

March 16, 2007

Moshe Ma'oz began his presentation on *Islam and the West: Confrontation or Dialogue?* with an apologetic promise: he guaranteed to depress participants with a discussion on the "muddle East." However, he proceeded to explain how Western diplomats and academics might be the ones truly muddled. For example, he recollected his experience at a meeting with Jeane Kilpatrick, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, who indicated that participants should "be careful negotiating with Arabs. Arabs are Muslims, Islam breeds violence." Other high diplomats and world leaders such as Pope Benedict XVI have also expanded their criticism of Islam. In the United States, the leader of the Pentagon once commented that "Muslims worship an idol, not a God, and they hate the Judeo-Christian religion," and despite his later apology, President Bush's reference to a "crusade" hardly seems to be accidental, particularly given his coining of the phrase "Islamofacism."

Western scholars, especially in the United States and Israel, have begun to refer to the new "green danger," a fellow of the red and yellow dangers of yesterday, whose common goal is to destroy Western Civilization. Others of Ma'oz's colleagues have begun to equate Islam with terrorism. For example, Bernard Lewis has spoken on CNN about the "1400 years of strife" between Islam and Christianity. He presents the image of Islam emerging like a warrior out of the desert, with the Koran in one hand in a sword or the other. The West, he suggests, is being asked to join or be destroyed.

This simplification, Ma'oz insists, is too good to be true. Although the problem should not be understated, it would be a mistake to assume that militant groups somehow represent the Islamic mainstream. For one thing, there is no single Muslim authority, directing Muslims to destroy the West. In fact, much of the violence linked to Islam is not even based on religion, but on other factors. As evidence for this statement, Ma'oz referred to the large percent of the 57 Islamic countries which are peaceful and moderate. In addition, he pointed out the existence of other motivations to violence, such as social and economic difficulties, corruption, lack of education, and lack of representation.

Religious terrorist groups, who tend to be marginalized in the Islamic society, differ among themselves as well. Although some, most prominently al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, have pan-Islamic goals, others, notably Hamas and Hezbollah, are more nationalist in scope and ambition. Still other groups, such as Amr in Lebanon, may have tenuous links to militant groups to promote their goals, but limit their support due to differing aspirations. Muslims in general just want to live well. Religion may at times be used to manipulate people, but this can work for and against anti-Western movements, as exemplified by Sadat's use of a fatwa to justify Egypt's recognition of Israel.

The United States has can respond to Islamic influences through dialogue, rather than confrontation. For example, Ma'oz suggests that the United States seek allies in the Muslim world, encouraging pragmatic leadership, and also to seek political solutions to longstanding issues, such as Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. In addition, he suggests that the U.S. seek a greater spread of "Western ideas" by encouraging more Arab and Muslim students to study in the U.S. These ideas may or may not include democracy, which some argue is already inherent in Islam, but should emphasize human rights, representation, and education. The best way to counter extremism may be to "drain the quagmire" by undercutting the radicals' support base in this way. The United States may be in a fairly unique position to have this effect on Muslims. This is because America has tended to be more accepting of religion and scholarship and also has the economic stability and opportunity many young Muslims crave.

Following Professor Ma'oz's presentation, the group discussed possible reasons for the animosity between Western Civilization and Islam. It was pointed out that the stereotypes used by both sides have not changed since the introduction of the major religions. They reappear in literature and politics, correlating with perceived military threat between, for example, Islam and Christianity during the Crusades and during more recent times following the attacks of September 11, 2001. One participant pointed out that Huntington's long-discredited "Clash of Civilizations" still rings true to many of the Religious Right in the United States who perceive the current situation as an attack by Islam against Western civilization. As another participant indicated, students in Morocco found this idea of the "Clash" more painful than anything else the United States did. In addition, students tended to resent American arrogance, particularly when it was imposed, rather than allowing communities to develop their own brand of "Western" ideas, particularly political institutions.