

## A New Islamophobia

By [Ilan Halevi](#)

*Islamophobia, according to Ilan Halevi, is a growing phenomenon in Western countries. Drawing on prejudices against Islam that have deep in roots in Christian European history and thought, the phenomenon has reached unprecedented heights in the post 9/11 political discourse. Its particular power and danger lies in the potential for a broad alliance of otherwise opposed political forces: Muslims and Islam serve as the embodiment of the ultimate enemy for conservatives and the right wingers striving for Western hegemony and racial purity, and for progressives standing up for freedom of expression, rationality, human rights and rights of women. In this way, Islamophobia today serves similar purposes as Anti-Semitism did in the past, and offers a convenient scapegoat and a battle cry to distract and rally those who see their livelihoods and their way of life threatened by the forces of globalization and global capital.*



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A *phobia* is hatred of a given object. Etymologically, it is the desire to flee away from that object. In its current usage, it refers to an aversion, a compelling and irrational fear, or a disgust, that goes beyond personal taste or distaste, as part of a collective phenomenon, akin to ideology. Xenophobia, hatred of foreigners, is the most common occurrence of this use of the concept, which can be applied to practically every human group. It can particularly be used as a synonym for all forms of racism: negrophobia for racism against Blacks, judeophobia for racism against Jews, homophobia for the hatred of homosexuals, etc.

The term "Islamophobia" has appeared in political discourse less than two decades ago, mostly as an accusation levelled by Muslims against various forms of anti-Islamic utterances, attitudes or practices. It was in Durban (South Africa) in August 2001, in the course of the "IIIrd World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and all forms of related Intolerance", organized under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Commission, that Islamophobia was, for the first time, officially recognized, and simultaneously condemned and outlawed. On paper, the Durban conference was a turning point: besides denouncing Islamophobia, Durban also retroactively condemned the Atlantic Slave-Trade, Slavery and Colonialism as crimes against humanity.

These solemn condemnations, nevertheless, were to remain without effect, as the US administration and its Israeli ally and *protégé* had taken care to discredit the conference in advance, claiming it had been "hijacked" by the Palestinians and their Arab and Muslim brethren to be transformed into an anti-Israeli festival, and hence, that its results would be null and devoid of any moral authority. Furthermore, the results of the Durban conference were practically obliterated by the attacks of September 11 only a few days after its closure. As a result, any criticism of "The West" was rendered next to impossible, and any defence of Islam became highly suspect. At the same time, it was precisely these events that boosted Islamophobia itself to unprecedented degrees, to an extent that it appears justified to speak of a new era of

Islamophobia: for the new global enemy, anonymously referred to as "terror", now has a face and a name, that of *Al Qaeda* and its alleged mastermind Osama Ben Laden, who became overnight a central element in the construction of the new discourse on global war. On a formal level, it is of course a war waged against a trans-national "Axis of Evil", but after the rehabilitation of North Korea, this war appears to be focused almost exclusively on states featuring Muslim majorities, or groups and individuals hailing from Muslim societies.

Terrorism (a technique, criminal indeed, but not an ideology), is basically the use of violence against civilians for political ends. On the morrow of the 9/11 atrocities, the US rushed through the UN an international convention on "terror and suicide bombings" defining the former as "unauthorized violence". This is still too vague and impersonal to be a substitute for the "Global Enemy System" or the "Evil Empire" that Communism represented, at the time of the Cold War. Hence the necessity to back up the global security discourse by notions of a cultural "crusade", as the American President initially and inadvertently called it, in a climate overshadowed by the idea of a clash of civilizations. It should be clear, in this context, that the multiplication of events and activities invoking the dialogue of cultures, the need for tolerance, interfaith encounters and multiconfessional demonstrations of "cultural diversity", only emphasize the reality of that rift, the reality of a dominant discourse that defines Islam and Muslims as the essential enemy.

This new hostility to Islam, of course, constitutes an inversion of the pattern which had dominated the European and Euro-American vision of the Muslim world since the end of World War I, when the victors of the day supported Ottoman legitimacy, and with it the Islamic Caliphate, against the Kemalist revolution in Turkey and its modernizing, secular and nationalist ambitions. Between the two World Wars, when France and Great Britain shared control of most of the Islamic world (with the exception of Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, then under the domination of tiny Holland) through various forms of occupation, colonization, mandates,

protectorates and other sophisticated legal fictions, the main fear of colonial powers was the emergence of modern nationalism. Consequently, they pursued privileged alliances with the traditionalist sectors of society, including religious circles.

The Cold War reinforced this alignment of colonial or ex-colonial powers with religious and traditionalist forces, liable to counterbalance the influence of modern and “secular” liberation movements, which had the tendency to look towards the Eastern Block when put under pressure. This was the Golden Age of the US-Saudi alliance, when oil interests and strategic designs converged. Thus the wave of Arabophobia unleashed, particularly in the American media, on the morrow of the October 1973 Israeli-Arab war, and in the aftermath of the energy crisis linked to the Arab oil boycott, did not develop into outright Islamophobia until much later, when the Soviet “common enemy” had disappeared. It remained, at the time, a campaign of anti-Arab racism, which did not connect explicitly with Islam.

The turning point seems to have been the Iranian Islamic revolution, which gave political Islam a sudden international visibility, and which coincided with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Since the Cold War was still going on, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan *also* engendered the last avatar of the old pattern, in a sort of anachronistic fashion, an overlap of two eras, as often happens in history. For a decade the US supported, financed armed and trained the Afghan *Mujahidin*, religiously inspired guerrilla fighters against the Soviet occupation, and gave its blessing to the international recruitment of Islamic volunteers. In a futile attempt to counter Iranian influence, it subsequently supported the very same Taliban which it toppled a decade later. The reversal of ideological alliances, however, was delayed until the Soviet Empire dissolved, and Bush’s *Axis of Evil* replaced Reagan’s *Evil Empire*.

To conclude the geopolitics of the production of Islamophobia, let us finally remark that, even though Islamophobia is growing everywhere, its particular traits and features in a given setting are determined by the cultural patterns, intellectual

traditions and specific prejudices of the particular country or region.

### Islamism and Islam

Outright and unabashed Islamophobia, as displayed by American Evangelists and neo-conservatives, or by an alarming number of European intellectuals, is largely absent from mainstream political discourse. The reason for this is that it would be politically incompatible with the need to include Muslim states and governments in the “War against Terror”, or in specific campaigns such as the one presently organized against Iran. Hence the official discourse underlying the new global war is rather that the problem is not Islam as such, but certain manifestations of it branded as “political Islam”, “radical Islam”, “Jihadism”, or, more recently, “Islamofascism”. This claim, however, clashes with a number of facts. First of all, since Islam is, according to its own definition, *Din, Dounia, wa-Dawla*, i.e. “religion, world and state”, it is always political, and there is no such a thing as an apolitical Islam. Second, if radical Islam is more specifically and more radically evil than radicalism in general, it logically implies that moderate Islam is moderately evil.

“Jihadism”, on the other hand, is a category invented by Western Orientalists and Islamologists, which Moslems do not recognize, while the phrase “Islamofascism” still suggests a particular and essential connection between Islam and fascism that does not correspond to any tangible reality. The term “Fundamentalism”, drawn from the universe of Protestantism, or that of “Integrism”, which pertains to the problematic of the Catholic Church in France, hardly apply to radical movements, and certainly not to the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, the common ancestor of most Islamic political movements. The apparently neutral terms “Islamism” and “Islamists” do not really help to overcome this contradiction, as the Arabic language itself does not differentiate between Islamist and Islamic (*Islami* would be the translation for both), except to translate or reproduce the European concept (*Islamiyye* or *Islamawiye, Islamiyyoun*, etc...).

In short, there is serious trouble in defining both Islam and Islamism, which accounts for the semantic confusion. At any rate, those who are labelled as Islamists do not recognize themselves as such, claiming to simply represent *true* Islam and not a current, a school or a sect. There are, however, many signs that the (silent) majority of Muslims does not endorse or support this claim, even if many of them are not insensitive to the Islamic political discourse, especially when it is opposed to Western hegemony, to repressive states or to foreign occupation.

In contrast, many European and American intellectuals, journalists and “experts”, including some “self-critical Muslims”, who are free from diplomatic imperatives and constraints, do not hesitate to go further and incriminate Islam itself. This is in particular the case of the famous scholar Bernard Lewis, or, in a more vulgar fashion, of the hate-monger and propagandist Daniel Pipes, whose anti-Islamic diatribes are a favourite reading of the US president. This is the case of journalists like Oriana Fallaci (a precursor in that field), of writers and intellectuals like Bernard-Henri Lévy or Michel Houellebecq, of the talented Tunisian writer Abdel Wahab Meddeb, or of the much mediatized Egyptian-Italian journalist Magdi Allam, who recently made a public act of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, which he wrapped up in a series of accusations against Islam as such, or even of the Pope Benedict XVI himself, who found it necessary to quote the anti-Islamic statements of a Byzantine Pontiff besieged by the Ottoman Turks, placing himself and the Vatican in a “cultural” alliance with the Evangelist tenant of the White House.

Of course, all this blossoming of anti-Islamic feelings grows on a pre-existing substratum of Christian hostility to other religions in general, and towards Islam in particular. From the Crusades to colonial wars, from the Spanish Reconquista and the russification of Tatar lands to the post-colonial problems linked to migration, European collective imaginary remembers Islam as the archetypical enemy, the irreducible *Other*. But it is also, as we have seen, linked to the present international configuration, and to the need to find a new global enemy after the demise of the Soviet bloc.

In the typology of islamophobic discourse, a special chapter should be devoted to Islamophobia inside the Muslim world itself. First of all, there are the governments of Muslim countries, who are well aware that for Europeans and Americans, prisoners of their own diabolization of Islamism, everything is allowed and legitimate when dealing with “terror” and “fanaticism”, and that demands for democracy and human rights become secondary once the spectre of Islamism is summoned. The late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was the first in the Middle-East who understood this equation fully, and enjoyed considerable US and European backing for his aggression against Iran. More than a decade later, the Algerian Government was to enjoy the same complacency in its struggle against the Islamic Salvation Front. The governments of Tunisia and Egypt also enjoy some form of immunity against democratic imperatives in the face of Islamic opposition parties, while the minority rulers of Syria combine the repression of Islamic currents with the clientelization of clerical authorities, and have long abandoned the hard-line secular discourse that was once a hallmark of Baathist ideology.

Then there is the Sunni - Shia rift, as a result of which one witnesses the production of two twin and rival brands of Islamophobia. In Lebanon, for instance, some Sunni activists and political figures indulge in the amalgam of Hizbullah with Iran, riding on the exacerbation of the anti-Iranian discourse held by the present US administration and the anti-Iranian campaign conducted by Israel, while their Shiite opponents hurl back accusations whereby mainstream Sunnis parties are making common cause with currents akin to the Taliban. Both, by the way, accuse each other of serving Israel’s designs in the area.

Individual “Muslim” Islamophobes, on the other hand, pertain to various categories. There are of course plain “collaborators”, good pupils of the colonial masters, those whom African-Americans used to call “Uncle Toms”. Some do it for material interest, but others out of conviction, and we are here dangerously close to what the Zionists call “self-hatred”. Dangerously, because the concept implies some form of compulsory tribal solidarity, and the unacceptable idea that it is “sick” to reject

it, whatever the circumstances. It is not always easy to draw a clear line between a rational, or even passionate criticism of one's own group and the tendency to denigrate it out of identification with another, typically dominant group, and to interiorize the hierarchy of values carried by the latter. Was Voltaire a self-hating Frenchman when he wrote, at the time of the Calas Affair, that France was the most barbarian country in Europe? Was Nietzsche a self-hating German when he wrote that the Mediterranean shores of Europe marked the northern border of civilization, and was Lenin a self-hating Russian when he called the Russian empire a "prison of peoples"?

Finally, there is a tendency of flirting with Islamophobia which stems from modernist, often non-Muslim, vehemently secular and westernized intellectuals in Muslim societies. Some defenders of Women, Gay and Lesbian, and other Democratic and Human rights fall into this category. While claiming that they are not responsible for whatever malignant use others might make of their legitimate concerns, in reality they are ready to serve as witnesses against Islam, and are considered especially credible due to their intimate connection to and hence knowledge of the object of their phobia.

But here, legitimate and even necessary criticism – including collective self-criticism – faces the test of being put to serve another purpose. A poignant example of this situation is the fate of the 2003 UNDP Report on Human Development the Arab world. Written by independent Arab researchers who were interested in the truth out of a sense of positive concern, it gave a dim picture of the area. There is no doubt that the authors' purpose was to serve their people. Yet the Report became a favourite reading for the US president and the Washington neo-cons, because it provided them with the evidence they needed to justify their military interventions and their aggressive diplomacy. This, however, is a permanent dilemma. The late Maxime Rodinson, some thirty years ago, admitted that the critique of African dictatorial regimes could indeed be used by anti-black racists, but that it was no reason to keep silent. One cannot, however, be totally "innocent" of the instrumentization, or even high-jacking of

one's work. The necessary balance between the need to tell and write the truth and consideration of its eventual misuse must therefore be invented and probed in each particular case.

### **Self-denying Categories**

If Islamists are a self denying category, so is the case with Islamophobes. The most vociferous denouncers of Islam indeed deny, like most racists, being inspired by prejudice. Since their criticism and deconstruction of Islam is, in their eyes, totally justified and founded on what they consider as irrefutable facts, they do not see it as a bias or as the expression of some sort of phobia, but as a rational assessment of the truth. Many of them even pose as heroes for daring to challenge the supposed political correctness of multicultural approaches, suggesting that complacency with Islam is in fact submission to Islamist terror.

In fact, many of those self-denying Islam-bashers do not only claim innocence from the charge of Islamophobia. They also insist the latter does not exist at all, and that the concept is a pure invention of the Islamists themselves, fabricated in order to allow them to pose as victims (while they are, indeed, the aggressors, who threaten the lives and liberties of the rest of the world!). Some say that the term was coined by Ayatollah Khomeini, others trace it to the Swiss-Egyptian theologian Tareq Ramadan, but all dismiss the very notion as irrelevant.

One basic assumption they all have in common, however, is the essentialist belief that the behaviour of Muslims, or of some Muslims, and particularly of Muslim terrorists, does not stem in any way from their experience of confrontation with what they call the West, but from their intrinsic Islamic programming. In Bush's discourse, this program induces hatred for freedom, women and Jews. For someone like Alain Finkelkraut, on the other hand, hatred of Jews has nothing to do with Israeli practices and policies, but rather reflects the frustration of people who used to hold Jews in contempt and are now forced to deal with them as a strong and powerful community!

There is, in this context, an aggravating French “exception”. The unique French understanding of *laïcité*, which goes far beyond what others mean by secularity, and the mere separation of Church and State, has contributed to make it, amongst other reasons, a hotbed of Islamophobia. The French republic, after all, is the heir of a revolution which burned thousands of churches and monasteries, and put hundreds of “counter-revolutionary” clerics to death. It is therefore no wonder that France witnessed, more than twenty years ago, the first public uproar in Europe related to the wearing of the *Hijab* (the headscarf abusively called “Islamic Veil”) by schoolgirls. The lone teacher who took it unto himself, in the name of *laïcité*, in 1986, to exclude a pupil from his class, was followed by others, inducing a national debate on the “dissolvability of Islam in the Republic” which eventually led to an extensive anti-Hijab legislation (formally against all “exterior signs of religious identification”). A multitude of regulations followed, first in schools, and then in various administrations and public space, soon followed, with local variants in other European countries. The said teacher, by the way, turned out to be a radical leftist, who broke the ideological ground for the new alliance of the left and the extreme right against an alleged Islamic threat. It is also true that in France, the left and part of the extreme left are at the forefront of militant Islamophobia with feminist and libertarian arguments, and one is tempted to apply to them what the German socialist August Bebel, more than a century ago, said about anti-Semitism, namely that it is the “Socialism of the Fools”!

Indeed, historically, anti-Semitism in Europe until World War II drew its particular virulence from the fact that it was a consensus cutting across class cleavages, a terrain of encounter between the old conservative right wing, for whom Jews were low-down immigrants, cosmopolitan revolutionaries and enemies of the existing social order, and popular perception which saw in them a caste of exploiters and identified them with the evil power of money. It is precisely here where the particular danger of present-day Islamophobia resides: in its potential to create common ground or even consensus between classes and ideological camps that are supposedly opposed to each other.

The headscarf issue, however, revealed the depth of the cultural identity crisis in French and European societies. The range of attitudes vis-à-vis the admission of Turkey to the European Union also reveals an axis of consensus between the old “Christian” right, who clearly affirms that a Muslim country cannot be part of Europe, and democrats who oppose it in the name of Turkish women, Kurds and Armenians.

To be sure, the headscarf uproar does not reflect a genuine concern for the women of the Muslim world. As a good observer of French reality, the Paris-based ex-Yugoslav scholar Rada Ivekovic, wrote in a paper presented to the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004, it is a message that men convey to other men through women, using women’s body as an instrument (she affirms that this was also the case with regard to the systematic mass rapes during Bosnian war).

The case of Germany is quite revealing in this context. Culturally speaking, Germany has probably less islamophobic traditions than most other European countries. Goethe was a well-known “admirer” of Islam, and imperial Germany wove ties of alliance and cooperation with the Ottoman Empire. The latter had maintained relations with Austria (a country within the German linguistic domain) throughout the centuries of quarantine, which made circulation between the Muslim and Christian states practically impossible. Germany built the Hijaz railroad and eventually entered into a military alliance with the Ottomans and with the Young Turks. Germany never had colonies in the Muslim world, and since the end of the Crusades, the only hostile Muslims to figure in collective memory were the Ottomans besieging Vienna in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, which however were eclipsed by the mentioned rapprochement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet Islamophobia is clearly on the rise in Germany as elsewhere in Europe, and it is undoubtedly also an effect of the rise of global Islamophobia.

Germany had its own headscarf debate, over a veiled *teacher* who was banned from teaching, but the problem is structurally the same. And while Germany may be more “liberal” in allowing students to attend veiled, it does not see a problem

banning one religious symbol and allowing others: after all, Islam is the problem, not religion *per se*. One other good and current example could be the intention, stated explicitly and blatantly by German officials, to restrict immigration of Iraqi refugees to Christians. But there are indeed other factors, tangible material and social factors: namely, the weight and numeric importance of Turkish immigration in Germany, which is comparable to that of North African immigration in France. This accounts for the depth of German opposition to the entry of Turkey into the European Union, and like in France, it gives Islamophobia the role of the ideological discourse intended to give sense to a basically social contradiction, and to a grossly unequal conflict of power between groups defined as ethnic, cultural and religious communities.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that both “conservative” and “radical” Islamic authorities, whether religious or political, contributed to the escalation, for instance by making the *Hijab* the centre of a battle over principles and values. They thus had their share in transforming a single and somehow marginal issue, an issue chosen by the “other side”, into the symbolic heart of a complex and comprehensive conflict rooted in multi-dimensional historical grievances and political contradictions. This promptness to over-react in the wrong places, and to reliably fall into every trap they encounter seems to have become a trademark of these “radical conservatives”. Two decades before 9/11, and the appearance – or reappearance – of the Al-Qaeda scarecrow, some Pakistani clerics issued a *Fatwa* (religious legal opinion) against the Indian-British novelist Salman Rushdie for his disrespectful and supposedly blasphematory novel “The Satanic Verses”, putting the author in the position of a victim, exacerbating his islamophobic tendencies, and transforming him into a living symbol of Islamic intolerance.

In many ways, the Rushdie affair prepared the ground for the identification of Islam as an archetypal enemy of “freedom” (of expression and other types). This was the first “shock” encounter for Western public opinion with politicized Islam and its claims, and it already set much of the basic categories that became hegemonic after 2001.

### The Danish Caricatures

This pattern was manifest in the case of the Danish caricatures. In September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, linked to the xenophobic, anti-immigrant extreme-right, published a series of cartoons “making fun” of Islam and Muslims. The Muslim community in Denmark protested, singling out a particularly offensive cartoon depicting a man out of whose turban protruded a stick of dynamite. While it is in no way obvious or explicit in the drawing itself, the protesters considered that the man represented was supposed to be the Prophet himself, and that the cartoon was not only grossly offensive against Muslims, but that it also violated the Islamic prohibition on representing the Prophet. Pushed by outraged public opinion among Islamic communities in Europe, (and several Islamic organizations), eleven ambassadors from Islamic countries asked for an audience with the Danish Prime Minister – head of a conservative government that sent Danish troops to Iraq – who flatly and very undiplomatically refused to receive them, answering to them through the Danish media that Denmark being a democracy, the government could not interfere in what pertained to freedom of the press.

Several weeks later, after anti-Danish demonstrations took place all over the Muslim world, after Danish diplomatic missions were burnt or attacked throughout the Middle-East and after the beginning of a boycott of Danish products, the Danish government apologized, taking, in the name of tolerance and respect for people’s feelings, some distance from the editorial choices of the *Jylland Posten*. But the battle was already outside the kingdom with something rotten. It had moved to several other European countries, and particularly in France, where several newspapers, including some publications identified with the Left, decided to reproduce and publish the Danish cartoons in the name of freedom of expression. Others went further and put it clearly as an act of militancy, as a political and moral obligation in the struggle against Islamic obscurantism and totalitarianism. In the meantime, the Iranian president, who rarely misses an opportunity to provide his enemies with ideological ammunition

against his country, came out arguing that the very same Europeans who champion absolute freedom of expression when it comes to Islam have enacted laws to prevent holocaust-deniers from speaking in public or publishing their writings. He therefore organized in Teheran an international gathering of holocaust-deniers! In France, several Islamic associations, supported by some (but not all) anti-racist organizations, tried to indict the libertarian weekly "Charlie Hebdo", one of the "reproducers" of the cartoons, and failed miserably as French judges gave full moral support to the paper.

In Denmark itself, the story kept unfolding. The police announced they had arrested three men, a Dane of Moroccan origin and two Tunisians, who were allegedly plotting to assassinate the cartoonist. A few weeks later, the former was released and the latter were expelled from the country, which seems to indicate that the case against them was shaky. But in the meantime an outcry of islamophobic rage had united part of the Danish "radical left" with its political adversaries on the right, in the face of such an unacceptable threat against Danish democracy.

One can, of course, regret that so many Muslims let themselves be provoked and manipulated, both by Islamophobes and by Islamic groups, associations and organizations, into waging marginal and rear-guard battles over purely symbolic issues, while there are so many concrete and substantial issues in the relation between the Muslim world and Europe that could ground a morally flawless case. But for Europeans themselves, it should be clear that if criticism of religion in general and of one's own in particular, is indeed perfectly legitimate, the critique of one given religion by the followers of another must necessarily remain short of incitement. The issue here is not one of defending or exalting Islam as a system, but of respect for Muslims as human beings. More generally, the critique of religious thinking and institutionalized religions can only be credible if it is conducted with criteria and values that apply universally, and not selectively.

The parallel with judeophobia (rather inaccurately called anti-Semitism) seems here particularly relevant. Both are cases of what Maxime Rodinson

has described as an "ideological delirium", and in both cases the classical and/or colonial racism of the conservative upper classes meets and melts with the "socialism of the fools", and caters to the need for a scapegoat that can deflect social discontent and resentment. This is what gave "anti-Semitism" its particular virulence, and all seems to indicate that Islamophobia now plays, in the European and American universe, a similar or comparable role. The widespread fears associated with globalization and its social effects only reinforce the parallel. Let us just hope it will not lead to the same consequences.

### What to do ?

In the domain of analysis, which is to say of thinking, speaking and writing, it is crucial to reject essentialism, generalizations and the intellectual laziness on which they rely. That means looking into specific circumstances and conditions, and also looking at internal contradictions: in Iran, for instance, the reformist movement, the human rights movement and the women's movements are all formally "Islamic", if certainly not "Islamist" in the political sense. With all its shortcomings, the present Islamic government of secular Turkey is the first one to abolish the death penalty. To continue with a random list of facts which contradict the standard imagery, let's recall that Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary General of the Lebanese Hizbullah, explicitly condemned the New York attacks on the World Trade Center, while Al Qaeda recently denounced Hamas for "accepting democracy"! Recently, Al Qaeda has even embarked in an all-out anti-Shia campaign: against the Shiites of Iraq, against Iran and against Hizbullah in Lebanon, which puts it, as in the good old days of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, in a common front with the USA.

In the political and cultural arena, one must refuse the language giving credence to the notion of a clash of civilizations. Both "East" and "West", in this sense, have become dangerous concepts. It is probably much more useful to emphasize the cultural metabolism that has tied both banks of the Mediterranean for centuries, the exchanges and emulation. Dialogue and peaceful coexistence

must be guiding principles in the interaction between different systems, without falling into the trap of cultural relativism, because there are some basic human rights that demand universal recognition. Nobody must be subjected to inhuman, degrading treatment, whatever the cultural system involved, and this maybe is the difference between the headscarf and genital mutilation of females, a practice that has nothing to

do with Islam, but is widespread in some Islamic societies.

The stakes go far beyond the dignity and welfare of more than a billion followers of Islam. Islamophobia is a cancer that may devour European and American societies and push them into an abyss that will make the last world conflict look as a mere rehearsal.