

Dialogue among Civilizations: A Close Look at the Greater Middle East Reform

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Abstract: “The Greater Middle East Reform” has always been a heatedly debated issue in the international community. Although the Arab-Islamic countries have aspired for reform toward modernization, their religious beliefs and nationalism have kept playing an essential role in shaping their political life. Therefore, they feel it hard to adopt the democratic system as the U.S. expects. This article analyzes the Arab-Islamic countries’ perceptions on and reactions to the U.S.’s democratic transformation in the Middle East. This article also aims to draw Chinese scholars’ attention to the Islamic culture as a key factor of regional diplomacy in the Middle East.

Key Words: Greater Middle East Reform; Dialogue among Civilizations

The Islamic world has put forward the idea of “Dialogue among Civilizations” against the theory of “the Clash of Civilizations.” However, the United States, proposed, according to Huntington’s theory, the “Greater Middle East Initiative” after the Iraq War so that it could control and transform the Middle East. From three cultural perspectives, i.e., the religious culture, reform culture and political culture, this article tries to analyze the overall current situation of the Arab-Islamic countries and their reactions to the initial stage of reform after the U.S. proclaimed its Greater Middle East Initiative. It also aims to inspire more Chinese scholars to further their research on the Islamic culture.

From “The Clash of Civilizations” to “Dialogue among Civilizations”

The thesis of “Dialogue among Civilizations” was introduced, to a great extent, to refute “the Clash of Civilizations,” a theory put forth after the Cold War by Professor Samuel Huntington, an American scholar.

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Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilizations?", which appeared in the Summer 1993 Issue of *Foreign Affairs*, received extensive and prolonged criticism as well as heated contention. It is regarded as another most controversial international relation theory after the "Containment Theory" brought forth by George F. Kennan in the 1940s. It touched almost all the nerves of every civilization at that time. Four years later Huntington made a detailed, profound and extensive interpretation of the issues proposed in his article and published his well-known book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. This book promptly evoked a strong reaction from the international media and academic circles, particularly from the developing countries including China, for Huntington extremely worried that the possible union of Confucian civilization (actually referring to China) and Islamic civilizations (basically the Arab countries and Iran) would present the most serious challenge to the Western civilization. Obviously, his article is policy-oriented, while his book is an academic publication on international politics in which he has articulated a framework and a paradigm for addressing global political issues. Professor Huntington argued that "the most prominent form of this cooperation is the Confucian-Islamic connection that has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power." Despite the fact that Chinese scholars disagree with his conclusion, the Clash of Civilizations theory, objectively, is a significant proposition of the times and worth our concern and attention. Moreover, his major viewpoints, such as "this centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline, and it could become more virulent," "differences in culture, that is basic values and beliefs, are a second source of conflict," "on both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations,"¹ as he put it, have been totally reflected in the U.S.'s foreign policies and diplomatic practice.

According to the national security strategy of Clinton administration, the U.S. views "economy, security and democracy" as the three pillars of its foreign strategy, and takes the promotion of democracy in overseas countries as one of the three targets of its foreign policy. The Bush administration initiated the Greater Middle East Initiative and has spared no efforts to use all financial, human and material resources to transform Iraq into a model democratic state. It's apparent that the Clash of Civilizations theory has played a significant role in guiding the U.S.'s global strategy.

As a result, the Islamic civilization and culture were distorted and the images of Muslims demonized; the Islamic countries and communities are bearing increasingly enormous pressure. Apart from their incessant opposing and protesting against Huntington's theory, the Islamic world, especially the Arab countries and Iran, have repeatedly called for a dialogue among civilizations.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Summer 1993, pp. 22 - 49.

Meanwhile, on various occasions they have actively interpreted the Islamic principles such as tolerance, peace loving, justice and brotherhood, in order to win the understanding and approval from the Western countries, which is undoubtedly a positive and constructive measure. Despite the differences, contradictions and conflicts among civilizations, we cannot deny the possibilities of intercultural communication, integration and co-prosperity. At the age of economic globalization, most of the countries and peoples advocate substituting dialogue for confrontation, and replacing the arms race with peaceful development. For this purpose, the Arab countries have already hosted a series of international symposiums on Dialogue among Civilizations. Former Iranian President Hatami even designated 2004 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations. The International Symposium on Dialogue among Civilizations: China and Arab, initiated by the Sino-Arab Forum, was held in Beijing in December 2006.

Arab's Response to the "Greater Middle East Initiative"

Objectively speaking, the Arab officials, scholars and mass are clear about their current situation, and also have aspirations for reform.

At present, in terms of the number of followers, geographic sphere and scope of influence, there are three kinds of civilizations or cultures, i.e. the Western culture based on American and European Christianity, the Chinese culture centered in East Asia and the Islamic culture with 57 Islamic states (OIC) and 1.2 billion Muslims. In reality, one of the principal parties of the so-called "Clash of Civilizations" or the major participant in the Dialogue among Civilizations refers to Islam and Islamic countries. More specifically, it refers to the major Islamic countries--the Arab countries and Iran. It is well known that since the 9/11 terrorist attack, the U.S. has launched the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War, and has identified anti-terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and comprehensively controlling and transforming the Middle East as its national security strategy. In his second term, Bush made some tactical readjustment to his foreign policy. For instance, he abandoned the ideology such as "New Crusade War," and the notion that "all countries' governments must either choose to stand with the U.S. in the global war against terrorism or stand against it." Instead, he has adopted different policies to different countries. Unlike Syria and Iran, which he has always regarded as adversaries that he will continue to fight, other Arab countries have been treated with a positive and encouraging attitude. "Hopeful reform is already taking hold in an arc from Morocco to Jordan to Bahrain," President Bush said in his *State of the Union Address 2006*. "The government of Saudi Arabia can demonstrate its leadership in the region by expanding the role of its people in determining their future. And the great and proud nation of Egypt, which showed the way toward peace in the Middle East,

can now show the way toward democracy in the Middle East.”²

In fact, since the end of Iraq War the U.S. has carried out its strategy so as to comprehensively control and transform the Middle East and its most important strategic scenario is to implement its Greater Middle East Initiative aiming at the democratic reform of the political, economic, educational and social systems in the Middle East countries. Both the EU and the Arab League advocate solving the Palestine issue before reform is put into practice, which is always disapproved by the U.S. government because the U.S. refuses to take solving the Palestine issue as a precondition of reform. Moreover, the Middle East Peace Roadmap, formulated by the U.S. on behalf of the 4 parties, also treats the Palestine National Authority's reform as the precondition. We are aware that the Greater Middle East Initiative initiated by the U.S. in early 2003 is rejected almost unanimously by all Arab countries, for they are convinced that “reform cannot be imposed externally.” For this reason, the U.S. has to readjust its initiative; in June 2004 at the G8 summit in the state of Georgia the U.S. renamed the initiative the two working programs as follows: “The Broader Middle East and North Africa Partnership for Progress and Common Future” and “G8 Support for Reform.” In the eyes of Arab scholars, the two documents, are not only the international agreements comparable with the Peace Treaty of Versailles in June 1919 after the First World War, the Yalta Agreement in February 1945 and the Potsdam Proclamation in July 1945 at the end of the Second World War, but also the first institutional arrangements made by the developed countries for the Arab-Islamic world since the end of the Cold War.

It is self-evident that the Greater Middle East Initiative reflects the shift of the Bush administration's Middle East strategy from unilateralism (by means of force) to multilateralism (by relying on the Western “soft power”) so as to boost the Middle East democratic reform. Consequently, the Arab-Islamic countries' reform not only rests on their will, but also matters to the regional prospects of the Middle East and North Africa as well as the overall stability and development of the current international system and order.

In his book *The Crossroads*, Dr. Hussein Bah 'al-Din, who acted as the Egyptian Minister of Education for over ten years, and entrusted us to translate and publish the above book in China, stated that Egypt and the Arab world are at the crossroads. Should they succumb to reality and accept decadence, or surpass setbacks and strive to make unremitting effort? Which road should the Arab nations take? His answer to the question is reform, for “in the vicissitude of the world, reform as a necessity to be adapted to the change of the times and the new type of international relations, is not only the reality we have to face, but also a guideline by which we deal with the various problems at present or in the future.” In recent years, the term of reform has been a frequently discussed subject in the

² President George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address 2005*,

<http://www.white-house.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050202-11.html>.

Arab mass media, at various international symposiums and amid the contact with local sources. Although they still highlight that the main barrier to reform is the negative impact of U.S. unilateralism, such as its military occupation of Iraq, the Palestine problem unresolved in an impartial and comprehensive way because of the U.S.'s double standards, they have discussed and researched the cultural profile of reform, i.e. the problems concerning their fundamental values and beliefs.

The Initial Reform in the Arab World: A Cultural Perspective

The span of history ever since the mid 20th century proves that the Islamic beliefs and nationalism have always played an important role in the transition and shift of Arab-Islamic countries toward modernization.

This article makes some preliminary comments, in the perspective of culture, on the dialogues with Arab and Islamic civilization in accordance with my observation in recent years.

1. About religious culture. In the process of reform all over the Islamic world, the Islamic countries all encountered the task of reshaping their mainstream religious culture. As is well known, they have consistently taken Islam for their core values, in the past, present or in the future. So, there would be no Arab nation, Arab language or Arab culture without Islam; there would be no Islamic countries, Islamic world or Islamic culture without Islam. Islam appears unique and unprecedented throughout the history of human development. As a result, it is hard to exchange views or communicate with the Arab-Islamic countries without the knowledge of Islam, let alone to enhance their reform. In the long history featuring the rise, fall, development, and rejuvenation of the Arabs as a major Islamic nation, they have always regarded Islam as their banner, slogan and source of spiritual power.

Apart from the external factors or their practical political, economic and military conditions, their rise and fall also hinge on their selection and understanding of the Islamic classics. In other words, it depends on what scriptures they choose to construct religious culture of the time as their norms of conduct. In the realistic environment of the Middle East, Muslims place emphasis on the pursuit and upholding of justice as their basic value. The way they approach and handle problems is, above all, closely linked with their judgment of justice. It is simply ridiculous to view all the violent actions of resisting foreign invasion and occupation as terrorism. In *The Qur'an*, the scripture that advocates resisting foreign aggression is long considered as a spiritual weapon by Moslems to protect their independence and dignity. In the current struggle against international terrorism, all the Arab governments argue that they will firmly and

unanimously oppose terrorism of any form; but, similarly, they are strongly opposed to treating the resistance against foreign invasion and occupation as terrorism. To keep pace with the megatrends of peace and development in the international community, they are committed to propagating the doctrine of peace, moderation and *al-wasatiyah* (moderatism) for the purpose of eradicating extremism, the root reason of violence. Some articles in the Arab countries and Iran cite some classics so as to popularize moderatism, e.g., "We have made you a just nation, so that you may testify against mankind and that your own apostle may testify against you." "The most upright among them said, 'Did I not bid you praise Allah?'"³ Here "just" and "most upright" mean respectively "medium" and "most medium" in the original text. The articles emphasize that all Arab nations should be moderate ones and so does Islamic civilization. Even in terms of resistance, these authors also pay attention to citing such scriptures as "Fight for the sake of Allah those that fight against you, but do not attack them first. Allah does not love the aggressors."⁴ Yet, on *Djumah* (Friday) at the mosques in some countries or inside some religious groups, a certain fragments of the scriptures with related terms such as "resistance," "dying for a just cause" and "distinguishing oneself by fighting the enemy" are still cited and interpreted one-sidedly. Such a case implies that in the context of globalization, they have a long way to go before they can establish in the spirit of keeping pace with the times a mainstream religious culture of Islam, for the publicity of moderatism is not conducted widely and lacks mechanism and concrete policies as a guarantee. Particularly, judging from the current situation in Iraq and Palestine, and the U.S.'s unilateral sanctions on and deterrence of Iran, the criterion of "justice" is by no means convincing to the Muslims in the Middle East. Hence, in Arab countries and Iran, we have not yet found some widely influential theorists or authoritative masterpieces that fully illustrate Islamic moderatism.

2. About reform culture. The focus of the world's attention is how to start the reform in the Arab-Islamic countries. Generally speaking, reform in the developing countries starts with eliminating concepts and system flaws which have hindered their development, but political stability should always be a priority. The Greater Middle East Initiative launched by the U.S. implies that the driving force of U.S. Middle East policy has shifted from hard to soft power, and it does not necessarily mean that its reform must change the current social system in the Middle East countries. Nevertheless, once the reform process is initiated, it will first affect the current political power, for it may give rise to a contention on the legitimacy of such political power. As Kemal H. Karpat, a famous American scholar, once pointed out, there are three categories of legitimacy in the world today: first, the

³ N.J. Dawood, trans, *The Koran* (London: Penguin Group, 1988), 2-143(p.347), 68-28(p.62).

⁴ N.J. Dawood, *ibid*, 2-190(p.352).

traditional legitimacy based on tribal emirs or religious leadership; secondly, the personal legitimacy of heads, top officials or leaders in a certain period; thirdly, the legitimacy conforming to constitutions. At present, all the Islamic countries in the Middle East have their constitutions, and they all have the third kind of legitimacy. However, there are quite a few countries with the attributes of the first or second legitimacy. For the sake of expedient interest, it is likely for them to be pragmatic and maintain close-knit relations and even alliances with the U.S. government. Yet, once the democratic reform advocated by the U.S. concerns the symbols of their social codes and relations, or their cultural heritages, traditions and sacred objects, there will not be enough room for them to give in or make compromise, for these cultural heritages, traditions and sacred objects, in their eyes, form the foundation upon which their power rests. Therefore, although it has started with changing their concepts, the reform in the Arab-Islamic countries still focuses on partial systems and mechanisms. For instance, in October 2005, a general election was held in Egypt, and quite a few candidates participated in it after the revision of its Constitution. Today in Kuwait women are allowed to vote; they can be selected as legislative members and cabinet ministers.

In 2004, the Arab League summit made a decision to establish an Intellectuals Committee, so that scholars can discuss openly how to carry out reform and how the Arab countries can meet approaching challenges. Moreover, it decided to revise the Charter of Arab League and initiate its own system reform. Largyp Banerr, the editor-in-chief of the Egyptian journal *The October*, suggests carrying out reform on higher education among the Arab states by introducing first an international evaluation system of higher education. In the economic field, numerous policies and measures related to reform have been carried out in recent years. Thus it can be seen that reform in the Arab-Islamic countries has been gradually implemented in accordance with their specific conditions and needs. Now the greatest concern for Muslims in the Dialogue among Civilizations is how to achieve rapid economic growth and mitigate major social complaints caused by domestic wealth polarization, high unemployment rate and birth rate while maintaining their political stability and national and religious attributes. They are focusing on and comparing the modes of development such as the Russian mode, the Chinese mode and the Indian mode instead of the Western modes, in particular, the European one and the American one.

3. About political culture. Democracy, I believe, is the core concept of Western political culture, which is a loanword either to the Arab countries or to Iran. There is a prolonged debate on whether to accept such a term or not. As a matter of fact, it is not a problem at all today. "We don't need others to teach us about democracy," said Amr Mussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League. "To the Arab world, this is by no means a new problem; in Egypt, for instance, a parliament was

established as early as 1866, far earlier than the self-proclaimed progressive states." Since the end of World War II, the national liberation movement has sprung up like mushrooms in the Arab states like Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Algeria and Libya. In overthrowing monarchical systems and colonial governments, the Arab states all have demonstrated their democratic ideals. They also promoted nationalism or socialism while maintaining the values of Islam. Therefore it would be no barrier to their accepting the creed of democracy. As a matter of fact, their discussion nowadays focuses on whether the American-style democracy means that they have to abandon Islam and Arab or Persian national attributes and deny their past brilliant history.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Greater Middle East Initiative aims to view the elimination of the "Democracy Deficit" as the key to all the problems in the Middle East. It seems as if the realization of democracy would readily solve all the difficult problems including anti-terrorism, non-proliferation and the Arab-Israel peace process. In essence, the Greater Middle East Initiative lifts the importance of democracy to the level of the national interest of the U.S., which not only runs against the reality in the Middle East, but also causes a paradox between democratic aspirations and American national interest. In December 1991, the Islam Salvation Front, an opposition party, which won the national election in Algeria, turned out to be a fundamentalist organization, and later on triggered long-lasting political chaos. It seems that the U.S. has overestimated the pro-West liberal movement force inside the Islamic world. It is doubtful whether the civil society and NGOs that the U.S. has made every effort to nurture can represent the local mainstream ideology, or advance the reform as an engine or co-operate with other political powers concerned to promote democratic reform. Even if the election brought about a transformation of regimes as the U.S. wishes, there would not be the democracy it has always desired. Instead, some radical forces could come to power by means of democratic reform. Who can assert that the new Iraqi government dominated by the Shiites will surely be pro-America rather than pro-Iran? The history of the Middle East from the late half of the 20th century to today shows that various contradictions in this area have been interwoven, and the Arab-Islamic countries are still in the transition and shift towards modernization. As yet, it is very difficult to clearly map out the panorama of their political culture. Yet, among all the factors of political culture, the Islamic beliefs and nationalism, we are quite sure, will play a central role forever.

Objectively speaking, the research on European and American cultures has been carried out to quite a depth and breadth in China. However, our knowledge about the Arab-Islamic culture, which has played an important role in the history of world civilization and on contemporary international arena, is far from being enough. Neither the number of institutions and researchers specializing in

Arab-Islamic culture nor their achievements can be compared with that in the fields of American, European, Japanese and Russian studies. This paper has reviewed, from the cultural perspective, namely religious culture, reform culture and political culture, the overall current situation of the Arab-Islamic countries and their reaction to the initial stage of reform after the USA proclaimed its Greater Middle East Initiative. The above-mentioned explanation is just my personal view, far from being authoritative or comprehensive, let alone any construction of modern Islamic culture. The main purpose of this article is to exchange views with scholars at home and abroad. I especially hope that this article can draw Chinese scholars' attention to and interest in such issues. Then we can jointly further the research on Islamic culture in China.