

Disparate perspectives: Time for self-examination

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If the conflict in which the U.S. is now engaged is not one of the storied “clashes of civilizations” predicted by Samuel Huntington, it does involve a potentially deadly clash of perceptions. Those in the West who have joined the war on terrorism view Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorist network as self-professed agents of the mayhem that has struck the U.S.

However, many of the Muslims who do not unconditionally endorse bin Laden do distinguish his message from his methods. Even as they distance themselves from terrorist acts, some Muslims regard bin Laden as a new Saladdin—the Muslim hero who stood up to the medieval Christian Crusaders. Bin Laden’s words taking on the West “resonate across the Muslim world,” said one British Muslim quoted in the *New York Times*. “He is only saying what all the Arabs in the world want to say but cannot say in their own country.”

Perceptions also differ about responsibility for the attacks on New York and Washington. When Americans hear bin Laden praise those who carried out the acts as “a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam” who will “destroy America,” most conclude that the evidence against him is probably pretty good.

But according to a current of opinion in the Islamic world, Israel did it. The story has circulated widely that Mossad, Israel’s secret service, organized the September 11 attacks in order to discredit Islam, provoke American attacks against Arab targets, and provide cover for further Israeli aggression against Palestinians. As the story goes, Mossad even telegraphed its plans to 4,000 Jews who subsequently avoided the WTC on September 11. That such a conspiracy theory should gain credibility among Muslims underscores the clash of worldviews. (Bizarrely, accepting this theory puts bin Laden in the position of actually praising Mossad as a group of vanguard Muslims.)

President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, among a host of other administration officials in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, have repeatedly stated that the bombing in Afghanistan is not a war against Islam. The disclaimer sounds reasonable in the West: attacks are not being carried out against any Muslim country other than Afghanistan, which hosts a powerful man who has declared war against the U.S.

Many Muslims aren't buying it, though. "This is blatantly a war against Islam and you have to be blind not to see that," said one Muslim in the UK. The West's message that it is not at war with Islam in its attacks on Afghanistan is "weak and without much credibility," wrote a Muslim legal scholar in the U.S.

Why are such Muslims convinced the U.S. intends a "war on Islam"—especially when the U.S. itself is home to millions of Muslims who are generally quite content to live here? We again confront the difference in perspective between many people in the Islamic world and those in the West. The different perspectives are rooted in belief and history, fueled on both sides by specific grievances and criticisms, exacerbated by misunderstandings and ignorance.

Such differences in perspective can be negotiated only after they are honestly faced. The next step must be self-examination and self-criticism on both sides—and a move toward at least some measure of new understanding.