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**ISLAM BETWEEN CLASH AND CONCORD OF CIVILIZATIONS: CHANGING
RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MUSLIM WORLD AND THE UNITED STATES**

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Phase I: Convergent Values, Divergent People

In the first half of the 20th century relationships between American values and Islamic values were close. On such issues as sexual mores, gender roles, the death penalty and alcohol consumption, American values and Islamic values converged.

On the other hand, and in the same period, relationships between the American people and the Muslim people were distant. Their attitudes towards each other diverged and were marked by prejudice and racism.

In what sense did the values converge?

- (a) Islam and America shared an aversion to premarital sex. Some U.S. states even had laws against extramarital fornication.
- (b) Homosexuality was criminalized in the first half of the 20th century in America, as well as in the Muslim world.
- (c) Unmarried couples living together were stigmatized in both cultures and were quite rare.
- (d) Bearing babies out of wedlock was regarded as dishonorable by both civilizations. But was it the baby that was “illegitimate”? Or was it the parents who were illegitimate?
- (e) Men in both civilizations were heads of the family.
- (f) Women in America did not get the vote until a Constitutional Amendment in 1920. In both civilizations women holding political office were still rare.
- (g) Both civilizations had limited female participation in the economy. In 1936 only 18% of Americans approved of a married woman working outside the home unless it was absolutely necessary.

- (h) Prohibition of alcohol required a Constitutional Amendment in the United States. Such an amendment was ratified in January 1919 as the 18th Amendment and went into effect in January 1920. On the issue of alcohol, the United States became almost Islamic in the 1920s.
- (i) Both civilizations accepted the death penalty as an answer to some forms of human depravity. Islam's most controversial capital offense was for adultery; America's most controversial application of the death penalty was, until recently, the execution of the mentally retarded or the execution of juvenile offenders.

On the other hand, relations between the Muslim people and the American people diverged in the first half of the 20th century. These were the years of Jim Crow racist laws of segregation – a level of racism repugnant to Islamic ethics and mores. U.S. laws against interracial marriage were also repugnant to Islamic principles.

Treatment of religious minorities was also much more tolerant in the Ottoman Empire in the first two decades of the 20th century than was the interfaith atmosphere in the United States. In the U.S. there was still a lot of anti-Semitism, let alone Islamophobia. Discrimination against Roman Catholics was often rampant.

Phase II: Divergent Values, Convergent People

In the second half of the 20th century American values and Islamic values began to diverge. Sex before marriage in America, often with parental consent, had increased dramatically. The 1960s witnessed an explosion of “sexual freedom” in America.

While American culture did give greater and greater freedom to women than did Muslim culture, American culture extended less and less dignity to womanhood than did Muslim culture. Sons in the Muslim world still respect their mothers more than do sons in America; but husbands in the Muslim world respect their wives less than do husbands in the West.

In the second half of the 20th century American women became more active in politics and the economy than were Muslim women within the ummah. But there were paradoxes and contradictions in comparative gender experience.

Women in America were more liberated than women in the Muslim world – but sometimes women in America were less empowered than women in the wider ummah. The United States has never had either a woman President or a woman Vice President. But consider the following:

- I. Pakistan: Benazir Bhutto was Prime Minister twice.
- II. Bangladesh: The country has had alternating Prime Ministers of two women: Khaleda Zia and Hassina Wajed.
- III. Indonesia: Jakarta has had a woman President, Megawati Sukarno Putri (2003-2005).
- IV. Turkey: Prime Minister Tansu Ciller emerged as a woman leader.

This was long before the United States had had a woman President, Italy had a woman Prime Minister, France and Russia had a woman President, or Germany had a woman Chancellor. Germany elected a female Chancellor only recently.

On the alcohol issue, a new Constitutional Amendment (the 21st) was ratified in 1933 repealing the prohibition of alcohol. The U.S.A. reverted to its pre-Islamic alcoholic ways!!

On the death penalty, the U.S.A. is likely to abolish the death penalty long before the Muslim world. Many states in the American union have already abolished the death penalty (e.g., Massachusetts).

But relations between American people and Muslim people in the second half of the 20th century converged. The U.S. had become less racist, and was learning to be more tolerant of other religions.

Those of us who were living in the U.S.A. as Muslims in the 1990s started receiving Ramadhan cards from the President of the U.S.A. We also received cards for Eid el Fitr. First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton entertained Muslim women at the White House on Eid el Fitr. The President followed suit the following year and marked the Muslim festival at the White House. The U.S. had its first Muslim Ambassador to a small country in the Pacific. It was historic to have had the United States represented abroad by a Muslim envoy. The Clintons paid a price with the right-wingers. In the Wall Street Journal the Clintons were accused of being Friends of Hamas, a so-called “terrorist organization”. Presidential speeches started mentioning mosques – as well as churches and synagogues. The United States was described less and less as “Judeo-Christian”. There was recognition of Americans who belonged to other faiths.

Some of the new international friendships between the U.S.A. and Muslim countries were not necessarily in the interests of the wider ummah. The new friendship between

the U.S.A. and Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser was sometimes inimical to global Muslim interests. Egypt was no longer willing to risk Egyptian lives in defense of the Palestinians as it was in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973..

The friendship between the U.S.A. and Pakistan also became increasingly harmful to the wider ummah. The President of Pakistan became Washington's "Sheriff" for "law enforcement" in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Among his critics, the Pakistani Head of State was even nicknamed "Busharaf".

The Camp David Accords between Egypt, Israel and the United States also helped relations between the U.S.A. and pro-American Muslim regimes – but it was at the expense of the Palestinian people.

To summarize this second phase of Americo-Muslim relations, the values of American society and the values of Islamic culture were diverging – as American sexual mores were relaxed, premarital sex was legitimized, homosexuality was legalized, babies out of wedlock multiplied, alcohol was lawful again, and debates started in some American states about same-sex marriages. But the relations between American people and Muslim people improved both within the United States and internationally.

Phase III: Divergent Values, Suspicious People

In this new 21st century, the values of America have continued to diverge from the principles of Islam. As the new century unfolded, homosexuality was not only legalized; it was in the process of being religiously legitimated. Protestant Christianity was moving towards ordaining gay bishops, as well as ordaining women priests.

What about relations between American people and Muslim people? After September 11, 2001, the new spirit of cordiality was interrupted, though not ended. Two more Muslim countries fell under occupation – Afghanistan and Iraq, alongside occupied Palestine. Muslim minorities under occupation elsewhere include Kashmir, Chechnya. Muslims under international trusteeship include Kosovo and Bosnia.

Muslim charities in America have been harassed on unproven suspicion of money-laundering, Muslim suspects have been held indefinitely without trial at Guantanamo Bay and other hidden places. There is increasing evidence of torture in facilities used for terrorist suspects. There has also been increasing evidence of desecration of the Holy Qur'an by Americans guarding devout Muslims. This is quite apart from the harassment of Muslims at American airports.

There was a time during the Roman Empire when Christians were thrown to the lions for sport. Modern day religious persecution is rarely so callous. But are there global war-games unfolding at the expense of the Muslim world in this day and age?

Muslims under direct military occupation include Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Muslims militarily struggling for self-determination include Chechnya and Kashmir. Muslims on the radar screen for possible military intervention by Western powers include Iran, Syria and Somalia. Muslims being harassed under new anti-terrorist legislation already include communities in Tanzania, Kenya, potentially South Africa and a host of other countries under pressure from the Bush administration. Muslims under other methods of oppression include the appalling suffering of the Muslims of Gujerat in India. In comparative number of victims, Muslims of the world are more sinned against than sinning.

Muslims who are harassed at American and international airports are beginning to multiply. On August 3, 2003, on arrival from overseas, I was detained at Miami airport for seven hours under repeated interrogation. Detaining a 70-year-old man as a potential terrorist is a case-study of the new paranoia at airports.

I was interrogated by (a) immigration; (b) customs; and (c) Homeland Security and the Joint Terrorism Task Force in that order. They all focused on security. Paradoxically, the last interrogators were the most apologetic and the most courteous. But they still questioned me behind closed doors. Of course, I was truthful about all the Muslim organizations I belonged to, including the Muslim American Alliance, the old American Muslim Council and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy [CSID].

In fairness to the Joint Terrorism Task Force, they subsequently booked me a hotel room for the night in Miami and paid for it. They arranged for me to be taken to the airport hotel. And they paid for my dinner that night (giving me \$25 for it). The Homeland Security interrogators were the most friendly. Yet I felt that I would not have been kept for so long if they had not been interested in interrogating me personally. I was kept waiting until they arrived.

After living in the United States for more than a quarter of a century, did I arouse suspicion on August 3, 2003 because of where I was coming from? Was I coming back from Afghanistan? Had I visited Baghdad? Perhaps I was coming back from Indonesia? NEGATIVE to all of those! I was coming back from Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean. My primary mission in Trinidad had almost nothing to do with Islam. I had been a keynote speaker to mark Emancipation Day – commemorating the end of slavery in the nineteenth century. I was received by the Prime Minister.

The questions I was asked at Miami on my return included whether I believed in Jihad and what did I understand by jihad? What denomination of Islam did I belong to? Since I was a Sunni, why was I not a Shi'a? I reacted: "If you were a Catholic, and I asked you why were you not a Protestant, how would you deal with that?"

Since I was coming from Trinidad and Tobago, had I seen Yaseen Abubakar, the Islamic militant who had held the whole cabinet of Trinidad hostage in the Parliament building nearly fifteen years earlier? That was a much more sophisticated question.

I replied at Miami Airport that I had not met Abubakar, but I had tried to see him in Trinidad. After all, I was teaching a course at Cornell on "Islam in the Black Experience". I had also taught "Islam in World Affairs" at Binghamton. It was my business to study the Abubakars of this world!

The Miami airport officials allowed me one phone call. I called my home in Binghamton and raised the alarm. My wife mobilized my three adult sons and their families. She also mobilized some colleagues at Binghamton University. Their phone calls of alarm to the relevant authorities might have speeded up my release. My ordeal at Miami airport ended amicably, with a few embarrassed smiles. However, I am not complacent. I am afraid it could happen again, the Lord preserve us. But we shall not be intimidated. Amen.

How can the United States learn to trust the Muslim world a little more? How can the Muslim world, in turn, be better protected from American militarism? Both solutions need to restrain America's arrogance of power.

Counter-penetrating the American Citadel

We need strategies of how the might of the United States is to be moderated. Firstly, through greater self-reliance by other societies abroad. The less we need the United States, the less hegemonic it will be.

Secondly, by making Americans pay a price for any abuse of power abroad. The price could be by making Americans feel disliked by others, or even making Americans feel unsafe. The extreme and least legitimate form of this strategy is anti-American political violence. The third strategy is through counter-penetrating the citadels of U.S. power. The United States may be an empire abroad, but it is still a democracy at home. Different nationalities within the United States should learn from Cuban Americans and Jewish Americans – minorities who have shaped American policies from within.

In an article in the Saudi Arabian English language online newspaper, *arabnews.com*, Mark Weber, Director of the Institute for Historical Review, examines the achievements and political influence of Jewish Americans in the United States, and points out the following:

- “As Jewish author and political science professor Benjamin Ginsberg has pointed out:...

Since the 1960s, Jews have come to wield considerable influence in American economic, cultural, intellectual and political life. Jews played a central role in American finance during the 1980s, and they were among the chief beneficiaries of that decade's corporate mergers and reorganizations.

- Today, though barely two percent of the nation's population is Jewish, close to half its billionaires are Jews. The chief executive officers of the three major

television networks and the four largest film studios are Jews, as are the owners of the nation's largest newspaper chain and the most influential single newspaper, *The New York Times* ... The role and influence of Jews in American politics is equally marked ...

- Jews are between two and three percent of the nation's population and comprise eleven percent of what this study defines as the nation's elite. However, Jews constitute more than 25 percent of the elite journalists and publishers, more than 17 percent of the leaders of important voluntary and public interest organizations, and more than 15 percent of the top ranking civil servants.
- Two well-known Jewish writers, Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, pointed out in their 1995 book, *Jews and the New American Scene*:...

During the last three decades Jews [in the United States] have made up 50 percent of the top two hundred intellectuals ... 20 percent of professors at the leading universities... 40 percent of partners in the leading law firms in New York and Washington ... 59 percent of the directors, writers, and producers of the 50 top-grossing motion pictures from 1965 to 1982, and 58 percent of directors, writers, and producers in two or more primetime television series.

- The influence of American Jewry in Washington, notes the Israeli daily *Jerusalem Post*, is "far disproportionate to the size of the community, Jewish leaders and U.S. officials acknowledge. But so is the amount of money they contribute to [election] campaigns." One member of the influential Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations "estimated Jews alone had contributed 50 percent of the funds for [President Bill] Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign."...".¹

The most important reason for Jewish power in the United States is the successful counter-penetration by Jews into the citadels of American power.

African Americans are twice the population of world Jewry but African Americans have not adequately counter-penetrated the citadels of power.

Americans from South Asia and the Orient are counter-penetrating the Silicone Valley of Technology. Muslim Americans may be outstripping Jews in numbers, but cannot hold a candle to Jewish power.

The United States as an Empire can only be checked by the United States as a democracy. African Americans, Latinos and Muslim Americans have a lot to learn from Jews about how to be empowered Americans. So indeed do women of America of all races. American women are substantially liberated, but they have yet to counter-penetrate the citadels of power on a commensurate scale.

CONCLUSION

Samuel P. Huntington may be in the process of being partially vindicated for his controversial 1993 prediction. A new clash of civilizations may be unfolding between the United States and some of its allies, on one side, and, on the other side, a substantial body of Muslim opinion across the world. Under the U.S. administration of George W. Bush this clash of civilizations may even be drifting towards increasing militarization.

But Huntington was wrong in suggesting that a clash of civilizations involving the West was something new. On the contrary, the West has been declaring war on other civilizations for the last four hundred years. In the Americas and Australasia there was the First Genocidal Phase of Clash of Civilizations when new European conquerors and settlers annihilated native civilizations and destroyed millions of indigenous lives.

There followed the Second Enslaving Phase of Clash of Civilizations when millions of Africans were captured and exported as slaves to the plantations of the Americas and the Caribbean.

This period overlapped with the Third Phase of the Imperial Clash of Civilizations when the West conquered and colonized much of the rest of the world, flying European flags of conquest from Jakarta to Jamaica, from Lahore to Lusaka and from Malta to Mozambique.

The Fourth Phase of Clash of Civilizations is the hegemonic age of the United States as an Empire, especially since the country became the sole superpower. The United States is an informal empire, controlling millions of people abroad through economic inducements and economic threats, diplomatic pressure and state manipulation, the power of trade and the lure of aid, promises of military security and threats of destabilization, the pervasive use of the technology of espionage and control, and the domination of such global institutions as the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. As an Empire the United States also exempts itself from global rules which it does not like – such as the Kyoto Protocols on the environment and the new International Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The first genocidal phase of civilizational conflict (mainly against ancient native civilizations of the Americas) was not formally ended. It just petered out. In some parts of the Americas it may still be continuing in the form of the brutalization of rural Indians.

The second slavery phase of civilizational conflict (mainly at the expense of enslaved Africans) was gradually ended as a result of abolitionist movements in Europe and the Americas, and following a civil war in the United States.

The third imperial and colonial phase of civilizational conflict (at the expense of much of Latin America, Africa, Asia and many islands of the sea) took centuries to bring to a

close. The last of the great European empires came to an end in the twentieth century except for such small pockets as the Falklands, Gibraltar, some British West Indian dependencies, and Portuguese Macao on the China Coast.

How do we end the fourth hegemonic phase of clash of civilizations – the phase of the United States as an informal Empire, especially since it became the sole Superpower? Here there are three vital strategies. One is the promotion of greater autonomy from the United States and greater self-reliance in those countries which have come to lean too heavily on America as a market, or as a source of foreign aid, or as an umbrella of military security, or as a customer for their goods. For example, Egypt needs to be weaned away from too much reliance on annual foreign aid from the United States; and Saudi Arabia and Kuwait should learn to lean less heavily on Washington for military security.

Another strategy against excessive American imperialism is to make the United States pay a price for its abuse of power. The extreme case of this is trying to make Americans feel unsafe anywhere in the world. The insurgency in Iraq is punishing America for invading Iraq.

The third solution to the imperial role of the United States as the sole superpower may have to lie within the United States itself. Although the country has indeed become an Empire, it is still domestically a democracy. The ultimate check upon America as an empire is America as a democracy. It is to be hoped that the internal demographic changes will eventually be reflected on the political process and in policy choices. The population of the United States is on its way towards becoming more clearly multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and to a limited extent multi-lingual. Other parts of the world

have – through patterns of immigration – been counter-penetrating America as a society, but many have not yet counter-penetrated America as a citadel power.

The supreme examples of minorities successful in shaping the policies of the United States are Cuban Americans, on one side, and Jewish Americans, on the other. Cuban Americans have tended to be a lobby for a single-issue – American policy towards Cuba. The Cuban immigrants have held that policy hostage for more than forty years.

The achievement of Jewish Americans is more wide-ranging and more pervasive. Although Jewish Americans have indeed been crucial in determining the United States' policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, American Jews have been major participants in other sectors of American life as well. As we have indicated, Jews have been staggeringly successful not only politically in America, but also economically, educationally and culturally. Jews are the supreme example and ideal model of an American minority that has successfully used the American system to its full advantage.

In domestic policy American Jews have been a positive force for democratization and liberalization. But in foreign policy the Jews have fostered American imperialism. That is why Jimmy Carter's book, PALESTINE PEACE OR APARTHEID, is so important. It virtually calls upon the Jews to reconcile their love for democracy with their promotion of American and Israeli imperialism. Jimmy Carter's book seeks to address the causes of Arab terrorism – which has been provoked partly by the brutal aspects of Zionism.

If African Americans, Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, Latinos and women of all races became half as successful as the Jews in influencing directions of American policy, their effect would probably be towards liberalizing the foreign policy of the United

States. At the moment America is torn between a domestic philosophy based on rights and a foreign policy based on might. Demographic changes in the United States may tilt the balance towards a better and more humane equilibrium.

Yes, a fourth clash of civilizations has indeed begun, with the United States at the center of it. But the seeds of redemption may also lie in America. Those seeds are carried by emerging populations potentially more responsive to other cultures and civilizations than the contemporary U.S. power-elites seem to be. The imperial tunnel is still dark – but the light of a more inclusive Americana democracy can be seen at the end of this tunnel.

Notes on Discussion

Questions:

- How have values shifted, you implied the Islamic uma has been constant, could you expand some more on that?
- Is it a case of social versus politic values?
- Are evangelicals in the West trying to reverse values?

Dr. Mazrui:

There were no major shifts in values in Muslim system. Perhaps there were changes in individual Muslim values however these were slower to change than values in the west

I was referring to lifestyle rather than governance when talking about values. I did not address convergence in political values. There has been a very slow change towards democratisation in the non-Arab parts of countries (i.e. Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan and Bangladesh) and they have all elected women president

Evangelicals may be trying to move back to a less open society though I am not sure if it is so true. Hunting down gays, reversing women liberalization will not happen despite the backlash. The liberalization of attitudes of people is almost irreversible.

Questions:

- Are you saying that the insurgency in Iraq has had a positive effect?

Dr. Mazrui:

Prior to September 11 all wars were fought on southern soil. I have no intention of praising the actions of September 11 but it showed that the borders of violent conflict have shifted and it is no longer limited to the South. There is military counter penetration in both directions.

Terrorism is a word used for violent actions perpetrated by groups in the South, it is not a word commonly attached to violence committed by the North.

Endnotes

¹(Source: Mark Weber, “A Look at The Powerful Jewish Lobby”. *www.arabnews.com*. July 14, 2002).

Richard Cohen, columnist for the *Washington Post* also notes in an article that, “At the elite Ivy League schools, Jews make up 23 percent of the student body. They are a measly 2 percent of the U.S. population”.

(Source: Richard Cohen, “A Study in differences ” *Washington Post* May 28, 2002).