

Strategy Research Project International Fellow

The Roots of Muslim Rage Revisited

by

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United States Army War College
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Abstract

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Since 9/11, America and many of its allies have been engaged in a 'War on Terror'. Much has been written about this war, the politics governing it, its successes and failures, and the way ahead. Much less attention has been given to the conflict's root cause itself. This is unfortunate, because the war's underpinning policy and strategies are based on misconceptions about Islam and the problem we are facing. Therefore, what should have been a cure, in fact in many ways aggravated the problem by widening the gap between two cultures. It is essential to set this right, because with the 'Arab Spring' now tearing through the Arab World, increasing tension in the Middle East, and a still very angry Iran, we must understand better in order to properly respond. In this paper, I offer an alternative explanation for the turmoil in the Islamic world, as well as some advice on how to better approach it.

The Roots of Muslim Rage Revisited

September 11, 2001 a group of Al Qaeda terrorists hi-jacked several airplanes and crashed them into the Twin Towers in New York, the Pentagon in Washington and a field in Pennsylvania, killing thousands and leaving the world in shock. The United States reacted quickly with retaliation on Al Qaida and the government of Afghanistan with the objective to annihilate the former and overthrow the latter and, in doing so, making sure Afghanistan would never be a safe haven for terrorists again. Since then, America and many of its allies have been at war.

Much has been written about this war, the politics governing it, its successes, failures, and the way ahead. Much less attention has been given to the conflict's root cause itself. What brought those 19 talented young Muslim men to give up their lives on that godforsaken day? What had made them so angry with 'the West' to perform such a dreadful act? Many of the attackers had achieved high levels of education as engineers, scientists and academics. Most studied abroad, and several, leader Mohammad Atta among them, would qualify as young urban professionals. Nevertheless, they were convinced their death, and the deaths of thousands of innocents, was a necessary act.¹ What was driving them? This paper will try to answer this question. The aim is not to investigate the specifics of the 9/11 attack itself, but to seek the underlying forces driving it. In other words, what is the root cause that seems to fuel the conflict between the Western, well developed, dominantly Christian world, and the (often still) developing Muslim world?

One could argue that this analysis is a good example of 'too little, too late'. With over twelve years of conflict behind us, the war in Iraq already terminated, and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) well on its way of turning over

Afghanistan to the Afghans, the fighting is almost over. So, what is the point? This sense of “coming home,” however, is not equal to “problem solved.” On the contrary, this paper will argue that the conflict’s underpinning policy and strategies are based on misconceptions about the problem we are facing. Therefore, what should have been a cure, in fact in many ways aggravated the problem by widening the gap between two cultures. Therefore, even though it is late in the game, it is essential to set this right, because with the ‘Arab Spring’ now tearing through the Arab World, increasing tension in the Middle East, and a still very angry Iran, we must understand better in order to properly respond.

This paper will first examine the origins of the current policy towards Islamic fundamentalism, follow its course through recent history, and argue why it is so unfortunate we have chosen that path. Then it presents an alternative explanation for what it is we see happening in the Islamic world, and concludes with some policy recommendations.

In 1990 the well-established British-American Orientalist² Bernard Lewis³, published an article in “The Atlantic” with the ominous title “The Roots of Muslim Rage.”⁴ In his article, Lewis tried to find an explanation for the hostile attitude against ‘the West’ in many Islamic countries around the world. To many this came as a surprise, because there seemed to be no obvious cause for the resentment. Unlike in Asia and parts of Africa, neither the United States, nor Europe had recently been directly involved in major conflicts comparable to those in Vietnam or Cuba. In fact, according to Lewis there had even been relatively little meddling in Middle Eastern and Northern African affairs in the final years of the Cold War (apart from the heavily contested support of the

State of Israel in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, a fact he somehow overlooked). Yet, in places like Libya, Iran, and Lebanon a surge of hatred was manifest that distressed, alarmed, but above all puzzled the Western World.⁵ In his article, Lewis concluded that we were witnessing nothing less than a war of Islamic fundamentalism against both secularism and modernism.⁶ The resentment was rooted in disappointment over the quality of Western (political) concepts. The aftermath of World War II had brought change to the Muslim world. Following the example of Europe in terms of organization and structure, many Muslim states emerged. However, unlike in most Western countries, they remained authoritarian in nature. Thus, at first glance, these states appeared modern, but in fact, they were not.⁷ As a result, Lewis argued, “for vast numbers of Middle Easterners, Western-style economic methods brought poverty, Western-style political institutions brought tyranny, even Western-style warfare brought defeat.”⁸ It was hardly surprising that so many Muslims were willing to give in to the idea that the old Islamic ways were better and that their salvation was to throw aside the reformer’s modernity and return to Islam’s ‘True Path’. “Admiration had given way to hostility and rejection”⁹, according to Lewis, and he concluded in very strong words: “This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and worldwide expansion of both.”¹⁰

The catchphrase “Clash of Civilizations” caught on. Three years after the publication of Lewis’s article, the prominent Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington¹¹ used it as the title for a lengthy article in ‘Foreign Affairs’.¹² That article became the basis of his well-known book with the same title, published in 1996. Huntington comes

to a similar conclusion: “differences between civilizations are real and important; civilization-consciousness is increasing; conflict between civilizations will supplant ideological and other forms of conflict as the dominant global form of conflict.”¹³ The West should especially fear Muslims because “Islam has from the start been a religion of the sword,”¹⁴ as Huntington wanted us to believe, and “on both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilization.”¹⁵ In other words, the Islamic community as a whole was on a collision course with the West.

This fatalistic, polarizing, and rather depreciative point of view would have great effect on things to come, because although both Lewis and Huntington were nuanced in their thinking, the idea of an unavoidable and somewhat deliberate clash between ‘them’ and ‘us’ planted fear in the heart of many westerners. In turn, this would lead to misconceptions about the problem we were witnessing and, as a result, faulty strategies.

In 1992 war broke out in the former Yugoslavia, and at the edge of Europe, Christians were fighting Muslims. Huntington saw this as the first sign of things to come and it appeared to validate Lewis’s thesis.¹⁶ When Iran summoned Muslims from all over the world to help their Bosnian brothers, this added to the fear that Islam was aggressive in nature and aiming for world dominance.¹⁷ When American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed in 1998, and the USS Cole was attacked in the Gulf of Aiden in October 2000, the attacks were received as further proof of widespread Muslim hate against the West.¹⁸ Together with the unrealistic fear of a demographic Muslim takeover of Western societies,¹⁹ slowly but surely “Islamophobia”²⁰ started to take root; a widespread suspicion of anything labeled ‘Muslim’, together with the

conviction that Islam itself, not fundamentalism, was the threat.²¹ This idea was already very much lingering on the eve of 9/11.

Of course, the traumatic events of 9/11 would only make things worse. In fact, in the wake of this tragedy it would have been very hard to curb the popular trend in thought. Still the words of President George W. Bush, spoken in the weeks and months after 9/11, were crucial. Not only would his statements provide insight into the strategy that America had chosen to counter its new reality, they also would influence the billions of people around the world that would listen to them, representing every race, age and religion. The President's words would set the tone for things to come. Of significant importance, in this respect, is the fact that in his search for the best strategy, President Bush chose to consult Professor Lewis²² and in his pivotal speech before Congress on September 20, 2001, Lewis' influence clearly echoes through. In response to the 9/11-attacks, America decided to declare war. A "War on Terror" to be precise, not a war against Islam, and the President does point this out specifically, but a war nonetheless. In addition, he makes it very clear where the culprits were to be found:

This group and its leader, a person named Usama bin Laden, are linked to many other organizations in different countries, including the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries. They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan, where they are trained in the tactics of terror. They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction.²³

In other words, the problem is located in the Muslim world and it is widespread. From the President's words one can even conclude that terrorists are a common phenomenon in the Muslim community, as there are about 60 Muslim countries in the world. Furthermore, he, like Lewis and Huntington, apparently regarded the problem as

fundamental because he stated: “they hate our freedoms - our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other”²⁴, and therefore “This is not [...] just America's fight, and what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”²⁵ In short, President Bush officially declared it a “clash of civilizations.” Lewis’ ideas had become the foundation of U.S. foreign policy, identified by the Wall Street Journal as the “Lewis Doctrine.”²⁶

The emotions after 9/11, the “War on Terror”, and the tone that was used in official statements, gave the last push for a general acceptance that this new conflict was indeed a war between “us” (the Western World) and “them” (the Muslim world), as Lewis had argued, and by 2006 Islam had become the bogey-man for the American people and their western allies.²⁷ The western media did little to challenge these sentiments. On the contrary, the media kept the images of 9/11 fresh together with the “Muslim fury.”²⁸ Mainstream media, especially in America, began to portray the threat as ‘Islamism’ along Lewis and Huntington’s lines; as a widespread ideology in the Islamic world, intent on recreating an Islamic caliphate to engulf the world. By now, “Islamophobia” was a well-established phenomenon in western society. Lewis’ seeds had fallen into fertile soil.²⁹

Unfortunately, general opinion often lacks nuance and is often based on sentiments, rather than knowledge. In a Gallup poll³⁰ held in December 2005, a majority of the interviewed American people (57%) said they knew nothing, or not much, about the opinions and beliefs of Muslims, despite the enormous media attention on its

culture.³¹ This is unfortunate, because three major issues seriously undermine Lewis' doctrine.

The first issue with this school of thought is that it leads to the false idea that Islam is a monolith. Today people commonly speak of Islam in broad, all encompassing terms, while in fact this is wrong and misleading. Obviously, there are many interpretations of Islam and, as a consequence, many different Muslims. As mentioned above, the world's 1.5 billion Muslims live in some 60 countries that inhabit large parts of the vast area ranging from Morocco to Malaysia, and from Turkmenistan to Nigeria. In addition, in many Western countries substantial Muslim communities co-exist with their Christian, Jewish and Buddhist fellow citizens. Muslims not only speak Arabic, but also Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Swahili, Indonesian, as well as English, German, Spanish and Chinese. From a religious perspective, there is also ample diversity in the Muslim world. There are Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, of which the latter has three main divisions: the Zaydis, the Ismailis and the Ithna Ashari. Furthermore, in Islam, as in Christianity, there are different, and sometimes contending, schools of thought. Finally, Muslims, whether Sunni or Shi'a, can be moderate, conservative, reformist, fundamentalist, mainstream or extremist. At closer look, the Muslim world is surprisingly diverse, just as is the Western world.³² Islam may be many things, but it is not a monolith. Or in the words of the influential cultural critic, academic, and writer Edward Said³³:

Certainly neither Huntington nor Lewis has much time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization; or for considering that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture; or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the west is the west, and Islam is Islam. [...] This is the problem with unedifying labels such as Islam and the west: they mislead and confuse the mind[.]³⁴

Not only is this monolithic view incorrect, this popular generalization is also deeply insulting to the vast majority of Muslims (91%) that do not identify themselves with the 9/11 attacks and even qualify such acts of terror morally unjust.³⁵

The second issue with Lewis' doctrine is that it unjustly qualifies the Islamic faith as the source of aggression. Lewis for instance states:

There is something in the religious culture of Islam which inspired, in even the humblest peasant or peddler, a dignity and a courtesy towards others never exceeded and rarely equaled in other civilizations. And yet, in moments of upheaval and disruption, when the deeper passions are stirred, this dignity and courtesy towards others can give way to an explosive mixture of rage and hatred which impels even the government of an ancient and civilized country – even the spokesman of a great spiritual and ethical religion – to espouse kidnapping and assassination, and try to find, even in the life of their prophet, approval and indeed precedent for such actions.³⁶

In his statement, Lewis displays a level of precaution, and he does attempt to sugarcoat his message, but in the end he is crystal clear: the Islamic culture as a whole can easily be stirred to aggression. The justification for this aggression, even among the elite, is found in its faith. A blatant, denigrating generalization, to say the least, but that did not prevent it from becoming the general tenure. For instance, along these lines influential Christian leaders in the United States have been demonizing Islam ever since 9/11. Franklin Graham, Rev. Billy Graham's son, declared Islam a "very evil and very wicked religion" on NBC News and Rev. Pat Robertson called the Prophet Mohammed "an absolute wild eyed fanatic ... a robber and a brigand ... a killer" and declared that "to think that [Islam] is a peaceful religion is fraudulent."³⁷ Politicians joined the rhetoric too. In the once so tolerant Netherlands, right-wing politician Geert Wilders grabs every opportunity to add to the fear and misunderstanding. In the leading Dutch newspaper 'De Volkskrant' he wrote in 2007: "The Qur'an is a fascist book which incites violence.

That is why this book, just like Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf", must be banned."³⁸ His words clearly resonated, because in that same year Wilders was elected 'Politician of the Year' in the Netherlands and his party has grown to become a major faction in the Dutch Parliamentary system.³⁹ In various countries in Europe, similar examples can be found. American political leaders also tuned in. In his 'State of the Union Address' of January 29, 2002, President Bush included, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea on the "axis of evil"⁴⁰; a rather blunt qualification that unintentionally fed well into the Islamophobes' hungry mouths, because although 'the evil' was linked to Weapons of Mass Destruction and explicitly not religion, it placed two prominent Muslim countries in a bad spot and thus helped create the image that Islam is aggressive in nature.

A deeper examination of Islam reveals that it is not inherently aggressive. Similar to Christianity, Islam is a peaceful religion that helps to keep people on the right path on their walk through life. The word "Islam" even shares the same Arabic root as the word for peace (salaam), and Muslim theologians define Islam as "attaining peace through commitment to God's will."⁴¹ Like in Christianity, this commitment is personal. For its followers, Islam is above all a personal spiritual journey, rather than a movement with a prescribed direction. Unfortunately, this is not well understood, which leads to misconceptions. Take for instance the Islamic concept of "jihad." In Islam, jihad is not the "Holy War" many people in Europe and America believe it to be. The word "jihad" derives from an Arabic word meaning "to strive." In Islam, jihad has two connotations: the "greater jihad" is the personal struggle to elevate oneself spiritually and morally; and the "lesser jihad" is the defense of one's family or community. Both connotations have very little to do with organized aggression, let alone war.⁴² Furthermore, according to the

Qur'an, diversity in belief, cultures and tradition are accepted. Muslims regard diversity to be part of God's intended creation and a sign of his wisdom.⁴³ If anything, Islam promotes brotherhood and tolerance. However, no society is free of radical thought, especially not the Muslim world, and fundamentalists and extremists have been guilty of misusing their faith for their own interests. Nevertheless, to qualify Islam as inherently violent is simply wrong.

The third and last myth that needs to be invalidated is the widespread belief that Islam and western concepts such as democracy, freedom of speech and women's rights are incompatible. In the aftermath of 9/11, the famous political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote in *The Guardian*:

Modernity has a cultural basis. Liberal democracy and free markets do not work everywhere. They work best in societies with certain values whose origins may not be entirely rational. It is not an accident that modern liberal democracy emerged first in the Christian west, since the universalism of democratic rights can be seen as a secular form of Christian universalism. [...] But there does seem to be something about Islam, or at least the fundamentalist version of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that make Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity.⁴⁴

Yet, several examples of democratic Muslim countries exist. Think of countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia, which work fairly well.⁴⁵ Furthermore, many in the Muslim world agree that political freedom, liberty, and freedom of speech, is what they admire most in the West.⁴⁶ No less than 80% would even like to see their countries democratize.⁴⁷ In addition, in many western countries, including America, major Muslim communities have blended in society without problems. So, even though there are still many problem areas in the Muslim world, one cannot state that Islam is incompatible with modernity and concepts like democracy. In fact, there is even a widespread longing to change in that direction. It is this desire that is the well from which much of what we

see happening around us springs. 'Arab Spring', although mainly directed against secular rulers and often Islamist in nature, in essence must be understood as a public outcry for an extension of freedoms and more popular control of government.⁴⁸

Based on the above, it is fair to conclude that Lewis' doctrine of "Clash of Civilizations" is wrong. It has been misleading and polarizing. It helped to create the unjust, but widespread image that Islam is a monolithic, evil entity, incompatible with the core values and ways of the west. In many ways, even if unintended, Lewis and Huntington have made Islam into the enemy it is not. This not only polarized western opinion about the Muslim world, it also deeply insulted the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, driving them into a corner, seeding anger and resentment, widening the gap between people, and deepening the conflict. Today, the bitter conclusion must be that the "Clash of Civilizations" is well on its way of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If we are not experiencing a "Clash of Civilizations", then what is it? The aggression and attacks we encounter most certainly are real. This was even so well before 9/11, prior to today's policies and their polarizing effect. To find the answer we must go back in time once again and question Lewis' conclusions from his perspective. What he points out correctly is the deep disappointment in many Islamic states over the quality of government in their countries. Throughout the Muslim world, autocratic governments ruled; governments put in place, or supported by, Europe and the United States. Resentment grew, also against the West,⁴⁹ and people wanted change. However, they wanted change on their own terms and their religion would have to play an important role,⁵⁰ because faith remains the central criterion of reference in the Muslim world. Therefore, as Lewis points out, there was indeed this element of push-

back against the old, western supported regimes, which gave religious groups the perfect opportunity to rise to power. However, what is crucial for understanding the process is the notion that it was a desire for liberty that set it in motion; a desire nonetheless that must be balanced with the Islamic faith.

Iran serves as a good example in this respect. The United States had always supported the Shah of Iran, whose autocratic rule over time grew more and more unpopular. Thus, when the masses toppled the regime, it was hardly surprising that what replaced it was not only distinctly different, it was also a logical return to what people saw as their roots; a system in which religion would play a central role again. During times of social upheaval, people often seek a return to the basic and the familiar.⁵¹ In the Muslim world, that is Islam. This paved the way for Ayatollah Khomeini to return and claim power. However, what the people had in mind was freedom, liberty and (a form of) democracy.⁵² This may not have been what they got, but that original desire is crucial, because it shines a light on what drives the Muslim world. Rather than a clash of civilizations, we are witnessing a clash within a civilization,⁵³ a struggle about ideas, political concepts and power. Perhaps slow and ad hoc, but nevertheless a struggle to adjust to their environment, and to reform their societies.⁵⁴

In Iran, this struggle did not die after the rise of Khomeini. Held back by the Iran-Iraq war, it could not resurface until 1988, when a new generation revived the revolution's true ideals. Again, the goal was democracy; not a secular democracy, but one on Islamic terms, focused on Islamic values like pluralism, social justice and human rights.⁵⁵ The reformist cleric Muhammad Khatami was elected and, in what came to be called 'Teheran Spring', young Iranians took to the streets to celebrate.⁵⁶ Again, change

came too early. Khatami's powerbase proved to be too weak and it was systematically silenced. In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rose to power and the western world officially declared the Iranian reform movement dead.

Although sidelined again, the Iranian reform movement was still not dead. In 2009 the Green Movement⁵⁷, yet again launched a revolt against the nature of the Islamic Republic⁵⁸ and today "nearly all Iranians, regardless of the politics or piety, [have] adopted the reform movement's assertion that the democratic experiment that gave birth to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 had been subverted and must be set right again."⁵⁹ What the Iranian example proves is that in Islam the reformists cannot be silenced. The urge to construct Islam's version of a democracy, in which "religion" and "freedom" go hand in hand, is simply too strong.

The phenomenon referred to as the 'Arab Spring' shows that the urge for democracy is ongoing in many Islamic countries around the world, and the similarities with the Iranian example are sometimes striking.⁶⁰ Take for instance Egypt. After an intense uprising, the people of Egypt finally brought down President Mubarak's western-sponsored regime in February 2011 and elections were held. This was momentous in itself, because it marked the first time in Egypt's history that a reasonably free presidential election had been conducted, producing a head of state legitimized by the popular will. However, it was also to be the first time in the Arab world an Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, had come to power by democratic means.⁶¹ Again, as in Iran, the people of Egypt had opted for a solution on their own terms, one in which Islam plays an important role. Today, Egypt's struggle for the right balance between the restricting power of its religious government and the freedom of its citizens is far from

over, but it does prove the point that what we are witnessing is a clash within a civilization, rather than a clash between civilizations.

The problem is that in the Muslim world, because state and religion are not separated, political reform almost automatically means reform of the Islamic faith. And, where a religion reforms, fundamentalism is bound to surface. Fundamentalism is the rational response of religious people to social, political and economic changes that threaten to downgrade and constrain their religion's role.⁶² It is not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon. All major religions have experienced this form of militant religious piety.⁶³ Fundamentalism is primarily an intra-social struggle, however in later stages it is often directed towards foreign actors.⁶⁴ Unfortunately, that can lead to extremism with considerable spill-over effects, as 9/11 has demonstrated. However, it is crucial to understand these as external manifestations of an internal struggle.

This tug of war between reform (political and religious), and fundamentalism is apparent throughout the Muslim world. In some countries, the process is smooth and problem free; elsewhere the fight is fierce and all consuming. In general, the more conservative the environment, the more problems are to be expected. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that 15 of the 19 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, and none, for instance, from Turkey. Still, the overall fundamentalist push back is strong, to the extent that today it even poses a global threat. Several factors can help explain why it is so fierce.

First, time constraints place the Islamic reform process inside a pressure cooker. Islam is in a hurry. The Christian reformation process took over 400 years to complete. Islam cannot afford to give itself anywhere near that much time. To catch up with Tom

Friedman's "Flat World",⁶⁵ reformation much take form in a few decades. However, a faster pace means more pressure in the system, and therefore more pushback is to be expected.

Second, today's better-educated Muslim population has become more vocal; an effect multiplied by their connectivity to the outside world through the Internet.

Everywhere in the Muslim world, you now find a critical mass of educated and well-informed people who are able to read and think for themselves without relying on state and religious authorities.⁶⁶ These people fuel the reformation process, but also take it out of the Ulama's⁶⁷ grip. This also increases the tension.⁶⁸

Third, globalization and modernization are perceived to erode Islam's core values, with television, films and the Internet penetrating into their living rooms. The conservative older generation fears the appeal these media have on the younger generation, because with western influence issues such as individualism, sexual freedom and women's rights openly enter their society. As a result, many Muslims perceive core cultural and religious values are under threat. Across the board, when asked what Muslims resent most about the West, the two most frequent responses are "sexual and cultural promiscuity" and "ethical and moral corruption."⁶⁹ As a result, an increasing number of Muslims believe that their faith needs to be defended and the strong desire to do so plays right into the fundamentalist's hands.⁷⁰

Fourth, although change and interpretation are an integral part of Islam, by design it is challenging to reform, because Islam is not only a faith, but also a law (Shari'a⁷¹) that regulates all aspects of human life, including economic transactions, marriage, and matters of state.⁷² This makes Islam rigid, because it is difficult to

separate religious from everyday affairs. In addition, Islam's religious elite is defensive by default and often regard changes as a threat to the purity of the faith.⁷³ This does not mean change is impossible, but it certainly complicates it.

Finally, the reactions in the Muslim world are aggressively directed toward the West because we have given them every reason to do so. It is probably an understatement to say the West does not have a very good record of accomplishment in the Muslim world in recent history. According to Michael Hirsch, senior editor at Newsweek, the most important reasons for resentment include:

the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement by which the British and French agreed to divvy up the Arab-speaking countries after World War I; the subsequent creation, by the Europeans, of corrupt kleptocratic tyrannies in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan; the endemic poverty and underdevelopment that resulted for most part of the 20th century; the UN-imposed creation of Israel in 1948; and finally, in recent decades, American support for the bleak status quo.⁷⁴

To this list, the highly disputed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan should be added, as well as the unwelcome attempt to impose western-style democracy on these countries. Indeed, the list of ill-fated undertakings in the Islamic world is long. It is hardly surprising that by now there is widespread belief among Muslims that the West's true intentions are aggressive.⁷⁵ In addition, the West's seemingly unconditional support of Israel is a constant thorn in the side of the majority of Muslims.⁷⁶ Overall, the proponents of fundamentalism have an easy task motivating Muslims to react against the West. Therefore, what we witness today should not only be understood as a struggle for reform in Muslim states, but also as a cry for change in western policies towards the Muslim world.⁷⁷

The conclusion is that we are not dealing with an inevitable clash between two opposing cultures, but with the side effects of a civilization struggling with reformation. It

is crucial to grasp this, because if wrongly diagnosed, a patient's treatment is bound to fail. In the past decade, we have indeed been poisoning, rather than curing the patient. Rhetoric about democratization, axis of evil, and backwardness have only played into the Islamist's hands. Attempting to bomb Iraq and Afghanistan into submission has not helped either. Fortunately, as the 'Arab Spring' clearly proves, the patient is still very much alive. It is not too late to change our policy. In fact, we must change, unless we want to lose the trust of the Islamic world altogether. What should the Western world do to improve the situation?

First and foremost, we should properly understand the problem and accept that what we are dealing with is essentially an Islamic issue. We are witnessing a culture that is struggling to come to grips with the modern age. However, and this is most important, they need a solution that fits their own culture and that is built around their own faith. This implies that the issue can only be solved within the Islamic world. To stay with the analogy: we are not the doctor; they have to cure themselves. Even Lewis understood this, as he wrote: "But even before this issue is decided there will be a hard struggle, in which we of the West can do little or nothing. Even the attempt might do harm, for these are issues that Muslims have to decide among themselves."⁷⁸

In that respect, an eager search for what to do next, would be approaching the problem from the wrong angle. 'Doing' implies activity and initiative. Given the nature of the issue and the resentments in the Muslim world, before long too much action will be perceived as meddling in their affairs yet again and therefore become counterproductive. Let us learn from history and face the facts, too much the West has done in the Muslim world

has gone wrong and much harm has been done. Therefore, for the time being, we should take a more humble and respectful stance.

There are signs that today's leaders are beginning to understand this. In his 'Middle East Speech'⁷⁹, on May 19, 2011 as a reaction to 'Arab Spring', President Obama recognized the importance of "mutual interests and mutual respect" in the region. Furthermore, although denying responsibility for the circumstances that led to the revolts throughout the Arab-world, he acknowledged that in the past decades the United States had focused too much on its own agenda, neglecting the fate of the ordinary people. Indeed, Obama's honest words sounded very different from the messages his predecessor used to voice. For sure, this was a step in the right direction. Yet, the President did not quite get it right. He also sounded triumphant at times, as if western values had finally won after all. Not exactly the humble stance that is needed. In addition, he spoke of "a historic opportunity [...] to pursue a world as it should be." That is treading on dangerous ground, as his remarks could easily be perceived as a continuation of Bush's infamous democratization policy. Neither does it show a deep understanding of what is actually needed in the region: an Islamic solution.

It would be better for the West to practice patience and give the Muslim world time to sort things out for themselves. This will be difficult, as the path to modernization will not be straight and the Western world is not well known for its patience. Already it proves to be a bumpy ride. Libya serves in this respect as a good example. Even after Khadafy was pushed from his throne, calm and quiet did not return to the country. On the contrary, today Libya is in turmoil and a balanced solution is far from being

accomplished. Nevertheless, the West must practice restraint, because applying pressure, or worse, interference would only make things worse.

When it finally comes to a solution, the West must respect the outcome, whatever it may be. That will be difficult too, because we may not like it at first glance. In this respect, Egypt is the example. After the elections, Mohammed Morsi and his Muslim brotherhood came out on top. Certainly not the outcome the West had hoped for. However, the people of Egypt wanted it this way and therefore we must respect it. That is also democracy. We should not regard it as a disappointment, as the general discourse in the Western world seems to be.⁸⁰ President Morsi is the legitimate leader of Egypt and he should be welcomed as such. In that regard, it was good to see him successfully team up with Secretary of State Clinton, during the Israeli-Palestine missile crisis in late 2012. Apparently, Morsi was not such a bad partner after all and it shows that the Western world serves itself best by learning to deal with the Muslim world as it exists, and not the one they wish to have at a later time.⁸¹

Of course, taking a humble stance and being less pro-active does not mean the Western world can sit back and relax altogether. Being at least partly responsible for the damage, the West is obliged to help mend it. Furthermore, the West must continue to engage, as its economic and security interests in the Muslim world continue to exist. The Malian case makes this clear. Late in 2012, Muslim extremists, with clear links to Al Qaida, were on the brink of taking over the country. This presented not only a threat to Mali itself, but also to the region and, in the long run, to the Western world. Therefore, when the government of Mali asked France to step in, that was the right thing to do. However, in the light of what was argued above, France's objectives should remain

limited, focused on neutralizing the threat, and it should be prepared to leave the country as soon as the job is done. France must avoid long-term involvement with the aim to pursue national interests. U.S. involvement is best kept low key. A limited, careful approach with a good eye for the existing sensitivities is what is needed.

Other issues in the Muslim world call for a continued role for the West as well. The Iranian threat still exists and demands our attention, and so does the Israeli-Palestine conflict. However, in line with humbleness and respect, both conflicts are best served with a balanced approach. In both cases it would be wise to find a way back to the negotiation table. The recipe remains the same: accept the new normal in the region, limit the rhetoric, and grant every player a bit more respect. Even in the case of Iran this could prove constructive. Of course, we cannot just accept this country becoming a nuclear power, but the West should lose its proverbial arrogance, based on poor understanding of the Muslim culture, and use respect as a basis to help steer things towards a peaceful solution. Again, let us learn from the past, correct our mistakes and start dealing with the Muslim world we have, not the one we would wish to have.

Endnotes

¹ Editorial, "The Roots of Terrorism," *America Magazine* 200, no.2 (Jan 2009), 2.

² Originally, the term 'Orientalism' is used to describe the study in the West of the Orient, particularly the Arab World. It is subject to fierce debate in the academic world. Some argue that the term should be considered descriptive of intellectual pursuit rather than prejudicial. On the other hand, others point out it has created a stereotyped image of the East in order to better manage it, thus provoking a connotative transformation in which Orientalism came to be synonymous with stereotype, misrepresentation, and essentialism. Source: Steven Salaita, "Beyond Orientalism and Islamophobia: 9/11, Anti-Arab Racism, and the Mythos of National Pride," *The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 2, (2007), 248.

³ Bernard Lewis (1916 -) is a US (British-born) historian of Islam, the Ottoman Empire, and the modern Middle East. He is the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Lewis is widely regarded as one of the most influential postwar historians of Islam and the Middle East. He drew upon the reservoir of Orientalism, with its emphasis on philology, culture, and religion. Lewis regarded the “challenge” or “impact” of the West as the watershed between the pre-modern and modern Middle East. This set the scene for his confrontation with the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said (see endnote 33). In 1978, Said published “Orientalism”, which argued that the modern study of Islam in the West had evolved as a tool of imperialist domination, and that the West’s pursuit of knowledge had conspired with its pursuit of power. As he saw it, Orientalism, was effectively a form of racism, misrepresenting Islam as static, irrational, and in permanent opposition to the West. Lewis maintained, however, that the development of Orientalism was a facet of Europe’s humanism, which arose independently of, and sometimes in opposition to, imperial interests. Islamic studies, after neutralizing the medieval religious prejudice against Islam, had been an important arena of discovery and achievement. The Said-Lewis exchange prompted a charged debate about the representation of Islam and the Arabs in the Western academic world. Source: Martin Kramer, *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing: Bernard Lewis* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1999), vol. 1, pp. 719-20.

⁴ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic* 266, no.3 (Sep 1990), 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ Edward Szymanski, “Problems of Cultural Changes and Modernization in Islam,” *Journal of Arab Affairs* 7, no. 1 (April 1988), 85.

⁸ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *The Atlantic* 266, no.3 (Sep 1990), 59.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Samuel P. Huntington (1927 – 2008) was an influential political scientist who taught at Harvard for more than a half-century. Dr. Huntington was also a well-known author whose writings helped shape American views on civilian-military relations, political development, comparative government and the global clash of cultures. Dr. Huntington was not solely an academic: in addition, he was a foreign policy adviser in Hubert H. Humphrey’s 1968 campaign for president. In 1977 and 1978, he served in the Carter White House as coordinator of security planning for the National Security Council. On foreign policy, he was widely seen as a hawkish conservative. Dr. Huntington is best known for “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,” a 1996 book based on a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article. The book predicted that in the post-cold-war world, violent conflict would arise from cultural and religious differences among the major civilizations. Source: Tamar Lewin, “Obituary Samuel P. Huntington”, *New York Times*, December 28, 2008.

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.3 (Summer 1993), 22.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 3rd edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 263.

¹⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no.3 (Summer 1993), 22.

¹⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 3rd edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 212.

¹⁷ Editorial, "Iran - Bosnia?," *The Washington Times*, April 08, 1996.

¹⁸ Seth Cropsy, "War, not terrorism: attack on USS Cole was a declaration of war," *The Washington Times*, October 16, 2000.

¹⁹ Jaap Donath, "Muslim in the Netherlands," *Foreign Policy* 112, (Fall 1998), 139 and Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 3rd edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 200.

²⁰ 'Islamophobia' is a term used for a form of group prejudice directed towards Islam and its followers. It is what "anti-Semitism" is to Jews and "racism" is to black people; a type of discrimination rooted in the different physical appearance as well as intolerance of their religious and cultural beliefs. Like other forms of group prejudice, Islamophobia thrives on ignorance and fear of the unknown. Especially after 9/11, Islamophobia became a widespread phenomenon. Source: John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.

²¹ John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

²² Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, D.C, Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 136.

²³ President George W. Bush, "War on Terror," *Speech to a Joint Session of Congress*, September 20, 2001.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 136.

²⁷ Ibid., 139.

²⁸ Ibid., 137.

²⁹ Ibid., 141.

³⁰ Gallup Poll is a division of Gallup, Inc., an American research-based management consulting company. Gallup has more than 40 offices in 27 countries, with its headquarter in Washington, D.C. Gallup Poll regularly conducts public opinion polls in more than 140 countries

around the world. According to the news site 'The Huffington Post', "the Gallup Poll is arguably the most trusted survey brand in the world, a name virtually synonymous with public opinion polling." Source: Mark Blumenthal, Race Matters: "Why Gallup Poll Finds Less Support For President Obama," June 17, 2012, linked from *The Huffington Post* at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/17/gallup-poll-race-barack-obama_n_1589937.html.

³¹ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 155.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ Edward Said (1935 – 2003) was one of the leading literary critics of the last quarter of the 20th century. As professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, New York, he was widely regarded as the outstanding representative of the post-structuralist left in America. However, above all he was the most articulate and visible advocate of the Palestinian cause in the United States. His most influential book, "Orientalism" (1978), is credited with helping to change the direction of several disciplines by exposing an unholy alliance between the enlightenment and colonialism. As a humanist with a secular outlook, his critique on the great tradition of the western enlightenment seemed to many to be self-contradictory, deploying a humanistic discourse to attack the high cultural traditions of humanism, giving comfort to fundamentalists who regarded any criticism of their tradition or texts as off-limits, while calling into question the integrity of critical research into culturally sensitive areas such as Islam. Edward Said died of leukemia in 2003. Source: Malise Ruthven, "Obituary Edward Said," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2003.

³⁴ Edward Said, "We all swim together," *New Statesman* 14, no. 678 (Oct 2001), 20.

³⁵ John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

³⁶ Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic* 266, no.3 (Sep 1990), 59.

³⁷ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 137.

³⁸ Geert Wilders, "Genoeg is Genoeg: Verbied de Koran," (translation: "Enough is Enough: Ban the Qur'an"), *de Volkskrant*, August 08, 2007 and John L. Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 178.

³⁹ In the Parliamentary elections of September 12, 2012, Wilders' 'Party for Freedom' won 15 seats (out of 150), making it the third party in Parliament and opposition leader. Source: Proces-verbaal van de zitting van het centraal stembureau tot het vaststellen van de uitslag van de verkiezing van de leden van de Tweede Kamer (translation: Official government statement on the September elections).

⁴⁰ President George W. Bush, "Address to the Union," *Speech in Congress*, January 29, 2002.

⁴¹ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 7.

- ⁴² Akbar Ahmed, *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 2.
- ⁴³ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 9.
- ⁴⁴ Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama, "The West has Won," *The Guardian*, October 10, 2001.
- ⁴⁵ Edward V. Schneier, "Islam and Democracy," *Choice* 49, no. 1 (September 2011), 35.
- ⁴⁶ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 34.
- ⁴⁷ M.A. Muqtedar Kan, ed., *Islamic Democratic Discourse* (New York: Lexington Books, 2006), xii.
- ⁴⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, "Arab and Iranian Revolts 1979 – 2011: Influences or Similar Causes?," *International Journal for Middle eastern Studies* 44, (2012), 152.
- ⁴⁹ Maha Azzam, "Islamism Revisited," *International Affairs* 82, no. 6, (November 2006), 1131.
- ⁵⁰ Edward Szymanski, "Problems of Cultural Changes and Modernization in Islam," *Journal of Arab Affairs* 7, no. 1 (April 1988), 85.
- ⁵¹ Michaëlle Browers and Charles Kurzman, eds., *An Islamic Reformation?* (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 164.
- ⁵² Reza Aslan, *No God but God*, updated edition (New York: Random House, 2011), 257.
- ⁵³ Jeffrey Simpson, "The conflict within Islam is the conflict of our time," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), June 19, 2007.
- ⁵⁴ Fauzi Najjar, "The Arabs, Islam and Globalization," *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 105.
- ⁵⁵ Reza Aslan, *No God but God*, updated edition (New York: Random House, 2011), 259.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Since the June 2009 presidential election, the regime in Iran has struggled to contain popular dissatisfaction. In late 2009, this opposition movement—calling itself "The Green Path of Hope" or "Green Movement" (Rah-e-Sabz)—posed a serious challenge to the current regime. The regime subsequently pushed the Green Movement underground through imprisonment or house arrests of its leaders or main activists. However, the Green Movement remains an actor in the background. Source: Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, September 05, 2012, 2.
- ⁵⁸ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, (September 05, 2012), 11.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 260.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 261.

⁶¹ Anonymous, "Egypt in Peril," *The Economist* 403, no. 8790, (June 23, 2012).

⁶² Michael O. Emerson and David Hartman, "The Rise of Religious Fundamentalism," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 32, (2006), 131.

⁶³ Michaëlle Browers and Charles Kurzman, eds., *An Islamic Reformation?* (New York: Lexington Books, 2004), 164.

⁶⁴ Karen Armstrong, "Cries of Rage and Frustration," *New Statesman*, September 14, 2001, 18.

⁶⁵ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

⁶⁶ Dale F. Eickelman, "Inside the Islamic Reformation," *The Wilson Quarterly* 22, no.1 (Winter 1998), 83.

⁶⁷ The word 'Ulama' is the collective term for doctors of Islamic sciences. An 'alim (plural 'ulama') is "one who possesses the quality of 'ilm, knowledge, or learning, of the Islamic traditions and the resultant canon law and theology." An 'alim is the product of a religious institution of higher education (madrasah). He is educated to be a religious functionary, as, for example, a judge who gives legal decisions in accordance with Shari'a, a preacher who reads the Friday sermon or a canon lawyer who gives a formal opinion (fatwa) as to the legality of a case. Often described as the Islamic "clergy," the 'ulama' is not tightly organized. It requires no ordination or hierarchy of authority. Source: Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Islam* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2001), 262.

⁶⁸ Reza Aslan, *No God but God*, updated edition (New York: Random House, 2011), 281.

⁶⁹ John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), 88.

⁷⁰ Maha Azzam, "Islamism Revisited," *International Affairs* 82, no. 6, (November 2006), 1124.

⁷¹ Shari'a is the Islamic law. The purpose of Islamic law is to present its followers a set of norms that direct an individual toward a materially and spiritually good life. It also provides constitutional principles to help ensure justice and welfare for all as society develops political and legal institutions to manage the ever-increasing complexity of life and human interactions. It is not a clearly articulated set of rules available for immediate reference. Islamic law and the extant traditions are essentially an interpretation of revealed sources, the Qur'an and many of the Prophet's (pbuh) guiding traditions. There are many interpretations of the shariah. Muslims recognize five different schools--the Hanafi, the Shafii, the Maliki, the Hanbali and the Jaffari--as equally valid and legitimate. Islamic legal tradition practices epistemological pluralism, thereby allowing these schools to differ in their legal opinions but maintaining that their different opinions

are equally valid and Islamic. Source: Muqtader Khan, "Islamic Law and Its Use in Muslim Politics," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, no. 3 (April 2001), 82.

⁷² Fauzi Najjar, "The Arabs, Islam and Globalization," *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 93.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁴ Michael Hirsh, "Bernard Lewis Revisited," *The Washington Monthly* 36, no. 11, (November 2004), 15.

⁷⁵ Reza Aslan, *No God but God*, updated edition (New York: Random House, 2011), 254.

⁷⁶ Fauzi Najjar, "The Arabs, Islam and Globalization," *Middle East Policy* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2005), 94.

⁷⁷ Maha Azzam, "Islamism Revisited," *International Affairs* 82, no. 6, (November 2006), 1132.

⁷⁸ Bernard Lewis, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," *The Atlantic* 266, no.3 (September 1990), 60.

⁷⁹ President Barack Obama, "Middle East Speech", *Speech at U.S. State Department*, May 19, 2011.

⁸⁰ Berman Sheri, "The Promise of the Arab Spring: In Political Development, No Gain Without Pain," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1, (January/February 2013), 64.

⁸¹ Seth G. Jones, "The Mirage of Arab Spring: Deal With the Region You Have, Not the Region You Want," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1, (January/February 2013), 62.