

Napoleon in Alexandria and Turkey's EU dream

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The picture was clear and symbolic: on the EU's 50th birthday German Chancellor Angela Merkel presented as a gift to French President Jacques Chirac a cup with a depiction of Napoleon's invasion of Alexandria in 1798.

Never mind that Turkey, as a candidate country, has not been invited to the party. Never mind either the fact that the current EU president, Merkel, has nothing to hide in her opposition to EU's membership. But presenting the Napoleonic invasion of Alexandria as the symbol of a possible German-French cooperation against the entrance of a Muslim country to the EU is beyond any rationality. But there are reasons for such an act of exclusion.

A new world order

We are going through the birth pains of establishing a new world order. The transition from the bipolar world of the Cold War to the unipolar world of US dominance was not easy. In fact, it was never completed because the US dominance was challenged by economic globalization. The first Gulf War did not bring any order. Nor did the invasion of Iraq in 2003. All attempts to establish a new world order within a unipolar framework have so far failed.

At the cultural and intellectual level Euro-centrism continues to be a problem that hurts not only non-Western societies but also Westerners themselves. The reason is that a unipolar world only leads to the economic, political, intellectual or artistic marginalization of the vast majority of world populations. It strips people of a sense of meaning and purpose. A unipolar and Euro-centric model of cultural and civilizational order can no longer provide a sense of security and participation for all citizens of the world. A multi-polar and multi-centered world has to arise to undo the misdeeds of both cultural isolationism and Euro-centrism.

A multi-polar and pluralist world, however, is not a world without standards or values. It is a world in which all cultures and societies are seen as equals, but are urged to act for the common good. This is not a wishy-washy multiculturalism which runs the risk of eroding common grounds between cultures and creating parallel communities. Rather it is an act of enriching oneself by recognizing others. Today Muslims living in the West and Westerners interacting with Muslims have a chance to enrich themselves by recovering the middle path of preserving their identity while recognizing that of others. It is through such acts that we can foster an ethics and culture of coexistence that will not tolerate racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia or hate crimes against Muslims, as well as denouncing the demonization of Jews, Christians and others.

There is a certain danger in dissolving all boundaries between the self and the other: it creates a sense of insecurity and homelessness, which we see everywhere today from the streets of Cairo to Spain. Globalization has further deepened this sense of insecurity. A radically liberal view of the self leads only to a non-self, which in turn further exacerbates the sense of insecurity.

Muslims living in Europe face similar tensions. In the name of integration, they are asked to embrace assimilation and thus lose their identities. They are expected to become French, German or Danish, as if there are such neat identities that can be applied to all Europeans. Combined with the deep-rooted culture

of mistrust and suspicion, this demand results in the further alienation of European Muslims and forces them to become a subculture within Europe. What now many call "Islamophobia" is only the surfacing of these deeper problems. Islamophobia did not suddenly come into being after the events of Sept. 11. Rather, Sept. 11 helped bring the problem to the surface.

Stop seeing oneself in terms of "the end of history"

There are many things we can do to overcome these problems. The first is to revise our self-perception with a view towards recognizing those we call "others." We have to stop seeing ourselves in terms of the "end of history," "end of humanity," "the cradle of civilization" and stay away from using the language of "us against them." We have to understand that such divisive and hegemonic language leaves out a great part of mankind's common legacy. We can claim to be civilized only when we leave behind a view of the self that sees only clash and confrontation between the self and the other. A German cup with a French victory over Egypt does not help the cause at all.