

Oct 3, 2007

Guest Columnist: It need not be a 'clash'

By BASSEM EID

In recent years, the relationship between the Arab world and the West has been framed in terms of a fundamental conflict of interests, values and goals. The West, with its capitalist markets and liberal cultural standards, is viewed as being the antithesis of the Arab world, with its conservative social values and centrally-overseen markets.

There are countless ways in which Western-style capitalism differs from Middle-Eastern-style socialism, and just as many ways in which Western and Middle Eastern cultures differ.

However, these difference are too often exaggerated.



Egyptian demonstrators holds a Koran and a pro-Hamas poster during a demonstration organized by the Muslim Brotherhood at Al-Azhar mosque in Cairo [illustration; archive image]. **Photo: AP**

In fact, there are surprising similarities between the Arab states and the West. One involves the strict protection of state sovereignty. Both Arab states and the West have jealously guarded their sovereignty, and resisted relinquishing any of it to outside authorities. In the United States, this resistance is expressed as unilateralism, and at times shows itself in the outright rejection by the US of decisions by consensus organizations such as the UN. In comparison, most Arab states have been more willing to submit to UN decisions.

In the realm of culture and economics, though, the Arab states usually oppose outside influence.

Given these similarities with regard to sovereignty, what is the source of the poor relations between the Arab states and the West?

POLITICAL SCIENTIST Samuel H. Huntington's influential "Clash of civilizations" theory - first articulated in 1993 - represents the common viewpoint of Arab-Western relations. He foresaw an increasing threat of violence arising between countries and cultures that base their traditions on religious faith and dogma.

Like Huntington, many view the Arab states and the West as engaged in a type of cultural Cold War. Some even predict that this clash of civilizations will continue to polarize the world into two camps, until one or the other is destroyed in a process of cultural natural selection.

But I would argue that the ideologies of the Western and Arab states are not mutually exclusive, nor are they doomed to play out Huntington's theoretical model. As the late Edward Said argued in his "Clash of Ignorance" essay in 2002, Huntington's line demonstrates that the most pressing problem of Arab-Western relations is not a clash of civilizations, but a clash of mistaken perceptions.

In foreign policy, perceptions always play a key role in negotiations between powers. For example, nations tend to perceive their own actions as "necessary" and "defensive," while viewing the actions of other nations as "unnecessary" and "belligerent."

And this is the foundation of Arab-Western misconceptions.

It is the magnitude of the *Jihad vs. McWorld* question, namely border-crossing capitalism versus splintering factionalism, as Benjamin Barber termed it in his 2003 book, which sets the relationship between West and Arabia apart.

Thus mistaken perceptions encompass every area of life, including the economic, political, cultural and social realms.

Historically, for America and Europe it is the "West versus the rest," where property, safety, and value systems are perceived as being at risk of attack from an amorphous "them." These perceptions drive the West to view the Arab states as hostile toward Western values regarding everything from women's rights to democracy and freedom.

THESE PERCEPTIONS are distorted. By viewing Arab-Western relations in terms of "us" vs. "them," the West leaves itself in a perpetual state of apprehension and fear.

This does not imply that the Arab states do not suffer from a similar paranoia. However, Arab paranoia is a relatively recent development in world politics which did not begin to develop into a tangible protectionism until the division of the Arabian Peninsula into Western-style nation-states in the early 20th century.

Even today, the spirit of Arab protectionism is still accompanied by the vague understanding that the West is not so much hostile as ignorant of the Middle Eastern way of life.

It is probable that this difference in perceptions has resulted from the unequal balance of information exchanged between the Arab nations and the West. When you visit Arab states such as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, it is fairly easy to access Western media on radio and television, and English is widely spoken. In contrast, gaining access to Arabic media content in Western nations, such as the United States, is difficult.

Aside from the problem of unequal exchange, the influx of Western media into the Arab world does not help, but rather promotes the Arab perception that the West misunderstands Arabic culture.

Perception is key. In the Arabic-speaking world, there are groups which take a radical stance, and consider themselves in a clash against Western civilization. There are also radicals in the West who view the Arab states as a violent enemy. However, there are those on both sides who are able to identify their own misconceptions and who strive to work toward a greater level of understanding. In this sense, often the characterization of Arab-Western relations depends on the leadership of the nations involved, and their perceptions as influenced by history and the media.

The opportunity for cooperation does exist. As human beings, Arabs and Westerners share bonds that can transcend cultural, economic, or religious differences. The challenge is to look beyond the initial rejection of an opinion or idea and try to understand what motivates the other side. In this way, clashes can become misunderstandings, and in time misunderstandings can be transformed into partnerships.

The writer is the founder and director of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group based in east Jerusalem.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1191257219025&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>