

# Encountering perceptions in parts of the Muslim world and their impact on the ICRC's ability to be effective

**Andreas Wigger\***

Andreas Wigger is Deputy to the Director of Operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross

## **Abstract**

*The growing and intensified manifestations of religion in politics and vice versa are part of the environment of ICRC operations in Muslim countries and mark especially the interaction with Islamists. Different perceptions held by Muslims are examined, problem areas regarding interaction with the ICRC are analysed and aspects are mentioned which, in the opinion of the author, can help the ICRC improve its activities in Muslim countries. The conclusions of the examination could be relevant in any relationship with conservative movements within other religions.*

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Any Muslim person or organization working in the West, and any western individual or organization working in the Muslim world, will be confronted with myths. Deep-seated traumas stemming from historical contact with the “other” are being revived and updated, be those “others” the Crusaders, the colonialists and their alleged modern variants, or the Muslim troops ranged before the gates of Vienna or Poitiers and the global *Jihadi*<sup>1</sup> who, it is claimed, are intent on destroying western civilization. Hatred is being fomented, fear is being spread, and ignorance gives myths an aura of reality. The confrontation

\* The views expressed in this article reflect the author's opinions and not necessarily those of the ICRC.

of recent years between al Qaeda and both western and other societies and governments has heightened the centuries-old complexity of relations between the West and the Muslim East and their perceptions of each other.

## Old issues in a new environment

The ambition of the ICRC, with its international mandate, is to give assistance and protection wherever necessary and possible to the victims of armed conflict and collective violence around the world. More than half of all current ICRC operations are aimed at helping Muslim victims — prisoners, the families of missing persons, the wounded, or civilians who need a roof over their heads, clean water or food. A quick glance at its activities<sup>2</sup> in over 50 member States of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference reveals that the ICRC is strongly present in the Muslim world. A closer look at the various contexts shows that it is facing new types of challenge there. Yet the underlying issues themselves are not new. The reason is simply that considerable sections of the population or groups influential in specific conflicts are now attaching greater importance to what are largely traditional issues.

Generally speaking, the problem is to convince the majority of the population that the ICRC works in an independent and neutral manner and that it does so as effectively as possible. There is nothing new about this, nor is it a problem peculiar to the Muslim world. However, in previous wars in the Middle East and other Muslim regions the direct participants were from those same regions, whereas the ICRC, with its headquarters in Geneva, was equally foreign to both sides and was perceived as a valuable neutral intermediary. Today, western armies are operating in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time as carrying out military operations, soldiers are protecting humanitarian workers and large-scale civilian development projects. Such situations make it difficult to conduct an independent humanitarian operation, since resistance movements and some of the population tend to associate western organizations or those perceived as such with the military forces they are fighting. The latest wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the unresolved conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and the smouldering conflicts in Chechnya and Kashmir, plus police and army operations in many Muslim countries against Islamist<sup>3</sup> groups, ensure that no one remains neutral.

1 *Jihadi* is used in this article to denote any individual or group that has declared a *jihad*, i.e. war, on occupiers of Muslim land, Muslim or non-Muslim rulers, or any unbelievers. The declared war may comply with the strict criteria of Islamic law or it may be an individual interpretation of that law.

2 For descriptions of the humanitarian situation around the world, together with planned ICRC operations, see *Emergency Appeals 2005*, ICRC, Geneva, December 2004.

3 For a definition of Islamism, see for example E.G. Fuller, "Islamists in the Arab world: The dance around democracy," *Democracy and Rule of Law Project*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2004, Number 49, p. 3: "An Islamist is anyone who believes that the Koran and the *Hadith* (traditions of the Prophet's life, actions, and words) contain important principles about Muslim governance and society, and who tries to implement these principles in some way." In accordance with this proposed definition, in the present article the terms "Islamist" or "Muslim activist" are used to mean a broad range of individuals, groups and parties, be they radical or moderate, violent or not, traditional or modern, democratic or undemocratic.

In parts of the Muslim world, people feel threatened by an invasion of the political, social and cultural values of the West, perceived by many Muslims as “a war against Islam.” Islamist groups seize on this feeling and criticize the decadence of the “unbelieving, secular” West. ICRC delegates are increasingly being asked about their own values, and modernism and secularity have become unavoidable subjects for discussion in which individuals, groups and parties argue from an Islamist standpoint. The topics vary according to the geographical area and ideological orientation of those concerned. In regions where many Christian missionary organizations are working, such as Central Asia,<sup>4</sup> the ICRC has to prove that it is not proselytizing. Its religious neutrality is particularly important in parts of Africa and Asia where tension or even conflict prevails between Christian and Muslim communities. In Iraq and Afghanistan, where certain *Jihadi* groups refer to the foreign armies as the new Crusaders, the ICRC has to show by word and deed that it is indeed neutral, independent and universal. The red cross emblem can give rise to discussion in all these situations.

## Problem areas

This article will examine a number of the different perceptions held by Muslims — and in particular by Islamists — with whom ICRC delegates come into contact. Any research on interaction between the ICRC and religious institutions or members of other religious communities may lead to similar findings. In particular, orthodox or fundamentalist movements professing a religion within the Abrahamic faith, namely Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have similar attitudes towards certain characteristics of secularism. Many of the patterns of thought and reaction described below are found, with variations, in non-Muslim religious communities.

In the first section I shall describe the confrontation between Muslim societies and the secular West. I shall highlight the major socio-political tensions within these societies between secularists and Islamists and show how the latter perceive secularism as the principal danger. However, I shall also point out that recent opinion polls in Muslim regions show the vast majority of people to have a negative perception of the present policies of the West in the Middle East. Finally, I shall outline how political Islam in the West has provoked a major discussion on the role of religion and its perceived instrumentalization in politics and conflicts. Western reactions to the terror attacks of recent years have widened the divide between East and West. Today emphasis is being placed on the urgent need for dialogue. I shall therefore discuss certain initiatives and identify important preconditions for productive dialogue between the ICRC and the Muslim world.

4 See *Humanitarian Engagement with Armed Groups: The Central Asian Islamic Opposition Movements*, Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, Geneva, 2003.

Following this outline of the intensified manifestations and repercussions of religion in politics and vice versa, the second section describes the actual environment of ICRC operations in Muslim countries. Here I shall be looking especially closely at the interaction with Islamists. Taking the said survey of the most important popular views as a basis, the third section identifies the problem areas with regard to interaction with the ICRC. Finally, I shall mention a number of aspects which, in my opinion, can help the ICRC to improve its activities in Muslim countries.

## The Muslim world and the West

### Confrontation with the secular world

In recent decades, the ICRC's interlocutors in the Muslim world have increasingly cited Islam as the ultimate authority determining all aspects of political, social and personal life. They have also shown a growing tendency to question the norms and values that the international community has been declaring universal — and codifying — since the Second World War. This development has been accompanied by intensive internal discussions and power struggles in most Muslim States between secularists and Islamists. The West — viewed as secular and imperialist — is always present, directly or indirectly, in this debate.

#### *Secularism as a threat*

The economic, social and political situation in the Muslim countries changed dramatically in the course of the twentieth century. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the century, two world wars, decolonialization, Arab nationalism, the ideological struggle between Marxism and capitalism, oil, globalization and the accompanying increase in the cultural influence of the West played a crucial part in that change. For William Shepard,<sup>5</sup> the dominant factor affecting life in the Muslim world during the twentieth century was western imperialism in its military, political, economic and cultural forms. Hence the bulk of the political ideologies developed or adapted in the Muslim world were a response to western initiatives, primarily from Europe and the United States of America. One “modern” response was and is secularism. As in the West, which served as an example, this involves organizing almost all aspects of public life in accordance with human reason and initiative, religion being restricted to the private sphere and that of ritual. The hope was that this model of society would bring the benefits of progress already being enjoyed by the West.

Since 1970, there has been a response to this secularism in the form of a Muslim awakening; here, Islam is seen as a way of life, and Shari'a governs both the public and the private spheres. For Islamists, it is not Islam that

5 William Shepard, “The diversity of Islamic thought: Towards a typology”, in Suha Taji-Farouki and Gasheer M. Nafi (eds), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, I.B. Tauris, New York, 2004, pp. 61-103.

impedes progress but false interpretations of the original sources, the Koran and the Sunna. From this standpoint, secular ideology is seen as leading to a moral catastrophe and loss of identity. The groups and States that adhere to an Islamist model (such as Iran, Sudan and Pakistan) point to the failure of secular governments to achieve greater social justice.

Shepard<sup>6</sup> concludes that the nature of western imperialism in the Muslim world changed in the second half of the twentieth century from a physical, colonial presence to “soft,” virtual, cultural domination. He believes the influence of this latter phenomenon will be far greater in the long term. Akbar Ahmed puts it very succinctly: “If, for Muslims, late-nineteenth century European colonialism was a modern siege, the Western cultural campaign of the late twentieth century is a postmodernist blitzkrieg.”<sup>7</sup> Bassam Tibi sees instead a kind of selective consumption of western goods. He has interviewed Sunni Muslims of various persuasions, and has come to the conclusion that the majority of today’s Muslims, while maintaining their organic, all-encompassing Muslim world view, are in favour of utilizing modern achievements of the West. “At the same time, however, they reject that which is culturally modern — that modernity which, in addition to its technical advances has also and above all brought cultural pluralism, in the form of freedom for those who think differently, anchored in a rational view of the world that transcends specific beliefs, recognizing each person as a free agent.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Antony Black,<sup>9</sup> though, rejection of the West is one of the main characteristics of fundamentalism (i.e. Islamism). In his view, this rejection stems from the perception that the West constitutes a qualitatively new threat; it goes hand in hand with a firm emphasis on the difference between “us” and “them”, and contrasts believers with unbelievers.

An additional factor is that in many post-colonial societies religious revival based on existing traditions constitutes a delayed process of decolonialization.<sup>10</sup> It is the third phase of the cultural history of the underdog in world society as described by Tibi.<sup>11</sup> The first phase was revival of the original culture of the people living under colonial rule, resulting in anti-colonial movements. The second was westernization of the elite, i.e. they gave up their own culture and projected themselves into a foreign culture.

Today, we are witnessing a sort of checkmate<sup>12</sup> between secularism and Islamism. The Islamists have been unable to seize power from the secularists in

6 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

7 See Akbar Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam*, London and New York, 1992, p. 157.

8 Bassam Tibi, *Die fundamentalistische Herausforderung: Der Islam und die Weltpolitik*, Verlag C.H. Beck, Munich, 1992, p. 40.

9 Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*, University Press, Edinburgh, 2001, p. 338.

10 See Gerrie ter Haar, “Religion: Source of conflict or resource for peace”, in Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Busuttill (eds), *Bridge or Barrier: Religion, Violence and Visions for Peace*, Brill, Leiden, 2005, p. 7.

11 Bassam Tibi, *Die Krise des modernen Islam: Eine vorindustrielle Kultur im wissenschaftlich-technischen Zeitalter*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1991, p. 28.

12 William Shepard, *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 86.

most countries, and the secularists have been unable to exclude the Islamists. Nonetheless, Fuller<sup>13</sup> sees the Islamists as constituting the strongest movement within the opposition to existing governments, at least in the Arab world. He also maintains that they grow, metamorphose and diversify very rapidly.

All Islamists view secularism as a threat. However, they do so to varying degrees. For western organizations, it is important to be aware of the main elements of this assessment.

In Europe, too, secularization occurred against a background of extreme tension between the Christian churches on the one hand and modern science, technology and nascent democracy on the other. The churches declared war on the manifestations of modernism, while the modernists attempted to displace and ignore religion, and to confine it to the private sphere. Hans Küng<sup>14</sup> sees this as “a mistake on the part of Christian Europe”, which led to “a lawlessness, disorientation and godlessness criticized by Muslims.” One feature of modern society is that politics, law, the economy, science, education and art have become emancipated in a worldly sense and hence secular domains outside the control of religion. In many Muslim countries, modernization on all fronts has meant that this complex process of secularization is well advanced. Many, however, see it as a harmful, western import. Prominent critics<sup>15</sup> point to the loss of a sense of direction in the West, claiming that the supposedly high material standard of living has replaced the meaning of life.

Jacques Waardenburg<sup>16</sup> has tried to answer the question of how Muslim intellectuals in the twentieth century have perceived and construed the West. He describes how different Wests have existed at different times and in different places for different Muslim societies and groups. In the past, Muslims knew the foreign empires as “Franks,” “Christians” or “Europe.” He concludes that the term “the West” superseded all these labels during the second half of the twentieth century. There are a number of powerful images or connotations of “the West.” Let us take a closer look at that of the West as a “barbaric society.” This concept draws together all the hallmarks of decadence, portraying the West as a danger to the rest of the world, as harbouring an inherent aggressiveness which can manifest itself at any time in the form of colonialism, economic exploitation or political domination. Two prominent Islamists describe the West as an opponent and a danger, maintaining

13 E.G. Fuller, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 3.

14 See Hans Küng, *Der Islam: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, Piper Verlag, Munich, 2004, p. 768.

15 The Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb put it thus: “Behind the materialistic thinking that dominates the West, reduces ethics to utility and urges cut-throat competition for markets and profits, behind this thinking which banishes the spiritual factor from life and banishes faith in anything but scientific experiments and laboratories, which disdains pure ideals and defines things only in terms of functions, as does the philosophy of pragmatism, behind this thinking there is only Marxist materialism in a different form.” See William E. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam*. Brill, Leiden, 1996, p. 349.

16 Jacques Waardenburg, “Reflections on the West”, in Suha Taji-Farouki and Gasheer M. Nafi (eds), *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, I. B. Tauris, New York, 2004, pp. 261-295.

that it has fallen into a modern *jahiliyyah*,<sup>17</sup> a term denoting the pre-Islamic period of ignorance. In this view, propagated by Sayyid Qutb from Egypt and Abu al A'la Mawdudi from Pakistan, the West is characterized by selfishness, loneliness and pure materialism; it is the land of metaphysical alienation and the death of God. This barbaric West, they say, will destroy itself, and all one can do is protect oneself from it; those who have already fallen under its spell must be freed.

This Islamist literature should be seen against the background of a major ideological conflict, in which the Islamists have identified secularism as the true enemy of Islam. They call on Muslims to adopt the West's science, technology and way of organizing public services. At the same time, they warn sharply against the underlying ideology, i.e. secular materialism. It is important to understand that Christianity is seen as less of a threat than secularism. According to the Islamist analysis, religion in Western Europe is disappearing, and today the true battle for all religions is that against secularism. "A huge corpus of Muslim religious writings has been devoted to the task of combating secularism as an ideology, and to re-instilling religious faith and practice in Muslim societies."<sup>18</sup>

### *Imperialism as a danger*

The few representative surveys conducted recently in Muslim countries on current regional and international topics do, however, show that the West is perceived in a number of ways. People are suspicious as to the true motives of the West. It is above all the heavy US military presence<sup>19</sup> that many regard as aggression against the *ummah*.<sup>20</sup> They see resistance as legitimate *jihad* and in some cases even agree with attacking civilians, if they are collaborating with the occupier.

A recent opinion poll<sup>21</sup> in the Mashrek<sup>22</sup> yields valuable clues. It would be unwise simply to apply the results by extrapolation to the Muslim world as a whole, but certain general tendencies do emerge. US policy on the Israel/Palestine conflict and the occupation of Iraq give rise to similar feelings of powerlessness and arbitrary treatment in much of the Muslim world. The poll revealed that opinions on the West (limited in this case to the UK, France and the USA) are highly differentiated. US-dominated western policy was the factor that had the biggest effect on views of the West.

17 *Jahiliyyah*: "Pre-Islamic period, or 'ignorance' of monotheism and divine law". John L. Esposito (Editor in Chief), *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 154.

18 Jacques Waardenburg, *op. cit.* (note 16), p. 282.

19 See for instance Pew Global Attitudes Project, *A Year after Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists. A Nine-Country Survey*, Washington, March 2004.

20 *Ummah*: "Muslim community. A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings. In the Quran, designates people to whom God has sent a prophet or people who are objects of a divine plan of salvation." See Esposito, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 327.

21 Center for Strategic Studies, *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within*, University of Jordan, Amman, February 2005.

22 Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.



Those interviewed did not agree with simplistic statements about wars between Crusaders and Muslims, or a clash of civilizations. However, many are concerned about an upsurge in religious fanaticism in both the Arab and the western worlds. In Jordan, Egypt and Palestine, the majority believed that the Shari'a should be the sole source of law. At the same time, a large majority of people in all countries are in favour of instituting and practising *ijtihad*<sup>23</sup> once again.

Younger respondents in particular condemn the policies of the US or UK, and not the cultural values or the identity of these countries. The negative feelings relate to specific political acts or omissions, or to military operations in the region. There is no perception of a religious or cultural divide between East and West.

However, a large majority of those interviewed do not agree with qualifying action against the occupying power (citing in particular Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories and the US in Iraq) as terrorism. Local militant groups are seen as legitimate resistance groups. The majority of all Jordanians and Palestinians, as well as two-thirds of all young respondents (ages 16 to 34) in all countries, regard al Qaeda as a legitimate resistance organization.

General scepticism as to the true aims of western policy in the region and sympathy for Islamist groups had already been noted in a poll conducted by the Pew Project in March 2004.<sup>24</sup> This representative survey was carried out in four Muslim countries: Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco and Jordan. Overall, a general feeling of anger about US policy was expressed. Most respondents in Pakistan and Morocco had a positive opinion of Bin Laden. Many suspect that the international community is applying double standards to regional or global problems, and that higher priority is being given to protecting resources and opening up new markets than to social and political justice.<sup>25</sup> With regard to suicide attacks, the majority of respondents in Jordan and Morocco and just under half of those in Pakistan were in favour, if they were directed against Americans or other westerners in Iraq.

## The role of religion in politics

Discussion and controversy in the Muslim world often centre on the role of religion. The terror attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid, Bali and elsewhere

23 *Ijtihad* is an Islamic legal term meaning 'independent reasoning' and it is one of four sources of Sunni law. Utilized where the Quran and Sunnah are silent it requires a thorough knowledge of theology. It should be practiced by means of analogical or syllogistic reasoning. Its results may not contradict the Quran, and it may not be used in cases where consensus (*ijma*) has been reached. Sunnis believe *Ijtihad* is fallible since more than one interpretation of a legal issue is possible. Islamic reformers call for a revitalization of *Ijtihad* in the modern world. See Esposito, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 134.

24 Pew Global Attitudes Project, *A Year after Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists. A Nine-Country Survey*, Washington, March 2004.

25 See e.g. the results of the Pew Report, in which the majority of respondents in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey were of the opinion that the real reason for the war on terror was American interest in the region's oil. *Ibid.*, p. 18.



have put Islam in the dock, accused of being a violent religion. For many in the West, Islam presents a vague, implicit threat to modern and secular society; the headscarf debate in France is one example. They are afraid that weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of Islamist groups and consequently see Islam as a threat to world peace. Is it therefore correct to speak of a clash between the Christian West and the Islamic world? Can one go so far as to consider religion the true instigator of today's conflicts, as western political ideology often does?<sup>26</sup> As we saw above, opinion polls in the Arab and wider Muslim worlds refute the theory of such a clash. Nevertheless, considerable tensions do exist. Huntington argues that in the new era wars will no longer be between ideologies but primarily between civilizations, and hence between religions.<sup>27</sup> Discussing this theory, Küng agrees with him on two decisive points.<sup>28</sup> First, religions play a fundamental role in world politics, and secondly, they will not simply merge into a peaceable one-size-fits-all religion; it is realistic, to take account of their potential for conflict. Indirectly, Ter Harr<sup>29</sup> also advocates a sober assessment of religion when he points out that religion is not peaceable *per se*, but neither must it automatically lead to conflict. Reacting to the widespread assumption in the West that religion must inevitably lead to violence, he asks whether it would not be better to speak of instrumentalized religion. Viewed thus, religion would be a resource like any other, which could be used to achieve very worldly aims; one could also speak of the "ideologization" of religion, or its hijacking by politics. Hugo Slim<sup>30</sup> contends that "religious belief is not only exploited by war, (but) also genuinely drives war." He shows, however, that a group has first to accept an "activist theology of violence" before developing a doctrine of extreme and indiscriminate violence.

Against this background, western leaders tend to see "political Islam" as intrinsically problematic, or even as an un-Islamic and perverse exploitation of religion for political ends. The International Crisis Group<sup>31</sup> maintains that the West only began to see the concept of political Islam as a problem when the Islamists began to formulate and propagate anti-western and, more specifically, anti-American positions. It is often said that Islam is a peaceful religion, occasionally perverted by *jihād* fighters. Such a view presupposes that *jihād* has no real place in Muslim tradition. However, this is clearly at odds with all orthodox Muslim teaching, as *jihād* does under certain circumstances indeed constitute a war of self-defence, in accordance with clear rules and within a limited time-frame.<sup>32</sup>

26 Ter Haar, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 5.

27 Samuel P. Huntington, "The clash of civilisations?", *Foreign Affairs* 72, 1993, No. 3, pp. 22-49.

28 Hans Küng, *Das Christentum: Wesen und Geschichte*, Piper, Munich/Zürich, 1994, p. 888.

29 Ter Haar, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 8.

30 Hugo Slim, "Violent beliefs," *RUSI Journal*, April 2005, pp. 20-23.

31 *Understanding Islamism: Middle East/North Africa Report No. 37*, International Crisis Group (ICG), March 2005, pp. 1-3.

32 See the very detailed discussion by Ameur Zemali in his book *Combattants et prisonniers de guerre en droit Islamique et en droit international humanitaire*, Éditions A. Pedone, Paris, 1997, pp. 43-58.

## The universal call for dialogue

Following the terror attacks of recent years, the West saw the restoration and maintenance of security — and hence the “fight against terrorism” — as urgent. The form this fight should take is a matter of intense debate. There is a concern to avoid characterizing the “global war on terror” as a fight against Islam or Muslims. “Dialogue” is the in-word, and is hailed as an important accompanying measure. It is backed up by helpful gestures, often in the form of charity work. The aim is to show in people’s everyday lives that the West respects the vast majority of Muslims and is eager to enter into cooperation and partnership.

There is no agreement on the rules for such dialogue. The subjects to be discussed are often ill-defined, and each side suspects the other side of bringing some kind of hidden agenda to the table. In purely formal terms, Tibi lists the following as being among the minimum preconditions for any dialogue between representatives of different cultures: “Mutually recognized equality, despite the different nature of the other, on the basis of agreed norms and values, such as religious tolerance and political pluralism.”<sup>33</sup>

Anna Würth<sup>34</sup> makes a number of conceptual recommendations for discussions on human rights in countries guided by Islam. She draws attention to the pitfalls of essentialism, i.e. of trying to establish “the western position” or “the Muslim position” on a particular right. She also warns against trying to find common values, for example through interfaith or intercultural dialogue. Experience shows, she says, that an approach too far removed from reality that seeks to establish a consensus on values and compatibility between Islam as such and international law, for example, will often elicit defensive or apologetic reactions, while in actual fact nothing changes. She therefore suggests that instead of asking what “Islam” says on a particular issue at all times and in all places, the Muslim position should be taken as being that which one’s partner in dialogue in a concrete situation considers it to be. This is doubtless sound advice, given the wide range of situations and the absence of a central source of orthodoxy comparable to that of, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church. Würth<sup>35</sup> points out that the problematic aspects of societies guided by Islam, and the areas that need explanation, are widely regarded in the West as stemming from Islam rather than from the political balance of power or economic inequality. She sees this western emphasis on the religious/cultural perspective as going hand in hand with a basic lack of interest in history and politics. The West is clearly suspected of concentrating selfishly and exclusively on the terrorist threat as its immediate problem, hoping to weaken the presumed Islamic motivation of resistance groups through calls from religious leaders. The Muslim demand for greater international justice in the handling of conflicts with symbolic value for Muslim societies is seen as being deliberately ignored.

33 Bassam Tibi, *op. cit.* (note 8), p. 19.

34 Anna Würth, *Dialog mit dem Islam als Konfliktprävention? Zur Menschenrechtspolitik gegenüber islamisch geprägten Staaten*, Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte, Berlin, 2003, p. 9.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 21 and 22.

International organizations need to be aware of the political and religious complexity of the Muslim world when operating there. The partial overview given in this first section will enable them to understand why certain groups are sceptical about much that comes from the West, or reject it altogether. Since the 2001 terror attacks in the US and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, communication between the West and the Muslim world has worsened, accentuating still further the perception of each side that the other is an enemy.<sup>36</sup> It is consequently important that humanitarian organizations in particular should perceive their environment as distinctly and with as much differentiation as possible. Generalizations impair mutual understanding and hence the trust that is the basis for any kind of humanitarian action.

In the next section, I shall therefore focus my attention on those within the Islamic world who — as individuals, parties or groups — aim at installing and enforcing the full panoply of the Shari'a: its rules and penalties, its jurisdiction and its prescribed form of government. This review leads to the identification of ideologically sensitive subjects and areas for discussion between those political and social forces and humanitarian organizations.

## Islamist activism

To increase the chances of successful dialogue, I intend to indicate in this section where the problems can lie in contacts between ICRC delegates and representatives of various Islamist tendencies. Restricting this analysis to Islamism<sup>37</sup> has two implications. First, we are not looking at the degree to which Islam as such — with its clear theological doctrine and a belief system that addresses questions such as the supernatural, morality, fate and the meaning of life — relates to the ICRC and international humanitarian law. Rather, we are assuming that any humanitarian operation is carried out against the background of a concrete social situation and that it is therefore important to be familiar with the discourse and practice of Islamic activists in that situation. Secondly, it is not the overwhelming majority of Muslims on which we are focusing; it is not possible to define all the problem areas with regard to interaction between ICRC delegates and the various Muslim communities around the world.

Here, when I speak of the Muslim world, I am referring mainly to the Arab world, even though it constitutes a minority in demographic terms.<sup>38</sup> There are two reasons for this. First, the ICRC has been present on a large

36 See Zidane Mériboute, *La fracture islamique: demain, le soufisme?*, Fayard, Paris, 2004, p. 12. Mériboute speaks of a breakdown in communication between western and Muslim civilizations and paints a bleak picture of the future if the two camps persist in their ignorance and rejection of each other.

37 The International Crisis Group proposes a definition of Islamism as broad as that put forward by Graham E. Fuller above (note 3). It appears to me equally valid: "Islamism is defined ... as synonymous with 'Islamic activism', the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character." See Understanding Islamism, *op. cit.* (note 31), p.1.

38 Certain points can, however, be extrapolated to the Muslim communities of the Indian subcontinent, Afghanistan, central Asia, Iran and parts of East and West Africa.

scale in the Arab world for a substantial length of considerable time. Its delegates have worked there during almost all conflicts in the region and there has been intensive contact with the major Islamist groups and States. Secondly, it is in that region that the changes of recent years are especially apparent. The new challenges are visible in concentrated form in Iraq: local and international *jihad* fighters are opposing a massive western presence; contemporary topics are now being debated confrontationally for the first time on the major Arab TV stations; animated discussions are taking place on such questions as the introduction of western democracy, the consequences of occupation of territory, imperialism, interpretations of *jihad*, the Muslim view on “suicide attacks”, etc. Many groups are now using these platforms to propagate their views. Most Arab countries are facing huge social, political and economic challenges, and many of their people are living at the subsistence level.<sup>39</sup> There is also the unresolved problem of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which is a matter of fundamental importance to all Muslim countries.

The Islamist activists described in this section are part of a complex and rapidly changing environment. In presenting Islamism, I shall largely follow the line of thought of the recent study by the International Crisis Group (ICG), *Understanding Islamism*.<sup>40</sup> Its report is limited to current Sunni activism,<sup>41</sup> describing it as a relatively recent development and ongoing process. In addition, there are the Muslim charitable organizations, important “stakeholders” for the ICRC with regard to any humanitarian situation in a Muslim country. I mention them here specifically because most individuals working for these organizations are fairly Islamist and link missionary activity in the broadest sense of the word with humanitarian work. I am aware that certain large organizations such as Islamic Relief (based in the UK) do not engage in missionary work.

I shall attempt to use a classification of Islamist States, parties, organizations and groups to highlight a number of important issues and place them in groups of topics for discussion. This is, of course, a simplification of a complex situation, and there are numerous overlaps.

## Global organizations

Various bodies play a direct or indirect role in spreading political Islam. These include the international Muslim Brotherhood. There are also Islamic universities, which are highly competent in researching the Muslim position on various issues.<sup>42</sup>

39 As regards the Arab world, see the detailed UNDP study, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*.

40 *Understanding Islamism*, *op. cit* (note 31), p. 3.

41 Between 80% and 90% of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. The majority of remaining Muslims are Shiite.

42 International humanitarian law is one sphere in which academics point out the superiority of the Islamic system and the fact that it pre-dates European progress in this field. Without questioning the universality of existing international humanitarian law, they see it as European humanitarian law. They emphasize that Muslim international law (*siyar*) is free of the shortcomings that afflict European international humanitarian law, has existed for longer and actually forms the basis of international humanitarian law.

Here, however, I wish to give a more detailed account of two internationally active groups with a strong presence in the humanitarian field and often with a clear opinion — positive or negative — of the ICRC.

### *Missionary movements*

These groups are not interested in political power. They concentrate on missionary preaching (*al-da'wa*) and hence on reviving faith, rebuilding morals and strengthening the great community of believers (the *ummah*). These include the Salafiyya movement, which started in the Arab region and is now active throughout the world, and the Tablighi movement, founded in India in 1926 and also operating internationally.

One area on which the Salafiyya movement places considerable emphasis is that of correct individual behaviour in matters such as dress, eating rituals, sitting, sleeping, etc. It therefore comes in for frequent criticism from other Islamists, who accuse the movement of distracting the faithful from more urgent and important political questions by its preoccupation with rules and regulations. The Salafiyya movement is particularly receptive to Qutb's description of the "decadent West."

In certain regions, these groups tend to interpret the red cross emblem as a Christian symbol and therefore to regard the ICRC as a missionary organization. In other regions, they may see the ICRC as part of the western, secular charitable system. In both cases, the ICRC needs to allay fears through contact.

### *Muslim charitable organizations*

I shall describe the Muslim charitable organizations as a self-contained group which, while partly composed of Islamist activists, also includes large organizations operating under such principles as neutrality and impartiality.

Unlike secular aid organizations, some Christian and Muslim charitable<sup>43</sup> organizations make an explicit link with religion, in that they undertake charitable activities to promote their missionary goals. This causes difficulties for humanitarian organizations, including secular ones. When humanitarian work is combined with the spreading or revival of Islam or Christianity, the humanitarian organizations are placed on a competitive footing. In the Muslim world the perception is then that Christian NGOs, but also secular NGOs and international organizations are working — directly or indirectly — for the expansion of the West and its values. Both their Christian and secular character poses a threat to Islam. Conversely, Muslim NGOs are seen as being

They do not question the compatibility of the two bodies of law. Rather, they point out that the West could certainly learn from Islam in this respect and that in Muslim countries Islamic law should also — and indeed primarily — be the reference. For a good example, see the introduction by Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi in Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Shaybani, *The Shorter Book on Muslim International Law*, edited, translated and annotated by Dr Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, Islamabad, 1998, pp. 1-39.

43 Charity in Islam is mainly ruled by *Zakah*, the "required almsgiving that is one of the five pillars of Islam...Zakah is used for the needy, for propagation of the faith, to free slaves, to relieve debtors, to help travelers..." See Esposito, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 345.

too focused on *da'wa*, or winning new believers for Islam, and in the context of the “war against terror” they are also regarded as covert militant organizations. However, Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan<sup>44</sup> notes a depoliticization of Muslim NGOs in recent years. He describes how in the 1980s the international Muslim organizations routinely combined *da'wa* with humanitarian aid, and how prominent Muslim ideologists portrayed western humanitarian organizations in Pakistan and Afghanistan as missionary societies.<sup>45</sup> In the early 1990s, the Muslim NGOs came under pressure in countries such as Egypt and elsewhere. At that time they made a clear break with political and military aims, taking on an internationally recognized discourse on humanitarian issues. The terms “*da'wa*” and “*jihad*” disappeared from their brochures.

Abdel-Rahman Ghandour<sup>46</sup> paints a somewhat different picture. He reckons that Muslim and Christian NGOs have grown further apart in recent years. He sees the 1990s as characterized by an increasing exclusion of Christian missionary and other types of NGO by Muslim NGOs in the Muslim regions. As a result, many Christian NGOs have confined themselves to predominantly Christian countries. At the same time, many Muslim NGOs have established a position with local Muslim communities as being closest to them in culture and religion, and as being the most professional and legitimate. Non-Muslim international NGOs or organizations are welcome as partners, but only for their money — not their non-Muslim foreign personnel. At the end of his study on Muslim NGOs, Ghandour<sup>47</sup> comes to the worrying conclusion that a “dialogue of the deaf” is currently in progress between Muslim and western NGOs, together with a “humanitarian cold war.” He sees each side as having adopted simplistic, stereotypical views of the other as the enemy, and believes that the more extreme groups feel there is little to be understood. For certain Muslim humanitarians, for instance, having non-religious reasons for doing good is simply incomprehensible. For them, non-religious means atheist and thus constitutes a threat to believers.

The ICRC in particular faces challenges in its dialogue with Muslim charitable organizations. It is important to maintain an open, proactive attitude toward them. As the founding body of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement it has a natural partner in the Red Crescent Societies, which are rooted in their respective environments. It can work together with them to get messages across, including the message that the Movement is neutral on issues of belief and politics and therefore makes no attempt to promote

44 See Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, “Helping the ‘brothers’, the medic, the militant and the fighter”, in Jonathan Benthall and Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, *The Charitable Crescent*, I.B Tauris, New York, 2003, pp. 69-84.

45 In his pamphlet published in Peshawar in the 1980s, Abdallah Azzam described humanitarians as *mubashirun*, or missionaries. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

46 Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Humanitarianism, Islam and the West: Contest or Cooperation?*, article on the website of the HPN Humanitarian Practice Network <[www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2582](http://www.odihpn.org/report.asp?ID=2582)> (visited on 10 March 2005).

47 Abdel-Rahman Ghandour, *Jihad humanitaire. Enquête sur les ONG islamiques.*, Flammarion, Paris, 2002, pp. 318-341.



secularism, Christianity or Islam. Delegates need to make an effort to include Muslim organizations in their coordination and cooperation activities. At an organizational level, it would be possible to set up fora in which to discuss concepts of humanitarian work, facilitate mutual criticism and deal with it by debate. Such discussions could also lay the foundations for joint activities with certain organizations in both the Muslim world and the West. Such symbolic acts could help each type of organization to become better integrated into the cultural context of the other.

### Local parties and institutions

This group encompasses States, political parties, educational institutions, social institutions, the media and independent politicians and personalities.

Just as Christian parties in the West base (or used to base) their social programmes on Christian teachings, Islamic parties try to structure society in accordance with Muslim principles. There are significant differences in the radicalism of their political programmes. In countries where Islamist parties cannot take part in elections, there are often groups of independent parliamentarians who in fact pursue Islamist policies.

In the educational sphere there are the *madrassas*, which exist on the Indian sub-continent and in many other areas. This type of school began to appear in the nineteenth century and provides a consistent Islamic curriculum from primary school through to university. In Shiite regions there are also the *hauzas* — centres of Islamic knowledge, almost always with an international student population. Islamic universities complete the spectrum. It is not at all the case that these institutions teach a political form of Islam. They are often very traditional seats of learning, concentrating exclusively on matters of faith.

Nowadays the media play a major role. Magazines and newspapers are the traditional instruments of the parties, whereas radical groups tend to make more use of cassettes and videos. Internet is particularly favoured by organizations that operate worldwide. New pan-Arab TV stations facilitate confrontational political debate and provide opposition groups with a platform they lack in their respective countries.

### Groups that have declared jihad

#### *Global jihad: al Qaeda*

This is a new organization. Experts differ as to its true strategy, leadership, structure and strength.<sup>48</sup> Here, we wish to consider how far the strategy of this global movement differs from that of other *jihad* groups.

48 For an up-to-date assessment of al Qaeda, see Adam Ward (ed.), James Hackett (assistant ed.), "Combating transnational terrorism," *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 10, Issue 10, December 2004 <[www.iiss.org/stratcom](http://www.iiss.org/stratcom)> (visited on 10 March 2005).



There are two key areas.

The first is a reorientation of the traditional salafi<sup>49</sup> concept of *jihad*, moving away from an alliance with the West against Soviet communism or secular, nationalist Arab regimes and veering in particular towards a frontal confrontation with former western sponsors. In his statement of 23 August 1996, Osama Bin Laden described as his target the alliance of “Crusaders and Jews.” It was for that reason he founded the “World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders” and stated in a *fatwa* dated 23 February 1998 that “to kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the Aqsa Mosque and the Haram Mosque are freed from their grip and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from the lands of Islam, incapable of threatening any Muslim.”<sup>50</sup>

The second key area is a reorientation of the *takfiri*<sup>51</sup> *jihad* model away from the “enemy nearby,” i.e. Muslim governments deemed to be un-Islamic and corrupt, to the “enemy afar”, namely all States that support politically, economically and militarily that “enemy nearby”, as well as Israel.

Oliver Roy<sup>52</sup> further points out that most of the second generation of al-Qaeda fighters, recruited after 1992, come precisely from immigrant families living in the West. He says that virtually all of them have broken off contact with their families. They have also made a conscious break with the religious traditions of their families and constructed their own, individual Islam. For Roy, suicide attacks are the other new element and mark a total break with orthodox Muslim tradition.

Al Qaeda’s media activity has taken up many of the grievances of people in the Arab world and the Muslim world in general, presenting them in an extreme form. As al Qaeda has identified the improper interference of the West in Muslim affairs as being a basic problem, the West has become the target of forceful rhetoric. The foreign troops stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan are dubbed the “new Crusaders” and the international organizations are suspected of being agents of imperialism.

### *Local jihad groups*

These activists crop up in various contexts, with different aims.

The “internal *jihad*”<sup>53</sup> is waged against Muslim governments that the *Jihadi* consider to be unbelievers. In the 1990s, such groups attacked the Egyptian and Algerian governments.

49 “Salafi is derived from salaf, ‘pious ancestors.’ The name was given to a reform movement led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh at the turn of the twentieth century. Emphasized restoration of Islamic doctrines to pure form, adherence to the Quran and Sunnah, rejection of the authority of later interpretations, and maintenance of the unity of ummah.” See Esposito, *op. cit.* (note 22), p. 275.

50 See Bernard Lewis, “License to kill: Usama bin Ladin’s declaration of jihad”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1998, p. 14 ff.

51 *Takfir*: “Pronouncement that someone is an unbeliever (*kafir*) and no longer Muslim. Takfir is used in the modern era for sanctioning violence against leaders of Islamic states who are deemed insufficiently religious. Mainstream Muslims and Islamist groups reject the concept as a doctrinal deviation.” See Esposito, *op. cit.* (note 17), p. 312.

52 Olivier Roy, *L’Islam mondialisé*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, September 2002, pp. 34 and 35.

53 See *Understanding Islamism*, *op. cit.* (note 31), p. 14.

The *jihād* to liberate a country seen as part of the *dar al-Islam* and currently under occupation or being run by a non-Muslim government is fought against a foreign army of occupation. One typical example today is the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel. In the 1980s Afghanistan was in this category.

These groups often have a very pragmatic approach. Their aim is to end the occupation or to topple the (often secular) government, and they are at best highly sceptical about the true intentions of foreigners. They distrust western organizations, suspecting many of being in the pay of the enemy. It is interesting to note that the ICRC as a humanitarian organization is valued and respected when it consistently and coherently insists upon compliance by the occupying power with the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. What also helps are activities that benefit prisoners and their families and address emergency situations in a very practical manner.

## The challenges for the ICRC

The great diversity of Islamic activism both in terms of ideological emphasis and of local adaptation calls for a careful reading of the various realities. The ICRC is well equipped for this; it has experienced expatriate delegates, motivated national staff, and firmly established local partners in the form of the Red Crescent Societies. However, the challenges remain manifold, foremost among them the need to generate analysis of the environment based on broad evidence, and to improve the discussions with important stakeholders about compliance with IHL. Both require a sound methodology, and failure to meet these challenges would be detrimental to the success of the work of a humanitarian organization.

### In-depth analysis

In today's overheated situation, those who dominate are those who present their positions stridently, provocatively and with visual symbolism. This has disastrous consequences for the formation of public opinion, as anecdotal material is used to draw conclusions about the views of "Islam" or the "West." But how can one form a more nuanced picture of a country or a region? The Muslim world does not have many representative opinion polls on the topics considered above. There are also very few well-structured, documented interviews with key members of so-called civil society in the global south. Many analyses are compiled by western observers, cover individual groups and are restricted to a small geographical area. Some attempt to draw general conclusions, but must often do so on the basis of data that can only be described as anecdotal.

A humanitarian organization needs to know as precisely as possible what matters to the various segments of a population. It needs to know for whom the radical Islamists' anti-western slogans make sense, and whose opinions

are shaped by them. To obtain this information a brief analysis must be made with regard to all countries exposed to the “war on terror.”

Potential sources for interesting data could be:

a) Contacts and discussions

The delegation employees are our primary contacts, as they often represent the entire spectrum of civil society. As a result, they can approach the points mentioned above from various angles, clarify them and assess their importance and urgency. Colleagues from the Red Crescent Societies are present in all parts of their countries and are thus able to form a complete picture of the problems that exist. In addition, they often help marginalized social groups and are hence able to pass on minority or otherwise unheard views. Delegates are in constant contact with representatives of parties to conflict and need to know their broader views. The victims of conflicts, i.e. the wounded, the prisoners, displaced persons, the families of prisoners and missing persons, have opinions about societal issues and need to be listened to. Other important stakeholders are key public figures such as parliamentarians from Islamist parties, the mullahs of major mosques, Islamic scholars at universities and *madrassas*, journalists working for the Islamist media and representatives of Muslim NGOs.

b) Careful analysis of topics discussed in the media and consultation of analyses of local and global think-tanks.

c) A careful reading of existing surveys, the carrying out of surveys, or cooperation with local or regional polling institutes. Use of this option is currently insufficient and sporadic. A very dynamic and critical section of civil society in Muslim countries is young, educated, politically committed and reads/watches international media. Surveys are the only way of taking the pulse of these future-oriented people. The other sections of these societies are, however, also being increasingly influenced by the media, and general public opinion can no longer be ascertained through interviews with representative public figures alone.

It is worth asking whether more surveys should be conducted in key regions by the ICRC itself. In 1999, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, it carried out a worldwide survey involving 12,860 civilians and combatants in twelve war zones. One section of the questionnaire concerned the role of the ICRC and the Red Cross/Red Crescent. In the country report for Somalia, for instance, we read: “Next to their own religious leaders, the people of Somalia trust the ICRC/Red Crescent to protect them and help them in time of need. These organizations are not only widely recognized but also genuinely appreciated for the active role they have played in shielding Somalis from the ravages of the past decade.”<sup>54</sup> Such results are highly valuable indicators of the possible success of humanitarian operations in that country. An organization that has built up so much trust in a Muslim country will be able to deal quite differently with sceptics, critics and even opponents of its presence there.

54 See *People on War: Country Report Somalia. ICRC Worldwide Consultation on the Rules of War*, a report compiled for the International Committee of the Red Cross, Greenberg Research, Inc., Geneva, October 1999, p. 24.

Things will remain difficult, but there is proof that the organization is doing something useful, there is support from the population and one can be sure that there will be internal discussions between advocates and opponents of cooperation with the ICRC.

The situation has become more critical since 2001 in areas where US troops are physically present as part of their “war against terrorism.” The results of such surveys therefore have to be periodically verified. Any new survey would need to be more closely centred on our problems: the perception of western, non-religious humanitarian work, the value of international humanitarian law, its applicability, the principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the ICRC, etc. Such a survey is particularly necessary in the countries most exposed to the “war against terrorism.”

Discussing the right topic with the right individual or institution or group is essential. We have concluded in this article that all contacts with people or institutions are influenced by certain aspects of how the general public in a Muslim country perceives the ICRC. Missionary movements and Muslim charities suspect that the Red Cross conceals Christian missionary ambitions and see the ICRC as a competitor in the humanitarian sector. Local Islamist parties or local institutions perceive the ICRC as part of the Red Crescent and Red Cross Movement; the position of the Red Crescent Society in the respective country is therefore important (as in the example of Somalia above). This group observes action on the ground in its own country and evaluates the usefulness of that action against its own criteria.

The global *jihad* groups strongly question the independence of what they see as “imperialist forces.” They also use a variety of stereotype labels such as “new Crusaders” and “western agents.” Local *jihad* groups emphasize operational efficacy and neutrality. They have concrete problems to solve and will continually test the ICRC as to whether it is properly fulfilling its role as a neutral and independent party.

## Informed action

This is not the place to elaborate new strategies for working in the Muslim world. It would moreover be unnecessary to do so, as the ICRC has been working in those regions for many years. I simply wish, in view of the increased tensions in the current context, to reiterate and stress certain basic points that could improve our relations with the various groups.

### *Cultural sensitivity of ICRC representatives*

Work in the Muslim world requires every delegate to show sufficient sensitivity to Muslim culture. In the late 1980s, the ICRC commissioned Marcel A. Boisard to write a guide for ICRC staff members in Muslim countries.<sup>55</sup> It is the result of consideration and suggestions by numerous delegates working in such

55 Marcel A. Boisard, *Guide pratique à l'intention des collaborateurs du CICR en terres d'Islam*, Geneva, 1989.

countries and is confined to giving basic historical data and information about Islam, plus practical advice on behaviour in the Muslim world. While this guide is certainly essential reading, it should not be considered as being sufficient on its own. As Boisard points out,<sup>56</sup> and as we have seen above, the Muslim world is not culturally homogenous. Certain attitudes vis-à-vis the ICRC are moreover heavily influenced by the nature of the conflict concerned, and a person's reactions to a delegate will also depend on that person's sociological and cultural background. ICRC delegates from Muslim countries help to promote interaction between cultures within the organization, together with a global approach to problems.

### *Concentrating on the ICRC's mandate and on humanitarian operations*

The controversy over modernity and continuing western imperialism currently strikes a strong chord, especially in the Middle East. Internal discussion about western attempts to bring democracy to the region, to "modernize" educational institutions and their curricula, etc. is rife. This provides Qutb's readers and other opponents of a western cultural "invasion" with an opportunity to discuss the topic extensively in public. Inevitably, this has an effect on the region's conscious and subconscious perceptions of what is seen as a western organization. The ICRC needs to steer clear of controversial social and political issues. A clear focus on the organization's mandate under IHL will help delegates avoid being seen as foreign agitators.

### *Living up to principles*

In the Muslim world, just like everywhere else, the ICRC will have to demonstrate its neutrality and independence in most situations.<sup>57</sup> Two misconceptions with regard to neutrality will crop up time and time again. First of all, in occupation situations the ICRC is liable to be suspected of hiding behind its neutrality because it supposedly has no ethical position on breaches of international humanitarian law by occupying forces. Secondly, people will be unable to understand how one can be neutral in a just war against an attack on the *ummah*. Here, actions speak louder than words, and effective operations will take the wind out of critics' sails.

### *Understanding of international humanitarian law*

Numerous breaches of international humanitarian law occur in conflicts in Muslim countries too. Attacks on civilians, whether by armies or suicide bombers, are particularly reprehensible. Yet a survey by the Centre for Strategic Studies in Amman concluded that most of the population regard suicide attacks on civilians as a legitimate form of resistance in combating an occupation. So how are we to deal with this problem in a manner likely to bring success?

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 192 and 193.

<sup>57</sup> See Pierre Krähenbühl, "The ICRC's approach to contemporary security challenges: A future for independent and neutral humanitarian action," *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 86, No. 855, September 2004, pp. 505-514.

The ICRC can approach it at various levels. Dialogue with Muslim opinion-makers, such as that which took place at the Islamabad conference in October 2004,<sup>58</sup> can serve to establish at a fundamental level the compatibility between the norms of international humanitarian law and those of international Islamic law. At the same time, the question of a consensus within Sunni or Shiite orthodoxy on central issues can be discussed. In direct contacts with groups that carry out such attacks, however, delegates would be wise to emphasize international humanitarian law instead of putting forward political and moral arguments. It is useful for the delegate to be aware that the orthodox Islamic view supports this legal position. Delegates can also encourage prominent intellectuals or politicians to debate the issue publicly and thereby influence attitudes. That said, such processes are highly complex, and the ICRC will need to consider carefully the extent to which it wishes to get involved in internal Muslim debates.

The ICRC should also not hesitate to appear in unusual contexts and media where contact with the general public is concerned. ICRC delegates will have to address current questions about asymmetric conflicts.<sup>59</sup> It is certainly possible to publicize common positions based on both Islamic tradition and international humanitarian law. Interaction with civil society should be as close as possible. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee, in its book *Growing the Sheltering Tree*, presents 24 different and in some cases very creative examples of how to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law, human rights and refugee law.<sup>60</sup>

### *Cooperation with Red Crescent Societies*

Humanitarian work as an act of charity is highly regarded in religious terms, especially by Islamists. As mentioned above, Muslim NGOs see the ICRC and to a certain extent the Red Crescent Societies as competitors. This situation needs to be clarified. Transparency is required on both sides, and paves the way for clear discussions on operations and possible coordination. Good relations with a country's Red Crescent Society, based on successful cooperation, can lay the foundations for good relations with Muslim NGOs.

### *Emblem*

The use of the red cross emblem will always need explaining. ICRC delegates must at least be familiar with the connotations that various groups give to it.<sup>61</sup> Groups that speak in terms of a global confrontation between Islam and the

58 See the short article by Hadia Nusrat, "Humanitarian law and Islam", *Magazine of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, No. 1, 2005, pp. 24 and 25.

59 See Toni Pfanner, "Asymmetrical warfare from the perspective of humanitarian law and humanitarian action", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 87, No. 857, March 2005, pp. 149-174.

60 *Growing the Sheltering Tree: Protecting Rights through Humanitarian Action. Programmes and Practices Gathered from the Field*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, Geneva 2002, pp. 63-73.

61 See the excellent discussion of relations between Islam and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in James Cockayne, "Islam and international humanitarian law: From a clash to a conversation between civilizations", *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 847, September 2002, pp. 597-625.

West will dub any kind of cross a symbol of Christian-imperialist agents. Efforts are under way to tackle this thorny issue.<sup>62</sup>

### *Integration in civil society*

In most Muslim countries, young people represent over half the population. A large percentage, especially in the Arab countries but also quite extensively on the Indian sub-continent and in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and certain African countries, are highly frustrated by the West's policy on the Israel/Palestine conflict and intervention in Iraq. In addition, they are worried about the future in view of their own precarious economic and social situation. They support, passively at least, groups that talk openly about what is wrong and resist the occupiers of Arab countries and populations. According to a survey carried out by the Strategic Centre in Amman, young people in the Mashrek do not necessarily share the ideology of these groups, but they do consider some of their strategies and their methods as legitimate. As pointed out above, the issue of relations between the ICRC and young people typifies the whole question of integration in civil society. Institutions such as universities are one forum in which we can participate in discussions on contemporary issues; the media are another. The ICRC's Internet presence also merits particularly careful consideration, as all groups make a closely targeted use of this medium.

## Conclusions

In this article I have looked at the perceptions the ICRC may encounter in the Muslim world today. As mentioned in the introduction, the Muslim world was chosen for the overview because of the ICRC's long and multifaceted interaction with it. The conclusions of the foregoing analysis could, however, be helpful for improving any relationship with rather conservative movements in other religions.

The main messages of this analysis are as follows:

All populations, both in the West and in the East, are exposed to highly simplistic and dangerous images of the "other." Vociferous minorities argue in terms of a global confrontation between civilizations, using labels for the other side that are calculated to engender fear and hatred. In the Muslim world, so-called "western imperialism" is seen in various ways, but all view its political and military manifestations as problematic. Islamist groups add the concept of cultural hegemony and see secularization as the main danger for the Muslim world.

The many tensions in the Muslim world make it essential that international organizations establish contact with all segments of society. It is important

62 See François Bugnion, "Towards a comprehensive solution to the question of the emblem," *International Review of the Red Cross*, No. 838, June 2000, pp. 427-478. A revised third edition of this article has been published by the ICRC.



to know what the “silent majority” thinks about such core issues as the acceptability of humanitarian work that is conducted within the framework of international humanitarian law and based on the principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Opinion polls on such issues are a means of obtaining a truly representative picture.

The ICRC has well-integrated partners in the Muslim countries — the Red Crescent Societies. They can help it to interpret the situation more accurately and to allay fears on all sides. Given the ICRC’s mandate, it will be necessary to decide on a case-by-case basis when to act jointly and when it is better to operate separately.

Many individuals and groups in the Muslim world suspect the international organizations of having a hidden agenda. Depending on the context, they may be suspected of proselytizing, acting as agents for western governments or promoting secularism and selective human rights. Adhering strictly to our humanitarian mandate, being open about our operations and above all carrying out effective humanitarian operations will form a basis for convincing the sceptics.

Many of the civilians and prisoners who have fallen victim to the current confrontation between western armies and *jihad* groups feel humiliated and afflicted by a loss of human dignity. Delegates encounter such people in various countries. It is extremely important that through human contact they and all others are made to feel they are being taken seriously, and are truly valued as human beings.