

## *COMMENTARY*

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### **A Dangerous Misperception and Cultural Divide**

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The flurry of reporting and analysis about the tragic death of the US Ambassador to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other Americans strongly suggests there is a strikingly limited understanding behind the complex underpinnings of this outrageous act of violence. The hatred and animosity toward Western powers, especially the US, by extremist Arab Muslims remains at the core of these despicable acts nurtured by the cultural disconnect between the two sides and misperceptions of each other, to which only cursory attention has been paid. For this reason, targeting American interests and institutions and assaulting US officials in various Arab and Muslim countries will not be a fading phenomenon. The onus is on both sides to better understand this cultural divide and what can be done to ameliorate it before it becomes increasingly more confrontational, especially in the wake of the continuing upheavals sweeping the Arab world.

The perceptions engendered about each other are often based on superficial information and serve to promote self-interests and perpetuate reckless acts of individuals, misguided official policies and irresponsible public narratives, all coloured by self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

On the Western side, there is a growing tendency to believe that Islam is intolerant and traditionally violent as if violence is exclusively Muslim, when in fact Christians have been killing each other for centuries, culminating with World War II in which nearly 30 million people were killed. Westerners accuse the Arabs of being politically immature and culturally backwards when, in fact, Mesopotamia, in today's Iraq, was the cradle of civilization; but many centuries later when all Arab states were ruled first by the Ottoman Empire and subsequently by Western colonial powers there was little or no opportunity for self-advancement and

development. After the establishment of most Arab states following World War I and II, the West supported Arab despots that ruled with an iron fist while oppressing the people and suppressing individual liberty and initiative. Finally, Westerners accuse the Arabs of harbouring unabated hatred and animosity toward the West when in fact the West had for decades exploited Arab resources with discriminatory policies dictated by national self-interest.

The Arabs on the other hand are quick to point out Western corruption when many Arab governments are notorious for their rampant venality, at times robbing their nation's wealth and stashing billions of dollars in Western banks while depriving their people of basic necessities and elementary human rights. They accuse the West of being morally decadent and indulging in promiscuousness when many of them not only violate the basics of such moral tenants but will go to great lengths to live in Western society. Whereas they rightfully accuse misguided anti-Muslim American or European zealots for producing a video or cartoon that insults Islam and the prophet Mohammed, they demonstrate little understanding that, unlike many of their own countries, American citizens constitutionally enjoy the freedom of speech. The US government cannot prohibit any one of its citizens from expressing themselves, with only few restrictions, such as revealing intelligence that might harm national security interests. Otherwise it is generally left up to the individual's discretion to write or produce what they wish. Finally, while some Arab states and Islamist groups seek to rid themselves of Western powers and influence, they clamour for Western financial aid, technology, military assistance and often political cover.

Regardless of how each side views the other and how their ill feelings manifest themselves, both the Arab and Western people and governments continue to need to cooperate with one another as globalization, technological inter-connectedness, and national security make such cooperation imperative. That said, there will always remain religious fanatics and ideological zealots on both sides of the fence who will seek to undermine each other. The Islamists in particular will strive to take advantage of the prevailing uncertainty throughout the Middle East. No incident, however tragic it may be, can or should prevent America's continued involvement in the Arab world, especially now as the region is going through a historic transformation that will shape their socio-political and economic system for generations to come that will have direct and indirect implications on the US' strategic interests.

To begin with, the US must apply consistency in addressing the Arab upheavals in the wake of the Arab Spring. Although it is a given that the US cannot, by virtue of its divergent interests and the prevailing internal conditions in any of the Arab states, apply the same policies, it is imperative that American values are projected in a transparent manner and its involvement is not seen as serving solely the strategic interests of America.

The US military involvement in Libya, for example, was viewed as motivated by oil considerations and abandoning Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was seen as a move inspired by maintaining regional stability and the peace treaty with Israel. Bahrain's Shias's peaceful

protesters were harshly subdued with the support of Saudi Arabia without American public condemnation because of the special alliance with Bahrain, the home of the American Fifth Fleet. And while Syria's Bashar al-Assad is butchering his people, the US still refuses to take decisive measures, even at the urging of the Arab League to end the massacres, and instead is seeking cover for its inaction by supporting useless peace plans.

Moreover, the US seems to be looking for quick fixes, promoting political reforms as if democracy is the panacea that will instantly solve all the endemic socio-economic problems, especially in poor Arab states such as Egypt and Yemen. The Arab Spring is a long evolutionary process punctuated with violence between domestic groups vying for power and against foreign interests to serve Islamists and other ideological agendas. The Arab youth, however, are impatient. They desire more than the right to vote; they want food, jobs, health care and education. It is not enough to verbally support freedom or deliver a speech in Cairo offering a new beginning or fraternity.

The US must carefully calibrate its support for political reforms and its financial assistance with the newly-emerging Arab governments. For example, a substantial part of the US economic assistance must be given on the condition that they are channelled toward sustainable development projects that empower the people while enhancing the quality of life of ordinary men and women. American efforts in this regard must be transparent because jobless young men need little instigation to go out and attack the Americans who are detested for their support of a despot like Mubarak for more than 30 years, and are still seen as the primary culprit behind their despondency and despair.

Knowing that the continuing support of the US remains central to most Arab states, be it for security or financial reasons, Arab governments old and new must also realize that they can no longer have it both ways. New and old Arab governments must demonstrate their commitment to fight irredeemable Muslim extremists who are out to violently harm the American and their own country's interests. Arab leaders must change their public narrative and speak loud and clear that it is in the best interest of their countries to fully cooperate with the US to benefit from its great sway on the global financial market and unmatched military prowess.

Such public expression and the change in tone are critical to quell the anti-American sentiments over time. The Arab states must remember that the revolutions in their countries were against their own regimes that have suppressed and deprived the people of their human dignity. Maligning the US and portraying it as the cause of people's misery will no longer work. Arab leaders that do not change their public narrative and portray the US in a more positive light should not be able to count on unconditional American support. This policy approach by newly-elected governments such as Egypt, Libya or Tunisia remains consistent with their interest in developing a more independent political path as long as they remain true to their international obligations and domestic political reforms. That said, Americans of all coloration must express

their outrage against those who debase the faith of other people and not use the principle of free speech as a blanket cover for such noxious misdeeds.

The violence we witness today, especially against the US, is not a “clash of civilizations” but a serious disconnect resulting, to a great extent, from a cultural divide—a divide the US can bridge by avoiding quick fixes, building relationships with the host countries, and continuing to foster political reforms that will enhance security and promote economic progress.

**Note:** This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir’s web portal. Link: [http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/a-dangerous-misperception-and-cultural-divide/?utm\\_source=Subscribers&utm\\_campaign=f1b326679b-UA-5963141-2&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/a-dangerous-misperception-and-cultural-divide/?utm_source=Subscribers&utm_campaign=f1b326679b-UA-5963141-2&utm_medium=email)

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