

***“East is East. West is West”:  
From misconceptions to  
open conflict***

Karin Kneissl

The statement the Anglo-Indian writer Rudyard Kipling once coined in his ironic phrase “East is East. West is West. And the twain shall never meet” has turned into a dangerously growing alienation, the results of which can be read in daily editorials or met in angry street crowds. Ignorance on both sides seems to nullify the accomplishments of the “global village”.\*

At the turn of the century from the 19th to the 20th, interest in the Orient, its poetic myth and potential as a sphere of influence, as a market, was at its peak. “Orientalism” flourished in manifold guises, whether as extravagant passion for Persian carpets or in the fantasy of Victorian Englishmen as travellers and painters who had fallen for the sensuality of the Orient. For a short period the East had lost its momentum of threat, of darkness and force – the image that has persisted ever since the wars between the Greeks and the Persians stretching to the Islamic conquests. But this time, the Ottoman Empire was an indebted client of Western banks and the new mixture of liberalism and nationalism of Western scholars inspired the peoples of the East. In Constantinople the “Young Turks” strived for the ideals of the French Revolution while political debate evolved in the name of an emancipated Arab culture in the salons of Damascus, Beirut and Cairo. The perception of East and West was a vague one. Blurred by a patchwork of knowledge and inspired by a desire to meet the other, at least on the level of the political, artistic and academic elites.

Let me illustrate this quite positive image of “the other” by the following citations.

The Egyptian Intellectual Hussein Fawzi expressed his view of western civilization as follows:

In Europe, the individual went out to seek for truth and beauty until he found the tree of knowledge and ate its fruit. He came to know

---

\* The published text is based on the lecture with same title delivered on December 7th, 2001 at the Historical Seminar of the Scientific Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Ljubljana.

good and evil and set forth what he had learned in the encyclopaedia; his eyes perceived the tyranny of rulers and the remnants of religious bigotry; he denounced regimes by the tongues of Montesquieu and Rousseau and Voltaire and rose up to destroy the Bastille with the hands of the people. He proclaimed the end of arbitrary monarchy with the tongue of Danton and the Jacobins. He strove through the ages, through the mind of his scientists, toward the mastering of nature by the power of steam and electricity and magnetism and radiation. ... I repeat: whatever the errors it may have committed, the great merit of this civilization is that it possesses an instrument of self-repair, which is freedom of thought.<sup>1</sup>

The French scholar and traveller Volney gave in 1787 a positive account of his journeys to the Orient and thereby had a considerable impact on French engagement in Egypt, such as the Napoleonic military operation and archaeological missions:

In general, the people of the East are quick on the uptake, fluent of speech, with ardent and sustained passions and good sense in the things that they know. They have a particular taste for morality, and their proverbs prove that they know how to combine sharp observation and deep thought with pungent expression. Their dealings with others are at first cold, but habit makes them soft and attractive. This is the impression they leave, so that most of the travellers and traders who have had dealings with them agree in finding these people a more humane and more generous character, a more noble and polite simplicity, and something more delicate and more open in the spirit of their manners than among the people of our own country.<sup>2</sup>

Of course both of these statements are only personal views, but nevertheless they reflect curiosity and knowledge. The same applies to academics and political leaders who cared about getting in touch with this other civilization.

### **Back to “crusade” and “jihad” at the beginning of 21st century**

Today, a century later, marked by the Jewish holocaust and the subsequent creation of Israel, relations between the West and the (Middle) East are marked by the founding of the Jewish State in 1948

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lewis, *A Middle East Mosaic, Fragments of Life, Letters and History*, New York, 2000, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

and the protracted Middle East Conflict. The region has been in a permanent state of violence since the 1940s. Tension between East and West is tangible. The West, alias the United States, is frequently reproached for arrogance and ignorance. Its strategic alliance with Israel, which in fact dates back only to the late 1960s and is therefore much younger than the US axis with Saudi Arabia, is often referred to as one of the main reasons for this cooling down. The Arab Middle East has been reduced to words like “terrorism” and “Islamic fanatics”. The days of mutual admiration and respect seem like prehistory.

This cultural and political confrontation has been sharpened by the Gulf war of 1991 – a war which was in fact termed a “just war” by President George Bush sr. Its tides have not ebbed. In fact Osama Bin Laden is the immediate offspring of operation “Desert Storm” which did not deprive Saddam Hussein of his grip on Iraq, but has brought US-troops to the country of the holy shrines of Islam, to Saudi Arabia.

In the limelight of an untamed “crusade” as US-President George Bush jr. has proclaimed in the aftermath of the New York attacks on 9/11 2001 and the numerous declarations of “a holy war”, a jihad, against the West – done by the mushrooming groups within the orbit of Islamism or beyond, we have finally arrived at a state of mutual hatred generated by irresponsible media and political populists on all sides. Clearly gone is the nostalgia for each other.

What we observe is the emergence of archaic and religious categories that replace the secular criteria of distinction from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The new American-Russian partnership against Muslim fundamentalism, whether in Central Asia or in the Caucasus, is described by many Muslims as a “Christian alliance.”<sup>3</sup> If we go back to the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini we also read – already in the 1960s (sic) – the rejection of these adversaries by putting them into the same non-Muslim category.<sup>4</sup>

And the same holds true that from a Western perspective, it seems more tempting to fight “Islamic extremism” under a wider title of common values, to which apparently Moscow and Washington can better subscribe than Teheran and Cairo.

The American educational institutions in the Arab countries are still attracting students. But the same ones are manifesting against US-Imperialism when they deem it justified because of another US

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Economist* Nov. 17th 2001, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Imam Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution*, Berkeley, 1981; quoted in Daniel Pipes, Fundamentalist Muslims between America and Russia, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, no. 5, 1986, p. 939.

or Israeli attack. And in the European West – not to mention the Far West of the USA – we would confront an amount of ignorance about the other sides of the Mediterranean that is just mind boggling. In fact, long before the watershed line of the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, the Western view, by and large, of the “Arab”, of the “Muslim” is one full of stereotypes, mostly linked to the notion of “terrorism”, regardless of whatever definition one might have at hand. Today’s rhetoric differs little from the propaganda we have experienced on our continent some sixty years ago. It has all the ingredients of a new type of witch-hunt.

### **East and West belong to each other**

And still the interdependence in the wellbeing of East and West is self-evident. Let me only briefly mention the already overstrained issue of inter-religious dialogue, which I do not want to underestimate. For in fact, the Vatican is doing much more for the dialogue among civilizations than any Western government.<sup>5</sup> This dialogue somehow risks being watered down to a mere discussion forum between the Holy See and the Islamic Republic of Iran, for only in the latter case do we have a Shiite clergy structured in a hierarchy. So two comparable systems can meet on the basis of counterparts. The large majority of Sunni Muslims does not dispose of a clergy; the imam usually only functions as coordinator of the community. However, let us skip the difficult arena of religion and revelation, where even in the utopian era of harmony every side might still contend for its absolutist version of the truth.

In fact, the common history started long before the arrival of monotheistic religions, their confrontations and the rise and fall of empires on both sides. Western civilization would be unthinkable without the contributions of Eastern accomplishments in terms of culture, philosophy and the natural sciences. Let us recall the alphabet, coming from Mesopotamia via the Phoenician coast to the Mediterranean, which laid the grounds for the rise of Greek culture. It was in Byblos, the 7000-year-old city-state in northern Lebanon, where archaeologists discovered the tomb of King Ahiram, the oldest known testimony of the modern abstract alphabet. It is dated to 1500 B.C. The coastal towns of the Levant, Ugarit et Byblos, have contributed – each one at its time – to the rise of the Mediterranean peoples, namely the Greek-Roman culture, being the basis for the Occident by and large. What would have been the course of humanity, had the

---

<sup>5</sup> See among others Visit of Pope John Paul II to Damascus, 1st–5th May 2001.

Greek philosophers not had the Phoenician alphabet at their disposal? And what about the law schools of the Imperium Romanum? They were all located at the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. Not to forget the name of the Continent. “Europa” was a princess of the East, of the city-state of Tyros, located in today’s embattled South Lebanon. She happened to be kidnapped by God Zeus and was taken to the island of Crete.

Western civilization is unthinkable without the heritage, the innovations left by the East, and the alphabet just as much as the art of administration and warfare not to mention the monotheistic religions that have stretched from the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean towards the North.

### **The revival of the “clash”**

But still East remains East and West keeps western on the other side. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is in a deplorable state of affairs. US decision makers learnt from Professor Samuel Huntington in 1993 that it takes more than three or four criteria to understand the rest of the world. Up to then, political risk analysis was reduced to parameters such as national security and containment of communism, just to mention a few. Huntington’s simplified version of the clash of civilizations<sup>6</sup> is not the ultimate reply to East/West relations.

Reaction came promptly from isolated Iran, which has been campaigning ever since for a dialogue of civilizations, obtaining the United Nations’ blessing in the form of a UN year dedicated to that theme in 2001. While several European governments rally behind this concept of dialogue, the confrontation cannot be neglected. It is one of various aspects touching the migration issue just as much as the fear of terrorism.

The explosive social climate in French and German towns with overpopulated suburbs of Muslim immigrants contributes to the ambivalence. The certainly vital topic of coexistence falls victim to petty politics and the frustration of the ordinary citizen. The “clash” seems somehow unavoidable, whether it takes place on a daily level in the “Banlieue”<sup>7</sup> of Paris and Marseille or in fetwas, Muslim advisory opinions, condemning Western presence on the holy ground of Islam.

---

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations – Remaking of World Order*, New York, 1996, based on his article in *Foreign Affairs*, summer 1993: »The Clash of Civilizations?«

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Kepel, *L’Islam et la banlieue*, Paris, 1999.

## **Mistrust as a result of historical experience**

Of course frictions have always been there, but it cannot be denied that alienation is more dangerous this time than was the case in the aftermath of World War I, when the Arab-Muslim world felt betrayed by the new map of nation-states designed by Britain and France. And today's hate speech whether pronounced by a Western head of State or an Eastern warlord is quickly expanded by a powerful media machinery

While wishing to avoid some of the negative rhetoric which can so easily polarise the already fragile relations between East and West, the fact remains that we live in an environment of persistent mistrust born of historical experience. And, despite our increased push towards the so-called global society, these cultural aspects are still affecting the energy industry today. Let us therefore briefly turn to one important area which clearly reflects the East-West encounters in a very sharp perspective: the oil market.

### **Relations between the Orient and the Occident through the Petrol Lens**

The power of the big oil majors, the so called "Seven Sisters" is still keenly remembered in the oil producing countries, from Iran to Kuwait. The power of these companies led to the creation of a form of "state within a state". The denationalisation of the 1960s and 70s in the name "permanent sovereignty over national resources" brought oil production back to the national governments. The heated debate right now – due to lack of money and expertise – is to bring the big majors, such as BP or Shell, back to the upstream production, the oil drilling. To grant full access now to its oil and gas fields could, some believe, lead to the companies controlling the market and removing the government's political leverage in the greater scheme of things. Having been at the mercy of the "Seven Sisters" is a phenomenon that has not been forgotten through the passage of time.

Of course, the majors have now gone and the family silver has been nationalised, but the new super-majors of today are once again lined up to obtain new contracts. Middle Eastern oil and gas producers want to see foreign investment but now on their own terms.

### **Countering suspicion**

However, this is a hard balance to strike as there is still strong suspicion that the West always needs to interfere. This "intervention-

ism" was highlighted by the reports of phone calls made by the then US-secretary for energy Bill Richardson in the spring of 2000, chasing Opec ministers in their Vienna hotel suites, urging them to take action for the American consumer. The fact that this approach almost jeopardised an agreement at that meeting demonstrates only too clearly that there is still much mistrust.

The machinations of Opec also generally serve to highlight the gap between East and West. While the group's 11 ministers take their own time to reach consensus – the "Westerners" are anxiously waiting for facts and figures. They have to accept that the timing of any production action can remain vague. Opec's opaque decision-making process proceeds at its own pace. Ministers talk and then visit each other on a bi- or trilateral level, sipping coffee as if they had all the time on earth. Not so long gone are the days when nobody knew at the start of a ministerial conference whether it would last for one or two or 10 days.

### **The notion of time is divergent**

Linguistics may help grasp the difference of the notion of time in East and West. The Arabic language does not have a future tense, unlike the many options available in English grammar to express any future action. The simple Arabic prefix to convey the future fails to encompass the mental attitude towards planning and controlling the future which is so prevalent in the "Anglo-Saxon" mind. Some philosophers like Germany's Max Weber have tried to establish a connection between the Protestant religion and capitalism. However, the Middle East, in particular Islamic culture, rejects this future-oriented state of mind and action. "Not man, but God controls the future," is the theme of "inshallah (God willing)". Fatalism helps to endure difficult times, but it can also paralyse a society. The authoritarian regimes of the Middle East know how to use that mentality for their own ends of suppression.

So, how can one reconcile this attitude, which is a fundamental cultural concept that dictates much of life in the region, with the demands of modern Western life and commerce? Those "speculators" that Opec, for example, is often quick to criticise for "manipulating" the price of oil. Here again a different view of time is the key element. The East lives very much with a view of time that can make last century's war appear like yesterday's headlines. And in this different setting of time and destiny, the individual also occupies a place which is far removed from the centre stage position he or she may occupy in the Western world.

This holds equally true for diplomatic negotiations. History is obsessed with all types of crisis management. And diplomatic efforts such as Henry Kissinger's "step by step diplomacy" of the 1970s have always been viewed with suspicion, for an Eastern, marked by the experience of the desert, would not embark on journey, the destination of which is unknown. The failure of the Oslo Process in tackling Arab-Israeli relations has only confirmed the Arab side in their rejection of interim arrangements. From the notion of time, let us turn to the role of the individual as opposed to the group in Western and Eastern concepts.

### **Which place for the individual within the group?**

In much of the Middle East it is the family, the tribe, or the collective that decides. Tribal allegiances count for more than any other relationships. How would the regimes of Baghdad or Damascus survive if they were unable to rely on the bonds forged by common descent, be it from the same village, or by common religious dissent? The role of the individual is subordinated to the honour and survival of the group. The East by and large views with mistrust the deification of the individual in the "decadent West" where family bonds have been replaced by a society of individualists.

### **The role of the territory**

A system based of tribal allegiances is less inclined to accept territorial limits, a concept which is inherent to the Western nation state. And the issue of borders is a delicate one in the Middle East. Considered as artificial limits of colonialism, the number of open border disputes is high. And they can break out at any moment, as two Gulf wars have demonstrated. In 1980 the border issue of the Shatt el Arab led to the war with Iran. When Saddam Hussein tried to incorporate Kuwait into Iraq in summer 1990, he was ready to deliver legal documents confirming his territorial claims. At stake were the oil fields in the border region, which Kuwait apparently wanted to drill to its exclusive advantage.

The US self-proclaimed war against terrorism implies that borders will be ignored in the campaign to ensure rights, justice or "revenge". Concerned Europeans have had to have it explained that the term "war" being used by Washington does not have the same meaning as it does in German, French or Spanish. So on that basis why should it come as

a surprise that the question of time, territorial issues or even the role the individual plays in society is so different between East and West?

## **Conclusion**

East and West have to coexist, whether it is in the Paris suburbs or in the oil regions of the Gulf. The interdependence between the Orient and the Occident by and large, the "Islamic East" and the "Christian West" cannot be reduced to mere issues of security, inter-religious dialogue or similar vital topics. It is simply a question of survival. And for that objective it would be necessary to leave the stratagems of "just wars" against terrorism and martyrdom in the guise of suicidal attacks. A more secular approach would facilitate the needed rapprochement between the civilizations. Otherwise we are on our path to a pre-1648 drama, i.e. the end of the Westphalian system: anarchy and hatred along religious lines instead of a territorially organised society, which has been the fundament of our state system for the past 450 years. To fall back into a situation similar to the one during the War of Thirty Years bears enormous risks, aggravated by today's weapons of mass destruction and propaganda machines. It does not take much fantasy to imagine the degree of "angst" on a global level when we already watch how internal wars are fought. The modern law of warfare, the "ius ad bellum" created in 19<sup>th</sup> century is repudiated. We are back to the "bellum iustum", the just war concept, predominant during medieval times. And once more it seems as if a "civitas dei", a Christian community were fighting a "Umma islamiyya", a Muslim society. But where are the sober voices of reason on both sides that can calm the shouting streets? Courage and wisdom based on long-term political action are rare virtues, both among Easterners and Westerners.

## **POVZETEK**

### **»Vzhod je Vzhod. Zahod je Zahod«: Od napačnih predstav do odprtega konflikta**

Odnose med Zahodom in (Bližnjim) Vzhodom sta zaznamovala ustanovitev judovske države 1948 in nadaljevanje bližnjevzhodnega konflikta. To področje je od leta 1940 naprej v neprestanem stanju nasilja. Ozračje napetosti med Vzhodom in Zahodom je čutiti na različnih področjih, vključno s področjem energetske politike in varnosti. Zahodu oz. Združenim državam

Amerike pogosto očitajo arogantnost in ignoranco. Njihovo strateško povezavo z Izraelom, ki dejansko datira v pozna šestdeseta leta prejšnjega stoletja in je potemtakem precej mlajša kot naveza ZDA s Saudsko Arabijo, pogosto štejejo za enega glavnih vzrokov ohlajanja tega nekdanj vzajemnega občudovanja. Arabski Bližnji vzhod so povezovali s pojmi kot »terorizem« in »islamski fanatiki«. Časi občudovanja in spoštovanja se zdijo kot predzgodovina.

To kulturno in politično konfrontacijo so še zaostrele zalivske vojne, vojne, ki so bile dejansko označene kot »pravične«. Njihova plimovanja se niso polegla. Ko so v središče zanimanja prišle divje »križarske vojne«, za kar je ameriški predsednik George Bush mlajši razglasil džihad po septembrskem napadu na New York in po številnih napovedih »svete vojne« proti Zahodu – ki so jih izvršile kot gobe po dežju znotraj islamistične orbite in onstran nje rastoče skupine –, smo končno prišli do stanja vzajemnega sovraštva, ki ga porajajo neodgovorni mediji in politični populisti na obeh straneh. Povsem je izginilo nekdanje hrepenenje po drug drugem, ki je bilo opredeljeno kot »orientalizem« in arabsko razsvetljenje. Zdaj lahko opazamo vznikanje arhaičnih in religioznih kategorij, ki nadomeščajo sekularna merila razlikovanja v 19. in 20. stoletju. Smo sredi tega, kar je francoski pisatelj André Malraux napovedal pred nekaj desetletji: »21. stoletje bo stoletje religije ali pa ga ne bo.«