Living on Border Lines: Islam beyond the Clash and Dialogue of Civilizations

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The concept of civilization has resurfaced and is now engendering a global discourse. The civilizational discourse is wide in its scope. It is philosophical and sufficiently profound to suggest a rethinking of the global human self and advance rudimentary theories of a global ethic. It is also mundane enough to become a central concept around which American foreign policy in the post–Cold War era can be anchored. As the vulnerabilities of the nation-state become obvious and its durability becomes suspect, international political theorists have increasingly sought to find alternate polities around which world politics can be organized. The phenomenon of globalization and the acceptance of global economic interdependence has also reduced the utility of the doctrine of state sovereignty, making porous borders and fluid polities commonplace. It is in an attempt to help theorize as well as give direction to the postnationalism world politics that the conception of civilizations is being invoked.1

While the global condition is highly volatile and in a constant flux, thereby escaping theoretical formations, there is an emerging consensus that we are living in a world experiencing “glocalization”—simultaneous forces of globalization and localization or integration and disintegration. Economies are going global, while identities are increasingly anchored in the local.2 Either nation-states are sacrificing sovereignty to merge into large political-economic unions like the European Union (or sometimes just economic unions, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement [NAFTA]), or sovereignties are imploding to create substates as in the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. Theory seems to follow process, and international political theorists are also responding by heading in opposite di-
rections. Those excited by the promise of globalization and integration are talking about a civilizational dialogue, and those seeking to defend the local fear a clash of civilizations.\textsuperscript{3}

For analytical purposes, I shall employ two concepts from international relations (IR) theory to explain the nature of the civilizational discourse. At its most fundamental level, IR theorists divide perspectives on world politics into two categories: the realist and the idealist.\textsuperscript{4} Realists are theorists whose ontological beliefs are highly pessimistic. They assume, following Thomas Hobbes and Hans Morgenthau, that the state of nature is a war of all against all. In the realm of international relations, which is beyond the borders of the nation-states, they do not recognize any higher authority and assume that world politics is conducted in a state of anarchy. This grim diagnosis of the nature of the international arena leads to even grimmer conclusions. Since there is no higher authority that one can appeal to for justice and order, actors can rely only on self-help. The best means to ensure this is through power maximization (or balancing of power), and therefore world politics is reduced to power politics, and interest is best understood in terms of capabilities. As a result of these assumptions, realists believe in the singular importance of power and expect conflict rather than cooperation with other actors in any system. For the realists, power is the key to security and peace, and order comes through hegemony and domination.\textsuperscript{5}

The idealists, on the other hand, have a rather benign view of human nature and human interaction. They believe that conflict is often the cause of misunderstanding or miscommunication. While there may be no higher authority in the arena of world politics, idealists are confident that the growing economic interdependence and the emergence of global governance through multilateralism and international institutions will preclude conflict and enhance cooperation. Therefore, for idealists, communication or interaction and not power is the key to a more peaceful and prosperous future. While realists are usually suspicious of the intentions of other actors, idealists are more willing to accept actors at face value and trust them to play their part in joint ventures. Thus, based on their assumptions about world politics, realists have advanced a discourse that fears a clash of civilizations, while idealists have proposed a dialogue of civilizations.\textsuperscript{6}

In the subsequent sections, I identify the authors and the central principles and arguments of the two discourses. But first I underscore some of the limitations of the two approaches. To begin with, we must understand that both realists and idealists, in their attempts to clarify each other’s relative theoretical positions, often articulated in opposition to the other approach, have boxed themselves in hard-core ontological assumptions that are far from reality. The realities of world politics are somewhere between the expectations of the two approaches. The ontological dogmatism of the two approaches precludes their practitioners from recognizing that while limited
civilizational contests are taking place in the geopolitical arena, civilizational dialogues also are taking place in the sociological arena of identity construction.\textsuperscript{7}

Realists undermine the virtues of any dialogue and constantly argue that in the face of a security threat, power and its judicious exercise alone can guarantee security,\textsuperscript{8} whereas liberals insist that not only is a dialogue of civilizations possible, but it is also necessary and the only way to preclude conflict and enhance peace and security. Both realists and idealists desire security and peace, the former through a preemptive clash or strategies of containment and the latter through a United Nations-sponsored dialogue between nations that will enhance mutual understanding and respect for each other’s values and cultures. In advancing their claims, the realists ignore the power of ideas and meaningful exchanges, and the idealists underestimate the logic of power. Realists do not really give peace a chance through a religious adherence to realpolitik (power politics), and the idealists fail to recognize that in the presence of significant disparities of power, a genuine dialogue is impossible.

### CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS?

In a 1993 article that gained great currency worldwide, Sam Huntington advanced the thesis that with the end of the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism the world would now face the prospects of a civilization struggle between the dominant West and others who sought to undermine the West or replace it.\textsuperscript{9} In his article, Huntington basically employs realist understanding of world politics to an imaginary political arena wherein a handful of civilizations compete with each other for global domination.\textsuperscript{10} Huntington’s primary concern in this article was to provide the United States in particular and the West in general a new grand theory that would help guide their foreign policies in the post-Soviet era. After the end of the Cold War, the United States and its allies were at a loss to even understand their international interests and foreign policy concerns. Huntington’s suggestion that the next threat was a civilizational challenge to Western domination from an emerging alliance between Islamic and Confucian nations identified a new threat that would not only keep the West politically united and give its military alliance, NATO, another raison d’être but also would prevent the possible decline of the West and sustain the globalization of Western values.

Huntington’s article was received by realists everywhere as one demonstrating Copernican insights. Indeed for several years, American and Western foreign policy experts saw nothing but the specter of an Islamic threat armed by nuclear weapons and missiles provided by China. But Hunting-
ton was also widely criticized for his analysis that on closer scrutiny failed the tests of reason and history. His use of history was selective and even erroneous. His definitions of cardinal concepts such as civilization seemed to lack clarity as well as purpose. Even if his reading of history and use of reason lack rigor, there is an intuitive value to his argument that cannot be rejected entirely. Yes, the idea of defense of a civilization has played a major role in global conflicts in the past. For example, Western Christendom did launch a global war called the Crusades at the behest of arguments advanced by Pope Urban II that were not very different from the one’s advanced by Huntington. This is a historical fact that mysteriously eluded Huntington, who in my opinion used the idea of civilizations as a cover to simply argue that resurgent Islam and an intransigent China alone continue to resist Western domination, and they should be crushed before they join forces to present stronger resistance.

Huntington’s argument is not new. Bernard Lewis, in an article titled “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” made a similar point as to how Muslims entertain serious reservations against Western values and harbor resentment against the West for colonial excesses and intend to seek revenge.11 He even used the subtitle “Clash of Civilizations” to underscore his claim about how Western and Islamic values were poles apart and would always prevent peaceful coexistence between Islam and the West. Lewis and his cohort of policy entrepreneurs have been trying to cast the Middle East conflict as a clash between Islam and the West, ostensibly to recruit Western power in an attempt to crush the contemporary resurgence of Islam. Many friends of Israel, like Pipes, Emerson, Lewis, and Miller, saw the Middle East conflict as a zero-sum game between Islam and Israel. And in their desire to provide Israel with Western protection they joined the Huntington bandwagon and nurtured the clash of civilizations thesis and propagated the myth of a global Islamic threat to the West and Western values.12

As a result of their endeavors, the United States in the mid-1990s saw itself engaged in global skirmishes with Islamic movements, in Central Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, and Afghanistan. The United States increasingly found itself in alliance with undemocratic forces in Turkey; in Algeria, it found itself standing by as Russia committed gross injustices in Chechnya in the name of crushing Islamic fundamentalism, and also creating new and unnecessary enemies such as Osama bin Laden. However, thanks to the wise council of many reasonable American scholars such as John Esposito, John Entelis, and John Voll, and sensible and pragmatic diplomats such as Robert Pelletreau, the myth of the Islamic threat was not only exposed but Islam was seen with new eyes and found to be an intellectual and moral (civilizational) challenge and not a threat. Islamic resurgence according to these scholars was not a threat to the West but an authentic expression of Muslim desire for self-determination.13
The clash of civilizations discourse essentially corrupted the American perception of reality and presented it with the deadly option of waging a new global cold and hot war against the entire religion of Islam, nearly fifty-five states and one fourth of the world’s population. The heavy ideological spin presented the Palestinian struggle for a national homeland, the Algerian struggle for self-determination, the Kashmiri struggle for freedom, the Bosnian struggle for dignity, the Egyptian struggle for authenticity, and the Islamic revolution of Iran against monarchy as an attempt by fanatical, essentially evil Muslims to terrorize the world in an attempt to destroy the West and its democratic and liberal ideals. In many ways the United States itself was undermining democracy and liberalism in its own institutions and through its policies as it sought to fight Islamic resurgence everywhere.\textsuperscript{14}

Three developments, however, significantly changed the American approach as idealists gradually gained more influence over American foreign policy and realists became marginalized. The first development was the realization that globalization is making geopolitics second to geoeconomics and identity politics. American focus has shifted from the realist domains of security and power politics to the idealist arena of economic cooperation and cultural exchange. America needs the world both as a market for its goods and as a supplier of cheap labor and expert talent to sustain its economy and power. It could not afford to wage a war against one-fourth of the world’s population. By demonizing Islam it was creating support and allies for a small band of militias who were creating security problems for the United States and its allies everywhere as manifest in the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa. The altered strategy recommended by idealists—recognize the greatness of Islam and its contributions to human civilization while surgically isolating sources of political violence (described often as terrorism when directed against U.S. interests)—has paid better dividends. Violence and attacks against the United States have nearly diminished, and the Lewis–Huntington clash of civilizations has been reduced to the clash between the United States and Osama bin Laden.

Among Muslim thinkers, too, one finds the same dichotomy between idealists and realists. Idealists among Muslims often focus on the positive aspects of the West such as democracy and human rights, and the realists tend to concentrate on Western colonialism and foreign policy excesses.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, one finds a Muhammad Abduh who remarked that in many ways the West was “Islam without Muslims,”; one also finds an Ayatollah Khomeini who argued that the West, the incarnation of Satan himself, was responsible for the decline of the Muslim World and is its number one enemy. Interestingly, Iran in the twenty-two years since its Islamic revolution has moved from a realist like Khomeini to an idealist like Khatami. Muslim idealists are keen to have a dialogue with the West while realists are preparing for a clash.

The differences between the idealists and the realists and their different
perspectives of the West have had a very profound impact in the way Muslims construct their identity today. Muslim intellectuals and thinkers have all had to contend with the power of the West and the power of Western ideas while interpreting and understanding the condition of the Muslim ummah (community). Many of them openly admired the West for its achievements in the arena of civil society as well as science and technology and have even remarked that the West was “Islam without Muslims.” For them the West was indeed worthy of emulation in many areas such as democracy, human rights, and respect for the rule of law and for their dedication to science. This conception of the West has resulted in a genre of literature widely known as Islamic modernism when the theory of modernization was popular. Now in the age of liberalism, this Islamic tendency is referred to as Islamic liberalism.¹⁶

Other Muslim thinkers have found the West responsible for the moral and material decline of the Muslim world. They blame Western imperialism and the era of colonial domination for the present backwardness and lack of self-government in the ummah. They imagine it as the embodiment of Satan and have postulated Islamization as complete rejection of all that they see as Western, including democracy and freedom of speech. These thinkers are widely represented as Islamic fundamentalists in the West and are often contrasted with Islamic liberals.¹⁷ Both discourses have an element of truth in them, but both suffer from a lack of balance. While the former suffers from a lack of self-esteem and exaggerates the virtues of the West, the latter confuses polemics and diatribe against the West for Islam. Both elements are to some extent valid and even necessary but only as supplements to a dominant discourse that is both balanced and constructive.

**DIALOGUE OF CIVILIZATIONS?**

Dialogue between Islam and the West is an interesting idea indeed. However, is it possible given the difference in power between the two entities? It is this issue that I wish to raise while exploring the possibilities of a dialogue between civilizations. But before that, I examine this treatment of West and Islam as two exclusive entities. When most people use the term civilization, they are generally referring to a culturally and historically homogenous society. While civilization is extremely ambiguous, most people do manage to conjure some shared meaning when the term is used. That will suffice to initiate a dialogue. However, I do not believe that Islam and the West are two easily distinguishable civilizations.

The present set of values and normative preferences that constitute “the West” are traced back to the classical wisdom of ancient Greeks and the Judeo-Christian ethic. This reading of the evolution of the West often
denies the contribution of Islamic civilization to the emergence of modernity in Europe. However, more and more scholars are now challenging this intellectual bigotry. Still many, like Sam Huntington of Harvard and Bernard Lewis of Princeton, would like to posit Islam as a passive inheritor and transmitter of Greek values and wisdom to the West. A rejection of the intellectual passivity of Islamic civilization makes Islam one of the three fundamental sources of “the West”—ancient Greek philosophy, the Judeo-Christian ethic, and Islam. The proximity of Islamic values to Judeo-Christian values further cements my contention that Islam is a major philosophical stakeholder in the modern West.

Two hundred years of colonization of Muslim lands by the West has had a significant impact in the transformation and evolution of contemporary Muslim political and philosophical sensibilities. The dislocation of traditional forms of education and their replacement with Western structures of pedagogy alone have changed the way many Muslims look at the world and at their faith. The redrawing of borders by the Imperial West alone introduced a new political sentiment—nationalism—into the Muslim world, a sentiment that has singularly undermined the political cohesiveness and communal unity of what used to be the Islamic civilization. While Western values and their sociopolitical processes were often imposed, they have been effective in instituting significant changes in the Muslim psyche. Thus, the West, too, has had a major share in shaping (or disfiguring) the character of the contemporary Muslim world.

The West was, however, only partially successful in this endeavor, and therefore the Muslim world today manifests, simultaneously, fragmented forms of tradition and modernity. It has become a mosaic of the past and the present. It is at once modern and traditional. The Muslim world is both a Western and an Islamic civilization. The various conflicts and crisis in the Muslim world today is an attempt by an ancient, once-cohesive civilization to reconcile its internal incongruity and inconsistency. The mass migration of Muslims to the West and their remarkable success in not assimilating into the local culture have further added an Islamic hue to the various shades of culture that make the present West. With over twenty million followers (more than the Dutch, Belgians, Swedes, or even Jews), Islam in the West is rapidly becoming as important an issue as Islam and the West.

Thus, to a great extent, Islam and the West are “shared civilizations.” They have shaped and continue to reshape each other. They remain interconnected and codependent due to their common historical experiences and, more important, due to the cross-pollination of ideas that have shaped their political and normative ethos. But these transfers of values, ideas, philosophies, and cultural ethos have not taken place through what is normally understood as a “dialogue.” The West learned from Islam through its admiration of the powerful Muslim empires and their economically and culturally vibrant societies
that they encountered in their Crusades against Islam. Muslims have been influenced by the West after being humiliated in the battlefields and after their lands were colonized. Even today, Muslims learn from the West to emulate their “methods” to regain Islam’s past glory.

While these transcivilizational transfers of knowledges sound romantic, I must remind readers that it happened under relations of power. This intellectual exchange involved ugly Crusades, parasitic colonization, and brutal wars of independence. Knowledges were shared in the midst of conflict, not through cooperation. Civilizations, it seems, learn under domination. The very idea of a dialogue presupposes an environment free from domination and intimidation. The question, then, that confronts the civilizational dialogue is, Do the present conditions in world politics represent a domination- and intimidation-free climate? Can those who are involved in such a dialogue ignore the realities of power and organize events where everyone gets to know everyone? World politics is not a company picnic where one chats pleasantly with the boss’s wife.

In most places, Muslims and the West are engaged in relations of power. The United States and its allies have imposed sanctions against many Muslim countries. Western forces are poised in a rather intimidating fashion in the Persian Gulf. The West is on the wrong side of many conflicts where Muslims are involved, in Chechnya, Palestine, and Sudan. Many prominent members of the Western elite have threatened to crush Islamic resurgence. Many Muslims, too, threaten dire consequences. Moreover, the economic and military capability of the West exceeds that of the Muslim world by such a margin that any talk of Muslim capability to resist Western intimidation rings hollow. The control that the West has on global sources of information and the mechanisms of meaning—media, academia, international forums—allows it to maintain a tight rein on how the world is perceived and what forms of communications take place.

There is much talk about freedom of speech and expression and about the virtues of pluralism in the West, but these values are for domestic consumption. Internationally, expression is tightly monitored. Propaganda dominates truth. International pluralism is not tolerated as slogans about the globalization of Western values, democracy, individualism, secularism, and economic liberalism become defining principles of activist foreign policies. Any difference is construed as a global threat, and there are attempts to eliminate them. A look across the map will clearly indicate that any state that is different is under siege. The world under Western hegemony has no room for difference. Ape the West, or face the West. The first option requires no imagination, but the second demands capability. Look at Iran and Cuba or Sudan. They all face stringent international sanctions. This is not in any way a defense of these states and their human rights records. The way the West relates with Israel, China, and Russia suggests that human
rights may be important, but they are not significant enough to be deterministic of foreign policy. Interstate relations are never entirely contingent on how states treat their own populations. Then, discounting human rights records, what the West seems to oppose is resistance to Western ideology.

If the West and Islam share a lot in common, as I argued earlier, then what separates them? It is the difference in their capability and the ideological necessity of their respective leaders to emphasize difference rather than identity. It is only by emphasizing difference that Western elite can justify policies of domination against a different, foreign, and inferior other. For instance, the constant vilification of Iran is based on it being a totalitarian and nondemocratic regime. If for some reason Iran were to become an ally (say, to counter a new belligerent Russian posture toward the Middle East), the same Iran would be appreciated for having a French-like revolution, for eliminating monarchy and taking significant strides toward democracy with its Majlis. What is emphasized is clearly a function of realpolitik. It is also by emphasizing difference that the Islamic elite can mobilize support for regime change. For the Islamist proximity to the West has become a barometer of legitimacy. They can delegitimize any regime by calling it a Western puppet. Any intellectual leader can be demonized merely by insinuating Western or Zionist connections. Thus, difference between Islam and the West, a major barrier to productive dialogue, is a source of power for elite in both cultures. This is a standard operating procedure for Islamists as well as traditional Mullahs.

The possibilities of dialogue cannot be conceived in a power vacuum. It is, I believe, contingent on realities of power. Can weaker civilizations dialogue with the West that so strongly intimidates “the other”? Can anyone negotiate with a player that cannot tolerate any difference? The West has also displayed a tendency to prefer intimidation to dialogue when the power differential is heavily favorable. For instance, the United States would dialogue with the Soviet Union, and it prefers engagement to sanctions with China. But it refuses to dialogue with Iran; it imposes sanctions across the board with no sensitive for behavioral change. It refuses to let up until the other completely transforms itself. Iran is a pathetically weak state when it comes to meeting the U.S. challenge. Though I must concede that Europe, like Japan, has maintained a “critical dialogue” with Iran. Many would agree that Europe and Japan are more dependent on Iranian oil and imports, and this gives Iran the power to demand more respect from them. But against the United States it enjoys no such leverage. The present China and the former Soviet Union are militarily more powerful states, who could be ideological rival as well as maintain a dialogue with the West, unlike the Lilliputs—Iran, Sudan, and Cuba.

Power implicates dialogue in domination because it uses dialogue to legitimize domination. Gramsci and Machiavelli both talked about the two
faces of power.22 Power to them was like a centaur, half human and half beast. The beast is the ability of the dominant player to use coercion to establish its will over the other, whereas the human face of power is the capacity to persuade the other, through economic concessions or normative criticism, to alter its values and adopt the values of the dominant player. This form of power is insidious, pervasive, and invisible. It legitimizes domination and makes power relations more stable over time. Dialogue with the subaltern (the group being dominated) is employed to understand their interests and shape them to proximate the interests of the dominant group. Dialogue also establishes the superiority of the master’s values and emphasizes the need for the subaltern to emulate the master’s values. This in Gramscian terms is hegemony—the moral and intellectual leadership of the dominant group. The dialogue with the master often convinces the subaltern that resistance is futile. For a while the master seeks legitimacy; it will always reserve its capability to use coercion if hegemony fails.

The dialogue between a powerful West and a weak Islam may only serve the purpose of convincing Muslim elite that they recognize the superiority of Western values and embrace them, and in return they may join the cadres of the global elite and get the opportunity to share some of the West’s success and glory. However, that does not seem to be the case as one clearly sees a new kind of Muslim elite successfully resisting being co-opted by the West. Some Western scholars, Sam Huntington and Paul Kennedy of Yale, believe that the West is declining.23 They fear that the gap between the West and the rest is lessening to the extent that its hegemony is being challenged. In a material sense, this may be the case given the economic growth of the Pacific Rim and China. But it does not hold true with respect to the Muslim world. The oil powers are weak and now completely dependent on the West for their security. Traditional powers such as Iran and Iraq are today pale shadows of what they were a decade ago. Pakistan is in turmoil, as is Algeria. What, then, is the source of power that is enabling some Muslims to resist hegemony and to dialogue with the West?

I contend that it is the growing moral and intellectual cohesiveness in certain sections of the Muslim world. The emergence of the new intellectual elite—the Islamists—and their ability to generate new ideas that simultaneously empower them and liberate them from the intellectual prisons have plagued the secular intellectuals and the traditional Ulema. The growing conviction among some Muslims that the solution to their problems must come from within has enabled them to shrug the inferiority complex that has plagued Muslims since colonization. The idea that Islam is the solution is gradually bringing political cohesion and moral vigor to growing legions of Islamists. The periodic success in counterhegemonic efforts, such as the Iranian revolution, the successful hijacking of Sudan, the successful politicking in Turkey, and the confidence in Malaysia, further
cements the convictions that Muslims must take their destiny in their own hands. There is going to be no Marshall Plan for Muslims or special relations as enjoyed by Israel (which has received over $75 billion in aid from the United States, equivalent to 4.5 Marshall Plans). The very intent to rely on “self-help” is a liberating and empowering experience. It is also an indication of maturity.

Thus, Muslims, without manifesting any palpable shift in capabilities, have become a more powerful community than before. It is the presence of a “knowing elite” and its commitment to self-transformation that is the new source of power that Islamists have found. Muslims today have performed an interesting feat. They have both physically as well as epistemologically traversed across civilizational boundaries. More Muslims are comfortable with Muhammad and Marx, with Khaldun and Kant, Habermas and Hanbal, and Foucault and Farabi on their shelves than their counterparts from the West. There are, I must concede, some Western scholars of Islam who have demonstrated the rare quality to transcend their cultural context and understand Islam. I have had the honor and pleasure to work with two of them, John Esposito and John Voll, but in spite of their huge impact, they are exceptions and not the norm. It is this ability to be comfortable with one’s Islamic heritage and also enjoy the cognitive capacity to engage with Western philosophical discourses, constructively and critically, that is the greatest source of power for the contemporary Muslim intellectual.

I had once asked the Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafi, When would we know that the process of decolonization was complete? And he had replied, “Muqtedar, when we become knowing beings.” Professor Hanafi, I think we are getting there. The presence of a knowing elite who is cognitive and comfortable with the plurality of epistemologies and philosophical traditions, yet strongly aware of who they are, is a sure sign that the knowing beings are here. It is this development, the emergence of the New Ulema (John Esposito’s idea), that is generating a discursive balance of power despite the tremendous imbalance in material capabilities. If the West can recognize this new dimension of the Islamic civilization, then the possibilities of dialogue are very real indeed. But this is still contingent on the West recognizing Islamism—the genuine desire of millions of Muslims to find ways to live life according to Islam—as a legitimate force and not equate it to the extremism of a minority.

The most significant development in this encounter of civilizations is the growth of Islam in the West. There are at least thirty-five million Muslims in the West, including seven million in the United States. Muslims in the West, particularly those who entertain the twin goals of retaining their Islamic identity and gaining acceptability in the Western mainstream, have indeed transcended the dichotomy of clash or dialogue of civilizations. They are living on the borderlines of both the civilizations, their feet in the West, their hearts
with Islam, and are creating through their very existence a discourse that is beyond either clash or dialogue of civilizations. Describing their existence as a syncretism of both civilizations would merely trivialize their identity. Western Muslims are not just an amalgam, a potpourri of East and West; they are indeed a reinvention of what it constitutes to be Western as well as Muslim. They are not just Muslims who live in the West or Westerners who believe in Islam. They are Muslims who are redefining what it means to be a Muslim, and they are also Westerners who are reinventing what it means to be Western. In constructing this new identity, Western Muslims are going beyond the conservatism of the realists and the liberalism of the idealists.24

LIFE ON THE BORDERS OF CIVILIZATIONS:
ISLAM IN THE UNITED STATES

Muslims who live in the United States and strongly identify with their Islamic identity are faced with a perplexing existential dilemma. Who do they belong to? They are not part of the Western cultural mainstream and are also not a part of the Muslim political and social mainstream; they live on the margins of Western as well as Islamic civilizations. If they see themselves as Western, then they suffer from cultural alienation; and if they imagine themselves as a part of the Muslim world, then they feel exiled. In a sense, as long as Muslims in the United States adhere to their Islamic identity, they will experience this double exile from the West (culturally) and from the ummah geographically as well as politically. Perhaps the emerging global village will eventually eliminate both physical and metaphysical distances, but the competing forces of localization suggest against betting on it.

The discourses on dialogue or clash of civilizations are essentially motivated by geopolitical dimensions and competing material interests that shape the foreign policies of the United States and the West, on one hand, and the strategically located and oil-rich Muslim Middle East, on the other. The issue of Israel and the plight of Palestinians further exaggerate the relationship between the two civilizations, since both perceive Israel as a frontier post of the West. American Muslims whose futures are linked with the West and whose hearts still remain anchored in the Muslim World are in many ways caught between the cross fire. While they are certainly not subscribers of the clash of civilizations thesis, they are also not exactly engaged in the civilizational dialogue.

American Muslims are engaged in interfaith but not intercivilizational dialogue. Perhaps the most important reason behind this is because, unlike the Muslims in the traditional Muslim world, American Muslims do not have a monolithic conception of the West. They are more acutely aware of the internal contradictions within U.S. society but are also able to see the significant differences between European and American approaches to Islam,
Israel, and Muslim minorities. They are also concerned with the immediate task of living in an environment that at once offers freedom and dignity as well as hostility. They are focused on finding their rightful place within the American mosaic while retaining their Islamic identity. In essence, American Muslims, by existing in and engaging with the Western ways in such a sustained and systematic fashion, have gone beyond the civilizational discourses.

The task of finding a respectful and meaningful communal existence in the United States has compelled American Muslims to reimagine America and rethink their conceptions of the self. In the process, not only has a balanced view of the United States emerged but also a new identity—the American Muslim identity. The American Muslim identity has not yet stabilized. It remains deeply contested, and, not surprisingly, the divisions about what constitutes the meaning of an American Muslim are between Muslims who are realists and those who are idealists.

There are clearly two images of America—“America the democracy” and “America the colonial power”—that exist in Muslim minds. Muslims who focus on the “inside” are fascinated and excited by the political freedom available to its citizens. They understand and appreciate the vitality of its economy, its culture, its ethics of competition and free enterprise. Most of all, they are deeply enameled by what they call Islamic values in action such as consultative governance (democratic processes), religious freedom, and cultural and political pluralism. For these Muslims, the relative opportunity to practice Islam and build Islamic movements and institutions in the United States, when compared to the presently autocratic Muslim world, remains the most thrilling aspect of American life. And it is to this aspect that they respond. For them, America is liberal, democratic, tolerant, and multicultural.

There is a competing image of America. Muslims who focus primarily on U.S. foreign policy see America as an evil force; a colonial power dominating the Muslim world, stealing its resources, depriving it of its freedoms and right to self-determination. Many Muslims also believe that the United States is anti-Islam and seeking to globalize its immoral culture. They find America’s uncritical support of Israel, even as Israel oppresses and massacres Palestinian children, as proof of its evil motives. The complete devastation of Iraq and the incredible hardships caused by the United States–sponsored sanctions are seen as further evidence of American intentions to destroy and eliminate Islam and Muslims. These Muslims have trouble reconciling America’s benign attitude toward Muslims at home with the consequences of its malevolent foreign policy.

The leadership of Islamic movements such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Islamic Circle of North America; of Islamic political institutions such as the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), American Muslim Council (AMC), and American Muslim Alliance (AMA); and of Islamic intellectual initiatives such as Association of Muslim Social Scientists
(AMSS) and the North American Fiqh Council, all share the first image of America. It is not that they are indifferent or blind to U.S. foreign policy excesses. They recognize it, are critical, and frequently voice their displeasure and condemnation of the United States' uncritical support to Israel and the inhuman sanctions against Iraq. But they also understand the need to build a strong, vibrant, and thriving Islamic community here. And in the interest of establishing Islam in the United States, they focus more on the "inside" rather than the "outside" of America. In defining the goals and interests of Muslims in America, the aforementioned institutions have emphasized the "America the democracy" identity over "America the colonial power."

The difference between these two images is essentially based on where Muslims imagine their homes. Those who still see the countries of their origin as "home" are more focused on U.S. foreign policy and are resentful toward and distrustful of the United States. Those Muslims who imagine the United States as their home and the homeland of their progeny are more concerned with establishing Islam in the country and are excited by the opportunities they see. Muslims who wish to make America their homeland dominate American Muslim leadership. Largely due to this group, Islamic activism, in the area of politics and in the realm of religious life, is well on its way toward what one may call Americanization.26

ASPIRATIONS OF THE AMERICAN MUSLIM COMMUNITY

Muslims who entertained a negative image of America were genuinely surprised by the relative freedom they enjoyed in the United States. Muslim immigrants who started coming to the United States from the early 1960s had already tasted the elixir of Islamic revivalist fervor and also tasted the brutality and autocracy of their own governments, which were interested in either crushing or co-opting emerging Islamic movements. Several members of the various Islamic movements such as the Muslim brotherhood and the Jamaat-e-Islami came to the United States, and many of them soon discovered the epochal opportunity that the United States provided.

In a society where there was political and religious freedom, Muslims could quickly organize and freely establish Islamic movements that were constantly repressed in the heartlands of the Muslim world. While there was deep hostility and prejudice toward Islam and Muslims, these attitudes were nothing compared to the stifling character of despotic regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, and Palestine (under Israeli colonialism). The easiest and often the only way for these Muslims to come to the United States was through the route of higher education.

They came, they got their Ph.D.s, in natural and social sciences, and they stayed to create a crucial mass of intellectual Muslim elite in the United
States. The nature of the immigration became a filtering process allowing only the better-educated and intellectually sophisticated individuals to enter from the Arab world. Add to this the flow of Muslim professionals and scholars escaping poverty and poor economies from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, and you have a Muslim leadership capable of articulating enlightened self-interest and formulating a far-reaching vision for the revival of Islam and Islamic values.  

The Islamists who found themselves in leadership positions in the emerging American Muslim community essentially had one overriding goal: to revive the Islamic civilization. They strongly believed that the key to reviving Islamic civilization was the intellectual revival of the ummah. Thinkers like Ismail Farooqi and his Islamization of Knowledge project, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr and his Islamic philosophy and Islamic sciences project, are indicative of this thinking. The establishment of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) was the first step toward establishing this revivalist thinking within some kind of institutional setting. The lack of freedom for rethinking the Islamic civilizational project and to indulge in serious rejuvenation of the stagnant Islamic sciences was not available in the Muslim world.  

The freedom available in the West led to further institutional development of this revivalist agenda and led to the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in Virginia and the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, United Kingdom. They are both think tanks dedicated to intellectual revival of Muslims. The idea was simple: The freedom of religion and thought in the West and in America in particular would be utilized to produce Islamic ideas and ideology and then exported back to the Muslim world, where it would be tested or introduced, hoping to stimulate and galvanize social and religious reform. Both centers produce prolific literature in the forms of books and journals on various aspects of Islamic sciences and social sciences. The most spectacular of such endeavors was the establishment of the International Islamic University (IIU) of Malaysia.

IIU Malaysia is a product of American Muslim expertise and Malaysian resources. The president of IIIT, who was also a founder member and president of AMSS, AbdulHameed AbuSulayman, left the United States to take over as the rector of IIU Malaysia. He took with him not only the ideas of Ismail Farooqi, the Islamization project, but also many Muslim social scientists and intellectuals who had bloomed in the free and challenging environment of American academia. There he sought to unite the so-called secular and sacred sciences in an attempt to create a generation of Muslim students well versed in modern as well as traditional knowledges, the essential ingredient for the reconstruction of a thriving Islamic civilization.  

Muslim leaders of this generation also created Islamic political organizations like CAIR, the American Muslim Council (AMC), Muslim Political Action Committee (MPAC), Kashmiri American Council (KAC), American Muslim Al-
liance (AMA), and American Muslims for Jerusalem (AMJ)\textsuperscript{31} to use the re-
sources of the American Muslim community to fight for freedom, democracy,
and self-determination in the Muslim world. These organizations are trying to
increase their political and economic influence in the United States in the
hope that it can be leveraged to improve the condition of the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{32}

In the United States, the emerging leadership realized that the single
most important goal was not to assimilate and disappear into the great
melting pot, like those who had come before them. The need to defend
and consolidate Islamic identity became the number one goal in the United
States. \textit{Muslims were not here to assimilate. They were here to be accepted.}
Thus, the development of the American Muslim community in the last three
decades, at least among the immigrants, can be divided into two phases.
The first phase entailed \textit{consolidation of the Islamic identity}; the second
phase entailed \textit{making an impact} on the American society.

To realize these goals, nearly 2,000 Islamic centers and over 1,200 Islamic
schools mushroomed within the last three decades. Several Islamic movements,
such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Circle of North
America (ICNA), and Islamic Assembly of North America (IANA), emerged to
galvanize momentum and fervor in adherence of Islamic practices so that the
Islamic identity of the immigrant community did not dissipate. Traditionalist
movements like the Tablighi Jamaat, a movement that focuses on ritual purity
and revival, have taken roots along with the Naqshbandi Sufi movement.\textsuperscript{33}

The leadership of the intellectual elite, the resonant echo of the Islamic re-
vivalist fervor of the Muslim world, the gradual transformation of the United
States from melting pot to a multicultural society and the rapid rate of conver-
sion of Americans, both White and Black, all provided energy and momentum
for the sustenance of Islamic practices in the nation. Unlike other ethnic im-
migrant and religious communities, the Islamic community has enjoyed the
great advantage that comes from conversions. When the Italians and the
Greeks and others came to the United States, they also struggled with the is-


sue of assimilation and identity. But unlike the Muslim community that wins
new converts, there was no such case of Greek Americans or African Ameri-
cans converting to Italian ethnicity or Anglo-Saxon Americans becoming Greek
American. Even as assimilation took away many, reversion and conversion to
Islam brought many new believers within the fold and kept the critical mass
of the community sufficiently large to preclude complete assimilation.\textsuperscript{34}

We can summarize the aspirations of American Muslim leadership as
follows:

- Defending the Islamic identity of Muslims in the United States against
  assimilation
- Developing intellectual and political resources capable of making sig-
  nificant social and political changes in the Muslim world
In the pursuit of these goals, the American Muslim identity has gradually emerged as the community coped and adjusted to challenges within and without the community.\textsuperscript{35}

**INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES**

The American Muslim leadership realized that the challenges to becoming fully accepted and respected participants in American democracy were twodimensional. They were *barriers to acceptance* posed by ignorance of Islam and prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims widespread in American society and nurtured meticulously by its political leadership and media.\textsuperscript{36} They also realized that there was *resistance to adjustment* within the community itself that would pose as a major barrier to engagement with the American mainstream. Both the challenges, internal and external, had equal impact on both goals that the American Muslim community had set for itself.

**RESISTING ASSIMILATION**

Prejudice against Islam in the American mainstream presented several barriers to the practice of Islam. Every time there was a major political development in the Middle East, American newspapers and TV shows would unleash attacks on Islam and its values. Islam was and is still presented as an irrational, undemocratic faith opposed to equality, freedom, and peace. The Western imagery of Islam as antithetical to Western values had made it difficult for Muslims in the past to declare their commitment to Islam in public.

The demonization of Islam in the media and the prejudice, hatred, and intolerance it bred, made practicing Islam in the public arena a dangerous prospect.\textsuperscript{37} Muslim women could not wear the headscarf in schools, at shopping malls, or in workplaces. Muslim women wearing headscarves were usually screened at the interview stage. If they started wearing scarves after they got the job, they were often fired without any reason. Teachers would object and send Muslim girls home for wearing the headscarf. Girls were punished when they refused to wear revealing clothes in gym classes or in the swimming pool. Social interactions in the workplace, which often takes familiarity between people of different gender as given, was alien to many Muslim women. Ignorance of Islamic gender practices also led to deliberate or unintended discrimination of Muslims. Work environments that lack sensitivity to Muslim needs tend to become hostile.\textsuperscript{38}

Men faced discrimination for wearing beards and caps and for wanting a longer break on Fridays to offer the congregational Friday prayers. Both men and women had trouble getting days off for Islamic festivals. Many
Muslim scholars and intellectuals faced discrimination while seeking jobs in higher education and while writing on politics, particularly on Middle Eastern issues, from an Islamic perspective. The pressure to "become normal," to consume alcohol at parties, to eat nonhalal food, or to participate freely in mixed environments remains very high. Muslim men in responsible positions found that their careers could be jeopardized because Islamic etiquette and dietary laws socially marginalized them.

The ignorance about Islam and the hostility toward it presented and continues to present several challenges. The pressure to assimilate to normalize was and still remains very high. Many Muslims started using Americanized versions of their names to hide their Islamic identity and even their "foreignness." Muhammad became Mo, Jeffery became Jeff, Ali became Al. But others resisted and sometimes made a breakthrough, and at other times paid the cost. As children were born, Muslim families realized that American public schools offered reasonable education at no cost, but they did not inculcate Islamic values. The food was not halal; the stories and the lessons were based on either Christian folklore or secular ethos. Children found it difficult to resist wanting to be like their peers. And most parents struggling to establish themselves in their careers found that they had little time to provide their children with the religious and cultural education that they needed.

Many Muslims were neither disturbed nor concerned with this. They were happy with their material success and tried to gain acceptance in the mainstream culture by distancing themselves from Islam and Islamic practices. For those who were not keen on defending their Islamic identity, life in the United States was wonderful. Many had realized the American dream, and all that was left was to enjoy the prosperity and freedom available in America. A large segment of this group returned to Islam in big ways once their children grew up and began to manifest some of the social ills of American society, such as sexual promiscuity, drug use, moral indifference, and other negative behaviors. Some still remain assimilated, finding themselves on the fringe of both the Islamic society in the United States and American society.

But there are many Muslims who came to the United States for political and economic reasons and are determined to resist assimilation. They answered the call from the Islamists and Muslim intellectuals and dawab (propagators of Islam) workers to join the various Islamic movements that mushroomed in the 1970s and 1980s. The first thing that Islamists did was to take over the National Arab Students Association and dissolve it. They replaced it with the national Muslim Students Association (MSA). The National MSA and its branches in various campuses started working with local communities to establish small Islamic halaqas (study circles) and musallas (prayers centers) in classrooms or rented apartments.

Gradually, with the help of the Muslim leadership that was graduating
from schools and outgrowing the MSAs, these small communities started establishing Islamic centers. Fortunately, in the late 1970s the Gulf states had become cash-rich with the rise in oil prices. Many of them gave generously to Muslim communities all over the world, seeking to establish mosques and Islamic schools. Some of the most important Islamic centers, like the Islamic centers in Washington, D.C., and New York, were built with generous donations from them.49

With some foothold in communities and universities, Islamic movements began to fight against the pressure to assimilate. In the 1970s and 1980s, the response was purely defensive, as the primary focus was to build large numbers of Islamic centers and Islamic schools. Islamic centers and their activities kept the adults in touch with their beliefs and their heritage, and Islamic schools taught Islamic values and inculcated Islamic practices among the young. Today there are over 2,000 Islamic centers and over 1,200 Islamic schools in North America.40

These centers also became the hubs for activities by Muslims who in their countries of origin belonged to various Islamic movements. For example, the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic movement focused on Islamic rituals, quickly took root in many mosques, especially in Florida, Chicago, upstate New York, and New York City. This apolitical and mildly spiritual movement is one of the biggest Islamic movements in North America, with over one hundred thousand participants. It is a loose network of activists who encourage each other to pray regularly.

Similarly, ISNA and then ICNA also expanded, centering their activities on Islamic centers. Gradually, all the Islamic movements began holding annual national and regional conventions that bring scholars from North America and the Muslim world to large convention centers where thousands of Muslims converge every year to listen to lectures on Islam and participate in various community- and faith-related workshops. Currently, the annual convention of ISNA attracts over thirty-five thousand participants and over a thousand scholars. The regional Tablighi jtimas (gatherings) attract anywhere between ten thousand and fifteen thousand attendees. ICNA averaged between ten thousand and twelve thousand participants at its annual conventions. At all these conventions, Muslim scholars and intellectuals from North America and the rest of the Muslim world mingle with American Muslims and each other, providing a sneak preview to the Islamic civilization that Muslims dream about.

THE STRUGGLE FOR "AMERICAN ISLAM"

The transition of American Muslims from a fragile group focused on defending its identity to an intrepid community determined to make an impact has
not been without contention. There is still no consensus in the community over several issues. To understand the political dynamics and the various contentions, it is important to return to the two images of the West that Muslims currently entertain: America as a democracy and America as a colonial power. For the purpose of this discussion, I use the term Muslim idealists to describe Muslims who pay more attention to American democracy. Those who give American imperialist tendencies overseas greater significance in conceptualizing American identity will be identified as “Muslim realists.”

The relationship between the two groups, Muslim idealists and Muslim realists, can best be described as a love–hate relationship. On practical issues concerning the defense of Islamic identity, such as establishing and maintaining Islamic centers and schools, these two groups cooperate fully, and the community appears to be seamless. But on political issues, these two groups break apart and do not see eye to eye on any issue. It is safe to say that, while on preserving belief and rituals these two groups have common ground, they clearly entertain different conceptions of the role of Muslims in the United States.

Muslim Realists and America

Muslim realists see the United States as an evil empire dedicated to global domination. In this decade alone, they have seen the United States benefit from the Iran–Iraq War and then destroy the most advanced Arab nation in the Gulf War and making billions of dollars in profit by billing Muslims for that war. They have seen how the United States–led sanctions have gradually squeezed the life out of Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands of Muslim children. Recently they watched in horror as the Israeli military killed over 350 protesting Palestinians using a war machine that has benefited from U.S. aid, which is about $4 to $6 billion every year and has exceeded $80 billion in total.

They could not believe their senses as they read report after report in the media blaming the Palestinians for dying and listened in amazement as the United States, the so-called defender of human rights, refused to blame or admonish its ally Israel. Muslim realists are incensed with the United States for having an utter disregard for Muslim lives and Muslim society. The media demonizes Islam, everyone gets away with defamation of Muslims, and when the president needs to divert attention from his private life, he chooses to fire cruise missiles at Muslim nations.

Most important, Muslim realists are not impressed with America’s democracy or its values of freedom and pluralism. They point to the secret evidence act, used only against Muslims, which violates both these values by not allowing defendants full access to due process of law. They see American society as immoral, sexually decadent, greedy, and exploitative of the weak at home and abroad. Philosophically, they do not appreciate
the value of freedom and tolerance; theologically, they disagree with democracy as a means of political governance. For them, democracy is an institution that legitimizes the basic instincts of humanity and is an affront to divine laws. They describe the American system as *kufr* (a system against the laws of Allah or the Islamic Shariah) and reject it totally.

The frustration and animosity that they feel as a consequence of American foreign policy excesses are translated into a rejection of all that is American and Western, including democracy and religious tolerance. The hostility toward the United States is also extended toward people of other faiths and makes them suspicious and paranoid even when they see the United States doing something right, such as intervening against a Christian state to protect Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Some of the realists are disingenuous in their explanation about religious freedom in the United States and argue that all the positive things that are happening to Muslims in America are from Allah, and American values of tolerance, freedom, and democracy have nothing to do with it since they are just empty slogans. They, of course, do not apply the same determinist approach in explaining the misfortunes of Iraqis or the Palestinians. The bad things that are happening to them are not from Allah but a consequence of American and Israeli colonialism.41

There is an element of hypocrisy, too, in the manner in which the realists conceptualize their own role in the United States. They maintain that, since the American system is not divinely ordained and is not geared toward realizing the Islamic Shariah (they ignore the fact that in theory both the U.S. Constitution and the Islamic state seek justice, protection, and the moral and material well-being of their citizens), participation in that system constitutes (in their minds) violation of Allah’s decree in the Quran (5:45) that Muslims shall not rule by anything other than what Allah has decreed. Participation, they argue, means endorsement of the system; therefore, they are opposed to Muslim participation in American politics.

Even though they reject the entire system, they have no qualms about participating in the American economy. They take jobs, pay taxes (to support the system), and some of them even start businesses in the system where, like the polity, the economy is also un-Islamic. When quizzed on this inconsistency and pressed further by suggestions that since they disapprove of the system they should migrate (which is an Islamic thing to do), the realists resort to accusing Muslim idealists as agents of the State Department and of being in league with the enemies of Islam.

They argue that American Muslims must participate in an effort to revive the institution of Khilafa, which will magically take care of all Muslim problems. Some of the realists have organized themselves under the banner of Hizb-ul-Tahrir, a fringe political movement that advocates a narrow and harsh interpretation of Islam. Tahrir has been shut down in most Muslim countries, recently in Pakistan. The only places where they are free to pur-
sue their activism in the open and without any fear of state reprisal is in the
West, specifically, the U.K., the United States, and Canada. Ironically, Tahreer
condemns the West for its belief in democracy and freedom, yet it is this very
belief in freedom that has helped them escape political extinction.

In the last few years, the realists have focused their attention on preventing
the Muslim idealists from bringing Muslims into the American mainstream.
However, their attempts to create intellectual and political ghettos have failed,
as more and more Muslims are participating in the American political process.42

Muslim Idealists and the American Muslim Identity

Muslim idealists have not only transformed American Muslims from a
marginal, inward-looking immigrant community to a reasonably well-or-
organized and well-coordinated interest group able not only to fight for its
rights but also to begin asserting its interests at the national as well as in-
ternational levels. The key to Muslim idealists' success has been their un-
derstanding of the West and their liberal vision of Islam.

Muslim idealists were quick to grasp the significance of the constitutional
guarantee of religious freedom in the United States. They used this in the
beginning to organize institutions and movements solely focused on pre-
serving the Islamic identity of Muslims. They were aware that Muslims who
had come before them had been culturally assimilated and had lost all con-
nection to Islam. But as more and more Muslims came to the United States
and answered their rallying call, they began to see a dream—a dream of a
"model Muslim community" practicing Islam as well as playing a role of
moral leadership, guiding not only other Muslim communities but also
Western societies toward a life of goodness and God consciousness.

What they see in America is not just the imperialist impulse but also the
respect for law and fellow human beings. They are aware of the double
standards that Western nations employ while treating their own citizens and
others differently. But this practice was not new to them. They have wit-
nessed their own societies employing separate standards while dealing with
people. They are frustrated with the United States when it does not fulfill
its commitments to democracy and human rights in the Muslim world but
are quick to acknowledge that Muslims are better treated here than in their
own countries. They have seen democracy, pluralism, and cultural and re-
ligious tolerance in action and are fascinated by its ability to resolve polit-
ical differences peacefully. They admire the American state for its commit-
tment to consultation and desire to rule wisely through deliberation. They
wish that Muslim societies, too, would be able to escape the political un-
derdevelopment from which they currently suffer and rise to manifest Is-
lamic virtues and, like the United States, present the world with a model
worthy of emulation.
Muslim idealists have had several successes. First, they were able to quickly assume leadership positions in nearly every avenue of American Muslim activism. Whether it is in the political arena or in religious affairs, Muslim idealists hold sway. Second, they have been able to advance a vision for the American Muslim community, which makes American Muslims proud of themselves and galvanizes them to contribute their money and time in the pursuit of this vision. Their greatest achievement has been their liberal interpretation of Islam.

Through thousands of seminars, persuasive articles in monthly magazines and Islamic center newsletters, lectures at regional and annual conventions of ICNA, ISNA, AMC, CAIR, MSA, MYNA (Muslim Youth of North America), workshops and leadership retreats in the last thirty years, and the Friday Juma prayers across the nation, Muslim idealists have campaigned to alter the way Muslims think about the United States and about Islam itself. They have fought for the legitimacy of their ideas against traditional scholars and battled against the siege mentality that had prevented Muslims from opening up and taking a fresh look at the world as well as themselves from the new place that they were in now.

In these three decades, Muslim idealists have shifted the Muslim communities' focus from battling the West to building bridges with it. They have rejuvenated the tradition of *ijtihād* (independent thinking among Muslims) and now openly talk about *fiqh al-akhlāq* (Islamic law, or interpretation of the Shariah for places where Muslims who are in the minority). They have emphasized Islamic principles of justice, religious tolerance, and cultural pluralism. They have Islamized Western values of freedom, human rights, and respect for tolerance by finding Islamic sources and precedence that justify them. A very good example of this tendency is the establishment of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID) that explores common ground between Islamic governance based on Shariah and Shura and idealistic governance that emphasizes rights and consent.

In the battle for American Islam, Muslim idealists have enjoyed a resounding success. They have gradually marginalized the realists and rendered their arguments and positions illegitimate. There are still pockets of resistance that are confined largely to Internet-based discussion groups or websites. In the run up to election 2000, the struggle between the two types of Muslim elite in America had intensified. But the realists have been completely isolated. Muslim idealists succeeded in mobilizing Muslims to register to vote, and they voted in large numbers, making a difference in the crucial state of Florida. Today American Muslims are not only eager to participate and make an impact; they have made an impact already.

The realists do not have any program or vision that would attract Muslims. Their call to establish Khilāfah is without substance and lacks credibility. They themselves spend their resources in attacking Muslim idealists
for “inventing an American Islam” in conjunction with American scholars like John Esposito and Yvonne Haddad who emphasize the “softer side of islam.” Their activism is now limited to harassing Muslim activists and trying to place hurdles in their paths.

As a new generation of Muslims joins the community, the influence of Muslim idealists is consolidated. While the new generation is familiar with the problems of the Muslim world and its bill of complaints against the West, life as they know it is in the West, with all its pluralities and inconsistencies. They are strongly in the corner of the idealists and truly manifest that “third identity”—American Muslims. They are proud to be Muslims and Americans.

They are not Americans who are Muslims or Muslims who are born in the United States. They are American Muslims. They believe in Islam; they are idealistic; they respect human rights and animal rights and share the concern for the environment. They are economic and political liberals and social conservatives. They believe in the freedom of religion and the right of all peoples, ethnic as well as religious, to be treated equally. They are aware of their economic and political privileges and grateful to Allah for it. They dream of making changes in Muslim attitudes as well as Muslim conditions so that their fellow Muslims can also learn the bliss of practicing Islam by choice and without any fear of the state or a dominant group.44

Beyond the Idealists and the Realists

The West is essentially like a centaur—half-human and half-beast. The human face of the beast allows the West to appreciate the virtues of democracy, equality, and freedoms of speech and religion. It provides it with the moral basis for protecting and treating its own citizens with utmost respect and dignity while also striving hard to advance their interests—understood in terms of political and material development. The bestial dimension of the West has led it to commit huge crimes against humanity. The world wars, the Holocaust, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and racism are just a few of the crimes that the West has committed or, to a much lesser extent, continues to commit outside its borders. These elements of the West are puzzling. How can a society that has so much respect for the human life at home be so determined to allow the steady elimination of innocent Iraqis? How can a society that stands for equality and democracy allow so little freedom to other societies to disagree with it?

Today in an era of globalization, all civilizations are forced to live in intimacy. Also, millions of Muslims now live in the West, and many others live in a close embrace of the Western ways of life. Understanding the puzzle that is the modern West is essential because its enormous power, both material as well as cultural, has attained hegemonic proportions. There is very little re-
sistance, except from some Islamists and some Asianists, to the growing influence of the West on the cultural and moral fabric of this planet. We not only have to understand the modern West in a more balanced way but also develop a discourse for the reconstruction of Islamic identity that is neither weakened nor distracted by the enormous shadow of the West. Until we as Muslims can go beyond blind imitation of the West or outright rejection of its values, we will not be able to construct an Islamic self, independent of Western influence. It is essential that we develop a positive and constructive understanding of the “other.” Only through such a positive and creative act will we be able to reconstruct a vibrant and meaningful self.

It is therefore doubly important that Muslims in the West develop a “firsthand” understanding of what the West really is. It is rather ridiculous that Muslims who have been living in the United States for decades put aside their own experiences and, to understand the West, turn to the polemics of Muslim intellectuals of the 1960s who have not experienced the contemporary West. Only those who have had a sustained experience of the West and have witnessed both its human and its bestial dimension can develop a meaningful understanding of it. Others will continue to rely on caricatures, one way or the other.

What does it mean to have a balanced view of the West? It means that we do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Because Muslims are upset that the United States has chosen to be friends with Israel and not with the Arabs, just because the United States has committed crimes against Iraqi children, we must not reject democracy, human rights, respect for freedom, and the rule of law.

A balanced view of the West should recognize the material impulses that shape many of the Western foreign policy choices and resist as well as condemn them. But in an endeavor to resist the Western domination, we must not foolishly reject the laudable results of their moral impulses manifest so elegantly in their self-governing, rights-respecting societies. A balanced view of the West will rise far above simple associations. Because democracy is found in the West, it should not be labeled “Western.” Now we can find Islam in the West, too—does that mean Islam, too, is Western? A balanced view of the West will seek to understand the sources of Western values and also their implications of social welfare before passing judgment on them. A balanced view of the West is essentially a considered and enlightened opinion of Western institutions and practices that does not allow negative emotions to cloud one’s rational faculties.

Only when such an attempt to understand the West is made by Muslim intellectuals as well as the general public will the basis of a healthy Islamic identity emerge. Until then, reactions to the West will continue to subvert the construction of Islamic identity. In this chapter, I have argued that American Muslims (idealists) through their sustained engagement with the American and Western way have not only developed a balanced view of the West but have succeeded in reinventing themselves as a middle nation.
NOTES


4. These concepts operate at the most basic level. In its most sophisticated incarnation, IR theory distinguishes among classical, structural, and neorealists and among liberals, liberal internationalists, and neoliberal institutionalists. But for the purpose of this argument the fundamental distinction between the ontological assumptions that realists and idealists make about the nature of things is sufficient.


8. Realists such as Daniel Pipes and Judith Miller have consistently argued for a military solution to the Islamist challenge to the current political status quo in the Muslim world. See Daniel Pipes, "There Are No Moderates: Dealing with Fundamentalist Islam," *The National Interest* 41 (Fall 1995): 48–57; Judith Miller, "The Challenge of Radical Islam," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1993): 43–56. Idealists such as Muhammad Khatami, the present president of Iran, and Anwar Ibrahim, the former
finance minister of Malaysia, have called for a dialogue of civilizations to remove any misunderstanding between Islam and the West and to enhance mutual understanding and respect. See the chapter on “Religious Belief in Today’s World,” in Muhammad Khatami, Islam, Liberty and Development (Binghamton, N.Y.: Binghamton University Press, 1999). Also see Khatami’s address to UNESCO in New York at www.unesco.org/dialogue2001/en/khatami.htm, September 5, 2000; and Anwar Ibrahim, The Asian Renaissance (Kuala Lumpur: Times, 1997).


10. His only departure from the realist paradigm was at the level of analysis. Realist theorists of international relations are state-centric and seek to balance power between states. Huntington chose a supranational entity—a civilization—as his level of analysis, and his realpolitik was the dynamics of power between clusters of states constituting competing civilizations.


18. Indeed, one of the most prominent of Western thinkers who claimed that Islam played a passive role in the emergence of the modern West is none other than Bertrand Russell himself. See Bertrand Russell, A History of Western Philosophy (New York: Touchstone, 1972), 427. For a completely antithetical thesis, see W. M. Watt, The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972).


20. See the chapter “When Worlds Collide: Muslim Nations and Western Moder-


25. See Khan, "Islamic Identity and the Two Faces of the West," 71.

26. Haddad and Esposito, eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*


28. Review the main themes in the works of some of the most prominent Islamic thinkers in North America, such as Fazlur Rahman, Ismail Farooqi, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, and the desire to revive the Islamic civilization will be the dominant theme. *Islamic Horizons*, the main journal of ISNA, dedicated an entire issue in March/April 1999 to the memory and ideas of Hassan Al-Banna, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and a prominent figure in twentieth-century Islamic revivalist movements.


30. For a review of IIIT's endeavors, see Jamal Barzinji, "History of Islamization of Knowledge and Contributions of the International institute of Islamic Thought," in *Muslim and Islamization in North America*, ed. Haque, 13–33.

39. I am grateful to Ahmad Totonji, the secretary-general of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, for filling me in on the early history of the MSA. Totonji was the general secretary and the president of the National MSA in its formative years in the late 1960s. He has also played a major role in its development over the years and is still one of its major patrons.
41. Because the realists are not as well organized as the idealists and lack scholars participating in mainstream scholarship, it is not easy to refer to any of their published works as indicative of their values. A book by Ahmad Ghorab, Subverting Islam: The Role of Orientalist Centers (London: Minerva, 1996), is often sued a major
source book by the realists. However, one can easily learn about their views by the discussions they carry out over the Internet. Some of the archives of their views can be found at http://political.islam@listbot.com and at http://islam.guardian@listbot.com.

42. Also see Abdul Basits's critique of the realists in “How to Integrate without Losing Muslim Identity,” *Islamic Horizons* (March/April 1998): 32–34.

