

*In your view, what is the genesis of the current crisis? The immediate cause of course is clear: an offending video was placed on the Internet, and since then people have protested, sometimes in more violent ways than others. But why do tensions between the Muslim world and the West persist? Why is it possible for one marginal person who represents nobody to come out, make a video that is humiliating, and for protests and violence to erupt on such a large scale?*

The current crisis has been precipitated by numerous factors; there is no one single cause to which we can point. Rather, this is a complex matter involving the fundamental inability of each side to understand the paradigm of the other. As you mention, the particulars of this case have been rehearsed many times in the past week, but the underlying causes are deeper, and, unfortunately, cannot simply be wished away.

*Is it an absence of responsible leadership that is causing this; is it because leaders in some part of the world are exploiting the situation to rouse people and strengthen themselves? Is it because there is already a lot of tension vis-à-vis the West as well as insecurity at the individual level in the Arab region, and people are looking for a way to vent or externalize their anxieties?*

To properly understand this matter it is important to look seriously at the politics that pertain to Islam and the West at this particular point in history. It is naive to point at a particular film, cartoon, or writing made by marginal figures in an attempt to provoke and insult Muslims as the cause of these conflagrations.

Rather, one must keep in mind the many points of conflict and tensions between the Muslim world and the West today: grave violations associated with the war in Iraq, regular drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the conflict that has persisted for decades in Palestine. More recently we have witnessed attempts to marginalize Muslims in Europe by banning headscarves, minarets and other religious symbols, while far-right European political parties consistently demonize their Muslim populations, casting them as unwelcome intrusions. To turn a blind eye to these serious and enduring conflicts is to remain oblivious of the underlying factors that make coexistence and rapprochement between Islam and the West so difficult.

*Some scholars have pointed to how the Prophet himself behaved when others insulted him: most often by letting things go and being forgiving. From your perspective, what is the Islamic point of view when something like this happens, especially given how easy it is to exploit people by simply posting an offending video on the Internet? How should a Muslim react to something like this?*

Of all Muslim symbols, there is perhaps none more sacred than the Prophet Muhammad himself. Muslims barely utter his name before their conscience obliges them to pray for God to bless him and grant him peace. Hundreds of millions of Muslims revere not only the Prophet, but also the city of Madina, which he made his home, and aspire to visit it at the first opportunity. Islamic history is filled with poetry expressing Muslims' love and devotion for the Prophet. Children are taught

to consider him their ultimate example, for his beautiful character, resolute determination, persistent sacrifice, and unwavering devotion. It is no exaggeration to say that Muslims love the Prophet more than their selves. Therefore, crude representations of the Prophet not only translate as a great insult, but ignites the already simmering tensions alluded to above.

Unfortunately each side considers themselves to be firmly in the right, and unwilling to hear the grievances of the other side. As a representative of the Muslim world, I would consider myself remiss if I did not therefore clarify the sensibilities and sentiments of the Muslim world for the many well-meaning non-Muslims in the world who desire peaceful coexistence and an amelioration of our current crises. In order to make any progress, the first step must be to listen to each other with a sincere and open heart. It will not do to simply claim, for example, that specific standards of free speech must be applicable to all, and then to impose this understanding on all other societies. Muslims do indeed value free speech, but we also recognize hate speech. Speech and dialogue are specific tools of communications and not purposeless. With them, we aim to achieve a greater understanding of both others and ourselves. Insulting a revered figure like the Prophet of Islam does not lead to a greater understanding, but leads to more scorn and ill feelings.

None of this is meant to condone violence of any sort. Indeed, the example of the Prophet was to endure the worst of insults. Not only was his message routinely rejected, but also he was chased out of his hometown, cursed at, and physically assaulted on numerous occasions. His example was to always endure all personal insults and attacks. There is no doubt that he was the most steadfast in his faith and in following the advice of God, and since the Prophet is our greatest example in this life, this should also be the reaction of all Muslims. As the Qur'an instructs, "Be patient, as were the great prophets."

*Given what has already happened, what do you think needs to happen next? What do each of world leaders, religious leaders, responsible citizens, the media, and young people need to do to change the situation?*

Muslim leaders have a duty to object to hate speech (aimed at any group) in the most peaceful of ways, and must unequivocally denounce violence of any sort. It is equally important to point out that some self-appointed religious leaders have failed to act responsibly. In the tense environment that currently prevails in the Muslim world, to air these provocations openly and to speculate on the supposed conspiracies behind them is to act recklessly. Unfortunately, the proliferation of satellite channels and other types of media platforms have opened the door to all sorts of people who have only their own material interests and popularity in mind, not the wellbeing of any of the Muslim nation, the Middle East, nor the world at

large. This, unfortunately, is a serious failure in leadership that must be addressed. A genuine religious leader has the responsibility to act as a sensible and measured guide for people, shepherding them towards the better course of action. Misguided figures use incidents like this recent one as cover for their own sinister designs. This is another reason why media outlets need to exercise responsibility with respect to what they publish.

Despite all of this there is room for hope and optimism. While this current situation has been particularly challenging, our actions should come with the firm belief that the world's religions are ultimately interested in achieving harmony between peoples. Throughout my tenure as Mufti of Egypt, I have called for strengthening the bonds between the world's great faiths. In this context, I have been involved in a number of forums devoted to building bridges of understanding. The virtue of these forums is that they quickly allow each side to appreciate the other's positions. This is a model that applies not only to religious leaders who have been at the forefront of such initiatives. Both political leaders and media outlets must look beyond their short-term benefits and take seriously their responsibility to the outside world.

*Are you worried about tensions between Copts and Muslims in Egypt, as fallout from this crisis? Have you spoken domestically about this following the crisis? What are you doing already at a domestic, regional, and international level to address these tensions?*

With regards to your question about Egypt, I am pleased to say that the official Muslim institutions in the country enjoy warm relations with the Coptic Church. Just as there are radical individuals within Muslim societies, there are extreme figures in the Christian world. Muslims are obligated to consider these people as marginal and unrepresentative of the Christian faith, just as we expect others to do when it comes to us. Many outside of Egypt fear that these incidents will be used as an opportunity to divide Muslim Egyptians from Coptic Egyptians. This is not possible. We denounce in the strongest terms any acts of sectarianism that occurs on our soil. We are always ready to cooperate with all willing parties to diminish the fears of sectarianism, and assert with a unified voice that Muslims and Christians are equal partners in building the country we share as citizens.