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Report on WG4: Islam and the West

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This constitutes the proceedings of Working Group 4 of the 56th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs. The brief to the Group was to discuss “Islam and the West”.

Preliminaries

As last year, the group was composed of a wide spectrum of people representing both Islam and the West. In addition, this year there were representatives from a diverse range of people from within the Islamic world. This enriched the discussion further.

The Group began by debating the appropriateness of the title for its deliberations; namely, the relations between “Islam and the West”. The primary objections to this terminology were: (i) that neither of the two entities is monolithic and so needed to be deconstructed (ii) that to posit Islam and the West as mutually exclusive was not correct as there is also the question of Islam in the West, (iii) that in recognition of the fact that there have been constructive contact between the two throughout history, the discussion should perhaps be confined to the relationship between “political Islam” and the political leadership of the West and (iv) that the dichotomy is asymmetrical as one term represents a civilization and the other a geographic region.

After a brief discussion, Group members conceded that these were not mere semantic differences, that it was important to understand that the title had its limitations. So we proceeded with some key assumptions. These were: (a) that we should not confine ourselves to discussing only the definition and concede that the reference, broadly, meant the current climate of confrontation between “Islam” and the “West” and without prejudice to the positive contacts between the two; (b) that there was not only a debate between Islam and the West,
but within Islam and within the West, and that the two debates are related; and (c) that it would be difficult to confine the discussion to only one segment of Islam or of the West.

Four key propositions, with views for and against them, dominated the agenda of the debate within this Group. These were as follows:

1. That religion and State should be separated in the public realm
2. That the confrontation between the two is one of a “clash of civilizations”
3. That efforts to marginalize women further aggravates relations between the two
4. That education was a central and critical to bridging the gap that exists between Islam and the West

It might be pointed out that these four points were not stipulated *a priori*; they emerged from the discussions. Under these headings, however, the group discussed many other related issues and ideas. I have attempted to include as many of these as possible in this Report.

**Separation of Religion and State**

There were three sets of opinions, cutting across denominational and geographic lines, on this issue. Some felt very strongly that the two must be separated, that the introduction of religion into the political arena had bred violence throughout history. Others felt that although this may be desirable, it was practically difficult to do and yet others argued that such a separation cannot be made and that Islam reserved the right to implement an Islamic State. So this portion of the discussion was one that might be described as a discourse on “political Islam”. Otherwise put, it was a discussion on the right or wrong of politics using the idiom of religion.

The discussion heard mention of the concept of *ijtehad*, or contextual interpretation of laws and decrees and of the implications of the plurality of the Muslim *umma*, community, for a pan-Islamic Islamic “nation”. Briefly, the points made were: that the idea of *ijtehad* needed to be understood and used properly, that the geographically wide distribution of Islam over fourteen centuries made this evident and that Islam came into the world with a bill of political rights, and so is a social force. During discussions on this point, it was pointed out that rights did come with duties and that perhaps this was not being discussed enough. What, in other words, is meant by exercise of democracy? This was apropos of a discussion of the possibility of having “fundamentalist” groups gain power through the ballot. The point being made was that in such cases it was important to ensure that laws exclude the possibility of the “end of democracy”.

One participant in the discussions posited the idea of giving space to “the sacred realm” in our lives. This, it was explained, is a reframing of the architectural distinction between private, public and sacred realms. It was mentioned that the latter could act as a bridge between the first two, although it was a distinct realm of its own. Discussion of this yielded that it implied an alliance of religions as such to come up with a solution to the increasingly antagonistic politics, and perceived or real threats to identity.

**Clash of Civilizations or of Interests**
The above discussion introduced the need for a “dialogue between civilizations”, a concept emanating from Iran and, after a ten year gap since its pronouncement, also from the author of the clash theory. A majority of the Group members felt that it was inappropriate to describe the confrontation between the West and Islam as one of a clash of civilizations; that a more helpful term might be one of a clash of interests, defined as the will to monopolize sources of energy. It was noted that both the “West” and “Islam” were undergoing internal change and that what was needed was a mutual recognition of this, which would enhance the “cultural dialogue”.

There was substantial discussion as to whether Islam was compatible with notions such as secularism and modernity. Several participants were at pains to argue that Islam was not against such notions. One participant cited the possibility of Islam having a “secular vision” and mentioned the works of Jamal ad-din Afghani as one Muslim reformer who could be used as a starting point on this issue. Others argued that Islam was not in opposition to modernity and that it was more a question of oppressive apologists amongst the ruling class within Muslim societies who also contributed to the problem.

Several members pointed out that ultimately it was a clash of interests that was fueling the confrontation between Islam and the West. The Western powers, over the period of the better part of a century, had recognized the importance of oil and gas in the modern world. This was concentrated in the Middle East, Central Asia and other lands that were overwhelming Muslim. It was in the interest of the West that they continue to control these lands. Thus, it was argued, that the present climate was a consequence of political and economic injustices and must be addressed in that context.

**Education**

This morning I had the opportunity, and the privilege, to meet with The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gom’a. Both of us agreed that one of the major problems facing the Muslim world was divisiveness and a lack of consensus on some of the basics of the religion. I asked him two questions in connection with it. (i) What is the cause of it? (ii) What could be done to remedy the situation? His answers to both questions were brief but assured: The cause was lack of education. The remedy was education.

This, I might report, was also the thrust of the argument in our Group. In a sense it was one of the threads, the other being gender issues which I shall discuss presently, that was repeated throughout our discussion. The Group was also of the opinion that there was a degree of education that was also required in the West about Islam, and *vice versa*. There were many dimensions to this: the Muslim cleric needed to educate Western educated Muslims about the religion, the traditional Muslim needed to be educated about the world at large, the West needs education about Islam and so on.

Although we did not have time to discuss this question in its details, the members of the group discussed the need for the education of both Islam and the West, starting at the very beginning of a child’s education. A “K through 12” approach was advocated by one member. There are models of this already being done in North America; these need to be studied, enhanced and used in other parts of the world. The point was also made that the use of traditional educational
institutions and religious authorities was critical to countering the violent reactions to perceived or real political and economic injustices in the Islamic world.

**Women in Islam**

Similar to the question of education, awareness of gender imbalance also constituted a thread through the discussions. In this connection several specifics were discussed ranging from a discourse on the degree of veiling (ranging from a simple head scarf to the *hijab* to the *naqab*) to the criticality of educating young mothers. It was also pointed out that using various means, women continued to be marginalized in insidious and dangerous ways.

Several of the participants pointed out that many women were wearing the veil willingly, and were not necessarily forced to do so. However, what troubled them was that the trend was to not permit women to have a choice in the matter and that there was an increased propensity to dictate to women what they can and cannot do. It was pointed out that much of this was happening for the first time in the history of Egypt, for example, and that there was a need to study as to why it was the case.

**Other Topics of Discussion**

The discussion was helped by the presentation of several papers and by way of concluding this report I would like to present brief summaries of the papers. They ranged from “case studies” on Islamicization in Pakistan and Somalia, the implications of this phenomenon and its linkages with violence. In both papers the thrust of the argument was that the United States’ time worn policies that argued for civilizational superiority, the legitimacy of supporting dictators and unilateralism were a primary cause of the problems confronting these two countries.

The Group was presented a paper that analyzed the theoretical works of individuals such as the Muslim reformer Jamaladdin Afghani who has argued that Islam was severe in its strictures against violence and the English writer Brunt, who argued against the imperial exploitation of religion to further its objectives. Both points, it was argued, needed to be explored in the context of the confrontation between Islam and the West.

The members of Group 4 also benefited from a paper on the importance, simultaneously, of a theoretical understanding of how dialogues between civilizations take place and the need for a set of practical principles to be employed if such a dialogue were, indeed, to take place. In the former case, there are two ways of exchange between civilizations: (i) that cultures and civilizations bordering each other have frontiers which allowed a natural seepage of ideas and material culture; (ii) yet there was also a need for conscious exchange between neighboring civilizations to make conscious, methodical and scholarly endeavors to find mutual points of agreement. The paper concluded by endorsing the 1998 Tehran Declaration on the details of the principles for such a dialogue as the basis for fostering a culture of dialogue amongst the nations of the world.

**Conclusions**
The discussions did not seek to find a consensus. However they did entail several observations, *inter alia*, as to why the world seemed dangerously poised precisely, to “clash” rather than talk, fragment rather than unite.

- There is no hesitation to declare a will to power, its accumulation in quantity and quality, in the name of ‘national interest’

- Despite intense discussions about a ‘new world order’ following the collapse of the Soviet Union, that mentality has continued and indeed, may be what fuels the confrontation between Islam and the West

A start to correcting the mutual alienation of Islam and the West would be to work toward a greater understanding of the above trends and either neutralizing them or heading them off. Towards this too there were a few observations:

- Efforts must be made to prevent the exploitation or distortion of religion in political discourse

- Improving the role of the media in reporting on conflicts that could be interpreted as one between “Islam and the West”

- Finding a solution to the Palestinian problem which was fraught with dangers in that direction.

- That there is a notion of a sort of ‘imperial imperative’ at work; this notion needs to be questioned and debated if we are to have a true dialogue

- That this can be detected in campaigns of a kind of ‘demonization’ of the adversary that creates a phobia about them be it Islam, North Korea or China