

# The Politics and the Promise of Civilizational Dialogues

By M. A. Muqtedar Khan | February 12, 2004

After attending two back-to-back “international dialogues of civilizations,” one in Doha, Qatar (Jan. 9-12) organized by Brookings Institution and the Emir of Qatar, and another at UNESCO in Paris (Jan. 17-19) hosted by UNESCO, Euro Mediterranean, and President Jacques Chirac, I cannot help but reflect on the promise and the politics of dialogues.

In response to Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington’s now infamous argument predicting a future full of clashes between civilizations, the world’s liberals responded with a call for a civilizational dialogue. After 9/11, this call for a dialogue between Islam and the West has become even more urgent.

The philosophical assumptions behind these dialogues are not too difficult to discern. Islam and the modern West share a common Abrahamic tradition and their foundational sources; Islamic law and philosophy and Western enlightenment philosophy have common roots—Hellenistic reason and Biblical revelation. The two civilizations have a common past and a common future, particularly in the light of strong economic relations between the West and the Muslim world and the growing presence of Islam in nearly every Western society.

Because the future of the two civilizations is inseparable, any clash will be devastating to both, regardless of the asymmetry of power. A clash between Islam and the modern West would be like a collision between the present and the future for both. Islam is integral to the future of the West and Islamic civilization’s reticence toward modernity is untenable. Eventually, the Muslim world will have to modernize, democratize, and recognize that its future, too, is interdependent. Neither the West nor the Muslim world can imagine a mutually exclusive future.

Clearly, the long-term benefits of cooperation and co-existence are apparent to all except those who are quite obtuse and whose reason and good will is blunted either by their hatred for the other or by the intoxication that comes from power. For them, the clash is not only inevitable but also desirable, as they

seek a future for the one without the other. Dialogues between the two civilizations help convince the undecided on both sides that there is hope and conflict is not inevitable.

In the dialogue itself, one can convince the other that not all interests are sacred and not all positions are etched in stone. With a little more understanding, patience, and a willingness to recognize the legitimate concerns of the other, along with some compromise and much restraint, dialogues can bridge even the widest of divides. For those who believe in the common humanity of all and dream of a world where all can live in dignity and security, dialogues are necessary and the only means to resolve disagreements and disputes.

Needless to say, I went to both international forums with hope, excitement, and anticipation. But I discovered that the promise of a dialogue can be so easily compromised, even subverted by the politics that underpin these dialogues or by those political entrepreneurs who seek to exploit them to score political points at the expense of advancing understanding.

## Paris Forum: A Stage for Bashing the U.S. and Islam

The forum in Paris was entitled “The Clash of Civilizations Will Not Happen.” Both President Jacques Chirac and Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin argued that the clash of civilizations must not be allowed to happen. They expressed fear that the growth of terrorism and the undermining of multilateralism in the world was threatening peace and enhancing the prospects of a clash. The forum was apparently designed to underscore the common tradi-



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tions between Islam and the West, but it actually ended up as a forum that rejected Islamic resurgence in the Muslim world and America as a neocolonial power.

Some topics were clearly provocative and in keeping with the French attempt to position themselves as the primary balancer of American unilateralism. One panel was titled “U.S.: Common Enemy or Shared Ally?” But there was no panel designed to examine how groups such as al Qaeda might be contributing to realizing the Huntingtonian prophesy. Another panel on which I was a speaker was titled, “Is the Arab World Undergoing Another Colonization?”

I have been a very vocal critic of George Bush’s foreign policy, which I agree is often contrary to international law, international norms, and common morality, but the Paris forum was seeking to bring secular forces in the Arab world closer to Europe by positioning the U.S. as a new-colonial power seeking to dominate the oil resources of the region by force. Clearly, the objective was to paint the U.S. as an international villain and France as the international hero that is defending international norms, the multilateral order, and a champion of third world rights.

As a result, I found myself as the only defender of America, pointing out to the audience that compared to Europe’s history, American colonial ambitions are insignificant. As far as democracy and freedom of religion was concerned, I noted, the U.S. is streets ahead of the French, who even legislate what Muslim women can wear and not wear. I reminded attendees that the U.S. was, as former Secretary of State Madeline Albright pointed out, the “indispensable nation,” and it was the U.S. that acted to prevent genocides in Europe (Bosnia, Kosovo) and not France. Finally, I had to remind Europeans that in spite of their pro-Palestine rhetoric, they had done little for Palestinians. Even the Palestinians recognized that if they were to get their independence, it would have to be through a transformed U.S. role.

On the panels that discussed Islam, only those Muslims were invited who saw no role for Islam in the public sphere. As one of the voices advocating Islamic democracy, I was surprised to find myself in

the audience as people who had done little or nothing on the subject discussed how secular Muslims alone—not any interpretation of Islam—were ready for democracy. The general mood at the conference was that there could be no peace or dialogue with Islamists. The occasional voice that advocated Islamic democracy was booed.

The radical secular fundamentalism of France, in my opinion, will enhance rather than diminish the prospects of a clash of civilizations. Secular westernized Muslims have little influence in the Muslim world. Islam has become the dominant idiom of the Muslim world and the West must find a way to cooperate and co-exist with moderate/liberal Islamists who believe in democracy, tolerance, and pluralism, but within the Islamic rubric. French-style secularism is neither welcome in the Muslim world, nor in America, nor by a majority of French Muslims who now constitute about one-fifth of the French population.

### Doha Dialogue: An Encounter of Rhetoric and Reality

The Doha dialogue was orchestrated by the Saban Center for Middle East policy at the Brookings Institution. Unlike Paris, where the main players—Americans and Islamists—were conspicuously absent, the Doha dialogue focused on bringing in all key players in the ongoing struggle between the U.S. and the Muslim world. Academics, policymakers, former government officials, media, former military personnel, and a strong contingent of American Muslims represented the U.S.. The American delegation included former President Bill Clinton, Ambassadors Richard Holbrooke, Martin Indyk, and Edward Djerejian. The Muslim world was represented by former government officials, scholars, journalists, politicians, and key Islamists such as Professor Qazi Hussain, leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami and also leader of the opposition in the Pakistani Parliament, and Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, an important leader in the Muslim Brotherhood and easily the most prominent opinion-maker and cleric of the Arab world.

The dialogue included open plenary sessions and several closed-door, three-hour workshops. The dif-

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ferent formats revealed the extent to which political considerations on the part of all parties undermines the promise of dialogues. In open sessions, Muslim representatives focused on U.S.-Israeli relations as the crux of the crisis in U.S.-Muslim relations and sought to underscore the injustices that Muslims suffer at the hands of the U.S. and Israel. In closed-door sessions, representatives from the Muslim world acknowledged that political and even cultural reform was necessary in the Muslim world. Many were willing to concede that the Israeli-Palestinian issue could be settled peacefully. Above all, even the most stringent public critics of the U.S. were more cooperative and willing to discuss things openly in private.

The American delegates tended to waffle publicly on most issues. They were often unwilling to discuss key complaints that Muslims had regarding U.S. foreign policy. While there was a plenary session dedicated to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, the American delegations' discomfort on the topic was palpable. But in private, not only were many Americans willing to admit the insanity of the Bush administration's policies, but they also acknowledged the policy log-jam that the Israeli-Palestinian dispute constituted. Many prominent Americans even acknowledged that perhaps it was time to rethink U.S. positions vis-à-vis the Middle East crisis.

But the only public statement that everyone remembers is Ambassador Holbrooke's. At first, he refused to discuss the issue and then finally made one statement: "The U.S. will never turn its back on Israel." Many Islamists interpreted this as "no matter what happens, no matter what Israel does, the U.S. will continue to finance, support, and arm Israel." Until Bill Clinton came to the rescue, Holbrooke's commitment to Israel had subverted the dialogue. Some cynics concluded from Holbrooke's comment that perhaps he might become the U.S. Secretary of State if Democrats should win in November 2004, now that he had sworn his allegiance to Israel in public.

On many issues, it appeared as if Americans and Muslims were public enemies but private allies. When not posturing for the consumption of respective constituencies, both arrogant Americans and

intransigent Islamists were actually willing to negotiate, share their fears and aspirations, and really open up to one another. In public dialogues, the sources of divergence dominated. In private conversations, areas that constituted common ground were explored.

One important development at the Doha dialogue was the realization by all parties of the potential of American Muslims as a catalyst for better communications and better relations between America and the Muslim world. Muslims from Malaysia to Morocco made it clear that they were looking toward American Muslims for guidance, support and initiative while dealing with the American establishment. Americans also began to realize that through American Muslims, America had an inside track to the Muslim world.

The conference ended with an eloquent and thoughtful talk by Former President Clinton. Unlike some Americans who showed both ignorance and insensitivity to Muslim concerns, Clinton demonstrated not only a clear understanding of the underlying problems, but also great respect and familiarity with Islam, the Quran and Muslim issues. He was willing to acknowledge past mistakes, admit American limitations on key policy issues, and did not shy away from criticizing the Arabs, the Israelis and Americans for failing to resolve the Middle East crisis by now. Former President Clinton would make an excellent "Dialogue Czar," and the White House should perhaps take notice of this and appoint him an Ambassador-at-large to deal particularly with intractable conflicts such as Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and North Korea.

### On the Virtues of Dialogue

September 11 and its aftermath has exposed the underbelly of U.S.—Muslim relations. The existing differences have been highlighted and exacerbated, while new ones have emerged as a result of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Everyone understands that while security issues are involved, so are identity, cultural, religious and economic issues. Therefore, military solutions have limited purchase. The tensions between the two can only be resolved through economic development, political reform and cultural dialogue. The lesser the use of force, the bet-

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ter the prospects for a more amicable resolution to Muslim grievances and American insecurities.

Dialogues such as those discussed must happen more often, and include more and more perspectives. They serve several useful purposes. Wars of words can sometimes help delay or even render unnecessary wars of guns. Familiarity with the other's fears and aspirations will help modulate one's own positions. While dialogues are most productive in an atmosphere of mutual trust and mutual willingness to compromise, they also can help understand and identify core political issues. In an era when misunderstanding and faulty intelligence can have devastating effects, dialogues can go a long way.

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