

## Ahmed Zewail: The West and Islam need not be in conflict

### We must not create barriers through concepts such as 'clash of civilisations'

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Five years after September 11, we must ask, can western wars solve the so-called global conflict with the Islamic world? The answer, in my opinion, is no. A far better state of world peace would be achieved if the West would make a serious commitment to the just resolution of conflicts, and be genuinely involved, using a fraction of war costs, in building bridges to progress and peace with an understanding of the profound role of pride and faith in the lives of Muslims.

The vast majority of Muslims are moderates working for a better future and seeking a peaceful life. As evidenced by past achievements, Islam in its pristine state is not a source of backwardness and violence. As recently as the September 11 event, the majority of Muslims were, as the rest of the world was, against its violence. However, if despair and humiliation continue in the population of more than one billion Muslims, the world will face increasing risks of conflicts and wars.

As a cultural product of both "East" and "West", I do not believe there is a fundamental basis for a clash of civilisations, or that the West is the cause of all problems. Muslims are ultimately responsible for their plight. But the West has been more reactive than proactive toward the Muslim and Arab world, and has yet to implement a sustainable and equitable policy. For at least half a century Arabs have witnessed inconsistency in foreign policy, support of undemocratic regimes for the sake of securing resources and influence, and insensitivity to their culture and faith.

Here, I would identify four guiding principles for a new perspective. The first, and essential, point is political. The West in general and the US in particular should chart a vastly different foreign policy with the aim of gaining the confidence and cooperation of Muslims for solving complex conflicts.

In the Middle East, it is clear that peace will never be reached without solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A two-state solution must be found and enforced. The unsettled conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq and with Syria and Iran call for solutions at the roots of the problems: occupation and borders; prisoners, refugees, and their right of return; and skewed international policy. Force and isolation will not solve these problems. Instead we need a comprehensive policy of fairness and firmness, perhaps established in an international conference and enforced by the United Nations.

Second, support for democracy in governance should be genuine. The West cannot and should not attempt to impose "Western democracy" and "Western values" by force on a culture proud of its heritage and faith. Many in the Muslim world admire the accomplishments and democratic values of the West, but people are mistrustful of "conditional democracy" and frightened of a culture now regrettably perceived to be of one of violence, sex, and other obscenities. Double standards and inconsistencies confuse people about Western intentions, and are used by totalitarian regimes to achieve their goals.

Third, foreign aid should be redirected toward economic development. Traditionally, an aid package is distributed to many projects, the major portion of which is for military support. The number of projects involved and the lack of an effective monitoring system, not to mention the influence of bureaucracy and corruption, results in few successes.

Directing aid toward the building of human capacity can be achieved through funding of innovative pilot programmes for enterprising individuals/groups in the free market, and invoking the expertise, and even the in-field labour, for the know-how. The use of aid programmes to support undemocratic regimes or groups is a grievous error.

Finally, education and research should be modernised through partnership. I see great opportunities for the people of the Muslim and Arab world, not less than those realised by China or South Korea. The West can help in the modernisation of education and research and development. I believe it is possible with the available talent and funding from rich Arab countries, and the know-how from the West and other world powers, to transform higher education.

Throughout history, people develop an interest in cultures and dialogues for the sake of mutual benefit. Even in one organ, the brain, 100 billion neurons work together to make a living human, and in our homes, cities, and countries we do the same. In an interdependent world, it is in the best interests of both the West and Muslim world to communicate through dialogues and to achieve global stability and mutual benefits from technology, commerce, energy, and cultures. We must not permit the creation of barriers through rhetorical concepts such as "clash of civilisations" or "conflict of religions", which are of no value to the future of our world.

*The author is the only Arab Muslim to receive the Nobel Prize in science, 1999*

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