# Dialogues of Civilizations after 9/11 with Specific Reference to the West-Islam Cultural Divide: Promises and Obstacles[1]

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## Abstrak

Tujuan utama kertas ini ialah untuk membincangkan beberapa aspek berkaitan dengan isu dialog antara Islam dan dunia Barat. Perbincangan tertumpu pada dialog selepas peristiwa 11 September. Kertas ini cuba menjawab beberapa soalan berhubung dengan dialog antara Islam dan Barat. Soalan pertama, apakah kesan peristiwa 11 September ke atas hubungan masa kini dan masa depan antara dua 'kelompok' besar dunia ini? Soalan kedua, apakah kesan peristiwa tersebut dan perkembangan-perkembangan berikutnya ke atas dialog antara Islam dan Barat yang sudah banyak berlaku sebelum peristiwa itu? Dalam memberi jawapan kepada soalan ini, penulis menjelaskan bahawa pada mulanya peristiwa itu telah menyebabkan dialog antara agama dan dialog antara peradaban banyak berkurangan. Tetapi mulai tahun 2003 aktiviti dialog berkembang dan bercambah sehingga menjadi lebih rancak berbanding dengan sebelum 11 September. Penulis juga menarik perhatian kepada pelbagai rintangan terhadap dialog yang berpunca daripada golongan ekstremis di kedua-dua belah pihak. Bagi mengakhiri tulisannya, penulis cuba menjawab soalan ketiga dan terakhir, iaitu apakah yang perlu dilakukan demi memajukan lagi dialog antara Islam dan Barat dan demi mematahkan rintangan-rintangan besar terhadap dialog. Sebelum menjawab ketiga-tiga

soalan, penulis terlebih dahulu membangkitkan beberapa isu dan kesulitan yang berpunca daripada penggunaan frasa 'Islam dan dunia Barat.'

## Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on "dialogues of civilizations" or as some would prefer to call it "civilizational dialogues." However, I am restricting the scope of discussion on the subject in the following respects. First, notwithstanding the importance of other world civilizations,[3] I am limiting the dialogue to that between "Islam and the West."[4] This limitation does not in any way deprive non-Muslims and non-Westerners of benefits of the discussion since the issue of "Islam and the West" is of importance to the global community. Were relations between Islam or the Muslim world and the West to deteriorate to dangerous and threatening levels, the whole world and not just them, is going to be adversely affected.

Second, I am limiting the dialogue between Islam and the West to the post-9/11 era. There is a lot of sense in concentrating on the post-9/11 era by virtue of the great significance of the 9/11 tragedy and its aftermath on our contemporary world. As indicative of the 'extraordinary' situation in which we have found ourselves as a result of this tragedy are claims made by parties from both sides of the "Islam-West" cultural divide that a "clash of civilizations" between the two, as postulated by Huntington, has indeed already taken place. Third, in speaking of dialogue between "Islam and the

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[3] Recognizing the importance of dialogue of all world civilizations, and not just dialogue between Islam and the West, we took initiatives to establish in 1995 a Center for Civilizational Dialogue at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur with the main purpose of promoting dialogues of religions, cultures, and civilizations through seminars, conferences, university teaching curricula, and publications. Our best known effort in this respect was the international dialogue between Islam and Confucianism in 1995 and another international dialogue between Islam, Japan, and the West in 1996. As these dialogues were partly in response to Samuel Huntington's controversial thesis "clash of civilizations," we invited him to attend the 1996 conference to which he in fact came. For publications resulting from these two dialogue conferences, see Osman Bakar and Cheng Gek Nai, eds., *Islam and Confucianism: a Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1997); and Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue: the Quest for a Truly Universal Civilization* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1997).

[4] More and more people are questioning the appropriateness and validity of the expression "Islam and the West" and I think this would be of major consequence to the issue of dialogue of civilizations that involve the West and Islam. I will shortly discuss this issue.

West" I am skipping the issue of its rationalization and justification.[5] Instead, the necessity of dialogue between the two civilizations is accepted here as a given. My focus will be on the impact of 9/11 on the development of dialogue of civilizations between the Islamic world and the West in terms of its promises for the future and the range of obstacles it has to face.

In pursuing the thrust of my discussion that I have just defined, I will try to answer a few questions pertinent to the subject. First question, how does the 9/11 tragedy impact present and future relations between Islam and the West? Second question, how does 9/11 and its aftermath impact on the development of dialogues between Islam and the West? Are we making progress in dialogue of civilizations since 9/11? If we are, then what are its promises for the future of our global community? Is the progress encouraging enough to make us feel optimistic about the future? If, on the contrary, very little progress has been made in the last four years or almost none at all, then what are the reasons for the lack of progress? Third and final question, by way of concluding our discussion, what can we all do to enhance the promises of dialogue and to diminish obstacles to dialogue?

## Impact of 9/11 on relations between Islam and the West

Let me now answer the first question: how does the 9/11 tragedy impact on present and future relations between Islam and the West? Before attempting to give a fairly reasonable estimation of the impact, let us be clear about our usage of the popular phrase 'Islam and the West' and try to understand how justified we are in using that phrase.[6] If the underlying idea in the usage of the phrase is comparing and contrasting between two seemingly different entities then we could say that the objects of comparison and contrast are hardly appropriate. The entity, Islam, may be understood in several senses. It is first of all the name of a religion (*din*), thus signifying a religious entity. It has also been used to refer to the community of its followers (*ummah*) bound together by common beliefs and a common religious law furnished by the religion. In this sense, it also signifies a religious and politico-cultural entity. The term Islam is sometimes used to refer to the culture and civilization (*hadarah; tamaddun*) that the religion has produced

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[5] We have addressed this issue in several of our writings, especially from the point of view of Islamic theology and law. See our works *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue*; 'Inter-civilizational Dialogue: Theory and Practice in Islam' Nakamura Mitsuo, Sharon Siddique, and Omar Farouk Bajunid,eds., *Islam and Civil Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001); 'Pluralism and the "People of the Book": an Islamic Faith Perspective' Robert A. Sieple and Dennis Hoover, eds., *Religion and Security: the New Nexus in International Relations* (Boulder-New York-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005); and 'The Qur'an's Universal Perspectives on Dialogue of Religions and Civilizations and Islam's Theological Foundation of Peaceful Existence' *Al-Shajarah*, 10:2 (2006), pp. 135-167

[6] The new interest on the issue of appropriateness of the phrase "Islam and the West" is itself the result of a post-9/11 perspective on the western understanding of Islam.

in its history. If by Islam we mean all these things, then, in comparing it with the West, are we not comparing an apple with an orange?

We know that the West, strictly speaking, is a geographical entity, whereas Islam is not. Those who insist on using the phrase 'Islam and the West' have actually opted for a loose definition of 'Islam' and likewise of 'the West.' The prevailing argument is, more than a geographical entity, the West as a whole also stands for a culture and a civilization that seems distinguishable from non-Western cultures and civilizations, particularly that of Islam. Arguing in the reverse in the case of Islam, these very same people are quick to maintain that although first and foremost Islam is a religion, a culture, and a civilization, it could also be understood as a geographical entity since it is synonymous with the Islamic world. Apparently, the underlying assumption of this argument is that, culturally and politically speaking, each of Islam and the West constitutes a monolithic entity or block. But this traditional assumption is no longer sound. The argument in question is therefore weak.

Moreover, in practical terms, it neither serves the West nor Islam – nor world peace – to persist in characterizing them as two monolithic blocks without having any commonality whatsoever, in perpetual hostility, and all out to dominate or vanquish the other. It certainly does not help the West to come to mutually acceptable terms with its Muslim minorities. Conversely, it does not help the Islamic world to appreciate the importance of the West as the other civilization in the contemporary world that could serve as the most important external source of enrichment of Muslim culture and civilization.

We now present a few arguments why it is getting increasingly problematic if not somewhat meaningless to speak not only of "Islam and the West" but even to speak of "the Islamic world and the West." The glaring fact before our eyes is that Islam today is no longer synonymous with what has been traditionally known as the Islamic world. For one thing, the term "Islamic world" has itself become problematic! Muslims in the post-colonial period live in nation-states, some which they rule and in which they are majorities, and others in which they are minorities living under non-Muslim rule. Do we then mean by "the Islamic world" the group comprising of all Muslim majority and Muslim-ruled nation-states? If that is the case, then we have to exclude about 500 million Muslims or a third of the world's Muslims from the "Islamic world," because they happen to live as minorities. As we all know, there are large numbers of Muslims living, for example, in China and India, both of which are largely non-Muslim. Because of the big size of these two Muslim minorities and also because Islam has long been an integral part of the cultural and religious landscape of both countries many Muslims do not want them to be excluded from the world called "Islam." As a matter of fact, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) has incorporated them into its membership. In so doing, this foremost

international Muslim body has abandoned the traditional reference to the "Islamic world."

Equally problematic in the reference to "Islam and the West" is the presence of Islam in the West. In recent years, Islam has grown in the West to the point of becoming its second largest religion. The case of two Balkan nations, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, both aspiring members of the European Union, is in this respect demographically interesting, adding color and complexity to a picture of increasing overlapping between Islam and the West. Albania is European but a Muslim majority nation (70%). As for Bosnia-Herzegovina, its biggest religious group is Muslim accounting for as much as 45% of the population. The mere fact that we have the presence of Western Muslims in large numbers who proudly assert they belong to both Islam and the West make it more and more inappropriate for us to refer to the West and Islam as two mutually exclusive entities and as two necessarily diametrically opposed cultures and civilizations.

As another argument, the West is not a religious entity in the sense Islam is. The West is neither a religion nor a religious community. It can hardly be identified with one particular religion or with a single religious community, even though Christianity remains to this day its dominant religion. The only meaningful comparison and contrast that we can have between Islam and the West is if we were to understand both as referring to culture and civilization. But the moment we are speaking of each of them as a culture or as a civilization and then examining their relationships in history we would come to realize that interactions between the two civilizations have been far more intensive and complex than what many people think. True enough there were periods of tension, conflicts and wars, but then, equally true, there were also periods of peace, fruitful dialogue, and creative mutual cultural borrowings.

A contemporary aspiration for a constructive dialogue of civilizations between "Islam and the West" has to take cognizance of this important historical fact as much as it has to be duly sensitive to new realities enveloping global relations between Western and Muslim societies in the post-colonial era and to the growing importance of the "Islam factor" in influencing that relationship. Without doubt, 9/11 has created new realities and new perceptions that raise questions about the direction in which their relations are going. Looking at the past, there are precedents for optimism as well as precedents for pessimism. Likewise, in the new realities in the West and in the new realities in the "Islamic world," there are grounds for both hope and despair. But here we are far more concerned with the new realities in both worlds and with new possibilities in their relationships rather than with past relationships. Dialogue of civilizations would be interested primarily in the new possibilities of peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the light of the new realities, especially in the post-9/11 era.

In view of the arguments we have just presented, when we are speaking of the impact of 9/11 on dialogue of civilizations between "Islam and the

West", it is necessary to point out we are using the term "Islam" primarily in reference to the global Muslim community and its civilization, and the term "the West" as embracing its Muslim minorities. In other words, at least for the purpose of this essay, the old phrase "Islam and the West" is being used in the light of an awareness of new realities influencing post-9/11 Muslims-Westerners relationship.

The new realities may be best described in terms of a growing "Islamic presence" in the West and likewise a growing "Western presence" in the Islamic world. The Islamic presence in the West takes the form of a fast growing Muslim community together with their religion Islam and their diverse ethnic cultures. The Western presence in the Islamic world embraces the whole domain of what is usually called modern civilization, including education, law, politics, religion, economics, art, literature, social norms, and the military. Both presences force us to rethink and reexamine our current perception and understanding of the Islam-West "dichotomous and problematic" relationship. Pursuing this rethinking and reexamination has obvious implications for the meaning and scope of dialogue of civilizations deemed appropriate to the improvement of their relations.

If the dialogue is envisaged as one between the West and Islam understood as meaning both religion and its world-wide community, the global *ummah*, then it has to involve the participation of representatives of Islam in the West. Such participation, if it were to be meaningful at all, requires both the West and the Islamic world to rethink their traditional perceptions of and attitudes toward each other. The Islamic world must know that while Western Muslims are expected to speak up on behalf of Islam the religion they would not necessarily endorse every position it has adopted even if it is in the name of Islam, since they also have to speak up on behalf of their own Western interests especially when they see these interests do not conflict with the teachings of Islam. As a matter of fact, we are witnessing American and European Muslims already behaving this way. Muslim American ambassadors speak in the name of their country's interests, and not that of the "Islamic world." As for the West, it has to know that as followers of the religion of Islam its Muslim citizens are bound to have sympathy with the Islamic world on global issues they perceive as legitimate from the point of view of both Islamic and international justice. Consequently, the West has to dialogue with a part of itself, namely its Muslim minorities. For this reason, 9/11 and its aftermath has elevated the public profile of Muslim communities in the West to a new and more visible level.

Even when the dialogue is purported to be one between "the West and the Islamic world," it would be in the interest of the former to call upon the participation of its Muslim citizens. But from the point of view of dialogue of civilizations, the implications for the West, including its Muslim minorities, remain the same. As for the Islamic world, it has to realize that it is not a monolithic block, just as the West is not. Many people in the West

have realized this, and they are also aware that the Western presence in the Islamic world has exercised as an important factor in generating post-colonial intra-Islamic pluralism. There is a large segment of modernized and Westernized Muslims in the Islamic world. It is from within their rank that sympathizers of the Western presence in the Islamic world have emerged.

From the point of view of Western group advocates of dialogue of civilizations between "Islam and the West," the participation in dialogues – more generally in nation-building – of non-Western Muslims but who are pro-Western presence, is vital to their national interest. Quite obviously, Western advocates of dialogue are interested in looking for Muslim counterparts who have a lot of things in common with them. As a good example, most of the Islam and democracy discourses that are going on now in many parts of the Islamic world, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, have been initiated either by Westerners or by Muslims who are pro-Western democracy.

If for no other reason, the Western presence in the Islamic world is good enough for the latter to embark on a grand dialogue not just with the West but also with itself. An intra-Islamic dialogue is a necessary condition for peace within the house of Islam, and this in turn is crucial to the success of "Islam- the West" dialogue of civilizations. Our foregoing discussion illustrates how important it is to go beyond superficialities in our current usage of the expression "Islam and the West."

In the post-9/11 era, however, the Western presence in the Islamic world under the United States' leadership has taken a new meaning and significance, especially with the increase in its military presence. The 9/11 tragedy for which Osama bin Laden has admitted responsibility has unleashed a chain of events that succeeded in creating unprecedented tension and animosity between the West (minus its Muslim minorities) and the global Muslim community (the Islamic world plus Muslim minorities) not seen since the colonial period. The United States' response to the terrorist attack has resulted in its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq with immediate and long-term consequences not only for the two countries concerned but also for the Islamic world as a whole and indeed for the global community in general. Its resulting war on terrorism has already left a visible and significant impact on Muslim societies all over the globe whether they are majorities or minorities.[7] In the West, particularly in the United States, its Muslim communities have to suffer the consequences of a prevailing perception that the religion of Islam has inspired the 9/11 attack. They have to endure various kinds of animosities and backlashes from segments of the American public. Worst of all, Islam has been attacked as a violent religion that condones terrorism.

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[7] For a detailed discussion of the impact of the American war on terror on global Islam with a special reference to Malaysian Islam, see Osman Bakar 'The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam' *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 107-127, April 2005.

On the global scale, there is widespread Muslim anger and criticism at the United States for its conduct of the war and its overzealous implicating of Muslims in terrorism which they take as ample proof of its hostility toward Muslims and Islam. The war on terror has radicalized Muslim politics in many countries, resulting in the emergence of fringe "extremist" groups that are prepared to commit terror in the name of Islam anywhere they see fit. The vicious cycle of attack and counterattack has transformed our world into a more violent and less secure place than at any other time in the recent past and with promises of more terrorism. Perpetrators of terror attacks in Bali, Jakarta, Manila, Madrid and London linked to the Qaeda claimed that these attacks have been carried out to avenge the United States-led war on Afghanistan and Iraq.

At a more substantive level and from a longer term point of view, the most significant impact of 9/11 and the American war on terror would be the 'civilizational' transformation, particularly in its political and religious aspects, that awaits both the United States and the Islamic world. The American promise of a post-war societal construction, including in the name of popular democracy and emancipation of Muslim women is not yet fulfilled, but if it succeeds then it will not just change the faces of Afghanistan and Iraq but possibly of the entire Islamic world.[8] The consequences of the war on terror for the United States itself could be far reaching. The world's lone superpower has become obsessed with security in a way not seen for a long time, and it is paying dearly for its security. Its engagement with Islam and Muslims at home and abroad is intensifying on many fronts. It looks like it is confronted with a global political situation that promises a prolonged engagement with global Islam regardless of whether it chooses to pursue its present Middle East policies or to bring about a lasting peace in the region.

## Post-9/11 dialogue of civilizations

The general impact of the 9/11 tragedy on present and future relations between "Islam and the West" that we have just outlined brings us to the second question that we have earlier posed. How does the impact affect the development of dialogues of civilizations between "Islam and the West" that have been going on well before the 9/11 terrorist attack? Apparently, there was a brief setback in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy when advocates of dialogue, particularly Muslims, felt that all their pre-9/11 good works in the promotion of interfaith and inter-civilizational understanding have been blown to ashes as a result of the tragedy. Since the tragedy has been attributed to the Muslim al-Qaeda, Muslims in the West tended to become objects of suspicion among intelligence and security officials and even objects of abuse and hate mongering, especially among right-wing extremists. There was also the feeling that it was the believers in "clash of civilizations" thesis, who had got the upper hand in the global debate on that controversial issue. We could hear voices in the American media claiming that the 9/11 terrorist attack itself constituted a "clash of two

cultures." On the Muslim side, Dr Mahathir Mohammad, the former outspoken Prime Minister of Malaysia highly critical of the West, indicated his belief that the United States-led war on terror has succeeded in turning Huntington's idea of the "clash of civilizations" into reality.[9] But a more informed opinion would endorse the view that 9/11 and the American counterattack are by no means sufficient to support the claim that a clash of civilizations, meaning between "Islam and the West," has already taken place. Nonetheless, they would concede the fact that there are many post-9/11 events and developments that appear to be bringing "Islam and the West" closer to the brink of a clash of civilizations.

Interestingly, many Muslim advocates of dialogue then felt they were the ones who had lost the most as a result of the 9/11 setback. That feeling seems understandable, since in the 1990s Muslim participation in dialogues of religions and civilizations at both national and international levels, be it in the West or in the Islamic world, had gained momentum, culminating in the *Tehran Declaration on Dialogue Among Civilizations* issued by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) at the end of its Symposium on Dialogue Among Civilizations held in Tehran on May 3-5, 1999.[10] Centers dedicated to dialogues of civilizations had sprung up in many parts of the Islamic world such as in Kuala Lumpur, Amman, and Tehran. Fortunately, much to the delight of dialogue advocates, particularly Muslims, dialogue initiatives recovered their momentum, as these centers reactivated their dialogue programs and more new centers were established. The World Economic Forum based in Switzerland, for example, has established an outfit known as "the West-Islamic world Dialogue Initiative" with equal number of Muslim and Western members. The latest high profile dialogue initiative is the United Nations-supported Project named "Alliance of Civilizations" launched on 27-29 November 2005 by its Secretary-General.[11]

However, it is in the United States itself that we see the greatest upsurge in interfaith, intercultural and inter-civilizational dialogues in the last two years. Muslim dialogue activists and academics whether in their individual capacity or as parts of dialogue groups, are participating in dialogue activities that appear to be steadily growing and expanding. They would dialogue with Christians or Jews or, in the case of the "Abrahamic trialogue", with both. The encouraging thing is that Jews, Christians, and Muslims have taken dialogue initiatives either separately by themselves or collectively.

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[8] Considering that civil war has erupted in Iraq, even among Americans, let alone among Muslims, fewer and fewer of them are still optimistic of a post-Saddam Iraq that would be democratic and stable. Post-Taliban Afghanistan has fared slightly better, but its political and security situation is still precarious.

[9] O. Bakar, 'The Impact of the American War on Terror on Malaysian Islam,' p. 111.

[10] For the full text of the Declaration, see *Al-Mootamar* (New York: The Organization of the Islamic Conference, 1999), issue no. 4

It is not an exaggeration to claim that these days, everyday there is at least one dialogue program taking place somewhere in the United States that involves Islam or Muslims. American Muslims have been greatly encouraged by the fact that, contrary to earlier expectations, the 9/11 tragedy has not put off Americans from knowing Islam. On the contrary, the tragedy has resulted in more and more Americans taking their own initiatives in trying to discover or to better understand Islam. According to one poll result, the percentage of Americans claiming to know more about Islam since the 9/11 tragedy has significantly increased.

Given all these facts and developments, we tend to think that despite all odds, dialogues of civilizations have progressed surprisingly well in the post 9/11 era save for the brief lull of dialogue activity within the first one year of the attack. The momentum for dialogue in both the West and in the Islamic world in the last few years is a good ground for optimism. The progress made has been all the more remarkable when we consider the fact that obstacles to dialogue are many, varied, and, in the case of some them, quite major enough to be a cause for worry. The most serious obstacle to dialogue is the persisting political and religious extremism displayed on both sides. It would take much efforts and ingenuity on the part of many people to effectively counter the threat of extremism.

## Conclusion: Promises of dialogues and confronting their obstacles

Let me conclude this paper by answering the third and final question that I have earlier posed. What can we all do to enhance the promises of dialogue and to diminish its obstacles? The root cause of hatred of the other or belligerent attitudes toward it is ignorance. It is also ignorance that causes indifference to dialogue. That is why it is important to root out this ignorance through numerous programs of intercultural and inter-civilizational understanding such as dialogues, educational curricula, social meetings, and dissemination of relevant information to the widest possible audience. The main aim of these programs should be to promote mutual understanding through the strengthening of commonalities and to inculcate respect for irreconcilable differences. All sectors of society, both governmental and non-governmental need to join hands in promoting dialogues and keeping them on track, no matter what.

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[11] The initiative has been jointly taken by the Prime Minister of Spain, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Although the project is purportedly an alliance of civilizations enterprise, the thrust of the dialogue seems to be directed at the "problematic" relationships between the Islamic world and the West as is clear from the membership of the High-Level Group responsible for submitting the final report on the project to the United Nations Secretary-General.

Given the pluralistic nature of our global community, dialogue among cultures and civilizations has to be seen as something necessary for our societal salvation. It has to be accepted as an integral part of our emerging twenty-first century global culture. Toward that end we need to share our understanding of, and commitment to the virtues of dialogue.