



The Relationship Between the West and the Middle East: Recipe for a Better Future

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Abstract

It is claimed that the relationship between the Middle East and the West (the USA included) has been marked by intervention, stereotyping, and misunderstanding, and that it has been, unfortunately, changing for the worse because of the double standards employed by the West and the unconditional support for Israel. Despite this situation, a better relationship can exist if Westerners go beyond stereotypes, adopt a balanced policy in the Middle East, and treat Arabs and Muslims as peers. The discussion demonstrates that the West-Middle East relationship has been lacking balance, and, thus, it has been bringing about tension and violence, impeding understanding, furthering separation, fuelling mistrust, and thwarting any attempt at achieving rapport. It also shows that the way to ease tension is by Westerners' tolerating diversity, renouncing superiority, reconsidering their double standards, and recognizing Arabs and Muslims as central parts of the social fabric. It has been shown that the Western policy in the Middle East has been biased, and that Westerners' recognizing Middle Easterners as they are, adopting a balanced policy, and tolerating diversity constitute a recipe for a better future relationship.

Key words: Stereotyping; Double standards; Hypocrisy; Rapprochement; Policy; Mistrust; Confrontation; Bias; Violence; Bitterness

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We have argued elsewhere that the relationship between the Near (or Middle, as some prefer to say) East and the West (America included) is over one thousand and four hundred years old. In spite of this long period of time, this relationship has unfortunately been marked by confrontation, intervention and stereotyping. After the end of World War I, Europeans, driven by their interests that are, Alkadry claims in "Colonialism in a Postmodern Age", at odds with the national and public interests of the Arab people, changed the geography of what is now called the Middle East, by deciding, at the San Remo Conference held in 1920, that "the whole of Arab Rectangle lying between the Mediterranean and the Persian Frontier [be] placed under mandatory rule" (pp. 305-306). While Europeans first arranged for colonizing the Middle East, they empowered and helped the Jews with establishing a state in Palestine. This choice made by Europeans is informed by their own interests as well as their misunderstanding of Arabs and Muslims who have the right to enjoy their rights as humans in much the same way others do. Weak and divided, Arabs and Muslims have been politically ruled by the West. They have also been subordinated to Israel whose alliance with the US has been stifling the development of any constructive peace talks, and shielding it against criticism. Arguing in support of this view, Zunes claims, in "Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East," that "[o]ver the past thirty years, the US has used its veto power to protect its ally Israel from censure more than all other members of the Security Council have used their veto power on all other issues combined" (p. 5). America's use of its veto power represents not only a direct and unconditional support for Israel, but it also places, Zunes adds, "the United States in direct violation of UN Security Council resolution 465, which calls upon all states not to provide Israel with any assistance to be used specifically in connection with settlements in the occupied territories" (p. 6). This attitude of America obviously reflects its double standards

despite its claims that it adopts an even-handed policy. Clarifying this situation, Eric Watkins holds, in "The Unfolding US Policy in the Middle East," that "[a]lthough US policymakers claim to adopt an even-handed approach in dealing with the Arabs and the Israelis, their practice traditionally favors Israel" (p. 1).

This bias has been igniting a lot of anti-Americanism in the Middle East, which not only springs from, Obeidat argues in "Beyond American Borders: The Middle East and the Enigma of anti-American Sentiments in the Aftermath of 9/11," "a prejudiced hatred of and a blind bias against the United States or American culture and citizens for that matter, but from a profound feeling about America's role as a leading power at the international level" (p. 15). Like Obeidat, Sumra Salem argues, in "Anti-Americanism in the Middle East," that the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict, also referred to as the Arab-Israeli conflict, contributes tremendously and is the foremost explanation of the high levels of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. These anti-American sentiments are created by Washington's stance within the conflict and are best exemplified by its substantial support for Israel politically, economically and militarily" (p. 4). Reiterating the same view, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak states that "because of the war in Iraq and Washington's continued support of Israel, hatred of Americans in the Arab world had reached new heights." Following Mubarak's steps, Shehab and Sid-Ahmed view Washington's unconditional and "eternal support of the ruling right-wing in Tel Aviv," and alliance with Israel whose stance on the core issue of Palestine is uncompromising "as the foremost reasons for the rancor" (p. 7). This American collaboration with Israel manifested in the alliance is, Sumra argues, "a legitimate source of grievances in the Middle East and prime generator of anti-Americanism" (p. 5). The alliance with Israel intensifies the anti-American anger that also stems from Arabs' feeling let down due to the United States' refusal to pressurize Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories, the United States' consistent policy of supporting Israel at all costs, the United States' condoning the Israelis' developing as many nuclear weapons as they please, and the United States' treating Israel as a country above the law. This stance of America brings about dissatisfaction, anger, and anti-American sentiments. These sentiments are further created by America's failure to help Palestinians enjoy their rights in a state of their own. They are also directly associated with, Sumra Salem adds, "the effects felt across the region as a result of American policies" (p. 4).

Lacking even-handedness, these American policies have been generating bitterness amongst Arabs for a number of reasons. Firstly, the US has been so far helpless to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict giving birth to instability, insecurity, despair, and acts of violence. This situation has been also contributing to America's losing its credibility.

Secondly, the United States' ongoing support for Israel has been enabling it to defeat Arabs and, thus, maintain its occupation of Arab territories. Thirdly, the US has been maintaining a military presence in the region, especially in Iraq and the Arabian Gulf countries. Such an ongoing presence is certainly conducive to creating an increasing resentment. Fourthly, the US has been opposing efforts by Arab states to produce, Stephen Zunes claims in "Ten Things to Know about US Policy in the Middle East," "weapons of mass destruction while tolerating Israel's sizable nuclear arsenal and bringing US nuclear weapons into Middle Eastern waters as well as rejecting calls for the creation of a nuclear-free zone in the region" (p.2). Fifthly, the United States' applying grievous double standards in connection with implementing UN resolutions. This American behavior makes Arabs and Muslims all over the world critical of America in particular and the West in general for failing, Andrew Young holds in "The 'Clash of Civilizations' and American Intervention in the Middle East," "to punish Israel for violating U.N. resolutions" (p. 2). Young adds that it is not surprising that the West (America included) "[has] utilized force against Iraq but fails to force its kin countries to behave" (p.2).

This imbalanced, pro-Israeli tilt policy has been hindering the advancement of America's national interests. A careful scrutiny of American foreign policy in the Middle East since the Cold War demonstrates that the US government has been serving its selfish interests, and, thus, it has promulgated, Isra Jensia maintains in "US Middle East Policy," "an outpouring of hatred and animosity toward the United States" (p. 1). Isra adds that unless the US government changes its policy toward the Middle East "the best interests of the American people will never be served" (p. 1). The United States has been subordinating its interests to those of Israel whose diplomats care only for their own interests. To advance its interests, the United States should suspend its aid to Israel whose compliance with the UN resolutions would liberate, Paul Findley maintains in "Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel," "all Americans from long years of bondage to Israel's misdeeds" (p. 3). The suspension of this aid is a necessity and a prerequisite for the protection of the interests of the American people. While the United States provides this type of support for Israel, it doesn't do Arabs and Muslims in the region any justice. It keeps imposing restrictions on them and disempowering them, which does not help them with wresting their inalienable rights as humans. It also arranges for keeping them subordinate to Israelis by holding onto and disseminating their negative images, which makes people unsympathetic with them.

Since World War II, the Middle East has been impacted by Western technology, and more so nowadays with the advent of satellite stations and the Internet. Audiences in this part of the world have been overwhelmed by spates

of stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in the US television and films. These stereotypes, Jack Shaheen claims in *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, “portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women and children are really like” (1). Commenting on the image of Arabs in American films, Shaheen argues that Arab Muslims are depicted “as hostile alien intruders, and as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons” (9). Echoing Shaheen, Edward Said similarly argues, in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, that Muslims and Arabs are “essentially covered, discussed, apprehended, either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists”. Rather than provide “the human density” of their lives, “a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world [are] presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression” (26). Said adds that “there is a consensus on “Islam” as a kind of scapegoat for everything we do not happen to like about the world’s new political, social, and economic patterns. For the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the centre, a kind of distasteful exoticism” (*Covering Islam*, pp. x, xv). Like Said, Ghareeb (1983) contends, in a study that measured American perceptions of Arabs, that it has been found that Arabs “were so dehumanized that Americans were inured against the miseries and concerns of the Arabs or any segment of the Arab world; it is as if the fear of Islam and Muslims were justifications for the negative image in the West”.

Such stereotypes that dehumanize Arabs do impede understanding and rapprochement. These negative images do Arabs and Muslims harm for they keep them in a state of stasis. They also stop Americans from understanding Arabs and Muslims as they are. The result is that Americans use these stereotypes to scapegoat them holding them to be responsible for actions they haven’t done. In so doing, Americans demonstrate their prejudice against Arabs and Muslims whom they mistakenly blame for their problems. By shifting blame onto Arabs Americans flee their responsibilities, leaving their victims to suffer on their own. This act of shifting blame occurs, Richard Landes holds, in “Scapegoating,” *Encyclopedia of Social History*, as a result “of the common defense mechanism of denial through projection” (659). This projection falls much in the same way scapegoating does. As far as understanding is concerned, stereotypes forbid Americans to understand Arabs and Muslims, and create hostilities as well as anti-American sentiments, which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as “opposed or hostile to the government, official policies, or people of the United States.” The sources of anti-Americanism remain, Samra Salem argues in “Anti-Americanism in the Middle East,” divided between individuals who simply possess a prejudice against America and those who

do so in reaction to the nation’s actions. Such diversity develops and changes over time with the current dominant source being the latter option, predominantly regarding America’s foreign policy under the Bush administration” (2) (*Global Affairs*, Issue 8, 2008). This policy consists of paramount support for Israel and hostility towards Arabs and Muslims. It is this practice which keeps giving birth to anti-American sentiments in the Middle East, that has often been, Stephen E. Ambrose holds in *Rise to Globalism*, “a headache, sometimes a nightmare “for American policymakers, “as each President has tried, in his own way, to pursue an even-handed policy, if only because he needed both Arab oil and Jewish campaign contributions” (p. 258).

These two needs, oil and Jewish campaign contributions, constitute American strategic interests in the Middle East. Edward Said argues in “Blind Imperial Arrogance—Vile Stereotyping of Arabs” that, since World War II, “American strategic interests in the Middle East have been, first, to ensure supplies of oil and, second, to guarantee at enormous cost the strength and domination of Israel over its neighbors” (*The Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2003). The second interest, in particular, has been doing America harm. In a sense, America’s support for Israel has been occurring at the expense of the interests of the American people. This support has been also maintained despite the cruelties perpetrated by the Israelis against Palestinians in the occupied territories. Commenting on these atrocities, Paul Findley, a member of the US House of Representatives for twenty years, argues in “Reflecting on Our Relationship with Israel” that hundreds of Palestinians are “detained for long periods and most are tortured. Some are assassinated. Homes, orchards, and business places are destroyed. Entire cities are kept under intermittent curfew, some confinements lasting for weeks” (1). Findley adds, “Injured or ill Palestinians needing emergency medical care are routinely held at checkpoints for an hour or more... The West Bank and Gaza have become giant concentration camps. None of this could have occurred without US support” (p.1). Findley also claims that “Israeli forces treat Palestinians worse than cattle” (1). Reiterating Findley’s argument, Charles L. Black, Jr. claims in “Let us Rethink Our ‘Special Relationship’ with Israel” that Americans “are being furnished copious and moving, contemporary illustrations of the actions of Israel in cruel derogation of basic human rights” (1). Laying the blame on Americans for these enormities, Black adds, “Through the actions of our government, we have put and seem bent on keeping Israel in a position to do whatever it desires, without fear of serious consequences. This corrupting power of Israel is in main truth and substance our creation; we are therefore ourselves fully responsible for the use to which Israel puts the power we thus place in its hands” (pp. 1 & 2). This support for Israel damages

the US national interests. Reflecting on the impact of this support, Paul Findley maintains that “the US government finds itself reviled in most countries because it provides unconditional support of Israeli violations of the United Nations Charter, International law, and the precepts of all major religious faiths” (1). Critical of this support, Black holds, in “Let us Rethink Our ‘Special Relationship’ with Israel,” that “... it is wrong for the United States of America to be arming and supporting such a regime, to the point of ensuring that it can pursue and attain such ends, by such means, while fearing no serious consequences” (10). Making a strong case that this blind support tarnishes the view of the United States in the Arab World, Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer both claim in *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* that this support for Israel provides arms and money and, at the same time, shields Israel from the consequences of its actions (2008). Dwelling equally on this support for which America’s interests are sacrificed, Findley holds, in his capacity as a member of the US House of Representatives, that “[all] members swear to serve the interests of the United States, but there is an unwritten and overwhelming exception: The interests of one small foreign country almost always trump US interests. That nation of course is Israel” (1). Like Findley, Justin Raimondo maintains, in “The Lobby,” that “American foreign policy has been weighed down for all too many years by an albatross hung round Uncle Sam’s neck, one that distorts our stance especially vis-à-vis Middle Eastern issues and ultimately works against US interests in the region and around the world: that albatross is unconditional support for the state of Israel” (1).

These arguments demonstrate that the West and the Middle East are mired in a circle of animosity and conflict. Similarly, the argument in this paper tries exploring the causes underlying this state, and prescribes a recipe for a better future relationship. Driven by hatred, Westerners have been holding onto negative images of Middle Easterners who have been thought of as being not only unequal, but also inferior to them. In fact, this belief runs counter to Arabs’ contribution to human civilization. Despite its diversity and range, this contribution has been overlooked by most Westerners for a number of reasons. Firstly, positive developments often escape the world’s notice. Secondly, Westerners tend to ignore others’ contributions to global progress because they are blinded by their ethnocentrism. Placing themselves at the center of the universe, they regard themselves to be better than others for reasons related to heritage. Thirdly, Westerners have been emphasizing their own interests, which makes them turn a deaf ear to the interests of others. This obsession with interests stops Westerners from criticizing themselves and reconsidering their choices which, being based on stereotypes, certainly do not do others justice. The absence of this criticism has so far been responsible, for instance, for the perpetuation of enormities not only in

Palestine and Iraq, but also other world countries where Muslims are denied human rights. To take an example, the Jews in Palestine, taking advantage of this stand, have been doing whatever they please without being afraid of criticism. Fourthly, Westerners have been suffering from anti-Islamic sentiments which preclude their looking at Arabs and Muslims as they are. These sentiments are expressed in different ways, such as disrespecting Muslims by shouting at them, spitting at them, and not giving them seats in restaurants. The expression of these sentiments may go a step further, taking on a more serious turn, such as sending a death threat to a Muslim.

The problem with these sentiments is that they are bolstered by similar ones occurring in public political discourse. The result is that Arabs and Muslims are unfairly targeted by acts of violence perpetrated by evil doers whose cruelties are deemed to be justified under the pre text that they are expressive of the right to self-expression. This rhetoric that justifies violence and maligns Muslims and Arabs is significant for two reasons. For one, it opens the way for similar atrocities. For another, it isolates and alienates the victims in the community. In this way, the isolated become much more vulnerable than before, which renders them easy preys for evil doers who won’t hesitate to seize an opportunity that permits them to perpetrate violence and flee punishment. Reckoning with the dangers involved in speeches that incite discrimination and violence on religious and racial grounds, Western governments should criminalize them to stop the bestial slaughter of Arabs and Muslims who are collectively mistreated and punished for crimes committed by few individuals who simply share them their race, religion, and culture. Arguing in support of this view, Jack Shaheen claims, in “Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture,” that “an abhorrence of the Arab peoples has become firmly embedded in the American psyche. They are being collectively indicted because of the crimes, or alleged crimes, of a few” (3).

Despite this situation, the tension between the West and the Middle East can be eased by taking a few trust-building measures. To take an example, Western governments can tolerate diversity and recognize Muslims as a central part of the social fabric. The value of this step is that it ends repression against Muslims who are being victimized, distrusted, denigrated, and thought of as being inferior. In so doing, these governments win Muslims over, which is conducive to their feeling at ease and doing their utmost to contribute to the development of their societies. Arguing in support of this view, Mosad Zineldin and Valaintisna Vasicheva maintain in “A New Mindset to Change the Arab-Islamic –Western Relations for Peace” that Western countries should be “able to accept the real image of Islam and prove that they can peacefully live and deal with people and nations of different identities, cultures and religions” (78).

Another example is that Western governments can

go beyond the stereotypical images, and hold Arabs and Muslims to be equal to them. Such a wise behavior transforms conflict into understanding, builds the required trust between Westerners and Middle-Easterners, and paves the way for a better future. This idea also occurs in Zineldin and Vasicheva's contention that Western countries "do not need to feel that their own society is superior and any society that does not try to emulate their own is substandard or inferior" (78).

This renunciation of superiority is a prerequisite for the Western countries peoples' doing Arabs and Muslims justice. To achieve this objective, Western countries should recognize that Islam is a religion that doesn't incite terrorism, that Arabs and Muslims equally have values and aspirations that are not antithetical to but similar to theirs, and that Islam isn't just a set of practices that humiliate women and reject religious tolerance. This recognition should be also reinforced both in education and media because they can play important roles in combating intolerance and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims. In fact, education and media can reduce the conflicts between the Western world and the Muslim world by emphasizing the shared ideals of which peace is one. In Islam, for instance, peace is the name of Allah the AlMighty, and Muslims are always urged to seek for it, promote it, and live by it. In the West, peace is a value that is equally sought for, and Westerners, being peace-loving peoples, do their utmost to make it in different parts of the world. Unfortunately, the efforts Westerners have been making haven't given any birth yet to a peaceful settlement in Palestine where Arabs have been suffering and living miserably just because of the double standards of Westerners who have been supporting the Israeli occupation forces, but turning a blind eye to the victims' search day and night for help.

These double standards themselves are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, they are to blame for the perpetuation of grievances in the occupied territories. Westerners sympathize with the Israelis, and are too timid to criticize them for constructing settlements all over the occupied territories (including Palestine), destroying the peace process, and trampling on the Security Council resolutions. In stark contrast with this stand, they blame Palestinians when they try defending themselves. Secondly, Westerners' double standards have been responsible for the Israelis' developing nuclear weapons which Arabs are denied. Thirdly, these standards impact Westerners' credibility and stop other peoples from trusting and relying on them. In other words, these double standards do them harm. They certainly provide others with the indication of their glaring hypocrisy. They also prove that they care more for their own interests than for human lives, which is a marker of their chauvinism and thoughtlessness. However, these Westerners have lately begun learning about the evils created by the tenacity

of their double standards. Oblivious to the problems created by their double standards for decades, they themselves are equally vexed nowadays by Russia and China's behavior as to supporting Al-Assad's regime in Syria, which is a criminal interest-driven act evocative of narrow-mindedness. In brief, the least that can be safely said about this political environment of double standards is that it thwarts common decency and humanity, and that it is not expected to yield any goodness. Resonant of the selfish ends ruling human behavior, this environment is making the world chaotic and jungle-like. This world is marked by the erosion of human rights, hatred, mistrust, and racism.

To conclude, Westerners' going beyond the negative images they hold onto of Arabs and Muslims, imposing restrictions on Freedom of Speech when it is concerned with Islam, Muslims, Arabs, and the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), re-examining their double standards that have been notoriously marking their responses to the Middle East problems created by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and renouncing superiority constitute a recipe for a better future relationship with the Middle Easterners.

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