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Islam Versus Terrorism
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'Islam' and 'terrorism' are contradictory words and incompatible with one another. Islam, which is the last of the three monotheistic faiths, signifies the commitment of its adherents to live in total submission to God. Islam is an Arabic word whose tri-consonantal root S-L-M connotes peace (salam), soundness and safety. That is to say, Islam offers inner peace and soundness in this life and safety from divine retribution in the life hereafter. Terrorism, though it has a variety of definitions, is premeditated, politically-motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatants or innocent civilians. The two terms ('Islam' and 'terrorism') should be mutually exclusive, given that Islam places such high value on the life of every individual, seeing life as God's spirit bestowed upon the human. As the Qur'an says, whoever eliminates a single life, it is in the sight of Al'lah like eliminating the whole of humanity (Surah 5, verse 32). However, we are all perplexed by the horrific events of September 11. Why did such a terrorist act occur and how did it come to be carried out by individuals claiming to be true Muslims, but with such zealous and distorted understandings of Islamic teachings?

It is essential that we examine this dangerous phenomenon and seek to heal these wounds in the hope of restoring the true and bright image of Islam as a religion that promotes peace and condemns the evil doer. The Qur'an demands punishment for those who wage war against Al'lah and His messenger, and those who strive to do evil throughout the land (Surah 5, verse 33). This teaching puts on an equal footing the waging of war against God and His messenger and the perpetuation of evil and terror on earth. In this essay, I want to invite us all to reflect with clear minds and objectivity on the root causes of the crisis facing humanity today. No one denies that anti-U.S. and anti-Western hostility has grown in unprecedented way across the Muslim world in the wake of the tragic events of September 11. A number of hypotheses have been offered to explain these developments. Many argue that these hostile feelings are an expression of the contradiction in culture and civilization between Islam and the West, and that their incompatibility is rooted in a long history of competition and conflict. This view echoes historian Samuel Huntington's thesis of the eventual "Clash of Civilizations" between the East (Islam) and the West. The rivalry between Islam and the West in part proceeds from the fact that in the years following the birth of Islam, Muslims managed to establish an empire extending across North Africa, the Middle East, Iberia, Persia and North India. After a lengthy period of stability, tensions erupted in 1095 with the first crusades. The Christian East, from its threatened capital in Constantinople, called for help from the Christian West to defend its territory against the expanding Muslim Seljuks. From the long subsequent history of unpleasant relations emerged two significant factors that underlie the current feelings of hostility and, in turn, September 11.

Before I proceed to present those two factors I would like to note that the terrorist actions of September 11 are stark reminders of the high stakes involved in seeking understanding of the dynamics of relationship between Islam and the West. The interaction between Islam and the West is a critical element of the structure of contemporary global affairs. Without positive relations between these two, a constructive global network of peoples and societies will not be possible. For almost a millennium and a half, Islam and the West have interacted, alternately in dialogue and in conflict. Today, it is vital that we address the actual conditions of the 21st-

century world rather than imposing concepts and models from an earlier age. Re-imposition of the structures of a West-centred imperialist hegemony on the one hand or nostalgic memories of past ages of Islamic power and glory on the other will not provide the answers humanity needs in the new millennium. The spread of terrorism demonstrates that the central reality of the 21st-century is that our world is globally interdependent but far from integrated.

According to Norman Daniel, in *Islam and the West*, up to the present time the mentality of the medieval Christian (viewing Islam as a genuine threat and the worst enemy) still lingers in the minds of many westerners.

The external factor

Let me now invite my readers to reflect on the external factors that triggered the September 11 attacks. Clearly, the great differences in culture and civilization between the two sides (Islam and the West) contributed to the tragedy. Yet what is equally important is the impact of US policy and western policy in general with regard to the Islamic world. In particular, US policy on the Arab-Israeli conflict has been disturbing to most Muslims, who see it as unbalanced and strongly biased in favour of the Israelis. These perceptions trigger feelings of hostility and aggravate the tensions emerging from differences in culture and civilization. It is important to understand that today's Islamic radicalism is often anti-nationalist. Its practitioners dream of uniting the people of the global Muslim community (ummah). They view the US as the prime obstacle, supporting governments and regimes they abhor and which they regard as uncommitted to the pure teachings of Islam. This explains why Osama bin Laden maintains close ties with the Egyptian Jamaat-al-Islamiah and Islamic Jihad groups intent on eliminating president Hosni Mubarak (just as they assassinated President Anwar Sadat).

The internal factor

The implications of imperialist influence on the part of the West over the Islamic world become clearer when one examines Islamic reform movements in the modern Arab world. With the end of the Ottoman Empire, such movements began to emerge in reaction to the acute deterioration of the empire in contrast to Europe's renaissance. Reformist groups are often classed in two broad categories: 1) The puritan Salafi, or Wahhabi, seeking a return to the pure primary teachings of Islam and refusing to submit to western culture; and 2) modernist Islamic movements, seeking to merge Islam with European civilization. The latter movement does not reject western modernity, but seeks to achieve a Muslim compromise with it. The most notable proponents of this view are Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Sheikh Mohammad Abdo.

Both movements wish to purify Islamic thought of all traces of weakness and deterioration. However, the Wahhabi movement has taken a stricter approach in its vision and mission. A Sunni-puritanical movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abdul-Wahab (1703-1791), Wahhabism rejects all religious practices adopted after the 3rd century of the Muslim era. Philosophy, Sufism, Shi'ism and local religious practices – even those imbued with Islamic spirit – are branded as heretical. The house of Saud entered into a pact with Imam Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahab in 1744 and began their conquest of Arabia twenty years later. A notable 14th-century scholar, a firebrand with a sharp tongue, by the name of Imam Ibn Taymiyah, was the ideological inspiration of the movement. Ibn Taymiyah sought with high intentions to cleanse Islam of the stain and contamination of alien cultures that he viewed as threatening to Islam and

to Muslims. He is known for his critiques of philosophy, Sufism, and Shi'ism as well of Christianity. He was a prolific writer and very much the product of an environment of intense hostility between Muslims and the Mongols on the one hand and between Muslims and Christians on the other (particularly in the wake of the crusades). In his fatwas (religious decrees), Ibn Taymiyah stated unequivocally that Jihad against the disbelievers is the most noble action. Wahhabism, a major strain of modern Islamic thought and practice is found in and around the new fundamentalism. It follows a literal interpretation of Islam as strict as its origin. It seeks to remove the varied readings of the Qur'an that evolved in the centuries after the prophet. Infidels were to be dealt with harshly; local customs, laws, or rituals – anything not found in a literal reading of the Qur'an – were to be abandoned as idolatry. The destruction of the statues of Buddha by the Taliban regime is a clear manifestation of the Wahhabis' teaching.

As a logical consequence of the pact between the house of Saud and the founder of the Wahhabi movement, Saudi oil wealth gives what would be a minority ultra-orthodox faction in the Muslim world a disproportionate degree of influence. Saudi funds pour out, paying for new mosques, Islamic centers, schools and charities promoting radical Islam. The donations bring with them the view that Islamic law should be taught as the only real law and that even competing forms of Islam should be abandoned. The spread of the Wahhabi movement and revivalist Islam has provided a breeding ground for militant behaviour as well as for an assault on local traditional forms of Islamic practice.

Prof. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has pointed out that a person from southeast Asia with a rich cultural background and experience of the long co-existence between religions and cultures, between Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims, returns home from a Wahhabi-funded school with the view that there can be no compromise, no cultural co-existence with non-Muslims. In Algeria, Nigeria, Indonesia, and elsewhere one finds groups eager to force rigid sharia (Islamic religious) law on their respective nations. The unintended consequences of a centuries-old pact have led to the emergence of rigid textualism and the increasingly dominant and angry voice of a group that see Islam as a beleaguered faith, surrounded by enemies from without and within.

This internal factor – rigid interpretation of Islam and a view of others as a source of threat – will, if nurtured by the external factor – an unreflective western political and cultural posture – create a group of people filled with a sense of frustration and despair which without doubt lead them to radicalism and extremism in the name of religion. In this regard, one can see that at the heart of the problem of global violence, is a battle of ideas, especially in the Islamic World, where fundamentalist rivalries have twisted religion to justify the act of terror as a legitimate tool blessed by Al'lah.

This battle revolves around 4 essential questions: 1) Can we religious communities be inclusive or must they be exclusive? 2) Can we have a shared future or must our futures be separate? 3) Can we ever possess the whole truth or must we not joint others in the search for it? 4) Can we at last move from a globally interdependent era into an integrated one? In answer to these questions let me quote the following verses of the Qur'an:

Say: "Who gives you sustenance from the heavens and the earth?" Say: "It is Al'lah : and certain it is that either we (Muslims) or you (non-Muslims) are on right guidance or

in manifest error!” Say: “You (non-Muslims) shall not be questioned as to our sins, nor shall we be questioned as to what you do.” Say: “Our Lord will gather us together and will in the end decide the matter between us in truth and justice. And He is the One to decide, the One who knows all.” (Surah 34, verses 24-26)

The bottom line is that we must not persecute one another or bring animosity to each other. Instead we must do our duty in declaring the universal message that is essential for you as much as for us.

Oh humankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Al’lah is the most righteous of you. And Al’lah has full knowledge and is well acquainted with all things. (Surah 49 – verses 13)

This verse advocates peaceful co-existence and constructive interaction; it can even be said that it urges the creation of an integrated global community.

If Allah so willed He could make you all one people.” (Surah 16, verse 93) To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way/guidance. If Allah had so willed He would made you a single people but (His plan is) to test you in what He had given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute. (Surah 5, 46-48)

Thus, while God could have made us alike, with one language and one disposition, out of His wisdom He gives us diversity and tests our capacity for unity and integration.

If God had so willed, He could have made human kind one people but they will not cease to differ. (Surah 11, verse 118)

In Al’lah’s plan, humans were to have a certain measure of free-will and this made difference inevitable.

Equipped with the Quranic spirit of peaceful co-existence, constructive interaction and mutual respect, Muslims together with the West and particularly with the US can do a great deal to move the world from interdependence to integration in a global community that builds a fitting world for our children, secure from fear and terror.