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**MARRËDHËNIET MUSLIMANO-PERËNDIMORE: RRËNJËT E
TENDOSJES DHE SHTIGJET DREJT MIRËKUPTIMIT**

**МУСЛИМАНСКО-ЗАПАДНИ ОДНОСИ: КОРЕНИ НА
НАПНАТОСТ И ПАТИШТА КОН РАЗБИРАЊЕ**

**MUSLIM-WESTERN RELATIONS: ROOTS OF TENSIONS AND
PATHS TO UNDERSTANDING**

Abstract

This paper examines the complex and often tense relationship between the Muslim world and the West, identifying the historical, ideological, political, and media-driven factors that have contributed to mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. It argues that the roots of discord extend beyond mere religious or cultural differences, encompassing structural power imbalances, the legacy of colonialism, and conflicting geopolitical interests. From a Western perspective, Islam is frequently viewed through a lens of incompatibility with liberal democratic values, leading to expectations that Muslims reform their beliefs to align with secular modernity. In contrast, Muslim societies often view Western foreign policies as exploitative, discriminatory, and supportive of authoritarian regimes, thus impeding genuine democratic development. Media narratives and stereotypes further aggravate tensions by reinforcing simplistic and negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims, especially in the post 9/11 context. The paper emphasizes that improving Muslim-Western relations requires a comprehensive and balanced approach rooted in mutual recognition, intercultural dialogue, and policy reform. Only by addressing both ideological misperceptions and political injustices can the two worlds move from confrontation to constructive coexistence.

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Introduction

The relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations has deep historical, cultural, and political roots. Throughout history, interactions between Muslim and Christian nations of Europe have been marked by a complex blend of cooperation and conflict, peace and war though predominantly characterized by antagonism. In the present day, similar patterns of behavior, including mutual distrust, continue to shape and define the nature of these relations.

The persistence of tension between these two worlds is not the result of a single factor, but rather a culmination of longstanding historical grievances, diverging value systems, geopolitical rivalries, and media-driven narratives. These factors have contributed to the development of mutual stereotypes and a climate of suspicion, particularly in the aftermath of major global events such as 9/11 and subsequent international conflicts. As a result, engagement between Muslim and Western societies is often shaped more by defensive posturing and reactive attitudes than by constructive dialogue and mutual understanding.

Given the global significance of Muslim-Western interactions, both in terms of geopolitical affairs and cultural integration, this study takes a multi-disciplinary approach to identify the roots of discord and assess their ongoing impact. The main goal of the paper is to critically examine the factors that fuel misunderstanding and mistrust, and to explore pathways toward greater mutual recognition and cooperation. The study introduces an analytical framework which focuses on four key categories: historical experiences, cultural and ideological differences, international politics and contemporary conflicts, and the media's influence on public perception and social stereotyping. By applying this analytical framework, the paper seeks to contribute to the academic discourse on prejudice and stereotypes in Muslim-Western relations and to examine whether mutual perceptions can be improved through the promotion of an apolitical sense of respect and cooperation.

The structure of the paper consists of four chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter studies the historical experiences between Muslim and European nations. The second chapter explores the cultural and ideological differences that affect each side to perceive the other as foreign, suspicious, and potentially dangerous. The third chapter analyzes current international political dynamics and contemporary conflicts that exacerbate tensions. The fourth and final chapter investigates the media's role in shaping stereotypes and evaluates the accuracy of those portrayals. The conclusion summarizes the study's findings and offers recommendations for fostering more constructive and respectful engagement between these two global communities.

1. The Historical Experiences

Historically, the relationship between the Christian and Muslim worlds has assumed various forms. While there were occasional moments of cooperation, interactions were predominantly marked by hostility and conflict. Despite significant religious commonalities, both sides have often accused each other of heresy and barbarism. Europe traditionally regarded the Middle East with a mix of curiosity, suspicion, and fear sentiments that were reciprocated by Muslims toward European Christians. Consequently, their relations over the centuries often manifested as cycles of occupation and reoccupation, attack and counterattack. (Pauly Jr., 2004:22; Esposito, 1999:49).

The initial point of contact between Muslim Arabs and European nations occurred in April 711 in the city of Jerez, in southern Spain. An Arab army loyal to Caliph Yazid al-Wahid crossed Gibraltar and clashed with the Visigoth army, led by King Don Rodriguez, on the banks of the Guadalete River. The Visigoths were defeated, and the Arab-Muslim victory marked the beginning of the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. This conquest led to the establishment of the Islamic caliphate of Al-Andalus, which persisted until 1492. By 718, Muslims had taken control of the entire peninsula and made territorial advances into southern France. However, their expansion was halted by the Frankish leader Charles Martel, who defeated Emir Abd al-Rahman's forces at the Battle of Poitiers in 732. Later, Martel's son, Pepin the Short, won another decisive battle against the Muslims at Narbonne in 759. (Pauly Jr., 2004:127).

Despite the adversarial nature of Muslim-Christian relations during this period, Muslim rulers often exhibited tolerance toward Christian and Jewish communities under their sovereignty. Individuals of higher social status, particularly, were treated with notable respect (Pauly Jr., 2004:134). The Jewish community in Al-Andalus welcomed the Arab conquest as a liberation from Visigothic oppression. Jews were integrated into society and even appointed to significant state positions. For instance, Hasdai ibn Shaprut served as minister of foreign affairs under Caliph Abd al-Rahman III in the 10th century. During this era, Jews and Christians contributed immensely to the flourishing of science, philosophy, and literature in Cordoba, then a major center of learning. (Karlson, 2005:76). A similar pattern existed in the Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East. Although political and military authority resided with the Muslim elite, local administrators often retained power. Under Caliph Mu'awiya (661-680), Christians and Jews were appointed to high-ranking positions like ministers, diplomats and advisors. For example, a Christian nobleman named Sergius served as the minister of finance. Al-Maqdisi, a 10th-century geographer, observed that in 995, most bankers in Syria were Jews and many officials and physicians were Christians. These communities played key roles in commerce, finance, and diplomacy. (Karlson, 2005:304,

306-307). Judged by the standards of the time, Muslim governance offered a relatively impressive degree of religious freedom, particularly in contrast to the religious intolerance pervasive in Christian Europe.

This interfaith coexistence was shattered in July 1099, when Crusaders captured Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest city after Mecca and Medina. The Crusades were a series of military campaigns by Christian Europe aimed at capturing cities deemed sacred to Christianity, such as Jerusalem and Bethlehem. During the First Crusade, approximately 30,000 Muslims and Jews were massacred, turning the city into what Karen Armstrong calls: "a stinking charnel house". (Armstrong, 2002:178-179). Saladin Ayyubi's counteroffensive culminated in the recapture of Jerusalem in 1187, restoring it to Muslim rule. (Pauly Jr., 2004:134).

This period marked a turning point in Muslim-Christian relations. Muslims did not forget the brutality of the Crusaders, who inflicted cruelty not only on Muslims but also on Jews. (Pauly Jr., 2004:131; Armstrong, 2002:93). The subsequent expulsion of Muslims from Spain in 1492, alongside the memory of the Crusades, fueled lasting fear and animosity toward Christians. These events prompted Muslim rulers to adopt stricter policies toward non-Muslim communities, including suspending certain rights previously granted to Christians and Jews.

Following the decline of medieval Arab empires, the Ottoman Empire emerged in the 15th century as a dominant power and a formidable rival to European kingdoms. Bernard Lewis observed that: "for nearly a thousand years, from the first landing of the Moors in Spain to the second siege of Vienna, Europe was under the constant threat of Islam". (Lewis, 1993:13). In the 17th and 18th centuries, European thinkers and utopians advocated for unity among European monarchs to counter the Ottoman threat and this was the only way for achieving the lasting peace in Europe. One such figure was Cardinal Alberoni, who published *Testament Politique du Cardinal Jule Alberoni* in 1753, calling for a unified European effort to expel the Ottomans from Europe. (Khadduri, 2006:277). Despite such aspirations, European political unity was undermined by internal rivalries. A notable example was the rivalry between Charles V of Spain and Francis I of France, both of whom vied for the Holy Roman Empire crown in 1519. The candidates promised that if they were crowned in this position, they would mobilize all the European powers against the Ottoman Empire. The voting body decided to entrust the crown to Charles V, considering him most suitable for this position. To counterbalance Habsburg dominance, Francis I allied with the Ottomans, an act criticized by legal scholars like Alberico Gentili and Hugo Grotius as an alliance with "infidels". (Inalxhik, 1995:51; Khadduri, 2006: 276).

The weakening of the Ottoman and Mughal empires in the 19th and 20th centuries opened the way for European colonization of much of the Muslim world. Colonial powers including Britain, France, the Netherlands,

Italy, and Spain, occupied vast regions across the Middle East, North Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. Colonialism was widely experienced by Muslims as an affront and humiliation, leaving deep psychological and political scars. These powers exploited natural resources, imposed artificial borders, and supported authoritarian regimes that served foreign interests. Their policies frequently ignored local welfare and deliberately obstructed fair governance to maintain political control. (Saikal, 2003:11, 33–37, 40; Esposito, 2010:63–64). For many Muslims, colonialism evoked historical trauma reminiscent of the Crusades, reinforcing the image of Europe as a threat to Islamic values and political sovereignty. (Esposito, 2010:49).

While Muslim-Christian relations were often characterized by conflict, there were also notable episodes of peace and cooperation. Religious identity was an important factor, but national and dynastic interests frequently dictated political decisions. Notable diplomatic examples include the agreements between Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur and Frankish King Pepin in 765, and agreement between Caliph Harun al-Rashid and Emperor Charlemagne in 797. These alliances were strategic designed to counter rival powers. The Abbasid caliphs aimed, through diplomatic relations with the Franks, to threaten the rulers of the Caliphate of Andalusia. On the other hand, the Byzantines maintained good diplomatic relations with caliphs in Andalusia to threaten Franks in Spain, whom they considered their rivals. (Zuhayli, 2000:14-15). Another key alliance was the 1535 agreement between Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and French King Francis I, motivated by the latter's disappointment over not being crowned Holy Roman Emperor. (Khadduri, 2006:276).

In light of these historical experiences, it becomes clear that a legacy of conflict, rivalry, and strategic manipulation shaped how Muslims and European Christians perceived one another as adversaries and potential enemies. These historical frustrations continue to influence contemporary policymaking and mutual perceptions. (Pauly Jr., 2004:135).

2. Cultural and Ideological Differences: Western Secularism vs. Islamic Traditionalism

Cultural and ideological differences play a pivotal role in shaping the relationship between the Muslim world and the West. They create parameters based on which the intercourse between them is determined. These differences, particularly around secularism, democracy, and modernism, serve as critical points of divergence, generating ongoing debate and tension. While Western civilization retains elements of its Christian heritage, its modern political and social structures have evolved markedly in the way it perceives politics and the role of religion in public life. This transformation was largely driven by Europe's historical struggles with theocratic rule and absolutist monarchies during the Middle Ages. These experiences prompted some of the

Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th century and onwards to oppose religious dogmatism and challenge the power of the clergy and monarchs. They championed reason, science, human rights, and developed the idea of democracy and pushed for modernist trends. Hereby, they significantly contributed to the creation of a new social and political order in which religion gradually lost its influence in public life and was moved to the margins of society, namely to the private sphere. Western nations welcome this evolution and do not publicly manifest religious presence in their daily lives. This intellectual movement laid the foundation for secularism, which became deeply rooted in European consciousness and institutional frameworks. (Ramadan, 2011: 265-266). Today, Western societies broadly embody secularism, democracy, and modernism. As Fukuyama notes, “liberalism vanquished religion in Europe”. (Fukuyama, 1992: 271).

Thus, what distinguishes the Western mentality from that of Muslims is the way they define the role of politics and religion in society. In contrast to Western history, Muslim societies experienced a very different trajectory. The period that Westerners label the “Dark Ages” (5th-10th centuries) is regarded by Muslims as a “Golden Age,” marked by significant contributions to science, philosophy, and learning. That is why Muslims refer nostalgically to their past and are proud of their glorious heritage. On a global level, Islam remains central and blueprint to Muslims identity and often takes precedence over national affiliation. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 6). Even among younger generations in Western diaspora communities, there is a growing trend toward reasserting religious identity. (Ramadan, 2011: 169-171).

Since modernism, democracy, and secularism are deeply interconnected and form core pillars of Western identity, they present a significant challenge to traditional Islamic values. Muslim societies, caught between long-standing religious norms and the pressures of modernity, continue to seek a balanced path forward by attempting to reconcile their cultural and religious heritage with contemporary ideas. This ongoing struggle has given rise to four main ideological approaches: traditionalist, fundamentalist, modernist, and secular.

Traditionalists represent the mainstream of Muslim society, adhering to established interpretations of Islam and practicing it in a conventional manner without actively seeking political reform. They generally accept the existing political order and are not ideologically motivated toward change. (Fuller, 2003: 47-48).

On the other hand, the fundamentalist approach views religion as the central element of life and insists that Islamic law (Shariah) should serve as the primary source of legislation. The Islamic state established by the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, and later administered by the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, represents the ideal model of governance they seek to imitate. While they regard modernism as a dangerous trend that threatens religious

identity, they nevertheless admire the scientific, technological, and economic achievements of Western societies. Consequently, when it comes to adopting foreign practices, they are cautious, selective, and conservative. Any cultural element from outside is expected to pass through a “cultural filter” before it is deemed acceptable. To them, democracy is a foreign political concept that contradicts Islamic principles, and they therefore reject it. Fundamentalists are strong critics of Western foreign policies, attributing their current struggles to European colonialism, American hegemony, and unwavering Western support for Israel and authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world. Although the vast majority of fundamentalists are peaceful, political oppression and social injustice can lead some to gravitate toward violent extremism as a means of securing their perceived rights. Their interpretation of Islamic texts, such as the Qur’an and the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition), is literalist and strict; for them, the text holds more weight than its context. While many are not highly educated, they are often well-socialized and have built extensive networks of associations through which they collaborate. (Saikal, 2003: 20-22; Fuller, 2003: 48, 51).

These characteristics can generally be attributed to modernists as well. However, what distinguishes modernists from fundamentalists are two key factors: their views on politics and their interpretation of the Holy Texts. Modernists regard participation in political processes as the most effective means of reviving and actualizing the ideals of Islam in everyday life. As a result, they advocate for comprehensive political and social reforms. Nevertheless, their efforts are often obstructed by authoritarian regimes that suppress the will of the people and prevent democratic participation in governance. Modernists seek to achieve their goals through ballots, not bullets. While they are fundamentally peaceful, they may become radicalized when subjected to violence or political injustice. Adherents of this movement are commonly referred to as Islamists, and their ideology is known as Islamism or political Islam. Modernists, like fundamentalists, emphasize the importance of reforming their societies by placing religion at the center of public life. They are committed to shaping society according to Islamic principles and moral norms. Many prominent modernist reformers fall into this category, including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), Rashid Rida (1865–1935), Abu A’la al-Maududi (1903–1979), Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), and Hasan al-Turabi (1938–2016), among others. Similar to fundamentalists, modernists hold a complex view of the West, a combination of admiration and resentment. They admire the West’s economic, scientific, and technological advancements, yet resent its perceived arrogance and discriminatory policies toward Muslim countries. (Saikal, 2003: 19–20; Abou El Fadl, 2004: 61). Consequently, they strongly oppose assimilation, acculturation, the secularization of the state and society, and the erosion of traditional family values. (Pauly, 2004: 21; Fuller, 2003: 54; Abou El Fadl, 2004: 18).

Another distinguishing feature of modernists is their critical approach to the Holy Texts. In interpreting the Qur'an and the Sunnah, they place emphasis not only on the textual content but also on its historical and social context. This approach leads them to seek a synthesis between Islamic ideals and democratic principles, as they identify significant areas of compatibility between the two. (Roy, 1994: 38).

As for the final group, the secularists, they fully embrace the concepts of modernism, democracy, and secularism. Following independence from colonial rule, the political elites in several Muslim-majority countries largely supported this trend. However, while secular in form, these regimes often showed little genuine interest in adhering to democratic principles. In recent decades, under growing pressure from the public, the influence of secularists has noticeably declined and lost its power. (Saikal, 2003: 85; Ebu Sulejman, 1998: 183).

The vast majority of Muslims reject the concept of secularism because it separates religion from public life and is seen as a serious violation of Divine sovereignty. Historically, secularism has often been conflated with atheism. According to Tamimi and Esposito (2010: 41), this perception provides a strong basis for the belief that atheism lies behind the veil of secularism. Critics further argue that, unlike the Islamic experience during its Golden Age, secularism in the West was a justified response to oppressive theocracies and despotic regimes. In the Western context, the institutional church was viewed as a major obstacle to progress, development, freedom, and human rights. In contrast, secularism in many Muslim-majority countries, particularly in the Arab world has often taken the form of pseudo-secularism, associated with stagnation, underdevelopment, and corrupt authoritarian regimes.² As a result, secularism has struggled to gain legitimacy and acceptance in the Muslim world from the outset. (Tamimi & Esposito, 2010: 39, 41, 62, 218).

It is important to recognize that most Muslims do not blindly oppose the principles of democracy. They are aware of the benefits that modernity can offer and acknowledge the advantages of democratic governance. However, they prefer to adopt only those aspects of modernity and democracy that do not conflict with their religious traditions and cultural values. What they reject is the version of modernism and democracy imposed by external powers such as the US, Britain, and France. (Armstrong, 2006: 199; Ramadan, 2011: 269-270; Tamimi & Esposito, 2010: 210). For this reason, many Muslims perceive globalization as a project of Westernization, an attempt to reshape Muslim societies by pressuring them to interpret and practice their faith in accordance with Western norms. From this perspective, being a committed

² Secularism in the Muslim world takes various forms, often shaped by political history and social context. Here are some notable examples: Turkey during the Kemalist governance, post-independence Tunisia under Habib Bourguiba, Syria under Assad regime and Indonesia under the reign of Sukarno.

practitioner of religion is often viewed in the West as a sign of nonconformity, suspicion, or failure to fully integrate into the dominant cultural model. (Ramadan, 2011: 266-268).

The problem arises when democracy is promoted as the sole legitimate political model. Many Muslims view democracy as one model among various possible systems of governance, rather than a universally applicable ideal. Consequently, the notion of the universality of Western values is not readily embraced by non-Western societies. Attitudes toward this idea range from deep skepticism to outright opposition. As Huntington aptly observed, "What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest". (Huntington, 1996: 184). As long as the West, particularly the US, continues to impose its way of life on Muslim societies, it is likely to face persistent resistance. Constructive dialogue between civilizations must be grounded not in assumptions of Western cultural superiority but in a spirit of mutual cooperation and coexistence. (Saikal, 2003: 131).

Unlike some Western views who urge Muslims to reconsider their culture and social norms, mainstream Muslims do not necessarily view Western culture or its values as inherently intolerant or as sources of mutual distrust. They do not perceive the West as a monolithic entity. Rather, they hold a nuanced view, admiring the West's scientific and technological achievements while simultaneously criticizing its foreign policies, which are often seen as discriminatory toward Muslim interests. For this reason, many Muslims believe that the root causes of conflict lie not in religious beliefs or cultural differences, but primarily in political factors. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 6, 159–160; Armstrong, 2002: 184–185; Esposito, 2010: 194; Nye Jr., 2011: 19).

3. International Politics and Contemporary Conflicts

International politics and contemporary conflicts significantly shape the course of relations between the Muslim world and the West. An analysis of public opinion in Muslim societies reveals widespread criticism and disappointment regarding the foreign policies of many Western states. Crucially, Muslims do not perceive the West as a monolithic entity. Their attitudes toward Western countries are differentiated and dynamic, shaped largely by the specific political approaches adopted by each state toward the Muslim world. This suggests that foreign policy orientations directly influence public sentiment and political trust. Survey data from Gallup (2001–2007) demonstrates this clearly: 84% of Muslims expressed unfavorable views of the United States and 68% of the United Kingdom, while only 25% and 26% held similarly negative views of France and Germany. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 81-82). The reason is straightforward. The U.S. and U.K. have been more deeply involved in international affairs that directly affect the political, economic, and strategic interests of Muslim countries. In contrast, France and

Germany's relatively limited involvement has led to more balanced and less hostile perceptions.

More broadly, Muslims often view Western foreign policy, particularly that of the US as discriminatory, exploitative, and egocentric. (Huntington, 2004: 346–347). One recurring grievance is the application of double standards in the promotion of democracy. Many in the Middle East and North Africa express skepticism toward Western commitments to democratization in their regions. They recognize that the West, particularly after the Cold War, vigorously supported democratic transitions in Eastern Europe, yet failed to show similar resolve in the Muslim world. Instead, Western governments frequently supported authoritarian regimes that curtailed political freedoms and limited citizen participation. These regimes often implemented selective and self-serving forms of democracy designed to preserve ruling elites and suppress opposition, especially Islamist parties. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 58, 83; Ebu Sulejman, 1998: preface X).

The 1992 military coup in Algeria illustrates this perceived inconsistency. After the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first round of parliamentary elections, the military intervened, deposed President Benjedid, canceled the elections, and imprisoned FIS leaders. Western governments largely remained silent, failing to condemn the interruption of a democratic process. Their indifference was perceived as tacit approval. In contrast, the same year saw harsh international criticism when Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori dissolved parliament and suspended the constitution. (Karlson, 2005: 188–190; Esposito, 2010: 63–64; Armstrong, 2002: 182). This disparity in response reinforced the belief that Western commitment to democracy in the Muslim world is selective and conditional, especially when democratic outcomes might empower Islamist parties. As a result, Western policymakers often face a dilemma: whether to support a friendly autocracy or risk a potentially hostile democracy. Frequently, they opt for the former, prioritizing short-term geostrategic and economic interests, such as access to natural resources over democratic principles. (Saikal, 2003: 124–127; Huntington, 1996: 184; Fuller, 2003: 101; Esposito, 1999: 273).

Western foreign policy is also seen as egocentric and culturally arrogant. From a Muslim perspective, the current world order reflects predominantly Western values and interests, while marginalizing alternative civilizational perspectives. As Ahmet Davutoğlu argues, such an order resembles an “oligarchic system” rather than a truly inclusive international framework. (2005a: 203). Western arrogance is often perceived in the promotion of its institutions and culture as universal values, and its political system as the dominant model to be adopted by other nations. (Huntington, 1996: 310; Davutoğlu, 2005a: 208; Davutoğlu, 2005b: 275–276). The tendency to universalize Western values is seen by some Muslims as an “egocentric illusion”. (Tamimi & Esposito, 2010: 395–396). As a result, they urge the West to reconsider its

stance and correct what they view as an ambivalent and contradictory approach. To gain legitimacy and international credibility, foreign policy must fulfill two essential criteria: its goals must be morally justified, and it must reflect not only national but also shared global interests. A policy that exclusively serves narrow national goals while ignoring the aspirations of others will inevitably be perceived as arrogant and self-serving. As Joseph Nye emphasizes, effective leadership in global politics begins with genuine engagement: “to communicate effectively, we must first listen”. (Nye, 2004: 2, 11, 111, 125; Nye, 2011: 21, 84, 232).

Contemporary conflicts have deepened mistrust and sharpened ideological divides between the Muslim world and the West. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 intensified mutual suspicion. While the perpetrators were identified as Arab extremists, the event triggered a broader discourse in the U.S. and elsewhere that linked Islamic thought, often inaccurately with terrorism and anti-Western ideology. (Brzezinski, 2006: 41). Many Muslims, however, viewed the U.S. response, the so-called “War on Terror” as a veiled campaign against Islam itself, a neo-imperial strategy aimed at reshaping the Middle East to serve American interests. (Nye, 2011: 3). Despite widespread condemnation of terrorism, Gallup World Poll data shows that 91% of Muslims considered the 9/11 attacks “morally unjustified”. (Esposito, 2010: 30). Nonetheless, they expressed strong resentment toward U.S. foreign policy, particularly its unconditional support for Israel, backing of authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, and lack of genuine efforts to support democratization. (Brzezinski, 2006: 69; Fuller, 2003: 84; Saikal, 2003: 89-92). The prolonged Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains a particularly acute source of regional grievance, with many Muslims viewing Israel as an occupying force and accusing the West of complicity. (Saikal, 2003: 91-92; Fuller, 2003: 84).

The US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq further inflamed anti-Western sentiment. According to World Public Opinion polls (2006-2007), 73% of respondents in Indonesia and Pakistan and 92% in Egypt believed the War on Terror was, in reality, a war on Islam (cited in: Bassioni, 2007). US credibility suffered severe damage following reports of human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison and Guantanamo Bay. These events reinforced perceptions of Western hypocrisy and deepened emotional and ideological estrangement between Muslims and the West. (Esposito, 2010: 82-83).

4. Media Influence on Public Perceptions and Stereotypes

In an era marked by the information technology revolution, media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. It can serve as a powerful tool for producing propaganda and speculative narratives that contribute to the formation of stereotypes, often manipulated by political actors to incite fear

and mistrust. Stereotyping typically stems from prejudice or misconceptions rooted in poorly examined assumptions.

Following the Cold War, some Western media outlets began projecting a distorted image of Islam, often portraying it as inherently violent, a threat to Western civilization, and at odds with democratic values. Muslims were frequently depicted as intolerant, narrow-minded, and religious fanatics. The entertainment industry, particularly through film, reinforced these narratives by routinely associating Islam and especially Arabs with terrorism. Many scholars argue that the fear of communism was supplanted by fear of Islamic fundamentalism, a phenomenon they describe as an “imaginary prejudice.” (Davutoglu, 2005a: 205; Zuhajli, 2000:6; Ramadan, 2011:28; Brzezinski, 2006: 64-65; Karlson, 2005: 344-345; Esposito, 1999: 217-218).

These prejudices intensified after the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. In the aftermath, a mindset emerged in which Muslims were deemed non-threatening only if they did not practice their religion or visibly express their Islamic identity. Even regular mosque attendance came to be viewed as a sign of fanaticism or extremism. (Ramadan, 2011: 267). Arabs, in particular, were stereotyped as desert dwellers, irrational and intrinsically violent further linking their identity with terrorism. (Esposito, 1999: 3). The tendency of Western media to highlight one side of events while ignoring the broader context significantly deepened public biases against Islam. For instance, while the media heavily reported on the 9/11 attacks, it largely overlooked the voices of Muslim scholars and communities who strongly condemned the violence. In reality, many prominent figures in the Muslim world issued fatwas (Islamic legal opinions) denouncing the attacks as un-Islamic. Some even urged Muslims to donate blood to the victims in an act of solidarity. (Esposito, 2010: 30, 100; Kardavi, 2005: 197-200).

This media campaign led to the discrediting of Islamic teachings and the demonization of Muslim identities. According to a 2006 *Washington Post/ABC News* poll, 46% of Americans held a negative view of Islam. Similar sentiments were observed across Europe, where 63% of Britons, 87% of the French, and 88% of the Dutch believed Islam incites violence (cited in Deane & Fears, 2006). Media propaganda tends to have a particularly strong impact on individuals with limited knowledge of Islam or no direct contact with Muslims. Surprisingly, a Gallup Poll found that 57% of Americans admitted knowing nothing or very little about Islam. Conversely, those who were more familiar with Islamic teachings or had Muslim acquaintances expressed more favorable views. (cited in Saad, 2006).

Do Muslims indeed support violence and extremism? Survey data overwhelmingly suggest otherwise. The majority of Muslims reject violence. When asked what they least admire about their societies, extremism and terrorism topped the list because Muslims themselves are often the first victims of such actions. From 1970 to 1990, most Muslim extremist groups

operated domestically within their own borders. These groups represent only a fringe minority and do not speak for the broader Muslim population. Often, they use religious rhetoric to legitimize their ideology, gain support, and recruit followers. (Esposito, 2010: 71–72, 78). A recurring mistake in Western discourse is the tendency to generalize all Muslims as potentially dangerous by equating them with extremists. (Pauly Jr., 2004: 21). In reality, the aspirations of most Muslims mirror those of other cultures: economic prosperity, job opportunities, improved living standards, quality education, social justice, and religious freedom. Their preferred path to political change is through ballots, not bullets. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 26, 44).

Moreover, violent extremism is not exclusive to Muslim societies. Similar patterns are observed in other parts of the world. As Brzezinski (2006: 43) notes, empirical evidence indicates that most terrorist activities are rooted in political conflicts. In many cases, the motivation for violence is a belief that foreign military forces have occupied one's homeland, thus prompting resistance. This holds true for groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland, Basques in Spain, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and Chechens in Russia. While these movements often adopt religious symbolism, their core objectives are nationalist in nature.

What, then, can be done to overcome stereotypes and build mutual trust? While the question is complex, Muslims from Morocco to Indonesia have voiced some key expectations. A recurring theme in public opinion data is the desire for Western countries, particularly the United States, to respect the sovereignty of Muslim-majority nations and refrain from interfering in their internal affairs. They call for greater respect toward Islam, an end to cultural imposition, and genuine freedom to practice their beliefs. (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007: 61–62). Since both sides suffer from a lack of objective understanding of the other, increased political and intercultural dialogue is highly recommended.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the key factors that influence and exacerbate tensions between the Muslim and Western worlds. As the analysis shows, these two spheres differ significantly in their historical, cultural, civilizational, and socio-political foundations. Despite the existence of shared interests and common challenges that demand joint efforts, they remain largely distinct entities. Past grievances and unresolved historical experiences continue to shape a mentality of deep suspicion, mistrust, and mutual apprehension.

From the Western perspective, tensions are often rooted in ideological differences, particularly those tied to the Islamic cultural and religious tradition. The resurgence of identity formation based on Islamic values is seen as incompatible with Western universalism, which prioritizes liberal democracy,

secularism, and modernism. As a result, Muslims are frequently viewed as misfits within the prevailing global order. They are often pressured to reform their religious beliefs to align with contemporary Western norms. However, such attempts are met with resistance and accusations of cultural imperialism. The core issue arises when the West insists on interpreting global realities solely through its own lens. Those who disagree, especially Muslims, are frequently labeled as fundamentalists, radicals, or backward. Consequently, Muslims call on the West to abandon exclusionary policies, to listen, and to respect their perspectives and values.

Conversely, many in the Muslim world do not view cultural or religious differences as the primary obstacle. Rather, they see the problem rooted in Western foreign policies, which they perceive as self-serving, unjust, and often discriminatory. Their demand is not for Westerners to abandon their values, but to revise foreign policy approaches that support autocratic regimes and suppress democratic aspirations in Muslim-majority countries. These policies, in their view, have stifled political freedom and hindered the development of genuine democracy, not due to a lack of desire among citizens, but because of structural constraints sustained by external powers.

To improve relations between these two worlds, a comprehensive and balanced approach is essential. This includes fostering intercultural and interreligious dialogue, opposing all forms of extremism, resolving international conflicts with justice and impartiality, and actively combating stereotypes and Islamophobia. Only through such efforts can a foundation for mutual respect, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence be established.

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