

'Cherchez la femme'

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In a highly controversial article, "Clash of Civilizations?" published in 1993, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington predicted that the future lines of global conflict will be drawn not between nation states, as they have been during most of modern history, but between "civilizations" or "supra-national cultures."

In particular, Huntington warned of an imminent clash between the liberal democracies of the West and the Islamic world. He pointed to the inherent affinity for violence in Islam for all that is not Islam, noting that "violence ... occurs between Muslims, on the one hand, and Orthodox Serbs in the Balkans, Jews in Israel, Hindus in India, Buddhists in Burma and Catholics in the Philippines." This brings Huntington to the somewhat ominous conclusion that "Islam has bloody borders."

Almost a decade later, Huntington's assessments received strong support in an address delivered recently by Efraim Halevy, head of the Mossad, at the Council of NATO. In his address, Halevy declared that World War III was in fact already under way, having started on September 11, 2001. For the moment, he claimed, the battle is still limited to a clash between the liberal democracies and the more radical elements of Islam. However, unless these elements are swiftly and decisively defeated, there is a danger of the conflict spreading to ever-widening circles within the Muslim world. In order to confront this threat, Halevy stipulated that assertive and coordinated action by NATO members was called for.

However, it is precisely here that difficulties begin to arise. For many believe that in its encounter with radical Islam, the democratic world is at a grave disadvantage, suffering from serious moral constraints that paralyze or at least severely inhibit its ability to conduct an effective and extended campaign against foes unencumbered by the same ethical taboos. According to this viewpoint, Western democracies today are unable to undertake the kind of measures necessary to win a decisive campaign against extremist Islam, since this would entail adopting methods so harsh and cruel that they would in effect negate the very essence of democracy itself.

WITHOUT GOING into a detailed analysis of the validity (or lack thereof) of this claim, it is difficult to dispute that certain contradictions do exist between the value structure of modern-day democracies and the kind of actions that might well be required to successfully wage a prolonged war against the Islamic world. There is, however, at least one course of action that can facilitate an uncompromising, long-term engagement against radical Islam, without contravening the moral tenets of liberal democracy.

This is a course of action capable of strategically undermining the foundations of the Islamic world in its present form, and certainly of the fundamentalist components therein.

The centerpiece of this stratagem is the Muslim woman, and her rights to civil liberties. It would be difficult to imagine any other measure which would cut the ground more effectively from under the pillars of Muslim society than a radical upgrading of the status of women in Islamic countries. Indeed, experience shows that advancement of women produces effects that run strongly counter to the factors which nourish fundamentalist extremism.

For example, improvement of the status of women is usually accompanied by lower birthrates hence smaller families higher income levels, and better standards of education. This was once again underscored by a recently compiled and well-publicized report, presented to the UN this month, which cited the low status of women in Arab countries as one of the major causes of the underdeveloped and backward state of this part of the globe. There can in fact be little doubt that an Islamic world, in which the status of women approached that of women in the West, would constitute an entirely different and a certainly less implacably hostile adversary than it does at present.

It would therefore be a definite interest of the Western nations to prepare for a long-term, comprehensive and vigorous campaign, designed to foment demands for women's liberation in Muslim societies, to promote pressure for upgrading their status and for acquiring civil rights currently denied them.

This will, of course, entail a huge effort in terms of funding, planning and execution of PR initiatives, propaganda offensives and psychological warfare stratagems. It would involve measures such as:

- the massive financing of movements advocating women's rights in Muslim countries (including arming them to fend off attacks, which may not be long in coming);
- continuously pounding public opinion within the Islamic world with themes stressing the need for, and the merits of, upgrading the status of Muslim women by means of media channels similar to those directed at the Soviet bloc during the Cold War;
- imposing punitive measures against countries which flagrantly violate women's rights such as curtailing diplomatic privileges of the representatives of such nations.

It would indeed be difficult to conceive of any other offensive strategy which, on the one hand, would more effectively erode the menacing foundations of fundamentalist fanaticism and induce a positive, moderating transformation in Islamic society; and which, on the other hand, conforms entirely to the moral tenets of liberal democracy. It would seem, therefore, that just as in many other walks of life, the solution to the conflict with radical Islam may also be found in the well-known dictum: *Cherchez la femme*.

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