

A time to rethink

By Samir Kassir,

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We must reject the “pragmatism of victims”. That is the starting point of any discussion of the issue facing us now. If we do not believe it is acceptable for the powerful to claim that the end justifies the means, we must refuse this justifying logic to the victims. We must not confuse terrorism with resistance, as the West has confused resistance with terrorism.

How to reject Huntingdon without forgetting Lévi Strauss? If the protagonists of the coming conflict could be described in academic terms, this would be the problematic of the new issue now facing us all.

At a time when both sides are striving to cultivate and insist on “difference”, it is extremely difficult to reject Huntingdon’s thesis that we face a “clash of civilisations”. Until we have proof as to their identity and ideological affiliation, let us put aside the question of who the perpetrators of the New York and Washington attacks are. The perceived understanding of these acts is already enough to pit two supposedly radically opposed blocs against one another.

On the one hand, an eastern essentialism is often invoked, even if commentators and politicians see fit to declare that all Arabs and Muslims should not be associated with terrorism (though only after a tirade that keeps setting up an opposition between “them” and “us”). On the other hand, there is the tendency to rationalise, and even justify the horror by reference to the evils of US politics – even if this is prefaced with a reminder that the murder of innocents is antithetical to the precepts of Islam.

Remember the great French anthropologist Lévi Strauss. Remember that there are no natural hierarchies in “civilisation”; that humanity is as one, founded upon one common anthropological foundation. That is to say, it is meaningless to talk about an “attack against humanity”. All this does is to try to categorise people according to their adhesion to a faith – Muslim or otherwise.

Perhaps I should emphasise here that supremacy is not only a white phenomenon. While some people within Muslim societies might be attracted to radical Islamism from a defensive point of view (because of their feeling of being threatened), still, the rhetoric of the military leaders of this radical Islamism seeks to be offensive. They justify their triumphant proselytism by defining the “Other”, “decadent” civilization, as inferior.

How to avoid the “bloc” effect

Is it still possible to stop the dawning of a “Huntingdonian” era, given the violence of the oppositions? Much will depend on the character which the war assumes, and on the diplomatic efforts that are (or aren’t) deployed in order to prevent the kinds of chain reaction that can only fuel a “bloc” mentality. But while military operations and political tactics seem to lead inevitably to confrontation, a re-consideration of ideological assumptions still might help to lessen this.

So then this ideological re-examination is vital. This does not just concern the West. The Arab world needs to make a supreme effort and commitment to end the kinds of ambiguity that sustain a confrontational cultural logic.

We need to counteract the “victim status” to which Arabic societies have become accustomed. We should not try to do this by cultivating a power complex, or a spirit of revenge, but by accepting the idea that, although the twentieth century has brought defeats to the Arabic world, it has given it many tools which may contribute usefully to a progressive agenda.

We must abandon a negative Arab-centrism (or Islam-centrism) that perceives the world as an abiding political or military threat, as the extremists do; or as a social threat, as do the so-called moderates.

We must give up essentialist justifications such as those exemplified by the silence which has surrounded the protracted affair of the western hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s; or the complacency of the attitudes to the fatwah against Salman Rushdie. We must accept the idea that democratic values have become one of the common heritages of humanity.

This is not impossible. But it is also not made easier by the fact that the elite, which could facilitate this change, is caught between non-democratic powers frequently supported by the West, on the one hand, and radical Islamic movements on the other.

The task would be greatly helped if the West were prepared to make a similar effort. Such an effort would need to acknowledge several precepts. First, that the vision that the West has used to define Arabs has served to protect very specific strategic interests. These have included the manipulation of governments and of groups reclaiming political Islamism against nationalist Arabic and leftist movements. Second, it would need to recognise that the Arabic search for justice, most strikingly in the conflict with Israel, was not born out of a rejection of the “Other”.

It is easy to allow oneself to give in to the idea of a clash of civilisations. But at a time when it is clear how hard it is to export the idea of democracy, this would be a great shame.

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