

Foreign Affairs

[Home](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Current Issue](#)

## **The Clash of Emotions**

By Dominique Moïsi

From *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007

---

Summary: The world today faces not only a clash of civilizations but a clash of emotions as well. The West displays -- and is divided by -- a culture of fear, while the Arab and Muslim worlds are trapped in a culture of humiliation and much of Asia displays a culture of hope.

*Dominique Moïsi is a Senior Adviser at the Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI) in Paris.*

### Fear, Humiliation, Hope, and the New World Order

Thirteen years ago, Samuel Huntington argued that a "clash of civilizations" was about to dominate world politics, with culture, along with national interests and political ideology, becoming a geopolitical fault line ("The Clash of Civilizations?" Summer 1993). Events since then have proved Huntington's vision more right than wrong. Yet what has not been recognized sufficiently is that today the world faces what might be called a "clash of emotions" as well. The Western world displays a culture of fear, the Arab and Muslim worlds are trapped in a culture of humiliation, and much of Asia displays a culture of hope.

Instead of being united by their fears, the twin pillars of the West, the United States and Europe, are more often divided by them -- or rather, divided by how best to confront or transcend them. The culture of humiliation, in contrast, helps unite the Muslim world around its most radical forces and has led to a culture of hatred. The chief beneficiaries of the deadly encounter between the forces of fear and the forces of humiliation are the bystanders in the culture of hope, who have been able to concentrate on creating a better future for themselves.

These moods, of course, are not universal within each region, and there are some areas, such as Russia and parts of Latin America, that seem to display all of them simultaneously. But their dynamics and interactions will help shape the world for years to come.

### THE CULTURE OF FEAR

The United States and Europe are divided by a common culture of fear. On both sides, one encounters, in varying degrees, a fear of the other, a fear of the future, and a fundamental anxiety about the loss of identity in an increasingly complex world.

In the case of Europe, there are layers of fear. There is the fear of being invaded by the poor, primarily from the South -- a fear driven by demography and geography. Images of Africans being killed recently as they tried to scale barbed wire to enter a Spanish enclave in Morocco evoked images of another time not so long ago, when East Germans were shot at as they tried to reach freedom in the West. Back then, Germans were killed because they wanted to escape oppression. Today, Africans are being killed because they want to escape absolute poverty.

Europeans also fear being blown up by radical Islamists or being demographically conquered by them as their continent becomes a "Eurabia." After the bombings in Madrid in 2004 and London in 2005 and the scares this past summer, Europeans have started to face the hard reality that their homelands are not only targets for terrorists but also bases for them.

Then there is the fear of being left behind economically. For many Europeans, globalization has come to be equated with destabilization and job cuts. They are haunted by the fear that Europe will become a museum -- a larger and more modern version of Venice, a place for tourists and retirees, no longer a center of creativity and influence.

Finally, there is the fear of being ruled by an outside power, even a friendly one (such as the United States) or a faceless one (such as the European Commission).

What unites all these fears is a sense of loss of control over one's territory, security, and identity -- in short, one's destiny. Such concerns contributed to the no votes of the French and the Dutch last year on the referendum on the proposed EU constitution. They also explain the return of strong nationalist sentiments in many European countries -- on display during the recent World Cup tournament.

Some of the same sense of loss of control is present in the United States. Although demographic fears are mitigated by the largely successful integration of Hispanics (compared with the difficulties surrounding the integration of Muslims in Europe), they are clearly present. The quarrel over the Spanish version of the American national anthem echoes the debate over the wearing of headscarves and veils in Europe.

Used to rates of growth significantly higher than those in most European countries, Americans do not fear economic decay the way Europeans do (although they worry about outsourcing). Yet they, too, are thinking of decline -- in their bodies, with the plague of obesity; in their budgets, with the huge deficits; and in their spirit, with the loss of appetite for foreign adventures and a growing questioning of national purpose.

The United States' obsession with security after September 11 is understandable and legitimate. But what has it cost in terms of U.S. influence and image in the world? From the difficulties foreign travelers have entering U.S. territory to the human rights scandals of Guantánamo Bay, terrorists have at least in part succeeded in undermining the United States' claims of moral superiority and exceptionalism by prompting such reactions.

Whereas Europeans try to protect themselves from the world through a combination of escapism and appeasement, Americans try to do so by dealing with the problem at its source abroad. But behind the Bush administration's forceful and optimistic rhetoric lies a somber reality, which is that the U.S. response to the September 11 attacks has made the United States more unpopular than ever. The U.S. intervention in Iraq, for example, has generated more problems than it has solved. Iraq is descending into civil war, and U.S. actions there have tipped the balance of power within the Muslim world to its most radical Shiite elements.

## THE CULTURE OF HUMILIATION

Europeans started to reflect on their own decay after World War I: "We civilizations now know ourselves mortal," the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry wrote in 1919. The Muslim world, meanwhile, has been obsessed with decay for centuries. When Europe was in its Middle Ages, Islam was at the peak of its

Renaissance, but when the Western Renaissance started, Islam began its inexorable fall. From its defeat by a Christian fleet at the Battle of Lepanto, in 1571, to its failure to capture Vienna in 1683, to its final disappearance after World War I, the Ottoman Empire slowly shrank into oblivion.

The creation of the state of Israel in the midst of Arab land could only be seen by Muslims as the ultimate proof of their decay. For Jews, the legitimacy of Israel was manifold; it combined the accomplishment of a religious promise, the realization of a national destiny, and compensation by the international community for a unique crime, the Holocaust. For Arabs, by contrast, it was the anachronistic imposition of a Western colonial logic at the very moment decolonization was getting under way. In their view, crimes of the Christian West, fallen into barbarism against the Jews, were being unfairly paid for by the Muslim East.

The unresolved conflict between Israel and its neighbors has helped turn the culture of humiliation into a culture of hatred. Over time, the conflict's national character has shifted to its original religious basis -- a conflict between Muslims and Jews, if not a clash between Islam and the West at large.

The combination of the deepening civil war in Iraq and the fighting in Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel has reinforced a sense of outrage in many Muslims that has been fully exploited by Iran and its allies. In a war of images and symbols, Shiite extremists can appear to embody the spirit of resistance to humiliation, getting stronger with each blow they endure.

Globalization, meanwhile, has contributed to the problem. Every day, the Middle East is confronted with the contrast between globalization's winners, essentially the Western world and East Asia, and those who have been left behind.

The culture of humiliation is not limited to the Middle East but extends to the Muslim diaspora in the West as well. The riots that took place in France during the fall of 2005, for example, had an essentially socioeconomic origin, but they were also a lashing out by the disaffected against a society that claims to give them equal rights in principle but fails to do so in practice.

The gap is also, in part, the product of incompatible worldviews, stemming from different historical eras. As societies in Europe are becoming increasingly secular, the importance of religion in the daily life of the Muslim world is increasing. When Europeans look at Islam today, they are reminded of their own zealotry and wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This gap in mindset exists between the United States and the Muslim world as well, but it is less profound because the United States remains deeply religious and has even experienced a religious revival lately. Yet fundamentalism within Islam is unique in the sense that it is animated by a dual sense of revenge: by the Shiite minority against the Sunni majority and by the fundamentalists against the West at large.

## THE CULTURE OF HOPE

As the West and the Middle East lock horns, confidence in progress has been moving eastward. An art exhibit displayed in 2005-6 at the Royal Academy of Arts, in London, entitled "China: The Three Emperors, 1662-1795," summarized new China's psychology. The explicit message of the exhibit, sponsored by Beijing, was clear: China is back. The central piece of the exhibit was a huge eighteenth-century painting, in the Jesuit-European style, showing the envoys of the West paying tribute to the Chinese emperor. After two centuries of relative decline, China is progressively recovering its legitimate international status. Its policy of concentrating on economic development while avoiding

conflict seems to be working, earning Beijing both material benefits and international respect.

As for India, for the first time in its modern history it has stepped onto the world stage as both an independent and an important power. Cooperating diplomatically with the United States and making economic deals in Europe, the emerging Indian elites are displaying even more pride and optimism than their Chinese counterparts. The world's largest democracy will soon emerge as the most populous country, and it seems to know no limits.

Of course, Cassandras may rightly point out that strategic, economic, social, and political difficulties abound and that the culture of hope could easily collapse on itself like a house of cards. Asia has yet to witness the reconciliation between former enemies that constitutes the most remarkable achievement of postwar western Europe. The level of animosity in China and South Korea over Japan's treatment of the past evokes the situation of Europe in the 1950s. (China seems to have set double standards in this respect, never forgetting Japan's crimes while never remembering its own.) North Korea is a particularly dangerous rogue state. And arms races and nuclear proliferation in East Asia could set the region up for a terrible conflict down the road.

The gap that exists in China between the dynamism of the economy and the near incapacity or total reluctance of the present leadership to implement the most elementary and necessary political reforms does not bode well for the peaceful evolution of the country. Yet despite these concerns, there is hope among both leaders and publics across the region, and it seems likely to last as long as growth continues.

#### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

In confronting this clash of emotions, the first priority for the West must be to recognize the nature of the threat that the Muslim world's culture of humiliation poses to Europe and the United States. Denying the threat's existence or responding to it in the wrong way are equally dangerous choices. Neither appeasement nor military solutions alone will suffice. The war that is unfolding is one that the culture of humiliation cannot win, but it is a war nonetheless and one that the West can lose by continuing to be divided or by betraying its liberal values and its respect for law and the individual. The challenge is not figuring out how to play moderate Islam against the forces of radicalism. It is figuring out how to instill a sufficient sense of hope and progress in Muslim societies so that despair and anger do not send the masses into the radicals' arms.

In that regard, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears more than ever as a microcosm of and possibly a precedent for what the world is becoming. Israel is the West, surrounded by the culture of humiliation and dreaming of escape from a dangerous region and of reentry into a culture of hope. But it must find a solution to the Palestinian problem first, or else the escape will not be possible. So, too, Europe and the United States seek to permanently banish their fears but will be able to do so only by finding a way to help the Muslim world solve its problems.

[Home](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Current Issue](#)

www.foreignaffairs.org is copyright 2002--2006 by the Council on Foreign Relations. All rights reserved.