

The 55th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs

60 Years After Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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Working Group 4 Report

The Islamic World and Relations with the West

Convener: Talat Masood

Rapporteur: Siddiq Wahid

This constitutes the proceedings of Working Group 4 of the 55th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs. Our brief was to discuss "The Islamic World and its Relations with the West".

- Our Group met for all six sessions, with an average attendance of twenty-three participants. Twenty-seven individuals had signed up for participation in it. There were participants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Canada, Egypt, France, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia and the United States. We had in our midst individuals who were academics, politicians, businessmen and technical professionals. Fourteen of the discussants were Muslims. Our discussions were vigorous and well-informed.
- We operated on two basic assumptions. First, that the relationship between the world of Islam and the West today are abysmal. Second, that neither the West nor Islam is a monolithic entity. These assumptions should be kept in mind when going over the recommendations of the Group.
- Given the free-flow format of the discussion and the breadth of its scope, it was decided at the start that the rapporteur should focus on three central questions during the discussions. These were: (i) what are the root causes of the negative relationship between Islam and the West? (ii) Given that the symptoms of this condition were antagonism and violence on the part of both sides, how do we bridge the divide between them? And (iii) what can/should Pugwash do to address the situation?

The Root Causes

Broadly speaking, the Group identified two broad causes for the problematic of the relationship between the West and Islam. These were issues that are, equally it must be emphasized, internal and external to Islam today.

Causes internal to Islam:

1. First in this category was mention of differences in the interpretation of Islamic canons and extra-canonical commentaries. In other words, as in other religions, there are several levels at which the Islamic scriptures can be interpreted. However, vested interests adopt one or another stance, as it favors political opportunity. It was repeatedly emphasized that although this phenomenon was not unique to Islam, it was aggravated in the case of Islam because of its large population, the diffusion of this population and the diversity of its social, ethnic, national and political make up.

2. It was also pointed out that contested interpretations were not unique to Islam in modern times. Exegetical debate and intellectual dissent has existed in Islam from the earliest times. Mutazilite rationalism of the 9th century, ibn Taymiyya's puritanism a few centuries later and other movements were mentioned to illustrate this point. Yet it was accepted that the present-day dissent has led to socio-political actions that are radical and, increasingly, violent in nature.

3. Another view within the Group pointed out that the challenges of modernity (roughly meaning the post-industrial revolution period in this case) were such that they have resulted in psycho-social problems for all societies. The post-colonial Muslim world, deprived of either instruction or debate¹ in this arena, had led to economic and social insecurity on a larger scale.

4. Next, it was recognized that during the late colonial age and after, there has been a growing rift between the Western-schooled Muslim (often co-terminus with liberal Muslims) and the overwhelming majority who are not literate in Western languages or often even in the vernacular. This condition has resulted in the mis-education of *both* "liberal" and "conservative" Muslims as to a future direction for the adherents of the religion.

5. The participants of our Group also recognized the difficulty presented by the problem of determining who would speak for the Muslims. Muslim-majority lands are scattered between Morocco and Indonesia; and increasingly Europe and America are home to significant numbers who profess the religion. The lack of any provision, within the theological and political framework of the religion, which locates a single "leader" or even "spokesperson" for this diffuse population, adds to the complexity.

6. Finally, we also had enlightening "case study" presentations of some Muslim majority countries which illustrated the problems not only on a global scale, but

locally as well. Egypt and Iran have had significantly rich traditions of liberal academic and social discourse, but the problems of political liberty and freedom of expression persist. Jordan today remains a monarchy, is considered "moderate" and finds favor with the West; yet it has difficult structural problems that, it was suggested, can be addressed only by radical changes in its constitution. Pakistan, although founded by a secularist in an argument over political power sharing, has shown alarming tendencies towards Islamist ideology. And many Iraqis, struggling to survive as a nation and a state, are caught between the paradox of having to endorse Western (chiefly American) intervention and simultaneously bear the burden of "proof" that this is not at the cost of its own sovereignty.

To summarize the discussion on the possible internal causes of the problems in the Islamic world: it is a religion at a theological cross-road in its journey through history and it is a group of almost a hundred Muslim-majority countries at a turning point in their political evolution. The West can either join it in its philosophical debate and participate in its political institution building, or aggravate the situation by manipulating ignorance to create prejudice and bigotry.

Some causes external to Islam

The framing of my last sentence has been deliberate. Several members of the Group expressed the importance of avoiding the temptation of facily placing the blame for the Islamic world's current woes solely on the Western doorstep. Yet, there was decided consensus that there are historical causes initiated by the West that have aggravated the Islamic condition today and threaten to prolong and deepen it. It was these that were chiefly discussed in the context of the external causes to the problems facing the Islamic world.

1. To begin with, the participants mooted the post-16th century development of Western political dominance on the world stage. It has seemingly been cultivated into a categorical imperative to domination that has persisted well into the twentieth century. It manifested itself through colonialism.
2. In the first half of the 20th century, the West's recognition of the criticality of harnessing energy resources coincided with the dismantling of the Ottoman legacy. As is well known, these resources lay in Muslim lands, resulting in the argument to Western hegemony as well, a process that was begun by the principal empire of the day.
3. The process of decolonization in the mid-20th century resulted in the newly independent Muslim majority countries having to adopt, and adapt to, modern political institutions on the one hand and, on the other hand, address the social and economic inequities that a century or more of Western colonialism had left behind. This was not unrelated to the tacit alliances that were formed between Western

educated Muslim rulers (as mentioned earlier) and Western powers, creating a gap within populations in Muslim countries.

4. This gap, it was perceptively pointed out by some members of the Group, was often filled by a "lumpen intelligentsia"², who either half-understood radical critiques of western dominance by Muslim intellectuals or were manipulated by charismatic political leaders to seize political power. They used the idiom of religion in political discourse. In any event, it created a new class of leadership amongst those who sought to gain power through ballot-box politics.

5. Finally, time and again, participants used the reference point of the mid-1970s, as directly responsible for the current low in the relations between Islam and the West. This, it will be remembered, was when aggressive U.S. policies sought to control the energy resources in the Middle East and elsewhere. It was a move that dramatically alienated the Muslims of those regions from the West. At the same time, given the palpable exclusion of the common man in democratic processes by their own rulers, and Western support for the latter, the alienation of the Muslim masses resulted in political mobilization on the basis of religion.

To summarize this part of the discussion, the general trend of the argument seemed to be that the West in general over the past half millennium, and the United States in particular over the last half a century, has become habituated to political dominance. It is loathed to countenance any substantive challenge to it. At the same time, the lack of political freedom in many if not most of the Muslim majority countries has resulted in the alienation of the ruling elite from the ruled. These two alienations, of the Islamic world from the West and Muslim citizens from their rulers, have converged to form a powerful anti-Western sentiment. It is this cycle of reinforcement that needs breaking.

Before concluding this section of the discussions on the "root causes" of the problems between Islam and the West I would be remiss in not reporting a seminal juxtaposition that was posed by some members of the Group with regard to the problem within Islam. The crux of this problem might be stated in the following manner:

"Is the concept of an Islamic *shariah* state compatible with that of a democratic secular state?"

*There were those amongst us, Muslim and non-Muslim, who felt that the two ideas were indeed compatible. These individuals held that although the "democracy" thus born would not necessarily be modeled along Western lines, it nevertheless would be a democracy. At the same time there were others amongst us, Muslim and non-Muslim, who argued that the two concepts (Islamic *shariah* state and democratic secular state) were incompatible and that what was needed was for*

Muslim majority countries to transform themselves into secular democratic states, without prejudice to minority religions in particular and all its citizens in general.

Needless to say, this was not an easy question to address. And I also wish to report that we did not find a solution to it in the half hour of discussion that was left to us! But at the same time, the Pugwash Council might consider it as the central question to address and debate in the subsequent meetings of this very critical Group in the Pugwash initiatives on world affairs.

Bridging the divide between Islam and the West

As I said at the start, this was an informed discussion. The Group members recognized the futility of suggesting ways and means to overcome the difficulties in the divide between Islam and the West, two diverse mosaics, in vague generalities. However, it was still felt that some general and directional suggestions could be made as an initial step. These were as follows:

1. To begin with, there was consensus on the need for the West and for Islam to reach out to each other. Given the history of the divide and, perhaps, its length, this could not be done without conscious effort and strong political will. Both must be garnered.
2. We had a thought provoking presentation which sought to argue that there is a need to think in terms of a paradigm of "pluralistic universalism" rather than politics and economics. That is, an understanding of each other by the world's societies based on civilizational analogy, empathy, legitimacy and acceptance; something that would make room for rewarding civilizational dialogue rather than civilizational clashes. During this discussion we were presented with an intriguing set of parallels between Islam and Buddhism, two religions that are popularly considered to be poles apart, and shown how the two could work in an alliance of civilizations towards global order.
3. Several Muslim members of the Group pointed out that there was an increasing need for the moderate-liberal Muslim, on the one hand, to educate the West on the positive aspects of Islam and, on the other hand, for this same group to speak out against misinterpreted and aberrant forms of Islam.
4. There was some discussion as to whether some of the difficult political problems that exist in the Muslim world, led by the Palestine - Israel one, had their genesis in religious rivalry or political power play. There were some who argued that it was indeed a religious problem, and others who argued that it was a political one entangled in a religious idiom. Predictably, we did not reach a consensus on this question!

5. It was felt by many in the Group that regardless of the genesis of the problem, the resolution of the Palestine - Israel conflict and the balancing of the United State's unqualified support of Israel would go a long way in convincing the Muslim world of the now-official Washington position that the United States is not anti-Muslim.

What can Pugwash do?

Again, the Group did not have enough time to discuss this practical and important question at any length. However, members of the Group did mention some points to the *rappporteur*, which I list here.

- Pugwash must continue its initiative in sponsoring this dialogue as an important part of its deliberations. It is much needed, and will bear fruit in time.
- It was proposed that the ISYP members could take the lead in a practical sense by using the potent mediums of media and tourism to bond the youth of communities in adversarial positions. The Middle Eastern case was mentioned explicitly, but could hold true in other regions of the Muslim world as well. The Pugwash forum could be used to kick-start these ideas.
- Pugwash could ask its national chapters to identify Muslim scientists, writers and others who had contributed positively to the world's knowledge wealth. Once identified, it could find ways to publicize them and talk about their positive influence in their specific societies or in the world at large.

Wahid	Siddiq	Talat
Rapporteur	Masood	Con
	venor	
	Hiroshima	
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1. [\[back\]](#) I must point out that these analyses must be understood without prejudice to many exceptions to this rule that dot the history of Islam. There were, in other words, many social reformers, but their success was either limited to a small social circle or simply cut short.

2. [\[back\]](#) The term 'lumpen intelligentsia', first introduced by well-known scholars on political Islam, was not used by anyone during the discussions; however the sense of it, meaning a hazy and shallow understanding of

the philosophical, historical and theological underpinnings of Islam, appeared to be what was meant by those who critiqued the role of this segment of Muslims around the world.