



*(Editor's note: It is with deep sadness that we report the passing of a dear friend and leading Asia intellectual, Tan Sri Dr. Noordin Sopiee, Chairman and CEO of ISIS-Malaysia and one of the founding fathers of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP). This article was written by him 18 months ago but is still timely and relevant and is printed today to remind us of his wisdom and insights.)*

**The clash of civilizations vs. the war on terror: some hard facts** by Noordin Sopiee

The theoretical “clash of civilizations” between “the West” and “Muslims” has been brought much closer to reality in the years leading to Sept. 11 and the events since. But such a clash is not yet reality. Far from it. It can be prevented – unless we wish it to come to pass.

About the real clash of civilizations, already in place and long fought, let me make a few points.

*First*, the real “clash of civilizations” that has been going on, at various levels of lethality, for hundreds of years, is the clash between Muslims and within the Muslim world.

We must always remember:

- The Muslim ummah is very diverse. There is no monolith, no homogenous entity. Muslims come in every color and shape, literally and figuratively.
- The 132 million Muslims in the Middle East constitute 11.3 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. In other words, 88.7 percent of Muslims are to be found outside the Middle East. Fifty-seven percent of Muslims live in South, Central, and East Asia. Indonesia has many more Muslims than the whole Middle East. There are 21.5 times more Muslims in Africa than in the Middle East. There are 40 million Muslims in Europe; i.e. there are almost twice as many Muslims in Europe as in Saudi Arabia.
- In some unlucky countries, even Muslim “moderates” are “extremist.” In some lucky countries, even Muslim “extremists” are “moderate.”
- Islam and Muslims are very often misunderstood in very profound ways.
  - in the so-called “West;”
  - in the so-called “East” (indeed, even more so, I believe, in Japan and China);
  - in Muslim-majority countries (such as Malaysia); and
  - within the Muslim ummah itself. Muslims are as capable of profoundly misunderstanding Muslims as Christians are capable of profoundly misunderstanding Christians.

*Second*, the primary combatants in the real clash of civilizations (second only to the clash of civilizations in the Cold War) have been:

- committed, politically activist conservative, traditionalist, literalist Muslims and
- committed, politically activist modernist, nationalistic Muslims.

*Third*, at the extreme of the conservative, traditionalist, literalist spectrum are those who advocate and act to create the historical Islamic state, at whose core is the Sharia, and rule by the “ulama.”

At the other extreme of the spectrum are the modernist, nationalist Muslims who advocate and act to create the completely secular state, oppressing Islam as a religion and oppressing political Islam (of the conservative, traditionalist, literalist brand) as it seen to be a serious political threat. (The Baathists are an example of modernist, nationalistic Muslim extremists).

In the vast middle are the vast majority of Muslims who are not political combatants. They are the primary battleground for the contending two “Political Islams.”

Where do the terrorists fit? I believe they are the very small lunatic or fiercely driven fringe, who may come from the left or the right, the north or the south, from the conservative extreme or the modernist extreme. It is remarkable how shallow is the immersion of almost all terrorists in the religion of Islam, regardless of where in the political compass they lie.

It seems clear that terrorist groups like al-Qaeda are (for now at least) involved first, in the political struggle with the U.S., and second, in the intra-Muslim clash of civilizations in countries with preponderantly Muslim populations.

*Fourth*, in the intra-Muslim clash of civilizations the incumbent modernist, nationalist Muslims have held or clung to power in all countries, in all continents, except in Iran. In many cases, this has not been achieved with ease or with easy, nice or neat solutions. Many more committed Muslims at the traditionalist and literalist end of the Muslim spectrum have been killed, repressed, and terrorized than committed Muslims at the modernist, nationalist end of the Muslim spectrum.

This does not mean that there are not better, more productive and more sustainable means for securing victory for the committed modernist, nationalist Muslims. The electoral victory in Malaysia of Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi in 2004 is a case in point. The electoral process in Indonesia is yet another clear positive case.

*Fifth*, for a very large proportion of the world, compared to the clash of civilizations within Islam and between Muslims, whose outcome has the most profound and comprehensive consequences to an entire society's economic, political, social, cultural, religious, intellectual, and psychological development, the so-called “war against terror” must be a critical concern of a much lesser order.

For societies with Muslim populations, with Muslim majorities, or with substantial Muslim minorities, defeat in the clash of civilizations means an end to life as we know it. Miss-steps and misdemeanors in the “war against terror” threaten the anger of the U.S. and may result in the occasional terrorist attack (which in any case will generate animosity against “the terrorists” and can be utilized against the conservative, traditionalist, literalist Muslim activists, sometimes even when they are not involved).

It is very important that organizations like al-Qaeda be vanquished and that transnational terrorism be contained (although we must be clear as to enemies and threats and cannot be too vaguely arrayed against terror or terrorism, which is a political method). But, the U.S. cannot expect states to act irrationally – to try to win the so-called “war against terror” at the cost of losing or seriously compromising the central clash with the conservative, traditionalist literalists.

It is not and cannot be in the interest of the U.S. to put at risk the bigger, more critical struggle.

*Finally*, with regard to the U.S. role in the inter-Muslim clash of civilizations and the “war against terror,” it is necessary for a hyperpower like the United States to be extremely involved, to be extremely well informed, to be extremely sophisticated, and to be extremely patient. It is useful to be reminded that the moderate Muslim modernists are neither feeble minded nor experts at failure.

Central must be the realization that the U.S. government in many circumstances works from a position of extreme political disadvantage. You cannot do for others what they have to do for themselves. There is no virtue in excessive application of the kiss of death.

*Tan Sri Dr. Noordin Sopiee was Chairman and CEO of ISIS-Malaysia. He lost his long struggle with thyroid cancer on Dec 29, 2005, just days after his 61st birthday. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and close friends as we jointly grieve his passing.*