

Conflicts between Orient and Occident: Threatening Images and biased Perceptions

([Picture 1](#)) How do we see the world? - ([Picture 2](#)) We see a house. This is a house, a piece of art by Roy Lichtenstein. – We know what this is. However, Lichtenstein cheats us. It's not a house. The walls and the roof are put together, so that they do not come into our direction, as they would have, if it were a house. But they are arranged in the inverse way, in a concave form. – You do not believe it, because you stick to your idea, it has to be a house.

Now, look at this ([Picture 3](#)), it's the lower part of the same house put on the ground and you see the concave shape. ([Picture 4](#)) But as soon as you see the whole picture, your brain is cheating you, as you want to see the house. And then ([Picture 5](#)) you see a similar house again with a little garden and you forget about the cheating altogether. – That's just a short lesson about prejudices. Prejudices have a serious impact on our understanding of anything new, or of anything foreign. If we enter a foreign culture, we – as the Swiss writer Hugo Lötscher once said – we do not look, what it's like, we just look, whether it's as we assume (“wir schauen nicht, wie's ist, sondern, ob's stimmt”).

In other words, when we perceive unknown reality, we only look for a confirmation of our expectation. We unconsciously compare what we see with something similar we already have registered as a picture in our head. And as we prefer assurance, we do not see what is different; we do not really see the reality. We stick to our pre-conceived ideas, which we believe to be confirmed.

([Picture 6](#)) When the French writer François-René Chateaubriand (1768-1848) in the early 19th century travelled through the Orient, he wrote about Cairo: “This is the only city, which gave me the impression of an oriental city, as we use to imagine it, that's how it is presented in the tales of 1000 and one night”¹.

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([Picture 7](#)) This brings me to our topic: the relationship between Orient and Occident, the conflicts between the Islamic World and the West. - The picture shows an attack by the invading Christian Crusaders against the Moslems. - Within my topic, I would like to focus the pictures used as reference in the mutual understanding. Pictures are increasingly important in politics and media. They are the most powerful form of information. A friend of mine, who works for the magazine DER SPIEGEL, told me, that before they used to write a story, for which afterwards suitable pictures were looked for – today, he said, it's often the other way around.

To present the topic, I try to understand the two sides in their mutual relationship as a result of their common history during the last 14 centuries. This is important, as we have to understand how mutual perceptions have been shaped, how each side has created its image of the other side. These images are the product of the political and social development on each side in these relations.

A good way to look at history is to look at maps. ([Pictures 8-14](#)). Let's run through the centuries. Look at the red area of the Christian world and the green area of Islam and look how the borders between the two have been shifted.

We see two phases: first the massive expansion of the Islamic world into the heart of medieval and renaissance Europe, first to Spain and then, at the end of the 17th century, even to the doors of Vienna – then, in the second phase, the massive roll-back by Western colonialism: Since the early 18th century the West has quickly overrun the whole Islamic world and expanded its colonial rule, which formally lasted until after World War II.

¹ Karl Ulrich Syndram: Der erfundene Orient in der europäischen Literatur vom 18. bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts, in: Gereon Sievernich und Hendrik Budde (Hg.): Europa und der Orient 800-1900, Berlin 1989 (Ausstellungskatalog), p. 336

Now let's look at the images the West has produced for portraying the Orient in these two phases.

In the first phase, the Orient was the threatening enemy: (Picture 15) 1493 Constantinople fell in the hands of the heretic Muslims. The danger moved closer. (Picture 16) Two centuries later, 250'000 Turks beleaguered Vienna. The future of the Christian World was at stake.

The threat from the East was personified in the figure of the Oriental despot: (Picture 17) - as represented here by Albert Dürer - ordering the killing of 10'000 Christians. The Oriental despot had unlimited power over his subjects as well as over the women of his harem. The Orient in form of this exotic figure was recognized in Western imagination as a strong opponent on equal footage or even stronger. Later on, this figure served enlightened kings in Europe as contrast medium for their legitimacy as humane and cultured rulers.

But then, colonialism turned the tides. (Picture 18) Napoleon "came" to Egypt, (Picture 19), here in action, bringing culture and civilization to the rest of the world. Colonialism changed our picture of the Orient radically. The Orient, as it was perceived in Europe from that time onward, became the mere object of the colonial intention to expand political domination over the rest of the world. And at the same time, the Orient was the object of a new science in service of this political will.

As the Orient had lost its threatening aggressive features, colonialism at the cultural level gave rise to a new imaginary Orient: (Picture 20) : "Es lächelt die Türkin, sie laded zum Bade". A painting by Ingres 1862: The Turkish Bath. This Orient became the projection area for ecstatic dreams, debauched pleasures and sexual freedoms, allowing the European bourgeoisie to escape from the narrowness, frustrations and moral restrains of their own society. In this imagination, political and military supremacy of colonial Europe was reflected in the boundless power of Western man over the passive female body of the Orient, open to his desires. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient followed the model of the relation between the strong and weak sex.²

(Picture 21) The marriage Market in Babylon, 1875 by E. Long – The oriental woman has become a commodity, she is free for sale and behind, at the wall the lions in the animal kingdom of paradise. - (Picture 22): The slave market by Gérôme showing the huge phallic fingers of the buyer, which enter the mouth of the naked women, who has a seducing white skin. - (Picture 23) Western engineers penetrated the Orient and build the Suez Canal. For its inauguration, (Picture 24) Giuseppe Verdi composed his opera about the tragic fate of a mythic oriental woman, the Ethiopian princess Aida.

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After World War II, colonial submission was overcome by the wave of nationalist movements. Our image of the Orient once again radically changed. (Picture 25). Before, the Orient, in the perspective outlined above, was supposed to be like an obedient women, who now suddenly refused her submission, became rebellious and then independent. On this background, political independence got a deeper meaning of defying, offending and threatening the former masters.

(Picture 26) Mossadegh in Iran dared to nationalize our Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, ... these bastards...

(Picture 27) Nasser in Egypt seized our Suez Canal

(Picture 28) the FNL took Algeria, a part of our French Motherland

(Picture 29) and Khomeini took our diplomats hostages, occupying the American Embassy in Tehran.

(Picture 30) This anti-colonial defiance was particularly threatening during the Cold War, as the Soviets offered their friendship to the young Arab states. The picture shows Chruschtschow and Nasser opening the Aswan dam, built by the Russians.

But in the end, Arab Nationalism failed, Soviet Socialism lost its attractiveness and imploded. (Picture 31) Western supremacy prevailed, although affected by continued conflicts and internal turmoil in

² Cf. Karl-Heinz Kohl: Cherchez la femme d'Orient, in Gereon Sievernich & Hendrik Budde: Europa und der Orient 800-1900, Ausstellungskatalog, Berlin 1989

different parts of the region. – The picture shows President Clinton as arbiter with Israeli Prime Minister Perez and the King of Jordan. The predominant Western, above all American role in the region had not been seriously challenged. A strong pro-western attitude among the elites in the Islamic world was still outweighing growing Anti-Americanism in the broader population.

To understand the increasing tensions in the relations between the Orient and the West since then, let's first remember the still encouraging signs only seven years ago - in contrast to the current crisis. In spring and summer 2000, although different conflicts continued, the region was not yet a crisis region threatening global stability. At that time, a series of positive developments gave still rise to hopes:

- (Picture 32): In Egypt the conflict between the radical Islamists and the authorities had ended and moderate Islamists participated in elections
- (Picture 33): In Algeria, the civil war, which had caused the death of 100'000 people, came to an end. The picture shows the Algerian President Bouteflika with his mentor Chirac.
- (Picture 34): In March 2000, after the victory of Khatami's Reformists in the Iranian Parliamentary elections, the American Foreign Minister Mme Albright offered Tehran an unconditional dialogue for resolving all mutual problems.
- (Picture 35): In May 2000 Israel, after having occupied Southern Lebanon for 18 years, withdrew its troops.
- (Picture 36): In July 2000, the Camp David negotiations brought the Middle East conflict close to a solution
- (Picture 37): In Iraq, a new UN mandate for inspecting the WMD-Program could be adopted
- (Picture 38): in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime was not yet under the control of the Al-Qaeda, the huge Buddha sculpture in Bamyán had not been destroyed yet – and
- (Picture 39): although Al-Qaeda in 1998 had launched its first major attack against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, terrorism was not a global issue yet.

Compared to this relatively peaceful period at the turn of the century, today we are confronted with far more threatening conflicts.

- (Picture 40) The key event of course was 9/11. Since then, the threat of Islamist terrorism has become a global phenomenon.
- (Picture 41) Already before, the Israel/Palestine-conflict had escalated, when Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September 2000 provoked the outbreak of the 2nd Intifada. (Picture 42) Today the economy and public life in the occupied territories are about to collapse.
- (Picture 43) The war in Lebanon last summer has aggravated the conflict, the cease-fire is fragile. In the whole region hatred against the Jewish state has further increased and in Lebanon another civil war has become a real danger.
- (Picture 44) The catastrophe in Iraq has caused Bush's defeat in the bi-elections for the American congress last November.
- (Picture 45) The nuclear crisis with Iran has led to a dangerous impasse. American or Israeli military action can not be excluded
- (Picture 46) in Afghanistan NATO is drawn into an escalating conflict in the South with growing Taliban resistance. Terror is on the rise. Drogue production is three times higher than at the end of the Taliban regime in 2001.
- And the disastrous situation in Iraq and in Lebanon has created a new dangerous rift between the Sunnis and the Shias in the Middle-Eastern Islam.

(Picture 47) All these conflicts, aggravated by their mutual interrelation, have transformed the entire region from the Mediterranean to the Hindukush in a crisis area, proliferating radicalism and threatening global stability.

Today, there is no perspective in a foreseeable future for any solution of these problems. (Picture 48) The conflicts are driven more and more by radical forces with anti-Western positions. Dialogue has become difficult, if not impossible, also because the US administration rejects any official contacts

with all these forces, accusing them of being terrorists or supporting terrorism: the HAMAS, the Hezbollah, Syria, Iran and the Taliban.

The West and above all the US have lost their predominant influence in the region. Washington is not the credible arbiter anymore and has isolated itself with its unconditional support for Israel and its repression in the occupied territories. Russia and China ([Picture 49](#)) pursue their own interests and have become influential alternative partners for regional regimes: Ahmadinejad, the Pariah of Western diplomacy, is received by the Chinese President on the red carpet. - ([Picture 50](#)) Guantanamo has become the symbol for American double standards. ([Picture 51](#)) Sympathies for West are at their lowest in Islamic societies and anti-Western positions are now prevailing also among the elites.

In such a tense atmosphere in our general relations with the Islamic world, small incidents can suddenly spark a wider confrontation: ([Picture 52](#)) The publication of a few cartoons in a Danish newspaper provoked violent demonstrations in the Islamic world. ([Picture 53](#)) Western Embassies were put on fire. - ([Picture 54](#)) An imprudent quotation by the Pope last September, in his speech in Regensburg, was perceived as an intentionally hostile act against Islam.

Moreover, this external confrontation has directly influenced the internal debate about the integration of foreigners in European societies. ([Picture 55](#)) Whereas before the issue was referred to national communities – the Turks, the North Africans or Pakistanis – today integration problems are linked to the religion: Muslims allegedly refuse integration and their headscarf is seen – as Roland Koch, the Prime Minister of the German federal state of Hesse once put it – as a means for political struggle (politisches Kampfmittel).

Objectively we are confronted here with a series of quite different conflicts, most of them without direct links: Al-Qaeda has nothing to do neither with the demonstrations against the cartoons nor with the Iranian nuclear program. However, the common denominator Islam in all these issues underpins a general perception in the West of an overall conflict.

([Picture 56](#))-There is a common denominator: Political positions are justified by a political interpretation of Islam. In fact, this interpretation transformed the religion Islam into Islamism, a political ideology. However, this ideology, which justifies violent action for changing political reality, is a new and modern phenomenon of Islam of the last 50 years.

Huntington has created the notion of the “Clash of Civilizations”. He explains the conflict by the contradiction between the essence of Western Culture and the essence of Islam, which he sees particularly aggressive by its nature: (quote) “Moslem borders are bloody, and so are its innards”, as there is a (quote) “Moslem propensity toward violent conflict”³.

Without entering the debate on how to refute such an ahistoric approach, we can use it as reference for the widespread lump-sum perception of “Islam as a threat”. And we find this perception in the pictures our Western perspective has developed for representing the Islamic world.

([Picture 57](#)) Just look at this cover of a Special edition of DER SPIEGEL: “Allah’s bloody land, Islam and the Middle East”. In these pictures - as well as in other pictures commonly published on Islam - we often find the confirmation of the three notions, most associated with Islam by large majorities in European opinion polls⁴: Fanaticism, terror and the repression of women. What we see in these pictures is the underlying general message of rejection and aggression.

Look at the barbed butcher below on the right of the SPIEGEL cover. ([Picture 58](#)) If you are looking for picturesque bloody and fanatic Muslims, just go to the yearly Ashura processions of devoted Shias, ([Picture 59](#)) staging the sufferings of their early brothers in faith in the battle of Kerbala in the first

³ S.P.Huntington: The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order, New York 1996, p. 217, 258

⁴ FAZ, 15.9.04: E. Noelle: Der Kampf der Kulturen, Die Deutschen sehen mit zusammengebissenen Zähnen der Bedrohung entgegen.

century of Islamic history. – It's as easy to find pictures of bloody Christian Passion plays, such as those in Oberammergau in Bavaria, to produce similar impressions from our side.

(Picture 60) It's true, that in recent years almost all major terrorist attacks have been committed by Islamists and this terrorism has tremendously increased. (Picture 61) In this context however, the notion "terrorist" has become a label to justify absolute condemnation not only of the deed, but also of the persons concerned. This is a terrorist, not a human being. And as these terrorists themselves justify their deeds with their understanding of Islam, the connection between the Koran and the Kalashnikov is confirmed.

(Picture 62) Women in tshaddors are the symbol of male repression in Islam. It's true, these women are Iranians who are forced by law to cover their head in public. (Picture 63) It's a different story, if Muslim women in our society insist on wearing their headscarves. How can we deny them the freedom to do so and pretend at the same time, that they are the victim of male repression, allegedly in their family? Research shows that young Moslem women in Germany, using the headscarf often do so against the will of their secular parents. – I dare to speculate - having also in mind some ideas I have presented before - , that we, above all as men, are against headscarves, as we perceive them as a signal of rejection and denial by these women.

(Picture 64) Pictures, which we are used to in our perception of Islam, have become general metaphors for threat and violence. (Picture 65) It is fashionable to play with them in modern theatre productions, as shown by the last and this picture of the staging of Bellini's Norma in the State Opera in Munich two years ago. - Bellini's Opera hasn't got anything to do with Islam or the Orient.

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Now, let's go to the other side and let's try to understand how the mutual relation is perceived by the Orient. First of all, we have to remind that the Orient did not have its own pictures to document own history. (Picture 66) The cameras were European, so were the photographers and thus the whole perspective on historical events. This picture was taken at the end of the Baghdad conference in 1924, when modern Iraq was created – by the British. In the first row, sit the colonialists and some local dignitaries, the rest of the natives are standing behind, as if they were mere spectators of the event. In the middle, Gertrude Bell, she ran the show, brought King Faisal to Baghdad and put him on the throne.

It was only after independence that the new nationalist regimes were able to use their own means of mass communication (Picture 67) – newspapers and above all radio. Gamal Abdel Nasser's speeches were instrumental for awakening Arab nationalism. In his most famous speech, he announced: "The Suez Canal is ours" and just laughed. This became a key event in Modern Arab history.

(Picture 68) The real change in Arab media occurred only ten years ago, when Al-Jazeera started to broadcast from Qatar with the explicit support of the Qatari regime. For the first time, Arabs had access to an independent TV channel, credibly offering an objective Arab perspective on world and regional events. In addition, with a professional standard of Western media it is far more attractive than boring state channels in these countries.

(Picture 69) The channel with its independent credibility was broadcasting daily pictures of the second Intifada, of the Palestinian suffering under Israeli repression. It had a tremendous impact on public opinion in the Arab world. This Al-Jazeera effect forced the Saudi regime to urge Washington to change its attitude on Palestine; and with success: Bush in August 2001 announced for the first time his support for the creation of a Palestinian state. - (Picture 70) After 9/11 Al-Jazeera launched an open debate on terrorism, offering even a platform to Bin Laden, provoking harsh criticism in the West. (Picture 71) Al Jazeera and also its influence on other Arab TV stations was a major factor for producing the pictures, by which the Orient could strengthen its own view on itself and on the world. Consequently, it also hampered American and Western prestige and reputation in the region.

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In my two points so far, I have tried to explain, first the crisis in the relationship between the Orient and the West in the context of escalating regional conflicts. We can conclude that the paradigm of Western supremacy has reached its end. But we still do not know what a new paradigm of these relations will be. - Second, I have tried to explain the crucial role of pictures in the mutual perception between the two sides. I also tried to indicate the impact of these pictures on this relationship itself.

Now to my third and last point. ([Picture 72](#)) You have seen or heard about the video of Saddam Hussein's hanging, produced by an unauthorized person who happened to be present. ([Picture 73](#)). This video announces a new era. In fact, since very recently we have been witnessing a change of paradigm in the production and availability of public information: The second Gutenberg Revolution has reached the realm of pictures.

What does this mean? ([Picture 74](#)) Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing machine. ([Picture 75](#)). Before, information could be passed by one person only to a few others. Then, thanks to Gutenberg's machine, one person could inform all others, at least those who could afford his book. - The internet has brought about the second Gutenberg revolution: ([Picture 76](#)) Now all can inform all. Everyone can produce information available to everyone. We all know what it means for written information. But everyone today, using his mobile phone, can take a photo or shoot a video everywhere and anytime and can make these pictures available to everyone through the internet. Pictures are the most powerful form of information. The two-and-a-half minute video on Saddam's hanging needs less than one megabyte storage, it's easy to handle.

It's far more difficult to understand the political implications of this new development. Your guess is better than mine. I could assume three possible consequences:

First, state power or institutions lose control over information, it's the end of their information monopoly and hopefully soon the end of political censorship. ([Picture 77](#)) The US-minister of defence, Rumsfeld definitely did not like these pictures about US soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq. But when he was confronted with them, he offered Bush his resignation. Torture is nothing new, above all in wars, new is only that it becomes more difficult to hide it.

Second, ([Picture 78](#)) if information is produced less by institutions close to governments or by established authorities and more by individuals and independent institutions and if access to information becomes freer and cheaper, then the spectrum of available positions becomes wider. Pluralism will increase and ideologies will have it harder to survive, maybe just for being replaced by new ones. I do not argue that this will necessarily promote Western enlightened and secular positions. Maybe on the contrary, the internet was instrumental for the proliferation of radical Islamism. But the space, in which all this is happening, is not restricted anymore to regional and national boundaries, it's global. This could help to dissolve the still more or less coherent concepts of how people in different cultures see the world. (Weltbilder). Consequently, it could even help to overcome the antagonism, as outlined before, of the mutual perceptions of the Orient and the West.

Third, ([Picture 79](#)) the new possibilities to produce and circulate information will help individuals and groups, so far excluded from the political debate, to go public. This will have a major impact on societies of the Middle East, in which modern individual thinking is progressing faster, above all among urban middle classes, than the stagnating authoritarian political system. Young people escape to the Internet and have created there a new public space, in defiance of state ideology. Today, Persian is worldwide the fourth often used language for Internet diaries. It can therefore be assumed that the Internet with all its new possibilities will support the 'coming out' of the group in Islamic societies with the greatest potential for social change: women.

I thank you.