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Chapter 1

WHY WE NEED A FRESH LOOK AT THE WORLD

To take the simplistic “West vs. Islam” view of many conflicts, including the war on religious extremism and terrorism, is to underestimate the global situation. Most comparisons with past events have been rendered irrelevant, as have many past mechanisms.

Of course we can analyze the various reasons behind the objective and subjective difficulties and miscalculations inherent in the current world order. However, it is fairly obvious that international relations have taken a noticeable turn. “Our lives and the relations between countries and nations are wrought with severe dangers,”¹ says Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia. “We are facing the huge issue of terrorism, and the often difficult dialogue between adherents of different religions and cultures.” He adds that the world is becoming increasingly “small and interconnected” as everything gets faster and closer, and humanity turns into a “massive family.” “Humankind has entered a very difficult and dangerous period: a new phase in our development in which faraway conflicts are becoming our own,”² notes the Patriarch.

However, we can bring political positions on many international issues closer together through respect for the human rights set out in the United Nations declaration and for international law, rejection of double standards in all matters (including anti-terrorism policies), and adherence to the universal traditional values that are common to all religions of the world.

Recent events show that the racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and other aggressive behaviors prevailing throughout the world are creating a growing need for non-political opposition to the spread of conflict,

¹ From a speech delivered in Baku in April 2010, on the eve of the World Summit of Religious Leaders. See: Vzglyad. Delovaya Gazeta. April 25, 2010 (<http://www.vz.ru/news/2010/4/25/396452html>) .

² Ibid.

and for closer relations between the Muslim world and the West, whose inhabitants often labor under misapprehensions about each other.

While the Arab world receives a deluge of information about Western culture via the media – primarily radio, television, and the growing global reach of the Internet – most residents of the West have substantially fewer opportunities to learn about Arab culture. Many Europeans and North Americans cannot tell the difference between Indonesia and Malaysia, and believe that Darfur (located in the western part of Sudan) is, in fact, the country of Sudan. Of course, the situation is beginning to shift, especially as recent events in the Middle East and North Africa have captured the world's attention. Still, the majority of Westerners have only the most rudimentary understanding of Muslim countries, and of their history, cultural diversity, customs and traditions, and way of life.

Each Muslim state is unique in its history, culture, language, religious traditions, and cultural norms. People in Egypt, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan, Malaysia, and the Comoros face vastly different socioeconomic realities. It would be a grave mistake to think that their lives hold no interest because of their poverty and underdevelopment.

The process of forging mutual trust between two huge cultural communities – Christian and Muslim – must begin with a dialogue of mutual understanding. Unfortunately, some factions in Russia and throughout the world declare this dialogue to be superfluous, even counterproductive, believing in the maxim that “familiarity breeds contempt.” Yet the well-known verse from Ecclesiastes, “For in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain,” does not quite fit the occasion.

We must first learn to analyze the causes and the nature of the conflict that engulfs this dangerous zone. First, we must consider whether we have sufficient grounds to think of this particular conflict as cultural, religious, or ethnic. What are the underlying reasons behind it? Who is fighting whom? Conflicts are normally triggered by a clash of political motives and economic interests, and yet the opposing groups and individuals who hold these motives and interests can sometimes see them change over time. Religion and culture, meanwhile, remain relatively constant.

In his 2008 book *How Enemies Are Made: Toward a Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*, Director of the Max Planck Institute for

Social Anthropology (Halle) Günther Schlee offers a critical overview of conflict theories, formulates the need for a fresh take on these theories, and demands a new, scientifically grounded approach to their analysis. The author proposes that we set aside “popular” theories and established stereotypes of ethnic conflicts and culture clashes, especially the persistent use of “Islamist” labels (and, I would add, discriminatory language). Schlee stresses that academic and widespread popular opinions can differ noticeably over a long period of time, especially when it comes to the ethnoconfessional sphere.³

Increased interest in these conflicts is related primarily to the methodological dead end in which the discipline of ethnic conflictology finds itself today. Experts note that traditional conflict settlement models focused on peacekeeping no longer fit the social and historical context of the twenty-first century.⁴

There is little doubt that we can use fundamental science, with its ability to get to the bottom of a given problem, to find the original source of a conflict and reveal the true nature of the alarming events and phenomena that occur all around us every day. It probably pays to remember that we cannot analyze the origins of a conflict or consider the required conflict management tools outside the context of globalization. Developing countries are catching up and reaching new technological vistas. Since technological and economic modernization remains fragmented, however, its effects on the sociocultural and political milieu are quite limited.

One known challenge lies in the fact that, unlike natural science, social and political fields of study enjoy high visibility, since they fall in the sphere of universal human values and touch upon various aspects of daily life: wealth and poverty, war and peace, religion and politics, economy and business, conflict and security. These issues are frequently subject to non-scientific media analysis and discussions among laypeople who pick and choose opinions based primarily on emotion, bias, and subjective assessment.

³ See Schlee, G. *How Enemies are Made: Toward a Theory of Ethnic and Religious Conflicts*. N.Y.: Oxford, 2008. p. 7.

⁴ See, for example, Minyazhev, T. *Ethnic Conflict Management: Modernist and Postmodernist Concepts and the Sociology of Management*. The Intercollegiate Conference of Doctoral Candidates and Postgraduate Students. Moscow: Moscow State Pedagogical University, 2005. pp. 96–104.

Naturally, this is a common approach to the analysis of the conflict between the West and the Muslim world. We are, however, seeing some attempts to seek tools and methodologies for weakening the destructive fallout of globalization in the form of culture clashes.

To analyze this topic, we must employ theoretical models from various fields of knowledge, keeping in mind that available information about a given subject of study always lags a little behind the current reality of the situation on the ground. The last two decades have been characterized by a tendency to exaggerate. This tendency has led to the appearance and proliferation of religion-based political organizations and groups that can be classified as “anti-globalization” movements.

Criticism of globalization as a secular ideology, which is inherent to many religions, often takes a hardline approach. It is driven by a desire to retain traditional values, along with a rejection of the stereotypes prevalent in Western culture that are seen as the embodiment of materialism and rationalism. Countless examples of political radicalism have been found in areas of Islamic expansion, and have been traced back to groups and organizations that positioned themselves as “Islamic” forces in these areas. Thanks largely to the media, any declarations to this effect have become intrinsically linked with Islam in the minds of Westerners. Moreover, the media bought into its own mistake and began to claim, often without evidence, that extremism and terrorism were linked to religion, and that Islam was an anti-Western ideology.

As a result, by the end of the Cold War, sometime around 1990, Western politicians went on an intensive search for a new enemy, probably concerned that the lack of a common adversary and the associated structural shifts would trigger the disintegration of NATO. According to Günther Schlee, this is the context in which Islam was once again proclaimed a hostile force. The West found its new enemy in the Middle East. “Since then,” writes the German social anthropologist, “our Orientalist colleagues have been fully immersed in counting instances of distortions of Islam printed in the media.”⁵

This interpretation of the reasons behind the rise in Islamophobia and the decision to cast Islam in the role of a hostile force may come across as somewhat simplistic. Of course, the real causal link is much more complex. In fact, the issue began to take shape as early as the

⁵ Schlee, G. Op. cit. pp. 75–76.

1970s. Still, Schlee's assertion rings true. It goes without saying that the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack triggered a sharp deterioration in relations between the Muslim world and the West.

Today, while many people around the world do not identify with any faith, few can deny the persistence of religion as an ideology. We cannot deny that in many corners of the world, religion is increasingly politicized. Many moral, ethical, and political values are disappearing before our very eyes. Economic integration is accompanied by a new, unfortunate trend toward cultural uniformity.

Current steps to strengthen global and regional security and forge a twenty-first-century world order would enjoy much greater success if they were based on a collective action plan tailored for each individual sphere, based on international law, and supported by the fundamental values of respect for all life and a desire to live in peace. Despite this, relations between different religions and cultures are fraught with misunderstandings, spontaneous outbursts, intolerance, and mistrust. Here, we base our analysis on the assumption that culture determines the behavior of both individuals and entire nations, and that this behavior, in turn, largely determines a nation's future.

As the present-day Russian state and its institutions take their place in bilateral and multilateral relations, alongside traditional political, economic, and humanitarian issues, they face what is commonly called a dialogue of civilizations – a cultural or religious dialogue – and invite public institutions to take part in this process. We know that the world sees Russia as a great Eurasian nation that goes to great lengths to strengthen the tradition of mutual respect among its own diverse communities and cultures. Within the present global power structure, Russia can fulfill a role as a bridge between the West and the East.

The year 2015 marked ten years since the Russian Federation became an observer state in the Organization of the Islamic Conference and participated in the Extraordinary Session of the Islamic Summit Conference in that capacity.⁶ Since then, Russia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which now unites 57 countries, have launched dozens of cutting-edge historical, cultural, and economic

⁶ During the 38th Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers in Astana (Kazakhstan), held in June 2011, the Organization of the Islamic Conference changed its name to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

projects. Both sides understand that the common goal is to foster tolerance among people of different cultures and religions, especially among the younger generations. We expect that, as contacts grow and common projects become more diverse, this dialogue between Russia and the OIC and its various institutions will gain stability and a more strategic footing. As we move forward and develop relations particularly with our closest neighbors and traditional partners – the CIS countries, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa – the success of this process in the twenty-first century will be determined by the strength of our trade, economic, cultural, scientific, and educational ties. Beyond simply fostering these relations, many partner countries, including Russia, are invested in creating a new global context based on the multipolar reality. A new power structure is emerging in the world. Each of these centers of power, along with its immediate neighbors, represents a relatively independent culture and has its own “civilizational” footprint.

Cooperation between Russia and the Muslim world, in turn, will represent a universally acceptable line of communications within the emerging system of polycentric international relations, and will guarantee regional stability as it strengthens its balancing role on the global stage. In addition, growing economic ties between Russia and the OIC member states will help to expand integration at various geographical and structural levels, serving as a case study for global cooperation. By working in these two formats, Russia is gaining a chance to serve as a bridge of sorts between various positions, and to participate more effectively in solving global security issues and assist the economies of the world’s poorest regions.

It is absolutely clear that the global economic system born in the twentieth century is currently undergoing a deep, fundamental transformation, characterized by transnational competition. While it is often discussed, this global tectonic shift is little studied and even less understood. One of its more significant symptoms is America’s weakening role in global economic, financial, social, and cultural spheres. The unprecedented economic growth of other countries, especially the BRIC grouping – Brazil, Russia, India, and China (changed to “BRICS” after the addition of its newest member, South Africa), is another. These countries have proven to be a leading force in the emergence from the global financial and economic crisis. This structure could become a crucial building block in the emerging world order. The issue goes

beyond the fact that the United States has gradually lost its leading global rating: the point is that other countries are on the rise. This, among other topics, is the subject of a new book, *The Post-American World*, written by renowned American political scientist and author of *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Fareed Zakaria.⁷ Zakaria stresses that we are entering a new era of weakening American dominance and an emerging system of control centered in many locations and many hands.⁸ Despite dramatically consolidating its global economic and financial positions, China is in no hurry to show off its achievements, no matter how undeniable they might be: the country's steel and cement production alone surpassed 30% of global production several years ago, while one Chinese company reached a capitalization sum of USD 370 billion (Petro China, as of December 31, 2009) .

Judging by the way in which global political and economic processes are developing, humanity has truly entered a new era. This gives rise to a reasonable question we will all recognize: what will the inevitably approaching new world look like? We must acknowledge that unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar global systems are far from ideal: each has its pros and cons. Let us assume that as the number of “centers of power” goes up, it grows harder to maintain global equilibrium. At the same time, a multipolar world, paradoxical as it may seem, offers more opportunities for humanity to reach its common goals, and fosters principles of global coexistence as a foundation for international relations. Polycentricity will inevitably affect the nature of global changes, seen as a trend toward the internationalization of human life. It is crucial to remember that we simply have no other choice. The emerging world must have no place for the “anti” element so common in the era of bipolar power structures, which was expressed in the standoff between two superpowers.

As we can see, for example, in the fallout from Japan's manmade disaster in March 2011, natural cataclysms, and the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the new era brings with it an immeasurably more complex interplay between common interests and rising interdependence. In this new world, the consequences of a spontaneous

⁷ Fareed Zakaria served as Editor of *Newsweek International* magazine until spring 2011.

⁸ Zakaria, F. *The Post-American World*. New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. p. 5.