Islam and Western Peacemaking: Partnerships for a Better World

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For decades Professor Said has worked to expand the frontiers of international relations scholarship, improve Islamic-Western understanding, and generate new insights into the cultural dimension of world politics. Professor Said is deeply involved with a number of professional associations and Service Academies. His past and current public service includes consulting the U.S. Department of State, the Department of Defense, the United Nations and the White House Committee on the Islamic World. He advises and serves on the Board of Directors for various international non-governmental organizations including Search for Common Ground, the National Peace Foundation, PAX International, International Youth Advocate Program, Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, Nonviolence International, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, the El-Hibri Charitable Foundation and the Jones International University-University of the Web. He also serves on the editorial boards of Human Rights Quarterly and Peace Review. He served as advisor to the Democratic Principles Working Group of the United States Department of State’s “Future of Iraq Project” and was an advisor to the members of the Iraqi Governing Council.

Professor Said has authored more than 16 books, including Contemporary Islam: Dynamic, Not Static (co-edited with Meena Sharify-Funk and Mohammad Abu-Nimer, Routledge Publishers) and Islam and Peacemaking in the Middle East (co-authored with Nathan Funk, Lynne Rienner Publishers).
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I. Introduction: Three Stories

Contemporary Islamic-Western relations are at a point of crisis—a moment of danger and challenge, to be sure, but also a time of opportunity. Despite President Obama’s efforts to set a new tone in U.S. relations with the Muslim world, the momentum of current events appears to be leading towards increasing conflict and a deepening sense of mutual alienation. Each act of violence or intolerance appears capable of eliciting a retaliation of equal or greater severity.

Those who fatalistically resign themselves to escalating conflict tend to view Islamic-Western rivalry as an unalterable fact of history, an outcome of incompatible doctrines and values. From this standpoint, there are no transformative policy options; long-term management of delicate, conflicted relations or the pursuit of a decisive cultural or religious victory are the only clear choices.

Those who reject these conclusions offer a different reading of history and of the “other,” in which two interdependent macro-cultures or civilizations have become entangled in dangerous and unnecessarily destructive conflicts that can produce no “winner.” These conflicts threaten the interests and values of both sides—including interests and values that are shared, and that provide common ground for new beginnings.

The more pessimistic interpretation of events is a story of confrontation. According to the pundits and scholars who tell this story, current American-Muslim tensions are only the latest manifestation of a long-standing rivalry between Islam and the West—between civilizations that inevitably manifest opposing identities and irreconcilable values. Each is fated to regard the “other” as inferior and threatening, and to nurse grudges from the distant past as well as grievances from the present.

Those who hold out hope for new beginnings offer a different reading of history and of our present difficulties, and narrate a second story: a story of compatibility rather than a story of confrontation. According to the narrators of this story, the West and Islam partake in a common heritage of civilization, and share many religious as well as humanistic values that provide a basis for cooperation.

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These shared values include a deep respect for learning, affirmation of human dignity, esteem for toleration, and belief that real peace is a presence of conditions for human flourishing (presence of justice, provisions for political coexistence and cultural diversity, cultivation of environmental sustainability), and not merely an absence of violence. While the story of confrontation discounts these shared values and attributes current tensions to a culturally engrained ideological divide, the story of compatibility proposes that fear, ignorance, and mundane political motivations drive much of what has been done to exacerbate Islamic-Western relations.

In addition to the story of compatibility, there is also another story, a new story that is beginning to be told in settings like this one. I call this the story of complementarity.

It begins with the story of compatibility’s affirmation of common ground and shared values, but also acknowledges differences in value priorities. It proposes that mismanaged conflict compromises the most cherished values of each side, and forecloses the possibility of benefiting from the existence of the other in all his or her particularity and uniqueness.

According to the story of complementarity, Islam and the West—and more specifically Americans and Muslims—need each other. Both are here to stay.

American and Muslims need to experience themselves “in relationship” rather than “out of relationship.” They need each other to reassess the meaning of their present estrangement, and to discover ways in which each might be enriched by partnership with the other.

II. Preparing for Peace

To reengage in ways that make partnerships for a better world possible, Americans and Muslims must first ask themselves if they are willing to make new choices.

Americans must choose how they wish to conceive of their own national identity and project it in the world. The United States has the power to select between two paths—one likely to polarize the nations of the world further and one capable of transforming the existing transnational disorder.

The first path is that of “America the Strong.” Because its actions are motivated by fear, America the Strong will continue to pursue a hegemonic foreign policy strategy predicated on ensuring its own security in ways that other nations regard as threatening and contrary to their interests.

To reinstitute order in a manner believed to be in line with its own narrowly conceived interests, the U.S. will continue to support its perceived friends and undermine its perceived enemies based on calculations of short-term power politics. By choosing short-term security, America the Strong will use power in ways that ensure lasting strife and resentment.

The path of “America the Brave” relies on the courage to make short-term, unilateral concessions as well as bilateral and multilateral compromises to ensure long-term global prosperity. This path is one of leadership instead of control. In choosing this path, the U.S. response to mounting
disorder will be a commitment to advancing a more humane global community. The priority in maintaining security will be to address the root causes of disorder instead of concentrating on strategic advantage.

Rather than building ever-higher barriers around itself America the Brave will explore options for constructing bridges to Arabs and Muslims. By recognizing that America needs the world and vice versa—and indeed that the whole world needs the whole world—America the Brave will seek to engage Arabs and Muslims as partners and in doing so set the stage for a new era of cooperative relationship.

U.S. policy in the Middle East is a significant source of Islamic-Western acrimony. Muslim opinions concerning the motivations behind U.S. policy vary, yet the most widespread impressions are that the U.S. government is, at best, strangely indifferent about issues that concern Muslims and, at worst, actively hostile to Islam.

U.S. professions of support for democracy lack credibility among Middle Eastern Muslim audiences, who are convinced that U.S. policies are motivated by a desire to control the region’s natural resources by backing repressive allies and undermining strategic adversaries.

Supporting change in the Muslim Middle East requires appreciating the positive potential of religious activism, which is not merely a source of extremist threats. Changes underway in the domain of religious civic activism can create opportunities for new types of engagement.

No country can control the outcome of internal Islamic debates, yet United States policy has a profound impact on the extent to which Islamic activism will be motivated by desperation or by hope.

Acknowledging positive roles for religion does not mean turning a blind eye to the fact that religions have also been used to justify slavery, imperialism, and opposition to workers’ rights or women’s suffrage. What is necessary, however, is a balanced view that does not regard progress as the child of secularism alone, and that acknowledges the role of new religious thinking in participatory governance, public accountability, human rights, and social justice.

Like Americans, Muslims also have important choices to make. They have the opportunity to choose between a defensive, collectivist outlook that underscores alienation between Muslims and members of other cultural and religious communities, and a more broadly inclusive framework that seeks to make traditional Islamic prescriptions for social justice, human dignity, and cultural pluralism more broadly relevant to the contemporary world.

Defensive uses of Islam overlook the complexities of Islamic history and demonstrate a preoccupation with attributing blame for the current difficulties of Muslim communities. The inclusive, proactive approach recognizes the scope of the challenges, but embraces dialogue and derives dynamism from the belief that the practice of Islam must be as dynamic as the historical and cultural contexts within which Muslims live.
III. An Agenda for U.S.-Muslim Cooperation

Without a comprehensive vision of how U.S.-Muslim coexistence might be achieved, the power of existing cultural mythologies is likely to overwhelm piecemeal cooperative efforts. The following nine suggestions are intended to provoke further thinking about how partnerships can be built across current divides, in ways that embody shared values and give substance to the idea of Islamic-Western complementarity.

1. Strategize for Conflict Transformation

Generally speaking, current U.S. policies manifest an overriding concern to control the direction of events, whereas Muslims hope for change and cultural self-determination. Neither side is sufficiently vigorous in seeking points of leverage for non-violent, constructive responses to social and political ills. Rather than conflict management or conflict escalation, we need cooperative strategies of conflict transformation that address the underlying sources of current tensions.

Recent U.S. proposals to revive or recalibrate a Cold War “containment” framework presuppose a distanced relationship between the United States and the conflicts that motivate extreme Muslim political groups and movements. Such proposals fail to offer effective means for engaging Muslim populations and addressing the problems that fuel extremism—among the more important of which is the widespread impression the U.S. is actively colluding with narrowly based, allied governments to thwart legitimate Muslim aspirations for self-determination, political autonomy, popular participation, and social justice.

Strategizing to transform conflicts in the Middle East and other regions of the Islamic world will require a nuanced approach: less Western control and more effort to achieve Western-Islamic partnership in regional conflict resolution efforts. The U.S. and other Western actors must also be willing to engage with Islamic movements seeking a stake in the political process.

Over the long term, one of the most crucial tasks for peacebuilding is depriving violent extremism of legitimacy.

2. Strengthen Diplomatic Preparedness

Diplomatic discourse intended to win trust rather than cause offense should give increased weight to multilateralism, cultural pluralism, respect, inclusion, consensus-building, and conflict resolution. To communicate respect, new emphasis could be given to the idea of an emergent “global ethic” (forged through interreligious and intercultural dialogue) and to the many (past and present) Islamic contributions to Western culture. Connecting policy principles to a search for shared values might prove particularly useful in relating conceptions of national interest to abiding regional concerns and priorities.

3. Insist on Negotiated Solutions

Though governments may not wish to trumpet a willingness to engage with non-state armed groups, negotiation with insurgent forces is often the only way to put
an end to civil and regional wars. Denying “radical” groups a chance to develop a stake in the political process can make things worse, not better. Because radicalism feeds on unresolved conflict, patient efforts to bridge divides are a necessity if more moderate political dynamics are to have a chance of succeeding.

In addition to creative Western policies that engage multiple stakeholders in the Middle East and South Asia, there is also much room for new Islamic initiatives. The Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, for example, could devote institutional resources to mediation training and to the development of improved mechanisms for dispute resolution and conciliation.

By working together on jointly formulated proposals and nurturing an interreligious “second track” for dialogue and negotiation, Western and Islamic leaders might make significant contributions to peace by reframing the conflict over Israel-Palestine as a feud within the Abrahamic family rather than as an interreligious collision, seen by Muslims as a “crusade” and by Washington as a “defense of democracy.”

Willingness to engage with Islamic movements can give enhanced credibility to Western demonstrations of respect for Islamic symbolism, and can help to ease Muslim perceptions of security threat.

Western policy toward the Middle East should not target Islamic revivalism (which, like Reformation-era movements in the West, is experienced as a process of internal renewal) or Islamic fundamentalist reactions to perceived external threats.

Rather than seek to manipulate intra-regional rivalries such as the Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shi'a divides, Western policy might generate more lasting contributions to security by calling for collaborative efforts to redress grievances used to justify terrorism—for example, the suffering of Palestinians and Iraqis, the maldistribution of resources, and the absence of legitimate and genuinely participatory political authority.

4. Foster Greater Inclusion of Muslims in North American and European Public Life

To support democratic change and human rights abroad effectively, Western countries have a strong interest in practicing what they preach on matters pertaining to cultural and religious diversity. Domestic commitment to cultural and religious inclusion gives diplomats an important resource that can be utilized in the effort to engage Middle Eastern publics, so long as national policies remain free from anti-Muslim or Western exclusivist rigidities. Recent initiatives in the United States and Europe to ban mosques are polarizing rather than promising, and merit principled critique by Western political leaders.

5. Support “Change from Within” in the Islamic World

By contributing to the radicalization of young Muslim men, the “War on Terror” has done more to destabilize Muslim countries
than to cultivate a basis for sustainable peace. Despite this trend, fostering incremental “change from within” in Muslim lands is among the most vital tasks for Western-Islamic partnership. The United States and other Western countries can best support positive internal developments by promoting political participation within structures appropriate to the needs and culture of the people, and not by unreflectively promoting the transplantation of Western models or supporting authoritarian regimes.

Rather than seek to globalize its own models for politics, economy, and society, the U.S. needs to acknowledge that there is more than one way to work toward the goal of a more humane, prosperous, and peaceful society. Peace in the Middle East and in other world regions needs to be locally rooted.

Localizing peace in Islamic contexts means making active use of local peace resources. Local resources for peace take many forms. They are present in religious and cultural value systems, in historical memories and narratives of conflicts resolved, in culture-specific vocabularies for speaking about peacemaking, and in indigenous (and often informal) processes of community dispute resolution.

Peacebuilding initiatives that take advantage of local resources are more likely to prove sustainable, effective, and empowering than those that do not. They are empowering because they enable local change agents to advance peace using tools and symbols that immediately accessible, familiar, and culturally legitimate.

6. Use Public Diplomacy to Listen as Well as to Speak

In the United States after 9/11, one of the more immediate concerns—beyond the tightening of security measures and the formulation of a military strategy—was to ensure that public diplomacy efforts were adequate to “sell” the U.S. and its policies overseas. This concern for marketing, however, was not accompanied by a comparable interest in the saleability of the foreign policy product, or in the utility of public diplomacy for taking the measure of foreign publics and discovering their messages for Americans. There is no easy substitute for addressing disagreements head on, in a manner that reflects openness to dialogue. Vigorous public relations packaging cannot by itself solve the problem.

At its best, public diplomacy is a valuable instrument which the U.S. and other Western nations can use to open channels of two-way communication with Muslim societies.

An effective public diplomacy strategy starts with actively listening to voices in the region—not only to their words and ideas, but also to the emotions and experiences behind the words and ideas. Active listening, an invaluable skill for conflict resolution and the cultivation of sustained dialogue, can also be an indispensable tool of analysis. In listening, the U.S. and other Western countries may begin to appreciate why their intentions have often been doubted by Muslims.
7. Foster Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue

Active engagement permits us to understand and recognize the authentic expressions of human religiosity, and protects us from the politics of manipulated symbolism. It defuses the felt need to continually defend legitimate religious beliefs and institutions. Visible partnerships across cultural, religious, and political divides are not a panacea, but they are an invaluable corrective for the sort of groupthink that led to damaging and counter-productive post-9/11 policies in the US. Their mere existence helps to undermine the “us vs. them” logic that threatens to shred the fabric of contemporary societies, with their deep-rooted cultural, ethnic, and religious pluralism.

To advance such bridge-building efforts, Western as well as Muslim governments should encourage and facilitate interreligious dialogue, multifaith projects, and coexistence initiatives—forms of encounter and engagement that provide positive roles for religion in public life.

It is not enough simply to condemn radical religion; people need positive examples of faith-based engagement that channel religious energies towards positive alternative visions. The popularity of the Left Behind series in some North American quarters suggests that this need for hopeful visions applies to Western Christians as well as to Muslims; in both communities there is a need for initiatives that open channels of communication and demonstrate the viability of coexistence.

8. Support Religious Peacemaking

Even when many of the motivations behind “religious” conflict are not particularly spiritual in nature, religiously based peacemaking activity can help to counteract misdirected forms of religious devotion. When specifically religious values are perceived to be at stake, and when religion is being used to galvanize confrontation and justify violence, peacemaking can be greatly assisted by engagement with the religious dimension of conflict.

One of the more important challenges in contemporary interfaith peacebuilding efforts is moving beyond the introductory stages of dialogue toward more enduring partnerships and coalitions. Such partnerships and coalitions need not be formalized in independent organizations, but shared commitment to dialogue and public education efforts over an extended period of time would appear vital for the consolidation of deeper understanding, as well as for the full development of problem-based explorations and “people-to-people” activities.

The “people-to-people” aspect of interfaith peacebuilding provides invaluable contact between people of faith who inhabit markedly different social and cultural realities; more focused activities can address challenges religious communities share in defining their approaches to issues such as citizenship, pluralism, peace, hunger, poverty, ecology, and development.

Given the increasing vulnerability of holy sites to acts of violence by members of rival faith communities—and the reality that
symbolic attacks on sacred sites are often a prelude to hate crimes and can contribute greatly to conflict escalation—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish religious leaders should seriously contemplate joint action to protect sacred places.

Partnership to protect holy sites such as churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques could take many forms, including local initiatives in diverse communities and countries. There is room, however, for a global advocacy campaign, potentially leading to an international convention signed by nation-states.

9. Identify and Implement Intercultural Confidence-Building Measures

Contact between Muslims and Westerners can and should be institutionalized to support regular interaction and mutual learning. In addition to public diplomacy and greater effort on the part of diplomats in the field to make contact with social leaders, governments and especially non-governmental groups can promote youth exchanges, intercontinentially linked classrooms, and even sister city programs. Through collaborative action, we can create interfaith structures for peace.

Both Western and Muslim endowments could be established to fund creative new interfaith programming and content in diverse areas of cultural life, from the visual arts, music, theatre, literature, television, and film to sport and recreation. Particular effort could be made to engage and tap the energies of youth, and to enable young people to share their stories through use of digital media and the internet. To educate children about their commonalities, endowments could sponsor the production of interfaith stories that could be published in books and also broadcast via television and the World Wide Web. Provisions could even be made to subsidize the development of dramatic motion pictures in which positive themes of interfaith solidarity and understanding are central to plot and character development.

These programs and others should seek to broaden public awareness of historical examples of interfaith coexistence, such as the “La Convivencia” in Al-Andalus, Muslim Spain. Such examples of Muslims, Christians, and Jews living together and working together on common scholarly, artistic, and literary endeavors can serve to disrupt narratives of confrontation, enrich our contemporary imagination, and provide a symbolic framework for intercultural and interreligious projects.

Existing initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations at the United Nations can continue to play an important role by mapping out the issues that divide Islamic and Western societies as a prelude to rapprochement based on reciprocity as well as “pre-emptive” conciliatory measures.

These efforts could be extended and enhanced through the founding of an Interfaith Institute of Peace that would seek to advance the knowledge and practice of faith-based and interfaith peacemaking, and to increase public awareness of peace precepts in the world’s many religious traditions.
Given that current arguments for environmentally sustainable and renewable energy are being couched in national security terms, there is room for rethinking in this domain as well. The language of “energy independence” reinforces the perception that the only way to improve America’s troubled relationship with the Muslim Middle East is to sever it. Given that complete national autarky in the domain of energy is improbable, we might as well embrace the logic of sustainable energy interdependence and use it as an impetus for further problem solving and relationship building.

Projects oriented towards sustainable energy interdependence might take many forms, including collaborative research and development initiatives in renewable energy sources (the energies of the future, even for countries with large remaining petroleum reserves). Joint initiatives could also be directed toward the creation of experimental, solar energy communities in North Africa and the Middle East. With sufficient international resources and support, peasants in rural Egypt and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip could become pioneers in the global search for sustainable futures.

IV. Conclusion: Giving Life to the New Story

Islam and the West are truly between stories—between the stories of the past, and the story that they must now create together. All who identify with Islam and with the West can become coauthors of this new story, and not merely those who reside in the Middle East and North America.

We are all heirs of the story of conflict. If we leave aside tired generalizations and seek to know one another, we can become the architects of a truly new order of cooperation. The possibility of fostering a “new story” of complementarity between the West and Muslims is a function of deep changes in the character of global politics. The inexorable dynamics of modern history rule out pretensions by any one group of finding a “separate peace” or establishing worldwide hegemony.

We have moved from a humanity that experienced its collective life as fragments of the whole to a humanity that must experience itself as whole—a humanity that must come to terms with realities of interdependence in the spheres of economics, ecology, culture, and politics. Security is no longer the private good of a particular state and nation that may be purchased at the expense of others, but a public good that can be achieved only through the cultivation of consensus and collaboration within a framework of dialogue and reciprocity.

Morality, too, is a public good, as it is deeply related to issues of collective human well-being. We cannot afford to separate security from justice—that is, from a fair distribution of costs and benefits derived from participation in global economic and political institutions.

The new story of complementarity exists only in the form of a working outline, and can begin with the simplest of acknowledgements: Islam and the West are “stuck” with each other, and have no choice but to learn to coexist.
Much progress can be made in the pursuit of reconciliation when Muslims and Westerners approach one another with humility, in a spirit of dialogue. There is no reason to accept the proposition that the West and Islam are predestined to remain rivals; a more positive mode of cultural encounter could involve the West offering Middle Eastern Muslims the best that it has in exchange for the best that Muslims can offer to the West.

Notes


3. Center for Strategic and International Studies, Mixed Blessings, p. 17.
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