

The Clash of Civilizations and International Politics Today

By

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The idea of clash of civilizations has become the focal point in today's international relations particularly in defining the relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations. But how much of this perceived clash is real? What is its background? Is this clash based on fundamental civilizational values? Or is it based on facts? Has this idea been coined and maneuvered by interest powerful groups to gain political advantage? An in-depth assessment of this phenomenon has become necessary. In this article we shall examine the origin, growth and the current state of this idea.

At the end of the cold war Harvard Professor Samuel P Huntington popularized the idea in article published in the *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993) which he published as a book three years later entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Huntington espoused civilization as a unit of historical analyses and subscribed to the idea that “enemies are essential” for “people seeking identity.”¹ Huntington wanted to retain the position of the pre-cold war momentum his of “free world” in international politics by identifying rival civilizations and he classified Islamic civilization as one of the challengers of his desire.

In modern history British historian Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) introduced the idea of civilization as units of historical analyses when he followed the German philosopher Oswald Spengler published the first volume of his *The Decline of the West* in 1918. This was a shocking conclusion about the fate of European civilization; for, Europeans had a very high expectation about the future of their civilization. This pre-war optimism is reflected in one of Arnold Toynbee's profound observations. Toynbee, who was born in 1889, expressed the optimism of his generation as:

[My generation] expected that life throughout the World would become more rational, more humane, and more democratic and that, slowly, but surely, political democracy would produce greater social justice. We had also expected the progress of science and technology would make mankind richer, and that this increasing wealth would gradually spread from a minority to a majority. We had expected that all this would happen peacefully. In fact we thought that mankind's course was set for an earthly paradise, and that our approach towards this goal was predestined for us by historical necessity.²

However, this optimism was shattered by the two World Wars. Toynbee concluded his voluminous *The Study of History* in the 1950s comparing twenty-one different world civilizations, saying,

¹ Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 20.

² Arnold Toynbee, *Surviving the Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 106-107.

If there was any validity in the writer's procedure of drawing comparisons between Hellenic history and Western, it would seem to follow that the Western society must, at any rate, be not immune from the possibility of a similar fate; and, when the writer, on passing to his wider studies, found that a clear majority of his assemblage of civilizations were already dead, he was bound to infer that death was indeed a possibility confronting every civilization, including his own.³

The idea of the fate of Western civilization was then undertaken by other intellectuals.

In 1980 sociologist Robert Nisbet entitled the last chapter "Progress at Bay" in his *History of the Idea of Progress* and concluded that, "the scepticism regarding Western progress that was once confined to a very small number of intellectuals in the nineteenth century has grown and spread to not merely the large majority of intellectuals in this final quarter of the century, but to many millions of other people in the West."⁴ Nisbet recommended a religious awakening or "even a major religious reformation" to revive the faith and optimism in the progress of current civilization in the West. The subject has motivated many scholars: In 1987 Paul Kennedy published *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* with a different approach, but reached to a similar conclusion. He analyzed economic and military changes within the European civilization since 1500 CE and held the view that big powers have always maintained their supremacy in world affairs by keeping a prudent balance between the creation of wealth and military expenditure. The failure to maintain such a balance in modern Europe had caused the fall from supremacy of Spain, the Netherlands, France and Britain respectively at different times in history. This has continued till the middle of the twentieth century. He also warned the cold war rivals at the latter half of the twentieth century, the United States and the Soviet Union, of similar consequences.

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama published a more controversial book – *The End of History and the Last Man* – defending the nineteenth century European optimism in progress and in the human nature. He expressed his firm belief that the last man in history, aware of his strengths and weaknesses, and aware of his 'perfect rights' and 'defective duties', will subscribe to ideas of liberal democracy. He also expressed his firm confidence in "a liberal democracy that could fight a short and decisive war every generation or so to defend its own liberty and independence would be far healthier and more satisfied than one that experienced nothing but continuous peace."⁵ Fukuyama's view of progress of modern European civilization seems directly in conflict with Robert Nisbet's views. Within years Samuel Huntington wrote yet another more controversial book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* and argued that there was a clash of civilizations in our contemporary times. And there was a need for today's dominating players in world politics to understand the nature of this clash: Huntington made policy recommendations for the US Government.

³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement by D.C. Sommervell (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 912.

⁴ Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 317.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 329.

The term clash of civilizations was first introduced by the British Orientalist Bernard Lewis in an article entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” Huntington endorsed Bernard Lewis’ clash of civilizations theory and proposed to create a new world order on the basis of this theory. He advanced this idea as a guideline for US foreign policy makers following the fall of the former USSR. Published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 1990) Lewis analyzed the Muslim psyche as saying:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival.

In order to convince his readers of the violent nature of the relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations, Huntington quotes Bernard Lewis, “a leading Western scholar of Islam,” and argues that there exists “no less than a clash of civilizations.” He provides empirical data from history: He says, “50 percent of wars involving pairs of states of different religions between 1820 and 1929 were wars between Muslims and Christians.”⁶ Academically this argument is extremely trivial: this was a colonial period in world history where most of Africa and Asia were occupied by European powers and it was only incidental that most of Europe supposedly followed Christianity (supposedly because most Europeans followed no organized religion during the latter half of the 19th century) and most of Africa and Asia was populated by Muslims. History books have recorded these wars as colonial or nationalist wars and wars of struggle for national self-determination. History has also recorded that one of the major contributions of the United States to world civilization is that the US has advanced the idea of self determination in world politics. The US has hard-pressed the world bodies such as the League of Nations and the United Nations undertake the diplomacy of decolonization in the 20th century. Huntington now seems to want the United States to abandon its historical role for the Enlightenment values such as freedom of conscience and respect for human dignity and to assume the burden of historical Christendom of Europe.

In support of his controversial thesis Huntington also argues:

[i]t is hard to find statements by any Muslims, whether politicians, officials, academics, businesspersons, or journalists, praising Western values and institutions. They instead stress the differences between their civilization and Western civilization, the superiority of their culture, and the need to maintain the integrity of that culture against Western onslaught. Muslims fear and resent

⁶ Huntington, 210. It is interesting that Huntington finds 50 percent of wars involving Muslims and Christians during this period. However he forgets that during this most volatile century in 14 centuries of Christian-Muslim relations followers of these two major world religions constituted at least 70 to 75 percent of the world population. It is also noteworthy that out of current 192 member states of the United Nations at least 169 have clear Christian, Muslim or combination of both majority populations.

Western power and the threat which this poses to their society and beliefs. They see Western culture as materialistic, corrupt, decadent, and immoral.⁷

Huntington believes that since “1979 Iranian Revolution, an intercivilizational quasi war developed between Islam and the West,”⁸ and in the near future “conceivably even more intensely anti-Western nationalisms could emerge, blaming the West for the failures of Islam.”⁹ Therefore, he argues that there is strong likelihood of a perpetual conflict between the two civilizations. Because the essential “problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people is convinced of the superiority of their culture and is obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”¹⁰ Is Huntington correct in his analysis of history? We shall now examine the accuracy of Huntington’s thesis.

In order to demonstrate his thesis Huntington manipulates history of both civilizations. Introducing the discussion on “Islam and West” during the Clinton administration, Huntington suggested that:

Some Westerners, including President Bill Clinton, have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other’s Other.¹¹

Huntington’s knowledge of history of both Islamic and Western civilization seems to be shallow. A thorough analysis of the relationship between Islam and Christianity is not within the scope of this short paper. But Huntington’s claims demand some reflections from history. Anybody with the simple knowledge of the *Qur’an* and Islamic history knows that the *Qur’an* does not single out Christians as enemies of Muslims. In fact the *Qur’an* encouraged friendly relations with Christians not only because the Christians believed in the existence of God, but also they believed in many common prophets in history. In fact when persecuted by their fellow tribesmen early Muslims sought refuge with the Christian king of Ethiopia. The *Qur’an* also favored the Byzantine Christians in their conflict with the Persians. In this context one may refer to an academically more sound work by Columbia professor Richard Bulliet *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* which argues a closer relation between Islam and Christianity in history than Bernard Lewis’ “Judeo-Christian heritage.”¹² However, one needs to examine the idea of the Christians and Muslims being “the other’s Other.” Let us first discuss the proposed thesis more closely.

⁷ Ibid. 213.

⁸ Ibid. 216.

⁹ Ibid. 121.

¹⁰ Ibid. 217.

¹¹ Ibid, 209.

¹² Richard W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

In fact the Qur'an doesn't identify any religious, linguistic or ethnic group as enemy; rather it strongly condemns those who hide the truth of the existence of One Lord and they themselves attempt to become lord over others. The Qur'anic message is universal: it claims that those who hide the truth, also spread corruption in order to establish their lordship over others. It is well-known that the earliest enemies of Islam were the Prophet's own ethnic and linguistic fellow tribesmen – the Qureish. The message of Islam attracted followers not only from the Qureish, but from various groups of people including Africans and Persians living in Arabia. In other words Islam's message was universal and therefore, both its followers and opponents belonged to the same tribal, ethnic, and linguistic entity. This is not to suggest that no Muslim ruler in history considered Christians as enemies; rather this is to suggest that there has not been any specific "Other" for Islam.

Also it is not true that Muslims always constituted the "Other" for Christians. Christianity was born as a reform movement within the Jewish tradition and the two communities became other's other during the early days of Christianity. Huntington romanticizes Christian history by suggesting that the "twentieth-century conflict between liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninism is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity."¹³ Perhaps the Cold war was too contemporary to be erased from the memory of his readers. But should one obliterate the memories of the Crusades against Orthodox Christians? Who fought the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), and the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648) in Europe? Who were the main participating forces in the two devastating world wars in the 20th century?

Most amazing is the fact that Huntington ignores the motivating factors behind the American war of independence. There has been an explosion of references to the Judeo-Christian heritage of the American republic during the past decade or so. But the fact is that like many Enlightenment philosophers the founding fathers of America were religious but vehemently anti-clerical (but not anti-religious). Of course the founding fathers might have learned about the principles of human rights and human dignity from Judaism and Christianity, which in fact, constituted the fundamental forces of their motivation. But these ideas are not only common to classical Greek tradition of Socrates and Plato, which the Renaissance attempted to revive, but also to Islam. How can a student of history fail to notice these facts! However, this is not to suggest that there hasn't been any conflict between Muslims and Christians during the last fourteen hundred years of history; rather, this is to argue that Muslims and Christians have not been each other's "Other" throughout history as has been suggested by Huntington.

What was the general pattern of the conflict between Islam and European Christendom in history? Again an in-depth analysis doesn't fall within the scope of this paper, but for the sake of our argument we shall formulate some observations on the issue. In fourteen hundred years of history one will definitely find faults with both parties. Invasions and incursions by one to other's territories have occurred. For very unfortunate events such as the atrocities committed by the Crusaders during the

¹³ Huntington, 209.

occupation of Jerusalem in 1096 have occurred; but the Catholic Church has admitted its mistakes. As for the relationship during the European colonial penetration into the Muslim world, most European historians now acknowledge the inhuman and savage penetration pattern of the European colonizers into Asia and Africa. Huntington claims that Muslims possess a “sense of grievance, resentment, envy and hostility toward the West and its wealth” is disgusting. Huntington doesn’t provide any evidence to support this accusation. If any Muslim resentment against European colonizers exists, that must be viewed in the proper historical context. In fact one will find some resentment among all Muslim and non-Muslim victims of European colonization and that is because of the colonial plunder of their territories by the colonizers. Describing the British ransack of wealth after the occupation of Muslim Bengal in 1757 one British historian noted that, “men made fortunes, returned to England, lost them and returned to India for more.”¹⁴ This was on top of millions of pounds worth of valuables and goods were stolen and transported by the British East India Company to England. That is why one needs to highlight the point here that the conflict between European colonizers and Muslims of Asia and Africa originated during the latter’s struggle for freedom and self-determination, and not because of the “wealth, power, and culture” of the former. In fact pre-colonial Africa and Asia were much wealthier than post-colonial Africa and Asia.

Now returning to the question – whether or not a clash of civilizations exists in international politics today – at the outset most observers of current affairs will come up with a positive answer. This is mainly because of Bush Administration’s policy toward the Muslim world. The “neo-conservatives” in the Bush Administration seem to have accepted Lewis and Huntington’s twisted history to suit their desire to impose hegemony in various parts of the world. The events of September 11, 2001 seem to have come to support their design. The introduction of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the rise of terrorist activities in various parts of the world, the stringent policies of the Bush Administration and a number of European countries toward Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia, and also because of policy toward Muslim charity organizations and travel restrictions on certain Muslim individuals have convinced many observers to conclude that this is happening because of a clash of civilizations in the world today. Yet if one examines some other developments and ponders upon the situation deeply, one finds many moderate voices around the world. For example, millions of Americans and Europeans came out on the streets opposing the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The opposition to continuous occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan is increasing not only in the Muslim world, but in Europe and America. It is highly unlikely that they would have done this had they believed in the idea of the clash of civilizations. Also the American voters have expressed their opposition to Bush Administration’s Iraq policy in the mid-term election in 2006. Clearly these voters chose to express their displeasure with administration’s foreign policy and out of their motivation and commitments to fundamental values of the US constitution. Now increasingly number of Americans are raising question about the validity of Bush Administration’s “neo-conservative” foreign policy and are challenging the clash of civilizations thesis.

¹⁴ Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of India* 4th ed. (Delhi, London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 474.

On the occasion of the arrest of six Muslim imams at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport in November 2006 Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, a senior member of the House Homeland Security Committee, said in an official statement that, "The Muslim American Community has grown in size and prominence, and is an integral part of the fabric of this nation. Muslim Americans share the same values and ideals that make this nation great: Ideals such as discipline, generosity, peace and moderation." She also said that, "Securing our homeland and protecting our national security is a paramount national concern. But the tragedy of 9/11 cannot be permitted to be used to justify racial profiling, harassment, and discrimination of Muslim and Arab Americans. Such Conduct is not only deplorable but also undermines our civil liberties and impedes our success in the global war on terror." Therefore Huntington's argument that "the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale" is not a valid argument. It is unfortunate that in international politics Huntington's suggestion of a "war between groups from different civilizations, most likely involving Muslims on one side and non-Muslims on the other"¹⁵ seem to dominate the mind of many academicians, journalists and policy makers. However, we would like to believe that human beings have become more civilized with the passage of time, and like Sheila Jackson Lee, they wouldn't subscribe to racism or tribalism, rather they would subscribe to common civilizational values to save the humanity. #

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¹⁵ Huntington, 312.