A Conundrum, not a Clash

As Semites, we have a cultural affinity for dualities. All our nouns have two genders, masculine or feminine, but three numbers – singular, plural and dual. Of course we're not alone. The West, which has always held tenaciously to a bipolar view of the world, sees through a prism where shades of grey are deficient and where only two civilizations can exist at any one time. Past the Cold War era and the West's new nemesis – or bête noire, depending on the level of animosity – is the Islamic civilization.

Many in the West associate the Arab world with some of their greatest fears: terrorism, dictatorship and weapons of mass destruction. Back in 1998, when Pakistan confirmed its nuclear capability the Western media sought to sensationalize the event with the label, "Islamic Bomb" – with marked comparisons to the nuclear arsenals of other countries, there has never been a reference to a "Hindu", "Christian" or indeed "Jewish" bomb.

It is at best purely arbitrary and, at worst, profoundly racist to categorize the world into neat compartments. It is dangerous to talk of civilizations in such loose terms as cultural groupings and identity since that opens the door to bias and the notion of "more righteous" or "purer" civilizations, which in turn can be used to justify ethnic cleansing and other acts of iniquity.

In addition to being morally questionable, it is in point of fact wrong to demarcate such an entity as the Islamic civilization. Civilizations are not homogeneous entities: they are composed of and divided by overlapping groups based on class, sect, region, language and ethnicity.

The clash between the West and Islam is therefore largely one of perception. The image of Islam – and of Arabs more generally – remains overwhelmingly negative, whether of radical Islamists blowing themselves up and knocking at the gates of Europe, as depicted in the media; or of dodgy Middle Eastern types as portrayed in popular culture. Within that context, Jack Shaheen, an eminent researcher into the Arab image in the American culture, made famous the "b" factor: billionaires (including "sheiks" kidnapping Western women and dragging them off to their harems), bombers (these used to be Palestinian but are now Muslim in general), bedouin bandits and buffoons.

Islam is now seen as assertive and belligerent; and Arab nationalism that once sought to emulate the ways of the West has lost to a powerful consensus that favours modernity with an Islamic core. While Davos and other forums can bring together technocrats and businessmen from both sides, they do little to change fixed preconceptions. Commerce has not delivered us from history's passions.

On this side of the divide, there is a sense of injustice, of double standards in the West's dealings with Islamic and Arab states. Occupying Iraq – Arabs everywhere never fell for the dance of the veils used to justify the invasion – cold-shouldering Iran and Syria and offering tacit approval of Israeli occupation of Arab lands are all seen as examples of the West's equivocal conduct in the Middle East. Most unnerving to the average Arab is that sabres always seem to rattle that much more menacingly when they are brandished by Muslim leaders, rather than by counterparts from others regions and religions.

To be sure, US foreign policy often seems to be dictated by a Western public that has a low opinion of Islam, rather than by any bona fide pursuit of international justice. Conversely and as with most stereotypes, the negative Western images of Arabs contain some elements of truth. The Arab world does suffer chronically from such ills as dictatorship, poverty and the denial of human rights.

But preconceptions and prejudices have done more harm to global security than all the despots of the world. The clash of civilizations cannot be rationalised by trite labels and then preserved in formaldehyde. The real clash is a manifestation of deeper fault lines: the battle lines of the future lie in the digital divide between those who embrace modernity and those who do not or cannot. Throughout history, technology has been a powerful tool for growth and the basis for numerous economic and social transformations. It is incumbent on the West as the current global powerbroker to encourage the developing world to harness these new technologies and bridge the development and income divides. Failure in this quest only serves to radicalize and widen schisms between people.

There is certainly a clash of civilizations if by clash one means mismatch rather than conflict. The deep fault lines created by religion, history and language are like so many jigsaw pieces waiting for the perfect bridging sections to link them all. Ultimately, with an eye trained on the bigger picture, red and blue paint – and a host of other dyes besides – will mix perfectly and complement each other.

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Gulf vs other Arab

The story of the Arab world is a true tale of overwhelming contrasts. Arab countries outside the Gulf – the Maghreb and Levant, incorporating Egypt and Iraq – have been in a winter of despair for more than 60 years, with several conflicts simmering and erupting at regular intervals. Striking a Dickensian parallel, the same period can be described as a spring of hope in the Gulf region. The ultramodern cities across the Gulf, which barely existed little more than a decade ago, are a testament to the drive aimed at transforming the societies of the Arabian Peninsula from a tribal and largely nomadic past. To be sure, the current disparity could not be wider between the neat urban planning of Abu Dhabi or Doha, for example, and the mad clutter of Cairo or Beirut.

Beyond the crumbling skyline, the stagnation in non-Gulf Arab countries is visible in most fields, from arcane and inefficient bureaucracies to chronic internecine feuds. Compare that with the development of Gulf Arabs, who have largely succeeded in resolving their differences within the framework of the Gulf Co-ordination Council and whose leaders have used oil wealth to embark on various programmes of domestic reform.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, the ties between the Gulf region and the Levant in particular were mainly symbolic or psychological in nature. Even with the rise of Islam in the 610s and despite its roots in the Arabian Peninsula, a distinction was made between the Muslim tribes of the desert and their urban and sophisticated counterparts who ruled the Middle East first from Damascus under the Umayyads and subsequently from Baghdad under the Abbasids.

Indeed it is a shared past – from the secretive Nabataens in the south who built Petra in modern Jordan to the community in Ugarit, Syria, who are credited with the invention of the alphabet – that continues to bind together the societies of the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean. Cumulatively, these societies were part of what was known as the civilized south in pre-Christian, Hellenic times.

The contemporary twist in the plot is that, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and of French colonialism in the Maghreb, the Gulf and non-Gulf Arab regions have experienced a very tangible reversal in fortunes and a paradigm shift in their respective roles.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, has evolved into a powerful religious and cultural force in the Arab world, assisting poorer states in the Middle East and influencing regional policies through oil wealth and a strong belief in its role as guardians of the Muslim faith.

The Saudi connection grew out of a perception of a raft of common regional threats, ranging from the establishment of Israel and the occupation of Jerusalem, which resonates deeply in the body politics of all Arab states; to the superpower confrontation of the twentieth century, with its unrelenting competition for regional allies; to a perception of a power void in the region, following the demise of the Soviet Union, which Saddam Hussein attempted to fill in the 1980s and 1990s. Currently, Saudi foreign policy, particularly in Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories, seeks to counterbalance Iran's growing sphere of influence.

Of course, other Gulf states have also sought to exert an influence. For instance, while Saudi mediation in Lebanon's civil war resulted in the Taef Accord, the United Arab Emirates provided a contingent back in the 1970s for the short-lived Arab Deterrent Force in Lebanon. More recently, in 2008, Qatar brokered the Doha Agreement between the Hezbollah-led opposition and the Western- and Saudi-backed government.

In addition to moral and diplomatic support, Gulf financial assistance has grown steadily over the decades, with official development assistance from the Gulf to the Levant and Egypt totalling some $75 billion from 1970 to 2006, according to the Arab Monetary Fund.

The relationship between Gulf states and their Arab counterparts in the Maghreb and Levant has become symbiotic, blurring the old subregional distinctions. On the one hand, a co-operative system has been developed whereby the Gulf states provide economic and moral leadership by virtue of their wealth, and the poorer Arab states provide military and labour forces to support Gulf regimes – currently, more than half of the work force in the Gulf region comes from non-Gulf states.

For much of Arab history, the Gulf region represented something of a backwater to the rest of the Middle East, which itself fell behind the rest of the world economically and politically from the fifteenth century onwards. The new relationship between Gulf and non-Gulf Arabs is a measure of the political dynamism and growing awareness of the Gulf's role in the global economy. In a very real sense – from a Gulf perspective – this is the best of times and the worst of times.

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