

# American Culture and the Muslim World

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This is a particularly difficult period for Americans, as we struggle with internal economic and fiscal challenges even as we continue to take stock of our place in the post-9/11 world. But take stock we must. And as we do so, one of the most elusive challenges that we face is coming to terms with the cultural dimension of our encounter with the Muslim world. Even now, as we skirmish over issues such as abortion and gay marriage here at home, Americans fail to appreciate how our cultural values affect our relations with Muslims around the globe—and with the Muslims in our midst, many of whom are fellow citizens. This is in part because cultural forces are downplayed or ignored as relevant concerns by our intellectual and foreign policy elites. This neglect is regrettable, for while there are some aspects of American culture that Muslims find problematic or repellent, there are others that they find—or might find, if made aware—appealing, even admirable. Our unwillingness or inability to address any of these cultural phenomena renders America all the more ineffective at addressing the Muslim world. This essay aims to begin righting this imbalance by exploring some cultural differences—as well as some similarities—between Muslims and non-Muslims.

## Material Acquisitiveness: One Side of the Coin

The nation's financial and economic crises understandably command our immediate attention. But as should be evident, we are dealing not merely with an economic

system but with the beliefs and values on which it is based, which constitute a way of life.

Many Americans, along with our friends and enemies overseas, routinely attribute our current predicament to our acquisitiveness. Lurking beneath the surface of this diagnosis is the conviction that the true source of America's quest for global dominance, however chastened it may be at the moment, is the inordinate appetite of its people for material possessions and pleasures. But is this, as we so often hear, simply a matter of "greed"?

First, it must be acknowledged that Americans' enormous consumer wants and our willingness to go into debt to satisfy them have distinguished us from most other advanced industrial democracies. But if we stop to examine the origins of the present crisis, it arises in part from otherwise laudable efforts to satisfy the aspirations of economically marginal African Americans and Hispanic immigrants to become homeowners. Indeed, the specific goal of increasing minority home ownership was a critical component of the rationale for the policies and institutional arrangements that got us into the present mess. Put differently, the greed of investors was gratified in part by an effort to promote what was viewed by Republicans and Democrats alike as a laudable social policy goal, even as social justice. Many would prefer to forget this today, but during the 1990s and well into the first decade of the new century, those who cautioned against increasing reliance on the sub-prime mortgages that were being marketed to economically marginal home-buyers risked being accused of indifference toward those struggling to achieve the American Dream. In some instances, such skeptics were accused of racism.

Moral as well as analytic clarity is essential here. Since the financial system sustained by those practices and institutions came crashing down, it has been these same economically marginal families who have been suffering

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the most. It would of course be naive to deny that the aspirations of such individuals were at times tainted by poor judgment and excess. Nor are human motives easily disentangled and judged. One person's drive and ambition is, after all, another's greed. Nevertheless, pointing out that immigrant and minority aspirations contributed to the debacle should in no way be interpreted as blaming those who have lost their homes. Without a doubt, primary responsibility for our current situation lies with the investors who exploited those aspirations and with the government officials whose lax oversight allowed them to take huge financial risks with borrowed assets.

The point is subtle but critical. Our present predicament illustrates how the extraordinary dynamism and openness of American society are sustained by our people's appetite for material advancement. Opportunities for the rich to grow richer both encourage and permit the non-rich to move up—and perhaps grow rich themselves. In no small way, American ideals of equal opportunity and social equality depend on our acquisitiveness, even on our greed. This of course is no original insight; it was the preoccupation of eighteenth-century moral philosophy. But as is often the case, the insights of philosophers are overlooked just when they can be most helpful.

The stark fact is that if the American Dream is to be kept alive, it will be through continued economic growth. And if we hope to nurture such growth, we will have to continue to countenance greed. Now, as we are just beginning to re-learn, there is unrestrained and restrained greed, just as there are unregulated and regulated markets. In both instances, we will doubtless be seeing more of the latter. But the basic acquisitiveness of our market-based capitalist economy will not soon be changing.

This perspective is one that some Americans will not readily accept. Among the well-educated and affluent, it has frequently been the fashion to reject “materialism” and to view our high levels of consumption as artificially maintained by hucksters and advertisers. Yet while the impact of advertising on specific demographic groups—especially the young—is not to be denied, it is also true that many of the goods and services that Americans aspire to purchase reflect the necessities of daily life in this society.

Put differently, Americans own two and three cars per family not simply or necessarily because their automobiles flatter their vanity on the road—though auto manufacturers clearly seek to manipulate consumers in such ways. In the first instance, Americans own cars because our cities and suburbs are built to be negotiated by such private means of transportation. The alternatives so evident in other affluent societies—inter-city rail and intra-city mass transit, for example—are far less available in the United States. To be sure, this reality reflects the interests of auto manufacturers and their ability to influence policy makers. But such efforts

would not have prevailed if they did not coincide powerfully with deeply ingrained cultural expectations of maximum individual choice and geographical mobility.

Clearly, America's habits of mass consumption cannot be willed away with moralizing sermons. President Jimmy Carter discovered this to his chagrin when his famous “malaise speech,” which explicitly asked Americans to change their ways, succeeded mainly in exacerbating his political decline. This is not to suggest that we will never reconsider our habits. But it is to assert that if this is our goal, then we must face up to the fact that high levels of consumption and maximum choice are deeply embedded in our way of life. (And in this sense, critics of American society—inside and outside the United States—who argue that fundamental change is needed are correct.) In other words, American consumerism is not impervious to change, but change will not come easily or quickly, because whatever its faults and shortcomings, our way of life has afforded extraordinary opportunities to individuals and their families from around the globe.

This basic insight was lost amidst the outrage over the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. Critics charged that the United States invaded that sovereign country “just for its oil.” But this was mistaken, in two critical respects. First, the United States did not topple Saddam Hussein *just* to gain access to Iraqi oil. However ill-advised and poorly executed that campaign was, its objectives were never defined in exclusively material or economic terms. To be sure, securing control or access to Iraqi oil was clearly one consideration. But it was hardly the sole, or even the prime, objective. The security of Israel figured just as prominently, if not more so. Indeed, America's oil and energy interests have long been at odds with its role as the guarantor of Israeli security.

Second, and more to my point, oil is not a frivolous indulgence, *just* a luxury that Americans can or should be able to do without. Nor is it any ordinary commodity, the uninterrupted supply of which does not merit political struggle or even military force. However unwise America's dependence on foreign oil may be strategically, it will not be abruptly curtailed without significant economic and social costs. And those costs will likely be borne disproportionately by those whose aspirations for upward mobility are most compelling. Once again, we are brought back to the central proposition that our material appetites are intimately bound up with the hopes and aspirations of millions of ordinary Americans—including immigrants who connect the United States to the wider world. And among these are growing numbers of Muslims.

### Lifestyle Options: The Other Side of the Coin

Yet this is not the whole story. The American way of life is not rooted exclusively in material acquisitiveness. If we are

guilty of greed, it is not simply greed for things. We are also a restless people who crave openness and new experiences. We are greedy for what have come to be called “lifestyle options.” This aspect of our national character is manifested by our sprawling cities and suburbs, by our high rate of geographic mobility—picking up and moving from place to place far more often than Europeans, for example, and by our high rates of drug abuse. And contrary to our reputation as Puritans, Americans have long since shed our sexual inhibitions. Young Americans not only begin sexual activity as early as their Western European peers, they also have many more partners. And Americans are certainly one of the world’s leading producers—and consumers—of pornography.

To grasp how profound is the American taste for individual options and maximum choice, consider how it operates in non-market settings—for example, in our family life. As Professor Andrew Cherlin explains in his book, *The Marriage-Go-Round*, the United States has one of the highest levels of marriage in any Western nation. Yet we also have the highest divorce rate. Outside of marriage, cohabiting couples break up here more frequently than in other Western societies. And then they establish new intimate relations. As Cherlin sums up the evidence: “Having several partnerships is more common in the United States not just because people exit intimate partnerships faster but also because they *enter* them faster and after a breakup *reenter* them faster.”

The biggest impact of such disrupted personal lives is of course on the children, who have marked difficulties relative to their peers from stable two-parent families and perhaps even those from stable one-parent households. As Harvard sociologist Christopher Jencks has concluded about our social mores more generally, “America’s laissez-faire economy is unusually productive, but its laissez-faire culture produces an unusually high level of short-sighted, anti-social, and self-destructive behavior.”

Jencks does not mention U.S. abortion policy, but it too illustrates the point. As articulated by the federal courts, the United States today has one of the most liberal—many would say the most extreme—policies in the world, affording women “the right to choose” abortion throughout the pregnancy, including the third trimester. This right to late term abortions is rarely exercised, but frequently fought over.

The U.S. Supreme Court has anchored this policy in what it deems the individual’s fundamental right of privacy. This contrasts with much more restrictive policies in Western Europe, which typically do not frame access to abortion in terms of rights. For example, in Germany, where women have relatively easy access to abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy but much less so thereafter, the procedure is defined not as an individual right but technically as a crime that the community

condones under prescribed conditions and that the state declines to prosecute.

Some libertarians understand how our economic freedoms and cultural liberties are linked, and defend both as two sides of the same coin. Yet most Americans have difficulty seeing this, and today’s polarization of our politics further distorts their view. Liberals and leftists denounce the market for undermining community bonds. Conservatives denounce the left’s cultural agenda for its self-indulgence and hedonistic individualism. The left regards dependence on oil as a sign of greed; the right sees easy access to abortion as an indicator of decadence, even depravity. Neither acknowledges—or perhaps even understands—the connection between these two realms of individual desire and choice. The net result is that Americans end up putting minimal constraints on the individual in both the market and the cultural spheres.

### The Water’s Edge

Now, we Americans may not appreciate how these disagreements, which have rent our culture and politics for decades, can be seen as different facets of a coherent whole. But this is precisely how many Muslims—friendly and unfriendly, here and abroad—perceive America’s internal cultural conflicts. In their eyes, Americans may disagree about particulars, but we are united in our preoccupation with unfettered individualism.

It is, of course, hardly surprising that Americans fail to grasp this broader view of our culture wars. These are *our* culture wars, after all, and we have been fighting them in a characteristically self-absorbed way. Yet this is not the whole story. Since 9/11 Americans have taken some tentative steps toward muting our disagreements and presenting a united front when we turn our attention overseas, especially toward an enemy who defines himself in fundamentalist religious terms. To be sure, controversies over abortion and gay marriage continue, but a bit less intensely than before. This may in part be attributable to economic conditions. In any event, just as Muslims have come together to defend themselves from criticism and attack from non-Muslims, so too have Americans closed ranks vis-à-vis Muslims. It used to be said that partisanship stopped at the water’s edge. That is clearly no longer the case. Yet today the American culture wars tend to stop there.

Consider for a moment the height of those conflicts during the 1990s. Not coincidentally, this era began as the Cold War was ending and controversies were erupting over “transgressive” art that depicted sado-masochistic sexual practices and desecrations of Christian religious and patriotic symbols. A few years later, in reaction to President Clinton’s scandalous private behavior, many conservatives

were not only denouncing him individually but characterizing his behavior as typical of a generation of Americans whose blatant rejection of conventional morality was damaging the American family. Judge Robert Bork argued in *Slouching Toward Gomorrah* that American culture was hopelessly debased, and at one point he and a group of colleagues associated with the journal *First Things* questioned the legitimacy of the American regime.

Today, in the wake of 9/11, such battles have been largely forgotten. Conservatives who launched fulsome broadsides against the excesses of American culture in the 1990s now mount the barricades to defend its virtues—against the practices and criticisms of Muslims, who all along have been troubled by those same excesses. The ironies here are too numerous to count. The most glaring is that conservatives who just a few years ago roundly criticized the feminist movement and routinely dismissed women's rights as the leading edge of a troubling liberationist agenda now loudly and insistently criticize Islam's failure to advance gender equality.

Today, conservatives and liberals alike hold up America to the Muslim world as an exemplar of women's rights and gender equality. In so doing, conservatives get to assert the superiority of the United States, though in a different key than before 9/11. Feminists and liberals join in and get to advance a favored cause and underscore their embrace of American values at time when they are typically voicing opposition to wars that their countrymen are fighting against violent jihadists.

Yet in our preoccupation with how Muslim societies treat women, we turn a blind eye to how our own liberal values have fostered a commercialized culture that condones and even glorifies sexual promiscuity and pornography that denigrate women—and men. These powerful forces that we have helped unleash on the world are one reason why many Muslim women seek refuge in Islamic modesty, including the head scarf. Of course, promiscuity and pornography offend and alarm many Americans. Yet when we turn our attention overseas, we uncritically close ranks and defend “our way of life”—much as Muslim societies have.

### Taking Culture off the Table

In an era noted for its polarized domestic politics, Americans have achieved some unity by focusing on an external foe. This should come as no surprise. Yet it is surprising and especially worthy of note that we have also downplayed our cultural differences with this foe, particularly since he defines himself in religious terms. More generally, we Americans have for a variety of reasons persuaded ourselves that our differences with Islam are not cultural in any important sense.

With regard to gender equality, for example, we consider it not so much a cultural value to be encouraged as a human right to be secured. This perspective is epitomized in a 2007 study from the RAND Corporation. *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* specifically equates gender equality with freedom of worship and designates both as “internationally recognized human rights.” Here as elsewhere in contemporary discourse, human rights—claims whose infringement on account of societal, cultural, or political conditions is presumptively impermissible—are asserted without any elaboration or justification. This is a complicated and controversial topic that cannot be adequately addressed here. My point is simply to highlight this resort to the language of rights as a salient example of how Americans sidestep the cultural dimension when we turn our attention to the Muslim world.

Another such example is evident among those who interpret the American encounter with radical Islamists through the lens of the Cold War, and insist that we are now engaged in an ideological struggle against “Islamofascism” akin to the battle against communism. Intriguingly, this perspective has typically been advanced by neo-conservatives, who in the past have emphasized cultural factors when, for example, assessing social policy in America or development policy overseas. Yet once the Cold War was won, many neo-cons rededicated themselves to the promotion of democracy and human rights and came to de-emphasize the role of culture in social, economic, and political affairs.

The term “Islamofascism” is clearly offensive to Muslims. Yet it is not without some merit. Like the Cold War, today's struggle is being pursued incrementally, over a protracted period of time without the sustained engagement of huge armed forces. And as we did in Western Europe and elsewhere during the Cold War, Americans are now attempting to win “the hearts and minds” of millions of ordinary people whose loyalty is up for grabs. Finally, as Francis Fukuyama, among others, has pointed out, extremist Islamists are driven less by religion than by a modern ideology that has clear affinities with communism and fascism.

Yet despite such similarities, the most critical distinction between the Cold War and today's struggle is that the latter has a substantial cultural component. Indeed, America's contests against fascism and communism were waged against adversaries who shared our Enlightenment heritage, albeit in perverted forms. Today, we confront enemies who emerge from a distinctive civilization that is not Western and that in fact has a long history of rivalry, contention, and conflict with the West.

The implications of such a cultural perspective are varied and vital. To begin, cultural conflicts are arguably more wrenching—personally and societally—than ideological ones. Consider, for example, the difference between the

apostasy of a Communist such as Whitaker Chambers and that of a Muslim such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali. While the former clearly pursued a painful and bitter path, sundering ideological ties with and then betraying old comrades, the pain and complexity of that experience must pale in comparison with the latter's renunciation and condemnation of the foundational beliefs and practices of her own father and mother.

Such treacherous shoals are undoubtedly one reason why our leaders insist that we are *not* engaged in any such cultural conflict with Islam. Yet on reflection, this hardly seems credible. Recall my earlier point that America's fiscal and economic crises are rooted in our values—some admirable, others not. Taken together they constitute our way of life. This is certainly how Islamist extremists see us. But so do many ordinary, law-abiding Muslims who are mindful, though perhaps themselves not always observant, of Islamic principles of thrift and self-restraint.

Let me be clear. America is not at war with Islam. Nor is there any unified, global Muslim community that confronts us—however much many Muslims invoke the *ummah*. Nevertheless, it would be disingenuous and self-defeating to ignore the cultural basis of today's encounter. In fact, our sometimes violent struggle with extremist Muslims is being fought on cultural terrain—and being watched by a vast audience of non-extremist but culturally conservative Muslims who are keeping close track not only of who is winning but of how Americans are waging the battle.

Those who cavil at such a cultural interpretation of the present struggle should stop to consider why gender equality in Muslim societies (albeit under the rubric of human rights) gets raised by non-Muslims so quickly and so often? Or why many Muslims are so averse to our popular music and figurative art? Or why the Muslim world is so profoundly hostile to any hint of open homosexuality? Such issues clearly loom large for many non-Muslims, as well as for most Muslims.

Nevertheless, America's political and intellectual elites habitually relegate culture to the background of contemporary discussions and debates. This is not just because doing so suits the immediate political interests of agile liberals or clever conservatives. It is also because, as I have already suggested, broader intellectual currents are at work. With regard to the Muslim world specifically, the mere mention of "culture" raises the specter of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. Indeed, most academics and analysts reject Huntington's emphasis on the importance of culture in global politics—a backlash that he helped to provoke when, in support of his thesis, he bluntly asserted that "it is human to hate." Huntington's point, of course, is that cultural conflicts are nasty and intractable, especially in this post-Cold War era. Yet he did not welcome such conflicts, nor did he regard them as inevitable. Indeed,

Huntington opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a fact overlooked by critics who incorrectly associate him with that war's neo-conservative proponents.

In any event, long before Huntington advanced his controversial thesis, social scientists were vigorously rejecting cultural explanations of human affairs. In part, this rejection of culture reflects among American elites a disaffection with or even an outright rejection of religion as a valid basis of action or of analysis. More specifically, our academics and intellectuals have identified such perspectives as "essentialist," by which they refer to the imputation of inherent or unchanging traits to groups, especially disadvantaged or marginal groups. The underlying concern here is that such groups will come to be seen as unresponsive to meliorative public policies, thereby fueling negative stereotypes and aiding conservative or reactionary political forces. In contrast, environmental or social structural perspectives have been seen as "progressive," on the assumption that such factors are more susceptible to governmental interventions. The irony of course, confirmed by several generations now of social policy experience, is that neither cultural nor structural factors are necessarily more amenable to policy initiatives.

### Our Cultural Blind Spot

The consequences of disregarding the cultural dimensions of America's contemporary encounter with Islam are considerable. One such is a failure to reckon with the global impact of our own culture. America's cultural footprint is arguably just as significant as its economic and military footprints. Yet apart from advocates of so-called soft power, few of us seem to appreciate this. This is not to suggest that our cultural impact is uniformly negative or positive. As I argued above, American appetites and aspirations are of a piece. Just as our extraordinary cultural fare simultaneously attracts and repels many Americans, so too does it attract and repel audiences around the globe. Certainly much of our popular culture appeals to the basest instincts, especially the stuff aimed at adolescent males here and abroad. Yet on occasion, our cultural output also speaks to the better angels of human nature.

Either way, we Americans remain largely oblivious to our cultural footprint. A disturbing example emerged from the shocking behavior of American military personnel in Iraq at Abu Ghraib prison. At the time, few Americans were not exposed to those bizarrely horrific amateur photos, what might be expected from tourists at an exotic zoo. Yet while most of us regard this as a nationally embarrassing episode of abuse and torture, John Agresto offers a strikingly different interpretation from a rather unique vantage point. Agresto is an American educator who served

in Iraq under Ambassador Paul Bremer as Senior Advisor to the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. In his book, *Mugged by Reality: The Liberation of Iraq and the Failure of Good Intentions*, Agresto draws on his conversations and experiences in post-invasion Iraq to show that Iraqis were hardly surprised by the egregious behavior at Abu Ghraib. He quotes his Iraqi translator: “We are a cruel people. It’s in our DNA.”

But then Agresto makes a point lost on many Americans: “It wasn’t the revelations of torture, as such, that so troubled Iraqis . . . it was the character and sexual nature of these abuses.” He elaborates: “Abu Ghraib, displayed not only Americans’ abandonment to perverse sexuality, up to and including homoerotic sadism, but also the willingness of American females to be photographed sexually abusing naked men, and the joy that they all seemed to display at not only degrading Iraqis but at degrading their own natures as well.” Agresto goes on to characterize the Iraqi perspective: “Abu Ghraib looked less like severe treatment of detainees in order to wrest important information from them as much as it seemed depraved fun and sexual games . . . To a people told by our enemies that modernity stands for indulgence and the loosening of our moral rules, that America is a perverse and hedonistic culture, that liberty is libertinism and anarchy, and that our secularism is really nothing but irreligion and an affront to God, Abu Ghraib was a gift to our enemies and an utter disaster for America and its friends.”

In the understandably outraged commentary on Abu Ghraib here in the United States, the emphasis was just the reverse. That is, Americans were much more focused on this episode as an example of “abuse and torture,” while the specifically sexual nature of many of the misdeeds got relegated to the background. Feminist writers underscored this perspective when they pointed out that liberals here evaded the pervasively pornographic context of Abu Ghraib because to do otherwise would have forced them to reconsider their fundamental commitment to free speech and, more generally, their understanding of the essentially benign nature of pornography.

The insistence of American elites that culture be taken off the table has had another unfortunate result: we have obscured from our own view critical differences between the United States and Europe. Ironically, these underscore how much better suited we are than our friends and allies across the Atlantic to address the cultural concerns of Muslims around the world. First, the United States is more tolerant and open to newcomers than just about any European nation. Second, we lack the strident, full-throated secularism that in Europe has successfully contained religion’s role in public life and consequently marginalized and alienated many Muslims.

A case in point is the brouhaha over the cartoon depictions of the prophet Muhammad printed in the Danish

newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005. Unlike their European counterparts, the American media generally refrained from publishing those cartoons. Despite our rough and competitive individualism and our First Amendment protections, the pluralism of American life has apparently instilled certain habits of self-restraint. By contrast, Muslims in Europe routinely encounter free speech absolutists who refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of their complaints.

All the more regrettable, then, that some American commentators (including many who contemptuously dismissed Europeans for not supporting our invasion of Iraq) rushed to the defense of Europeans who chose to flaunt the cartoonists’ insulting images. In this instance, apparently, the enemies of our enemies must be our friends—even if they are European social democratic wimps!

In this same vein, American commentators have also staunchly defended the rigid laicism of Kemalist Turkey, out of concern over the presumed religious agenda being advanced by the (thrice) democratically elected Islamist government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan. Yet on other occasions these same American commentators have just as staunchly criticized laicism—especially the French model on which Kemalism draws so heavily—as less commodious than our own Constitution’s explicit protection of religious liberty, tolerance, and pluralism.

None of these vital topics gets the attention they merit, because, to repeat, America’s elites have determined that we are not engaged in a cultural contest with Islam. This is not just ironic, it is also unfortunate, because in fact the United States has the social, institutional, and intellectual resources to address the contentious issues highlighted here. This is not to say that we have not made mistakes in this realm; we have made many. But generally speaking, Americans are better equipped to engage Muslims on cultural terrain than are Europeans.

One final consequence of side-stepping the cultural context of our encounter with Islam is to obscure commonalities across the three Abrahamic faiths. To be sure, such similarities get highlighted in myriad interfaith dialogues in which earnest clergy deftly point them out. But beyond these confines, in the wider, less cloistered public square, the tone is quite different. Listening to commentators there, one would never know that within living memory, Jewish women were confined to the balconies of synagogues (and in some Hassidic sects today still are rigidly segregated); Catholics abstained from meat on Fridays and fasted during Lent; mainstream Protestants denounced gambling and drinking; and Americans obeyed, by and large, a constitutional amendment prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of alcoholic beverages. More generally, one would never suspect that there was a time when Protestants, Catholics, and Jews all taught the virtues of self-restraint in the social, economic, and cultural spheres of life.

To be sure, there are critical differences of culture, history, and theology across Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. But there are also some affinities that invite Americans to put ourselves in the place of contemporary Muslims—not out of misguided guilt, but out of curiosity and a sense of urgency. Curiosity about the way many Muslims see contemporary American life as wasteful, exhibitionist, and self-indulgent, given that it was not so long ago that Americans valued thrift, reserve, and restraint. And urgency because only through such honest and fulsome exploration will we build genuine bridges of understanding and trust between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting the kind of interfaith dialogue that fatuously asserts common values while lacking the hard-headedness necessary to address fundamental differences. Nor am I suggesting that we focus on building friendships in the Muslim world. It is always desirable to have friends, but friendship can hardly be our primary goal. Indeed, in international affairs it is arguably an inappropriate goal. Right now, we Americans need to identify commonalities with Muslims—not just of history and background but of *interest*. To do this, we also need to acknowledge our power and dominance in global affairs, neither apologizing for them nor pretending that they do not exist.

In this same vein, Americans must abandon, whether at home or abroad, the fruitless and demeaning search for so-called moderate Muslims. Such Muslims do not really exist—not because all Muslims are extremists or terrorists, but because their cultural premises diverge sharply from our own. As the RAND study cited earlier defines them, “Moderate Muslims are those who share the key dimensions of democratic culture. These include support for democracy and internationally recognized human rights . . . respect for diversity, acceptance of nonsectarian sources of law, and opposition to terrorism and other illegitimate forms of violence.” In other words, a “moderate Muslim” is one who is willing to meet Americans 80% of the way.

Here again, a keener cultural orientation would be helpful. It would highlight how such a definition is at once far too broad and too restrictive. Quite aside from the troubling and contentious issue of Muslim sympathy and support for terrorism, this definition conflates “democratic culture” with “respect for diversity” in a tone that even some Americans would resist. Moreover, at a time when Muslims around the world are immersed in a conversation about all of these issues, it is imprudent of Americans to impose a litmus test of what does and does not constitute a “moderate Muslim.” Not to mention the fact that, as the RAND analysts note, there are precious few Muslims out there who would pass such a test—and those who might pass tend to lack meaningful ties to their communities of origin.

A far more promising approach has been suggested by sociologist Amitai Etzioni, who argues that we should seek

out “illiberal moderates” in the Muslim world. His point is that the center of gravity in that world is sufficiently distinct from our own that we need to be less preoccupied with who agrees with us than with who is willing to engage with us. Again, the aim is not to find friends but to locate interlocutors who may not be kindly disposed toward Americans or our values, but who are willing to explore areas of potentially mutual interest. This of course is the essence of politics. And politics is what we must be about.

### Culture and American Power

Yet any such reorientation will not alter America’s hegemonic position among the world’s powers. Many Americans object to our pre-eminence; some are gratified by our humiliations; and a few look forward to a new era when the United States exercises less power and assume that the world will then be a better place. This last perspective, in particular, is a pipe dream. For the foreseeable future, the United States will remain the most powerful nation on earth, and given our allies, our competitors, and our enemies, this is a good thing—both for us and for those with whom we share this planet.

Understanding these enduring realities, some counsel more subtle exercise of American power: more consultation with our allies and less confrontation with our adversaries. In this vein, it is suggested that our problems with the Muslim world might be mitigated if we pursued a more balanced policy with regard to Israel and the Palestinian question. Although this would hardly mollify our most virulent Islamist foes, it might well get us a better hearing among ordinary Muslims (and non-Muslims) around the globe.

This has clearly been the orientation of the Obama administration, though there are real limits to how far the United States is likely to move in this direction. Our fundamental interests are not likely to change any time soon; nor is the way of life that undergirds these interests.

One thing that could change, though, is our understanding of America’s power and position on the global stage. Here I would urge greater self-awareness, something we Americans tend to lack. For example, we should be more mindful of how our idealism turns easily into moralism, whether we are projecting hard military power in Iraq or soft power to promote gender equality in Afghanistan. In this same vein, we would do well to heed French political scientist Pierre Hassner’s admonition that while our own political system is explicitly built on an abiding suspicion of political power and the means to constrain it, our actions on the global stage tend to say to the rest of the world: “*We come to you with overwhelming power; trust us.*” Needless to say, there is a major discrepancy here between our values and our behavior.

Finally, I would urge greater humility toward Islam and the Muslim world. It is one thing to say that we want to learn *about* Islam, quite another to express a willingness to learn *from* it. For example, at a time of great distress in our financial and economic system, non-Muslim Americans might want to examine claims that financial institutions and products that observe Islamic teaching have not suffered nearly as much as those that do not. Many Muslims are certainly inclined to believe this. At a minimum, this would be a more fruitful topic for engagement than still another inquiry into gender inequality in the Muslim world.

Likewise, many Americans, even religious Americans, are uncomfortable with the way Muslims frequently invoke the absolute authority of God. Yet American Christians and Jews do the same, and take such invocations for granted. Even in the apparently secular setting of a twelve-step recovery program modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, individuals routinely acknowledge their submission to a “higher power” before taking responsibility for defeating their addiction.

In a similar vein, non-Muslim Americans might take note of remarks by the first Muslim elected to Congress, Rep. Keith Ellison (Democrat-Minnesota). In a speech shortly after the 2008 election, Ellison urged his fellow Muslims to be guardedly optimistic about the man who campaigned for president by distancing himself from his father’s religion. As Ellison reminded his audience: “Obama is not our savior, God is.”

This observation may or may not gratify non-Muslims. But it should remind us that we Americans know something about prophetic religion and how it has sometimes served us well as a nation. Certainly, its perspective informed and sustained the civil rights movement led by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One final thought. In the hurly-burly of the contemporary world, non-Muslim Americans routinely overlook those aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition that offer insights into Islam. Ironically, this is precisely where Islam has something to teach us. Rejecting any doctrine of original sin, Islam conceives of human beings not as fundamentally stained by sin, but as basically forgetful of their place in God’s creation. This is why five-times daily religious observance and ritual are so central to Islam: man’s forgetful nature must be constantly contested. So, the tendency of Americans today to forget our own religious heritages and practices is something that Islam can remind us of—leaving us free to disagree about other matters.

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