

AMIN SAIKAL

# ISLAM AND THE WEST

CONFLICT OR COOPERATION?



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# Islam and the West

## Conflict or Cooperation?

Amin Saikal

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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*For Mary-Lou, Rahima, Samra and Amina – the delights of my life*



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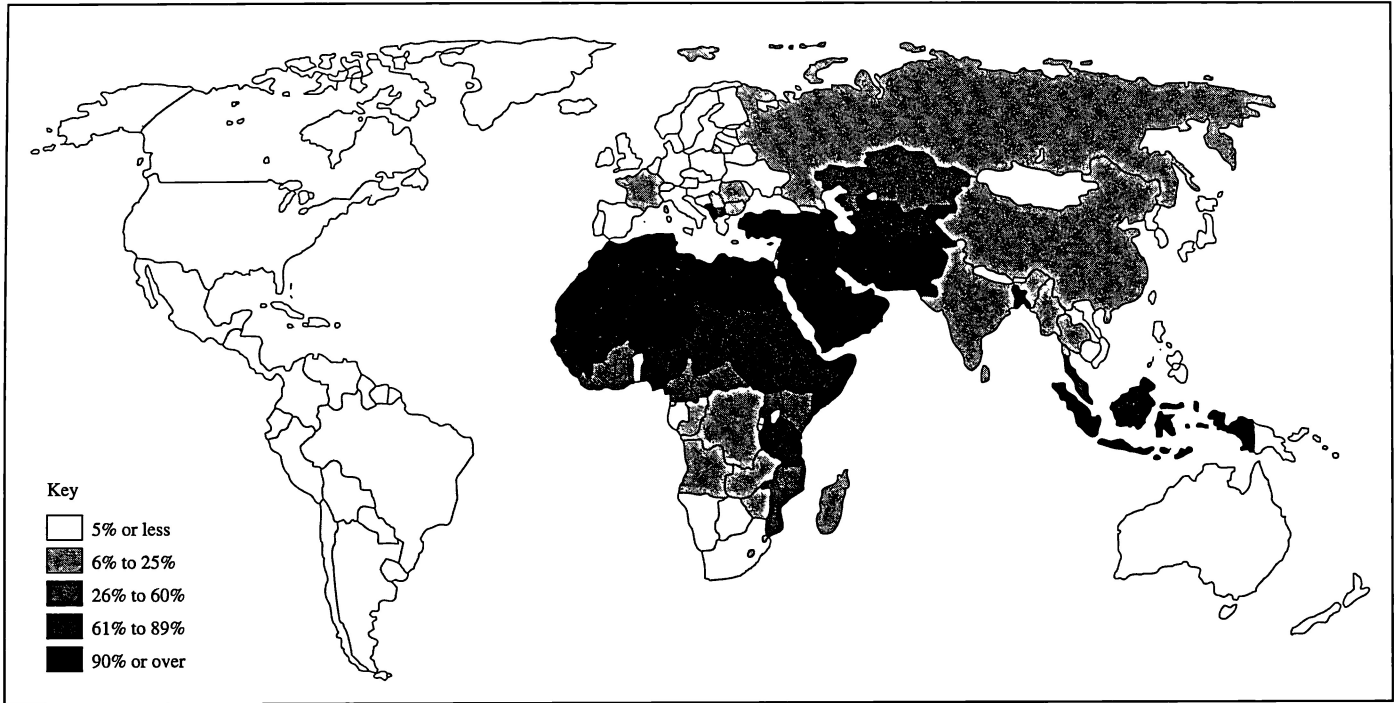
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However, I take responsibility for the entire content of the book.

AMIN SAIKAL



## Muslim Population as Proportion of Total Population

Source: Data from [islamicweb.com](http://islamicweb.com)

# Introduction

Relations between the ‘West’ and ‘the domain of Islam’ are now tense, to say the least. The September 11, 2001 events not only shook the USA and its allies, but also sent shockwaves through the Muslim world, sharply escalating differences that were already there. The relations are both complex and multidimensional, containing elements of conflict and cooperation, perception and misperception, and cultural and social differences. However, the tension has its roots more in political and politically motivated perceptual differences, its intensity fluctuating according to the political utility of the issues which have occasioned the two sides to expose their differences. In this context, the Western and Muslim entities are now more fearful and distrustful of one another than at any other time in contemporary history. A Western contention, which has resonated more strongly in Washington than in any other Western capital, sees those forces of political Islam which defy US control or influence as a serious threat to Western interests that must therefore be combated in whatever way necessary. Equally, a widespread fear exists among not only the radical and neofundamentalist political forces of Islam but also moderate Islamists and ordinary Muslims in general, that US ‘Cold Warrior realists’ have found it in their interest to exaggerate the notion of an ‘Islamic threat’ – to maintain a Western sense of superiority and hegemony over the Muslim world. They see the result as US promotion in the West of ‘Islamophobia’.

It is interesting to note that this turmoil now dominates international politics even though Islamic radicalism was not a major issue in world affairs until the 1970s. Of all the Muslim states, many of which achieved independence after the Second World War, only one was subjected to theocratic rule – that is Saudi Arabia, with which the USA had already forged a very close partnership. Another Muslim state that was seeking to promote an Islamic national identity and unity, but had difficulty in making clear headway, was Pakistan. From its inception in 1947, that country was torn between a drive to have Islam as an overarching national factor, and a commitment to develop a Westminster system of democratic government, which

essentially, for its success, required secularization of the state. The only time that Pakistan experienced an intense process of 're-Islamization' was during General Zia ul-Haq's military rule (1977–88), which the USA supported in the context of its opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Apart from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, all other Muslim states, both old and new, were under the rule of either secularist or semi-secularist forces. This is not to deny that a variety of Islamist forces were at *work* in most of the Muslim domain, but these forces lacked the strength to challenge the dominance of their secular and semi-secular counterparts in both political and economic settings. The situation started unravelling in the 1970s, sliding rapidly towards the growth of political Islamism as an ideology of reform, opposition and resistance. In some countries political Islam succeeded in taking over the reins of power, as in the case of Iran and subsequently in the Sudan and post-communist Afghanistan, culminating in the rise to power of the extremist Taliban and the consolidation of Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda network.

In this work, 'the West' refers to those North American, West European and Australasian democracies that have evolved and functioned as a somewhat coherent political and military alliance, under US leadership since the Second World War (especially when faced by a common threat), despite differences arising from identity, cultural, social and political diversity within the alliance that have often led to divergent foreign policy interests and approaches. The 'domain of Islam' refers to all Arab and non-Arab followers of the religion of Islam, whether living in countries where Islam is the dominant religion or residing as minorities elsewhere. It signifies a common broad religious affiliation, without denying the existence among Muslims of multiple interpretations of Islam and national identities, based on diverse historical, sectarian, cultural, social and political differences, which since Islam's early centuries have rarely allowed Muslims to act in a unified fashion on the world stage. Nor does it imply the absence of rivalries and conflicts which have often marred relations among Muslim states in modern times.

This book's central objective is to examine the nature of the growing tension between the West and the domain of Islam by seeking to answer three fundamental questions. What has gone wrong in both historical and contemporary terms? To what extent do Muslims bear responsibility and in what ways has Western, and more specifically

US, policy behaviour contributed to diluting the relations between the two sides? What is the way forward to repair the damage by building the necessary bridges of understanding and promoting a more peaceful coexistence between the two entities, as an important foundation for generating a lasting, stable and equitable world order? To this end, the book focuses on three major topics: first, the features that have united or divided the Western and Muslim worlds in the course of history, allowing them to enjoy durable periods of peaceful coexistence on the one hand, and stints of misunderstanding and conflict on the other; second, the great issues that have sharpened tension and reduced the chances of harmony in their relations in recent times; and third, the issues whose viable resolution could overcome some of the major obstacles in improving their relations in a globalized world. In addressing these questions, the book builds on and ranges beyond the excellent analyses in monographs such as John L. Esposito's *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, and Giles Kepel's *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*.

Of course, the multidimensionality of relations between Muslim and Western states has given rise to spheres of interaction in which religion, either as a value system or as a marker of communal difference, is a peripheral factor. Commercial relations provide a case in point. While the USA, for example, has put in place legal constraints on certain kinds of economic relations with Iran, many other Western states have been prepared to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities which they see as arising. Iranian graduate students study at European and Australian universities, many Western countries have 'normal' diplomatic relations with Iran, and the Middle Eastern state that is subject to the most stringent international sanctions – Iraq – has been targeted not because of anything to do with religion, but rather on account of its August 1990 violation (through its invasion of Kuwait) of a constitutive element of the Westphalian international system, as well as specific prohibitions in the UN Charter.

This book does not provide an overview of all aspects of relations between Western states and states in which Muslims are a numerical majority of the population. Rather, it is concerned with ways in which interpretations or perceptions of the religion of Islam and of the character and behaviour of the West can and have complicated relations between the West and those states. Semi-secular forces in the Muslim world are far from trivial; indeed, many rulers in Muslim countries regard religion as either a personal matter, or a basis for



legitimation of state power through subordinated ‘official’ religious establishments. However, these numerically significant semi-secularists, because of the very nature of their elite location, have proved less effective than their Islamist opponents in articulating values around which aggrieved forces can coalesce. The dilemma for semi-secularists is that they attract blame for what goes wrong, but little credit for what goes well, given that often they have no claim to ‘democratic’ legitimacy.

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the events of September 11 and their aftermath, with an exposé of various views of Islam and Muslims expressed in the West, and the different attitudes which have coalesced among Muslims towards the West, especially the USA. The purpose is to provide a setting rather than to detail the September 11 events and those that transpired after them, which in many ways are still unfolding.

Chapter 2 explores the shared religious values of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and examines the ways in which harmonious relations evolved and were maintained, and differences and conflicts were managed among these three great revealed religions. The idea is not to delve deep in history, but to tease out those issues which are relevant to understanding the background to what has transpired as major points of conflict between the two sides in modern times.

Chapter 3 looks at the rise of the USA to global power and the expansion of its interests in, and policy approach to, the Muslim domain. In particular, it assesses the US role in the context of US–Soviet Cold War rivalry and the USA’s policy of containment of the Soviet Union, the ways a number of Muslim countries fell into the US orbit, and the ways the USA sought either to marginalize or to ignore a few Muslim nationalist challenges. It also explores Muslim perceptions of the US role.

Chapter 4 focuses on the major issues of tension and the USA’s responses to them, which have sharply influenced Western–Muslim relations in recent times. I propose to examine the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, the Afghanistan conflict from the successful pro-Soviet coup of April 1978 to the fall of the Taliban in November 2001, and the Israeli–Arab conflict. With respect to the latter, the aim is to explain the impact of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian lands and the USA’s support of Israel in enabling radical Islam to enter the Palestinian nationalist movement and to galvanize the political forces of Islam across the Muslim domain. I also evaluate the USA’s

handling of each issue in order to determine how much the USA's own conduct may have contributed to generating Muslim distrust or hostility. The chapter is designed not to give detailed coverage of these issues, which has been ably achieved by many other works, but to distil those components which have proved relevant to the tension in US relations with the Muslim domain.

Chapter 5 investigates the tension between the West and the domain of Islam in the context of a lack of democracy in most Muslim countries, in an attempt to see how much this factor has contributed to a sense of a dichotomy between state and society, and therefore alienation of ordinary citizens from their ruling elites and governments in Muslim countries. Some have argued that many problems of the Muslim domain have domestic roots, and that as long as this remains the case no amount of effort by outsiders to reach out to Muslims can generate solid understanding with them.

Chapter 6 investigates ways to move out of the current frame of hostility and mistrust into which the USA and its allies on one side and the Muslim peoples on the other are locked.

An extensive bibliography is provided for those who wish to follow up the issues raised in this book in more depth.

# 1

## September 11 and its Aftermath

The apocalyptic attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, perpetrated by operatives of the wealthy Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden and his extremist Islamic Al Qaeda (the Base) network, proved as multi-dimensional in their impact as relations have historically been between the multifaceted entities called ‘the West’, now led by the USA, and ‘the domain of Islam’. The attacks were hugely destructive of lives, property and economic opportunities, profoundly symbolic in targeting the heart of the USA’s global economic and political-military power, and potent in shattering the psyche of invulnerability of the USA and many of its allies around the world. They exposed US vulnerability to attacks and changed the USA’s perceptions both of itself as the world’s only secure superpower, and of the international order it had cherished since the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union. In the past, the USA focused much of its intellectual and physical energy on a capacity to defend and assert itself against aggression by another state actor. The attacks struck at this paradigm of security. The enemy was no longer a state, but a sub-national actor with an extensive, shadowy international network, committed to what have been dubbed ‘Armageddon-type’ missions. The USA was now confronted with ‘international terrorism’ – violence waged to inflict maximum pain and suffering on a civilian population in pursuit of either specific or notional political objectives. It confronted the Republican Administration of President George W. Bush with new challenges, and made it recast its approach to the world and substitute many old assumptions and policies with new ones in order to reassert the USA’s superpower standing. It prompted the Administration to move rapidly to identify its enemy, and to set about creating

a domestic and international environment to fight this enemy on all fronts.

However, what transpired has defocused US foreign policy, enmity has emerged on multiple fronts, many of the USA's allies are confused, and the world is left in a state of suspense. While the USA and many of its allies continue to fear the threat of when and how terrorism will hit them again, the followers of the Islamic faith have been widely offended, and have felt besieged by the USA's attempts to alleviate this fear. Washington's resort to military might, without a well-crafted, coherent political strategy, has sharpened hostility and distrust between the West and the domain of Islam.

The September 11 attacks challenged the USA and changed the terms of reference for it on many issues in numerous ways. They exposed a colossal failure by US intelligence agencies, especially the CIA and FBI. Their inability to avert the attacks led to a Congressional Inquiry into their efficiency and to an overhaul of their role and operations, with a Presidential proposal to create a new super-Department of Homeland Security,<sup>1</sup> to retool the USA's protective services. They highlighted the weaknesses in US military preparedness in dealing with non-state actors, prompting President Bush to propose the highest military expenditure in 20 years to develop new high-technology weapons and methods of operation especially designed to fight terrorism. By June 2002, the Bush Administration expediently embraced a new strategic doctrine to enable the USA to bomb first and explain later. The doctrine exalted the primacy of preemptive strikes against terrorists and hostile countries possessing chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, and essentially sidelined containment and deterrence, the two key pillars of US behaviour during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond this, the terrorist attacks shattered the USA's sense of immunity from the way that globalization – the phenomenon of large-scale interdependence, which has come to dominate the world deeper and faster than at any other time in history, especially in the areas of mass communications, capital, and technology transfer – could be used by hostile forces to damage the USA itself. With its control of information technology and expansive corporate influence, the USA had grown very comfortable as the main beneficiary of the phenomenon. It had been prepared to overlook many of its predatory aspects,<sup>3</sup> to which many poor countries had been subjected, in order to safeguard and strengthen its own interests as the determinant of

the well-being of the world as a whole. It was the terrorists' relatively cheap but effective use of transcontinental means of communications, finance and technological innovations that enabled them to target some of the landmarks that symbolized the US position as the most powerful state on earth. Washington was also alerted to the danger that determined, hostile sub-national actors, supported by certain state actors, might now go even further to obtain and use weapons of mass destruction as easily as they had attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Washington now had to look seriously at the issue of 'globalization vulnerability', and examine its own role in it. This has led it to impose stringent controls on people movement, financial and technological transfers, and foreigners' use of US facilities and know-how at home and abroad. In other words, the USA has engaged in activities that are in many ways anti-globalization in character – a development which could have serious ramifications for the shape of the world order in coming years.

Until September 11, the USA and most of its allies shared a general assumption that poverty, lack of education and social deprivation generated violence and terrorism. The President of the World Bank, Paul Wolfensohn, regularly stressed the importance of this relationship, calling for rich countries to help poor countries and to create an international environment conducive to the generation of long term structural peace and stability. Yet less attention was given to the possibility that a combination of religious extremism, wealth, and political causes in the context of a globalized world could prove more deadly than poverty and social deprivation in producing unprecedented terrorist violence. The September 11 events changed this, at least for the USA and many of its Western allies. Bin Laden and his followers, most importantly the hijackers who flew the planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon, typically came from very wealthy and well educated, but disaffected, Arab backgrounds, with 15 of the 19 hijackers coming from one of the USA's key Arab Islamic allies, Saudi Arabia. Thus, they acted neither out of poverty, nor in pursuit of wealth.

This shifted the debate in the USA in favour of Samuel Huntington's prediction of the coming age as one of conflicts between various cultures and civilizations, with the West and Islam as main protagonists. He states: 'Conflicts between the West and Islam... focus less on territory than on broader intercivilizational issues such as weapons proliferation, human rights and democracy,

control of oil, migration, Islamist terrorism, and Western intervention'.<sup>4</sup> He calls on Western policy makers to ensure that the West gets stronger and fends off all the others, Islam in particular. He is, of course, widely criticized for relying on a vague notion of what he calls 'civilizational identity', adopting a tautological approach to define Western and Islamic civilizations as somewhat homogeneous and self-contained. Edward Said criticizes him for having little

time to spare for the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilisation, or for the fact that the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagogy and ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilisation. No, the West is the West and Islam Islam.<sup>5</sup>

Despite these criticisms, Huntington has claimed that the September 11 attacks vindicate his thesis, especially since the attackers acted for causes which did not emanate from poverty. This line of thinking now seems to have gained increasing legitimacy in Washington's corridors of power. However, it needs to be treated with a good deal of caution. The causes which drive alienated forces into the arms of a terrorist such as Bin Laden are strongly political in character, and emanate from specific historical circumstances rather than from broad 'civilizational' identity. Nor do the reactions of forces within the Muslim world to the September 11 attacks point to a homogeneity of the type that Huntington's analysis implies. For example, when Kabul was liberated from the Taliban on November 13, 2001, Western journalists reported scenes of wild celebration in the streets of the Afghan capital. Such episodes should give pause to those who see Western values as threatened by an undifferentiated 'Islam'. Many devout Muslims have no particular desire to live under the yoke of a religious autocracy, and many Afghans have indicated that they are prepared to accept a prolonged Western presence in their country to thwart externally imposed religious extremism, as long as it does not degenerate into an imposition of cultural hegemony.

Confronted with the September 11 outrages, the Bush Administration scrambled for an appropriate response strategy to achieve a number of short and long term objectives. The immediate aims understandably were to soothe public anger and despair, and

The relations between the 'West' – and in particular the United States – and the 'domain of Islam' have grown tense, especially since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In this important new book Amin Saikal takes issue with those who see this as exemplifying a clash of civilizations, arguing that it is rather the consequence of particular contentious contemporary factors that have disrupted a historical pattern marked at least as much by cooperation as by conflict. The military might of the United States, he argues, will not be enough to win the 'war on terrorism'; it must be accompanied by sound political strategy to address those factors – from the effects of American globalism and the lack of democratization in the Arab world to the problem of Palestine – that have provided moral and political 'nourishment' to terrorism but defy military solutions.

*Pre-publication endorsements:*

'At once engagingly written and worthy of the most serious scholarly attention, Amin Saikal's book provides an illuminating portrayal of Islam as a world historical force and a devastating account of the American response to the September 11 attacks. He concludes with a series of policy guidelines that offer the world its best chance of overcoming the intertwined challenges of mega-terrorism, religious extremism, and Western hegemonic geopolitics. All in all, a stunning achievement!' –

**Professor Richard A. Falk, Princeton University**

'Dismissing as an oversimplification the "clash of civilizations" view that Islam and the West are engaged in an inevitable and irreversible conflict, this book - written by a distinguished Afghan-born, Western-educated scholar - analyzes the specific political, economic, and cultural roots of Islamist terrorism. Anyone who wishes to understand the contemporary world must heed Professor Saikal's argument.' –

**Professor Robert G. Gilpin Jr**

A sober and thoughtful examination of what has emerged as the faultline in world affairs since the early 2000s. Those who pick up this book and those who take issue with the author's interpretations, analyses and conclusions, are likely to put it down the richer in informed reflection for having read it. –

**Professor Ramesh Thakur, Vice Rector, United Nations University**

'Covering with equal assuredness the Middle East and Central, South, and Southeast Asia, Amin Saikal provides a masterful analysis of the complex relations of Muslim polities with the non-Muslim West. He is especially convincing in showing how the lone superpower at the end of the 20th century, the United States, has allowed itself to be drawn into, or has purposely pursued, policies that serve to undermine its professed democratic values and even-handedness in foreign relations.' –

**Professor R. D. McChesney, New York University and editor of Iranian Studies**

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