

## After September 11

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## The Clash *within* Civilizations

**Mark A. Heller**

### Islam vs. The West?

The unbounded hostility that led 19 suicide bombers to crash hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, and brought millions of other Muslims to sympathize with and even rejoice at their actions, has forced many in the West to try to understand the sources of anti-Western hatred. What grievance, people ask, could possibly have justified the intentional murder of thousands of civilians? What resentment could lead people consciously to choose the path of "martyrdom," to hate others more than they love life itself? The search for an explanation has invigorated the debate about the reasons for anti-Western terror committed or supported by Islamists. This debate encompasses investigations into the role of and reasons for stagnant or repressive political systems and stagnant or regressive economies in the Arab/Islamic world, the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the aftermath of the Gulf War, and other hypotheses about "root causes." But it has also gone beyond specific issues and given added weight to hypotheses about a general "clash of civilizations," that is, to the notion that what happened – not just the events themselves but also the environment that gave rise to them and made them resonate so strongly – is simply the latest manifestation of age-old and ultimately irreconcilable confrontations between cultures, particularly, between the Islamic world and the West.

It is certainly true that there is a long history of conflict between Islam and what, for many centuries, went under the name "Christendom." But Christianity has long since ceased to be the defining characteristic of the West. Most parts of that world are marked by triumphant secularism. Even where personal religiosity remains strong, as in the United States, it is confined to the private realm, and the separation of religion and state is a cardinal principle of government. Indeed, the very term "Christendom" sounds archaic. Moreover,

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## The Clash *within* Civilizations – cont.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Shlomo Brom presents initial lessons that may be drawn from the US campaign in Afghanistan. In particular, the author examines the degree to which US successes against the Taliban may provide insights for Israeli security concerns in coming years.

This issue's seventh and final article, by Dr. Shmuel Even, deals with a domestic question: the failure of Israeli economic forecasters to predict recent downturns in the local economy. To that end, Dr. Even notes that economic planners may have over-emphasized the use of linear projections in their forecasts. He also argues that economists charged with charting growth in times of political or military strife should avail themselves of intelligence estimates that can help them make sense of complex regional and international developments.

the personal lives of some of the perpetrators of September 11 and many of their sympathizers were/are not particularly marked by outward religious devotion. This suggests that the clash that does exist no longer has much to do with religion *per se*. If there is any coherence to the concept of culture now, it must therefore lie in the realm of political and social values attached to collective identities. And if there is a culture clash – and surely there is – it must be defined by the

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values that predominate in the West and those that predominate elsewhere.

### The Clash of Value Systems

One way to understand these values is to use the general criterion of "openness" to compare and contrast two value systems: the internationalist or modernist culture, on the one hand, and the backlash or traditionalist culture, on the other. The former is more receptive to universal, secular values that emphasize the primacy of individual welfare and freedom, and to free economic transactions within

and across national boundaries. The most appealing and easily borrowed parts of this modernist culture are those material and technological elements which Benjamin Barber has defined under the rubric of "MacWorld." But these are surface manifestations of more profound and less easily exported components of culture: political systems based on democracy, the rule of law and independent judiciaries, and social systems based on tolerance of diversity, individual mobility and gender equality. The backlash or traditionalist value system tends to emphasize the primacy of the collective. It asserts its unique and "authentic" character, and it prefers to constrain the market, lest it permit the intrusion of "ruthless" capitalism, "shallow" consumerism, "degenerate" moral standards, and other foreign influences variously attributed over time to modernization, Westernization, or, most recently, globalization. Traditional or backlash values are reflected in political systems that claim to "embody" primordial identities, usually at the expense of individual freedom, and in legal and social systems that resist equality or self-assertion by women and ethnic or religious minorities.

The real clash of civilizations today is the contest between these value systems. And it is being waged within every civilization, including even the most "advanced" western societies. But it is precisely in North America, Western Europe and a few other outposts of post-Christendom that

internationalist or modernist values have become most entrenched. And it is precisely in the Arab/Muslim world where the political, economic and social modernizers have fared worst and where the backlash forces, the champions of “authenticity,” have become so strong – stronger than in East Asia, India, Latin American, or even Africa (where the problem is an inability to join the internationalists rather than a rejection of them). The latest and most dramatic evidence of this gap is provided by Freedom House, an independent New York-based monitor of political rights and civil liberties. Its 2001 survey of freedom and democracy shows that while 80% of 145 non-Muslim countries are free (58%) or partly free (28%), only 40% of Muslim-majority countries fall into those categories (2% free; 38% partly free). And in the Middle Eastern/North African core of the Islamic world, the modern value system has really gained the upper hand only in Turkey, where the revolution wrought by Mustafa Kemal following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire included the scrupulous separation of religion and state. But even in Turkey, that value system is not unchallenged. And almost everywhere else, it is the value system embodied by Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden (or their nationalist counterparts) that is entrenched or on the offensive. The only partial exceptions to this trend are in Iran itself, because of disillusionment after twenty years of Islamist repression and incompetent rule, and in

Afghanistan, because the Taliban overreached and incurred the wrath of the United States.

This does not mean that the clash of values only pits the Muslim world against the West. Islam’s frontiers with its cultural neighbors in Africa and Asia are also unsettled and often violent. But the sharpest contradiction takes place at the literal and figurative border between Islam and the West, perhaps because the West is seen as the successor to, and therefore the usurper

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of, Islamic hegemony in medieval and early modern times. There is no single, convincing reason for the huge failure of Islamic societies to come to terms with modernity and for both the strength and virulence of the Islamist backlash. One explanation may be that religious discourse is the only way dissent can be publicly expressed against repressive and incompetent quasi-modernizing regimes in the contemporary Islamic world. Related to this is the fact that non-governmental organizations steeped in Islamist discourse also offer social and welfare support and medical and

educational services to societies afflicted by problems of high unemployment and high rates of population growth, problems for which the region’s governments have been unable to provide satisfactory responses. It is also the case that many of these regimes themselves have used a steady diet of anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism to deflect popular resentment away from their own failings. Finally, not a few of them have coddled Islamists in the hope that the latter would provide a bulwark against liberal or radical secular opposition movements. But whatever the causes, there is a particularly widespread tendency in the Arab/Muslim world to blame the West (and its illegitimate Middle Eastern step-child, Israel) for the particularly huge gap between what individuals and societies have and what they believe they should have in terms of power, wealth and freedom.

### **The Delusion of Jihad**

And yet, even in the Arab/Muslim world, the outcome of the clash of values has not yet been decided, the rejection of openness is not absolute, and the Muslim-Western clash of civilization is not unavoidable.

Apart from the rapidity of the Taliban’s collapse, perhaps the most surprising thing about the campaign in Afghanistan has been the extent to which the Taliban were left to their own devices. Despite dire warnings by dilettante scholars, panicked diplomats and breathless television reporters that Taliban appeals for a



jihad against the unbelievers and their apostate partners in the Muslim world would mobilize the masses, almost nothing of the sort has happened. True, there were sporadic demonstrations, lots of vitriolic rhetoric by intellectuals claiming to speak on behalf of the masses, and even some instances of active enlistment by individuals. But regimes throughout the Muslim world were able, by and large, to ignore or repress "the street" and pursue their state interests according to their own calculations. Taliban calls for the Islamic *umma* to unite and rise up in sacred rage against the West proved to be no more effective than were similar calls by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War ten years ago or, one might add, by the Ottoman Sultan/Caliph during the First World War.

This is the second time in a decade that widely-held predictions of this sort have failed to materialize. To some extent, this is due to the sensitivity of the Americans and their western allies to the potential danger. For the most part, Western leaders have gone to great lengths to avoid creating the impression that they are engaged in a general confrontation with Islam. Whatever they or elements in their publics may think privately, there have been very few expressions of anti-Muslim prejudice in official posture statements or in the public discourse connected with the War on Terror. On the few occasions when political leaders did give vent to such sentiments, they were widely condemned and forced to retract. The

contrast with the negative stereotypes of the enemy that infused war efforts in the last century is truly striking.

Yet the Arab and Muslim world's passive response to the war in Afghanistan also shows that the potential for unity under the banner of Islam has itself been highly exaggerated. Some sense of common Islamic identity undoubtedly exists. Solidarity was one of the Prophet Muhammad's injunctions to his people, and events in one part of the

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Muslim world do strike a chord everywhere else, even among Muslims whose personal beliefs and practices do not betray much piety. That is why Indonesians, for example, care more than do, say, Bolivians, about the travails of Chechens in Russia, Albanians in Macedonia, Kashmiris in India, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. It is also why foreign financial or operational support for the struggles of Muslims almost invariably comes only from other Muslims.

But while Muslim support for Muslims in conflict with non-Muslims

may be broad, it is not very deep, because the *umma* itself is highly fragmented. Indeed, the very notion of a "Muslim world" is almost an abstraction. For within this world, there is a bewildering and seemingly endless variety of divisions. The most obvious fractures are along national, ethnic, confessional or tribal lines. Most of these fissures are apparent inside Afghanistan itself, which is in many ways a microcosm of the Islamic world and has long served as a theater for a Muslim civil war – between Sunnis and Shiites, and between Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tadjiks and Uzbeks. But Afghanistan is only an extreme example of the various primordial contradictions that exist everywhere within and among different elements of the *umma*. Iran and Iraq fought for almost a decade in the bloodiest Middle Eastern war in modern times. Even Pakistan, the only state consciously created to give political expression to Muslims, broke apart in 1971 because Muslim Bengalis resented their oppression at the hands of a Pashtun-dominated government. And since then, Pakistan has witnessed countless attacks by Sunnis on Shiite mosques and community centers.

### **The Internationalist-Backlash Contest in the Islamic World**

A less visible but equally important fracture is along value lines. Sometimes, this fracture involves different authoritarian ideologies, be they secular or religious. However, it

also pits those determined to impose some kind of collective imprint (as defined by them) on society against those eager to maximize the space for personal freedom in religious as well as political and economic affairs. This clash between fundamentalists (even if they wear business suits) and modernists (even if they wear robes) is played out in various ways in almost every society, including Israel. And in what amounts to a Muslim civil war, it is as important as is any other "domestic" division. What this means is that for ideological as well as national, ethnic, communitarian and tribal reasons, some Muslims will always resist the attempts of others to hijack Islamic identity and exploit pan-Muslim solidarity for their own particular purposes.

True, the modernists in most Muslim societies are a small and often vulnerable minority. Calls for

tolerance, pluralism, individual choice, democracy, and openness to the outside world are easily branded as treasonous, subversive, or "un-

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Islamic," while many of those who try to hold up a mirror in order to expose political or social dysfunction end up in exile, in jail, or dead. Because of the risks involved, challenging the power of governments and the self-esteem of

societies entails a considerable degree of courage, and what is surprising is therefore not how few such individuals there are, but how many. While they may be on the defensive and their voices have not prevailed, neither have they been stilled.

For Islamist elements in Muslim societies, the gap between *Dar al-Islam* (the Abode of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (the Abode of War) is unbridgeable. Those elements are eager to engage in a clash of civilizations, whether that clash is imposed on them by the West or whether they provoke it themselves. However, as long as non-Muslims are careful not to proclaim their own crusade against Islam, the Islamists will be unable to mobilize their societies for jihad. Without, that is, first gaining a decisive victory in the ongoing clash of values within their own civilization.