling is that the US has succeeded in gathering the “West” against the “East”.

We would like here to analyse this perception and its basis in the objective reality that is not always perceived in the so-called “West”. I hope that this could help decision-makers in the Western World to better understand that there is no clash of civilization or values, but rather an absence of dialogue on real and objective political issues that have to be dealt with outside the debilitating anthropological discourse on Arab and/or Moslem religion or ethnicity that has pervaded all the medias and academic research in both the East and the West.

We will identify here two crucial issues. One relates to different historical backgrounds separating so-called “Western” perceptions from “Eastern” perceptions; the other concerns the unfair implementation in the Middle East region of modern international principles and values.

I. Diverging historical backgrounds: Why the Arabs cannot share the same

historical emotions and historical background as the West in respect to the existence of Israel? A choc of different historical traumas

Too often Western decision makers presuppose that Arab public opinion should spontaneously share Westerners the same feelings and emotions about the main political issues that are debated in international affairs.

They tend to forget that the Arabs or other developing nations (Moslems or non-Moslems) have not gone through the same historical traumas and were only indirectly exposed to the domestic European history. These traumas should be clearly identified because they continue to influence considerably the "western" views on how to conduct world affairs and, in particular, Middle Eastern affairs.

The terrible wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants were one of the first European trauma of modern times, followed later by the explosion nationalisms and the different wars that devastated Europe and culminated in the First World War and then the Second World War. Narrow nationalism and anti-Semitism have grown together in European culture. When the Zionist Movement began its activities at the end of the XIXth Century it was a reaction to this monstrous alliance. When the horrors of the Nazi were brought to the open at the end of World War II, then there was a very general and strong feeling that the Jews should have as soon as possible a State their own in Palestine as a compensation for what happened to European Jewish communities under Nazi domination.

The Arabs and other non-western countries that were not exposed to the same trauma could in no way develop the same type of political culture and emotions. This is why there is no way whatsoever that the Arabs could ever feel the same emotions about the Israeli endeavour as a European or an American. True that some people can individually develop sympathy for the suffering of the Jews during World War II through readings or through the different films that were produced concerning this suffering. But it is unreasonable to believe that the Arabs and other non-western nations can collectively develop the same emotions that Westerners concerning this very specific European trauma.

On the contrary, the Arabs have their own specific historic traumas that are very different from the European ones. Arabs have leaved during centuries in a total state of peace being part of various non-Arab empires (Mamluks and then Ottoman). They did not have any access to political power that they lost in the beginning of the XIth Century, but their provinces has not been exposed to invasion and wars since the end of the Crusades. There have been tensions between various different Moslems creeds, but in general Arab land was at peace except for small internecine wars between feudal lords. Relations between Kurds, Berbers and Arabs were multi-secular and did not pose specific problems. Relations between Moslems and non-Moslems, namely Christian and Jews from 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 oppression as has been the case in Europe since the beginning of the Religious wars.

The trauma experienced by the Arabs was that of European colonial policies (invasion of Algeria beginning in 1840; invasion of Egypt in 1882, the troubles between Maronites and Druzes in Mount-Lebanon between 1840 and 1861 due to the confrontation between the British and the French empires). They saw the Ottoman Empire, which has been their very efficient protector for four centuries beginning to

crumble under the colonial powers greed and different and clashing policies to divide the Arab provinces between themselves and to gain influence on the different religious and ethnic communities.

This 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 the Jewish suffering in Europe to which they had no part. Such compensation in their view, if to be granted under the form a territory to become exclusively Jewish, should take place in Europe and not in a place like Palestine where Holy sites of the three monotheist religions are located and where Arab Jews have always lived at peace with their Moslem and Christian neighbours.

In general, Arab public opinion had no objection to an increased number of Jews living in Palestine. However, the historical reference for the Arabs was not an homogeneous nationalist State of the German or the French type; rather it was based on the model of a pluralistic society organised along the traditional system of the coexistence of different religious or ethnic groups under the old Ottoman "millet" system whereby each community would remain autonomous in managing its own civil affairs (education, marriage, inheritance, religious endowments or "wakfs"). Lebanon was given as an example where the millet system has been modernized and served as a base for the functioning of a parliamentary system along the liberal European model.

The idea of having a State exclusively based on one religion in Palestine appeared totally irrational and inconsistent with the own Arab social and cultural experience and historical background. Displacement of people to realize the Jewish National Home in Palestine appeared, and in fact continued to be looked at, as being unfair, unjust and politically inefficient.

This attitude is not well understood in the West. Decision makers and parts of public opinion under the influence of their own traumatic experience with anti-Semitism tend to believe strongly that the Arab so-called refusal of Israel could be the result of a deeply rooted local anti-Semitism similar to the old European one and that it should be repressed and suppressed by all means, including war either waged by the State of Israel like in 1948, 1956, 1967 or in 1982 with the invasion of Lebanon or with the reoccupation of large parts of the West Bank and Gaza in 2001.

Moreover, Western Governments tends to pressurize local Arab Governments, Arab intellectuals and civil society organisations to fight this "local" brand of what is perceived as anti-Semitism. Everything is done to induce the development of diplomatic relations and all kinds of economic relations between the State of Israel and Arab Governments and civil society, in spite of the fact that Israel still occupies Arab and Palestinian territories contrary to UN resolutions.

In addition, Western decision-makers, either Americans or Europeans, are imprisoned in an implicit or unconscious prejudice against the Arab and Palestinian public opinion negative attitude to the State of Israel. Based on their own historical experiences where so many forced displacement of population has taken place in the Americas and in Europe, they do not understand why Palestinians should stick so hard to their land and why they insist on the right of return.

After all, displacing population have been a solution to the intractable problems known by Europe during the two World wars or even during the Religious wars from

which emerged the famous principle "cujus regio, ejus religio". Millions of Europeans have been displaced after 1945 as reparation or compensation and to fix new borders. As for the Americas, the large-scale displacement and shrinking of local Indian populations has been the core of the modern history of this continent. This is why, both Israelis and parts of Western public opinion cannot understand why the Palestinians would not all migrate and settle in neighbouring Arab countries, so that the Middle East could live in peace.

On the other hand, many Arabs and Palestinians are puzzled by Western moral pressure they are exposed to. Western decision-makers would like to see the Arabs look at Israel as a peaceful and normal country, dealing with security problems and terrorism. But what the Arabs see is the prolonged occupation and suffering of Arab populations in the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, as well as the continuous expansion of settlements in occupied territories. Arabs can not and will not understand what is the logic behind depriving them of the land where they have lived for generations since the time of the Bible and depriving them of any right of return for those who have left during the last forty years, while any citizen from any country in the world could migrate to the same territory and colonise it, provided he can prove his Jewish origin.

In this context, one can understand that the tendency in Arab public opinion will naturally be to rationalize this Western attitude vis à vis Israel according to the two last historical traumas suffered by the people of the region: the Crusades and then centuries later European colonialism. Thus, for the vast majority of Arabs that has no detailed view of the history of Europe and its traumas, the emergence of Israel and the support it is receiving from the "Western" world cannot be explained otherwise. This Arab attitude is reinforced by the fact that universal values contained in international law are not being implemented fairly in the region by Western powers.

II. Implementing international law and values with scandalous double standards in the Middle East is destroying the credibility of democracy and the rule of law

This is the second point where Arab and Western public opinion cannot meet. Implementing or non-implementing international law with different standards is a key question to debate if we want to arrive at an understanding. Given their own historical background most Western decision-makers cannot realise how destabilizing is the misuse of international law and the United Nations in managing the Middle Eastern conflicts.

For Arab public opinion this is another key main issue to be seriously debated in any attempt at a constructive dialogue. In this respect, the following double standards in implementing international law can be identified.

On Palestine and Israel

- There has been so many US veto on draft resolutions presented to the UN Security Council and condemning Israel for the various violent and out of proportion acts of reprisals against Lebanon or the Palestinians in occupied territories.
- Adopted UN Security resolutions asking Israel to withdraw from occupied territories were never taken under chapter VII of the UN Chart, as was the case for the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq.
- No international sanctions whatsoever have been ever adopted against Israel

(except for the EU not allowing products from Israelis settlements in occupied territories), while so many sanctions were taken 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 like in the case of Namibia, East Timor, Bosnia or Kosovo, nothing of this sort is being envisaged for the Palestinians, in spite of their plight and suffering during the last seventy five years.
- Contrary to what happened in other places (Chechnya, East Timor, Bosnia, South Africa, etc.), resistance to occupation do not appear to be seriously recognized when it comes to Palestinians, or in the past to Lebanese fighting Israeli occupation of large parts of South Lebanon for 22 years (1978-2000). In these two cases, the occupied population is requested not to enter into any resistance to the occupier.
- The United Nations has produced in 1947-1950 the best possible compromise on the Palestinian issue between universal values and principles embodied in modern secular international law and the need in the Western view to create the State of Israel. This compromise included between others the right of return or of compensation for Palestinians evicted from their ancestral land and the need to keep Jerusalem as an open international city due to the specific fact that its numerous Holy places belong to the three monotheist faiths. This is international legislation forgotten or no more acknowledged by most decision-makers in the West. In sharp contrast, UN resolutions on Iraq were implemented backed by military force including the economic embargo created so much suffering.
- The policies of the UN Atomic Commission strongly implemented on Arab countries and Iran do not apply to Israel; policies concerning arms of mass destruction is only applied to Arab countries

In fact, this means that for most of Western decision-makers international law do not have to apply to the State of Israel, but only to the Arab States. They implicitly admit either that Israel is always right in its military moves or actions or that the specificity of this State and its historical origin justify the waiving of agreed international principles and values, included those embodied in the Geneva Convention and in UN numerous and detailed provisions for settling the Israeli question.

On Iraq

- Iraq invasion of Kuwait was dealt with by force under the cover of UN resolution based on chapter VII, but no other military invasion in the world during the last decades has been dealt with this way.
- Iraq economic embargo, again under UN cover, has been one of the cruellest acts undertaken by the international community. It has savagely punished the Iraqi population, and mainly its 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 in spite of the fact that it is acknowledging that it is developing nuclear armaments has not received the same harsh treatment as Iraq, either politically or militarily.
- There has been and still are many terrible dictators in the world, but never –to the exception of the small island of Grenada by the United States in 1983- did a major Western power invaded a country to liberate its population from oppression or to look for arms of mass destruction which presence in the case of Iraq was so questionable and in fact did not exist.
- There was obviously no link between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda terrorist group.

True that there was an alliance between this group and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but nothing of this 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.

For Arabs to believe that the Western decision-makers are fair in their management of the international system and are 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.

Using double standards is destructive for the credibility of democratic values that are so much needed in the Middle East. This why the basis for a stable regional order in the Middle East lies in the necessity to implement consistently to every country and with the same standards the core principles and values embodied in international law. However, it seems that many Western decision-makers do not even feel that they are not implementing fairly international law in this part of the world.

This is one of the biggest dangers for the future of international peace, as it is accompanied by the opposed feeling in large parts of Arab and Moslem public opinion that the "West" is manipulating general principles of law and justice against the legitimate interest of the people of the region. A minority radical fraction is thus reinforced in its belief that Moslems should reject all modern political principles originating from the European Enlightenment philosophy. 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 and there was in both camps the world of the "faithful" and of "peace" and the world of "non-believers" and "war".

Conclusion: Towards a moratorium on discussing religious and cultural issues so as to enter a real political dialogue

Since the famous book of Huntington about "Clash of civilizations", international politics in the Middle East have focused almost exclusively on religious issues, as if religion, culture and ethnicity were the sole cause of conflicts in the region. Most scholars, media commentators and decision-makers in the Western World and in the Middle East have forgotten that religion can be used and exploited for mundane political ambitions. Religion per se is never a cause for violence and conflicts or a cause for democracy and development on one hand and for dictatorship and underdevelopment on the other hand.

What is essential to point here is that the real issue is the way political decision-makers misuse a religion to encourage conflicts and war in certain historical context, while the same religion in another historical context can inspire the highest moral values in a different historical context to encourage peace and development. In fact, religious history shows very clearly how much a religious text can be interpreted differently by the believers of the same faiths and even provokes violent and enduring hostilities inside the same religion. This is why it is rather flabbergasting to hear all these superficial and ignorant comments on religion as the key to explain Middle Eastern conflicts.

The need to go back to a secular view of the world and to the Enlightenment political philosophy

We should remind ourselves here that fifty years ago secularism used to be a universal value, even in the developing countries. The non-Aligned Movement during its period of glory in the sixties and the seventies of last century never made any allusion to religious different values explaining the differences between the developed and the developing worlds.

It is also to be reminded that secularism is a basic principle of modern democracy and political life whereby politicians are requested to abstain from misusing and exploiting religion in public life or in regional and international conflict situations. Unfortunately, since religion was heavily mobilized during the last phase of the Cold war against the Soviet Union and socialist or Marxist segments of public opinion around the globe, secularism have been on the retreat everywhere in the world.

Discussions now are heavily focused on religious revivals in different parts of the world. So-called conflicting Islamic or Judaeo-Christian values are on the top of the mind of most people and on the top of political agendas discussed internationally. Such pervading and overwhelming discussions constitute an enormous obstacle to sound thinking about real political issues at stake in the various Middle Eastern conflicts, which we have attempted to identify. If we want to be able to dialogue in a positive way on relevant historical and legal issues at stake in the Middle Eastern conflicts, what is really needed to day in my view is some self-restraint or a kind of self-imposed and voluntary moratorium on discussion of religious issues.

I have no doubt that this is an urgent task for all of us. Too often, dialogue is in fact solidifying feelings and positions and deepening the artificial sense of a clash of civilization or religions. If we want to tackle the real issues at stake, then what is urgently needed is a common attempt at grasping real objective issues within the secular framework of the values and principles of the Enlightenment political philosophy. I would like to remind here how strong an impact did these principles and values had on the Middle Eastern region after the French Revolution. Arab, Iranians, Turks clerics and intellectuals adopted most of this philosophy.

However, the diffusion of these principles in the population was hindered by the colonial behaviour of the French and the British in these countries, which contradicted the Enlightenment principles they were preaching. Conservative elements in our Arab societies were thus reinforced in their opposition to adopt and adapt these principles and values locally.

It is my feeling that to day we are again living similar conditions. Western powers preach democracy, reform and the rule of law, but their behaviour in the region contradicts directly or indirectly these basic principles. Secularists and democrats in the region are thus looked with suspicion by conservative or Moslem radical fundamentalists; in addition, they are not considered sufficiently representative by Western decision-makers or medias who always prefer to dialogue or speak to conservative religious personalities or to tribal chiefs.

The benefits of enlarging the East West dialogue to Far Eastern countries

I believe it is high time that we change the East West agenda for dialogue and shift its focus from religious issues to real objective secular issues at stake. In this respect I believe that associating Far Eastern societies to this dialogue might be a very big step forward.

First, these countries have a rich historical experience in dealing successfully with Western influence in all its forms (imperial and non imperial). But they also are not religion obsessed as is the case with those societies where monotheism has forged the specific mentality of seeing the world in need to be saved by "elected" nations or race and their prophets or their gods.

Second, some of these countries after decades of being hostile to the Western political world are now not only in peace with it, but most of them have become an essential part of it. They have successfully absorbed the principles of a liberal market economy through their own ways and are today a vibrant part of economic globalisation knowing how to take advantage of it.

I can only see benefits to this participation and I thank the Barcelona Forum for inviting so many distinguished personalities from this part of the world. I am sure that this will help to design a much more objective and down to earth East West Dialogue.