Transatlantic Cooperation and How to Engage the Muslim World

HAIZAM AMIRAH-FERNÁNDEZ

Since the beginning of the current decade, international relations and domestic politics in North America and Europe have been marked by a growing threat perception linked to the radicalization of Muslim individuals and groups worldwide. Although 9/11 was a turning point, the “clash of perceptions” had been building up for decades between people belonging to Western and Muslim cultures, but also among those of the same cultural background.

Radicalization processes are inevitably related to the political and economic situation in the Middle East. This makes them, to a large extent, reversible. Factors such as the persistent climate of conflict, the absence of prospects for a lasting peace, the accumulated frustration and rage caused by unmet expectations of the population, the continuation of authoritarian rule, and the foreign policies of Western powers are used by radical ideologues to feed a solid narrative of exclusion and confrontation. The little interest shown by authoritarian regimes—including Arab “moderates”—in promoting critical thinking and the respect for diversity has solidified the radical narrative by which the West is responsible for all that is wrong with the region.

For many years, the Middle East has been suffering a constant deterioration in regional security and stability, as well as in the domestic conditions in different countries. The effects of such climate are felt beyond the region. Events in the Middle East are connected to the radicalization of Muslim individuals and groups in other parts of the world, including Western countries. Projections do not give many reasons for optimism. Demographic pressures, unemployment and underemployment, authoritarian rule, ethno-sectarian power struggles, absence of peace, and radicalization processes will continue to shape the region for the predictable future.

Why Does the Muslim World Need to Be Engaged?

Religion is gaining a prominent role in international politics. However, by itself, the religious dimension cannot explain the origins of the ongoing “clash of perceptions.” When insisting on the “Islamic” character of current Middle Easterners’ discontent with authoritarian rule and Western foreign policies, some relevant questions need to be posed: Aren’t such “explanations” validating the discourse of Islamist radical ideologues in the sense that it is religion what separates us from them? Don’t we run the risk of giving ideological fuel to all the Bin Ladens of the world who would like to be seen as spokespeople for the whole Islamic world? By placing religion at the center of the debate, what prospects are left for those who do not want to live in a theocracy? At a time when Islamism is becoming an ideology of resistance, the more the focus is placed on religion rather than politics the more we risk adding to the frustrations that strengthen the radicals’ cosmovision.
Engagement needs at least two parties. Who should the interlocutors be to have an effective engagement? Is there such a thing as a Muslim public opinion, or for the matter a Western one? What is needed to improve mutual perceptions? What can make radicalization a reversible process? Is public diplomacy a sufficient tool to offset the adverse impacts of certain policies?

Anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism in the Middle East is directly linked to what many feel are direct or indirect harmful consequences of U.S. and Western policies in the region. Although some of this anti-Americanism is structural, to a large extent this sentiment is reversible. Admiration of the West for its democracy, technology, science, and culture exists in all Middle Eastern societies. However, such admiration has been diminishing in recent times. It is no secret that, under past administration, the U.S. was viewed by many worldwide as provoking more conflicts than those it prevented.

Rather than asking “how to engage the Muslim world,” it could be better to look for ways to restore the trust between and within nations. Given that the origins of many conflicts are political in nature, solutions should also by political. Any effort in that direction will greatly benefit from sincere transatlantic cooperation. However, for that to happen there is a need for a gradual convergence of approaches towards common challenges emanating from the Middle East. Such process does not seem to be taking place at the moment.

Is Transatlantic Cooperation vis-à-vis the Middle East Possible, or Even Desirable?

Arguably, the Middle East is the Achilles heel of transatlantic relations. Divergent threat perceptions and policies, as well as differences in strategic culture and historical narratives make U.S.-EU cooperation on the Middle East less relevant than is required by current circumstances.

The U.S. and the EU have similar strategic interests in the Mediterranean region related to regional stability, the secure flow of oil, political and economic reform, economic development, and fighting transnational terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The EU has some additional strategic interests in its southern neighborhood, such as combating illegal immigration, fighting against drug trafficking, and tackling environmental challenges.

The fact is that, despite exiting differences, European and American democracy promotion policies tend to display similar shortcomings. Neither the EU nor the U.S. are ready to sanction democratic transitions that could have unpredictable results, nor to accept the outcomes of transparent elections where the winners are not their favorite candidates. Resources devoted to Middle East political reform are quite insufficient considering the seriousness of the existing challenges. At best, one could hope initially for a larger degree of transatlantic coordination in these fields, before a full-fledged cooperation could come into being. One key advantage of transatlantic cooperation is that it would make it more difficult for Middle Eastern regimes to play the U.S. and the EU off against each other.

It Is the Foreign Policy…
Past violations of human rights and international law in places like Iraq and Guantánamo, and tacit approval of Israel’s heavy-handed policies against the Palestinian and other neighboring populations are fostering a perception—not only among Islamists—that the U.S. is engaged in a war against Islam, despite official pronouncements to the contrary. For many in the Muslim world, the double standards they see applied by Western policy makers and media coverage reinforce their hostility. A way to break this vicious cycle is to translate the liberties, rule of law, and democracy discourse into actions, and at the same time to demand that Middle Eastern regimes honor their international commitments and their obligations towards their peoples. That is, aligning principles with interests.

Is it reasonable to expect that the ongoing “clash of perceptions” could fade away without the U.S. changing its policy in the Middle East, without the EU defining a common foreign policy and showing political will, and without authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes allowing for real political liberalization? Not really. At this stage, what is required is not only cultural dialogue, but rather a real paradigm shift that would make it possible to forge common strategic approaches towards and within the Middle East.

A number of forces supporting transatlantic convergence can be used to build cooperative ventures in the future. Engagement in credible peace efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian front and in brokering a peace deal between Syria and Israel would have a positive impact on the regional environment. Pacifying Iraq in cooperation with its neighboring countries would create new dynamics and enhance effective multilateralism. Such moves could provide an opportunity for renewed transatlantic efforts in the search for peace and democracy promotion, with the objective of easing the human development crisis in the broader Middle East.

The ultimate goal of any authoritarian regime is to perpetuate itself in power, almost at any expense. What is badly needed in the Middle East is to expand economic, educational, and political opportunities for its peoples. Rather than “engaging Muslims,” transatlantic cooperation should be aimed at expanding such opportunities. If unable or unwilling to do so, a good start would be to stop creating conditions in which radical ideas emerge and thrive.

*Haizam Amirah-Fernández is Senior Analyst for the Mediterranean and the Arab World at the Real Instituto Elcano and Associate Professor at the Instituto de Empresa (IE)*