

# **The Clash of Civilizations**

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Hundreds of lectures and thousands of books have been written on this topic within and outside the Arab world, which is an amount of publications equivalent to what have been written on the phenomenon of globalization. In this paper, I would like to speak of this topic from the perspective of the German cultural history. The opposite concept of the clash of civilizations and cultures is dialogue. On the Arab side, there are a lot of books and specialized articles that have been devoted to dialogue. In addition to this, there have been many conferences on dialogue; for instance, the Arab League had in September of 2001 held a conference on dialogue: communication, not clash. In Damascus, there was a cultural conference in May 2002 on Dialogue among Civilizations for Co-existence. Also, Iran under the leadership of President Muhammad Khatami is active in this domain, for there is a permanent office for dialogue among cultures or civilizations. I am certain that the series of lectures organized by the ministry of religious affairs and endowments in Muscat is conducted under the banner of dialogue for a peaceful co-existence.

The first part of this lecture analyzes the background for Huntington's thesis, the clash of cultures (civilizations). The second part of the lecture is an attempt to lay down the bases of the opposite movements, that of dialogue.

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## **1. Huntington's Theory**

In the summer of 1993, Samuel Huntington, American professor of political science, and one of the most famous theoretician for the period after the Cold War, published in *Foreign Affairs*, the famous and influential American periodical, an article entitled "The Clash of Civilization". The theory that is postulated is that after the end of the East-West conflict, international politics moves into a new age. For during the Cold War, that is roughly from the end of the Second World War in 1945 up till the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist camp in 1990, the main conflict in the world was between the two strong camps that the third world made alliances with. By the nineties, the fault lines of confrontation were being formed anew, according to Huntington. The conflict was not anymore revolving around class contradictions or ideologies or the national movements but about something else.

The main thesis of Huntington is that the fault lines among humankind will be cultural. For civilizations that have highly different cultural organizations will split from each other according to religion, history, language and traditions. The decisive line will deepen and become permanent. From Yugoslavia through the Middle East to Asia, the fault lines of civilizations will draw the fronts of conflict in the future. At the beginning of the cultural conflicts, the United States must form alliances with similar cultures and spread its values as far as possible. The West must also move towards foreign cultures. However, the West should not shy away from conflict if it becomes necessary.

Huntington differentiates between culture and civilization. And because there is no agreement over these two terms, I use civilization and culture interchangeably. Huntington mentions eight main cultures: Islamic civilization, Orthodox and Slavic civilization, Latin American civilization, and Af-

rican civilization. According to Huntington, the large-scale future wars will be along the line of cultural divisions.

Before we deal with this theory, we are certain that Huntington's theory became famous everywhere in the world in a way different manner to Fukuyama's theory on the end of human history. In 1995, that is after a year and a half of Huntington's article, Dr. Bassam Tibi, professor of political science at Jutington University in Germany, and an expert on Middle Eastern Affairs, who is well-known because of his t.v. and newspaper activities, published in Germany a book on war of civilizations: politics and religion between rationalism and radialism. If Huntington's title of the article was expressed in a question form, for Tibi it has become undoubted. If Huntington still talks about clashes between civilizations, with Tibi these clashes turn actually into wars.

We do not want to argue here whether there are indeed eight civilizations or expose what Huntington has called the Islamic-Confucian connection. For many observers doubt that such a connection exists.

Huntington's theory would have not been different if the number of civilizations has been nine or fourteen or that the Islamic-Confucian connection is just a fiction.

The seven or eight civilizations that are mentioned by Huntington are not equal at any rate, as Huntington himself has said. In addition, as he said, seven of these civilizations, though differ greatly, are similar to a point where in addition to the secondary fault lines, there is a major fault line. This fault line is the West's confrontation of the rest of the world. Huntington leaves no place for doubt that the most important power of the West is the United States of America. It is not accidental that this confrontation at a time when the West is at its highest power and more precisely, when the United States is at its highest political, economic and military power. If

Huntington is right, the West under the leadership of the United States faces the non-Western world. The decisive line between the West and non West in Europe stretches over the Eastern lines of Western Christianity in 1500. Beyond these lines lie the Catholics or the Protestants, and to the East lie Orthodox Christians and Muslims. According to Huntington, an Iron curtain has been drawn over the two sides in the past. However, the curtain now is softly cultural.

Huntington theory is not new; for after the First World War, and between 1918 and 1922, the philosopher of cultures Oswald Schpengler, who died in 1936, composed his pessimistic book on the deterioration of the West. The widely influential book, which was read by many, writes about the making of world history, and therefore, civilizations, which he considered to be living entities, have to go through a biological process. Cultures go through a phase of modernization, then development, and completion, then deterioration and finally collapse. He was pessimistic about the future of Western civilization, and like Huntington, he separates the eight civilizations of the world, including a Western civilization and an Arab civilization. But Schpengler deals with the Arab civilization in the context of the early Christian civilization. Western civilization, however, and unlike Huntington, is collapsing and will soon be overcome.

As Huntington said, there are today about seven or eight great civilizations, but he divides the world in a different manner. For him, there are Western civilization, Confucian civilization, Japanese civilization, Islamic civilization, Hindu civilization, Orthodox Slavic civilization , Latin American civilization, and perhaps the African civilization. This division of the world into great cultures or civilizations has had a long history. But if I am right, this division is seen as old. For in England, Toynbee has in his historical introduction to his book of twelve volumes, *A Study of History*, dis-

tinguished between twenty-three civilizations, then thirteen civilizations. In his book, he searched for the general laws of their foundation, flourishing and disappearance.

Huntington's theory about the clash of civilizations is the clashed imagined between Islam and the West. In an interview conducted by Bassam Tibi, Huntington said that the focus of future conflicts is going to be between the West and many Islamic-Confucian countries.

Therefore, it is perfectly clear that the Huntington's doctrine is tightly linked to American foreign policy, and thus, his theory seems like the old theory to the period after the Cold War. It could not be an accidental that those who accept this theory accept the dominant role of the United States.

As the main theory of Huntington assumes, after the end of the Cold War the main conflicts in the new world will not be ideological or economic in the first place. But they are going to be clashes of civilizations. Thus, Huntington connects Schpengler and Toynbee's concept to a political application that is closer to the fault line of future battlegrounds.

As mentioned earlier, Huntington speaks of a cultural curtain that separated today Europe as the Iron curtain did in the past. The coming of a new world war is trumpeted as a war of civilization.

As a professor of Islamic studies, well connected to this age, I cannot but deal with Huntington's theory, since of the main civilization in the non Western world is the Islamic civilization.

Now, there is no value in judging Huntington and his supporters after the collapse of the Socialist Camp and the end of the period of the Cold war since they have already created for Islam the image of the new enemy. Khomeini replaced Stalin as a symbol of the enemy, and he became a threat to the southern front of the North Atlantic Treaty. Should then we ask how in conformity with reality is Huntington's theory? It easier to critically deal

with the main weak points in the theory.

The main basic weak point in Huntington's exposition lies in the deduced assumption and the unacceptable simplification that the theory depends upon. This simplification means that civilizations and cultures are fixed systems composed by moral characteristics that developed through history. After that people are free to belong to any of them. However, we acknowledge that cultures and civilizations are not fixed systems, for every civilization and every culture has trends within it, and every trend is countered by another trend. Cultures are not homes surrounded by fixed fences, but are more like water. One of contemporary Arab thinkers said that all of us in the West and Muslims and other swim in the same deep water, between traditionalism and modernization, and since water belongs of the ocean of history, there is no point in splitting the ocean, since such an attempt is futile and useless.

The theory of the clash of cultures requires complete arrogance rather than critical consciousness of mutual dependency of modern societies.

It is true that Huntington admits that cultures also change and could be mixed. This however is not applicable to Islamic civilization. Since the separation between Western civilization and Islamic civilization has been very fixed for over 1300 years, that is, since the time of the rightly-guided caliphs. According to the principle of historical re-composition, the Western cultural bloc and the Islamic cultural bloc stand against each other in a confrontational posture for cultural reasons. I do not think any historian in the world agrees with this.

Nonetheless, the concept that Islamic civilization today is a fixed and unified cultural system and that it is a source of threat to the West is illogical for other reasons. According to the indicators of political, military and industrial power, most Muslims and their states rank much lower than the in-

dustrial powers. But what can be understood much better is the feeling of the third world, which the Muslims belong to, of being threatened, especially by the West. Furthermore, the Muslims do not constitute any block of power.

There are many racial and religious conflicts in many regions of the world that cannot be denied. They are bloody wars, but the conflicts between the protestants and Catholics in Ireland is not less bloody. The same applies as well as to the Orthodox-Catholic conflicts between Serbs and Croats. Such wars also happen among Muslims, as is the case with the civil war between Kurds and Turks. Unfortunately, throughout the regions of the world general wars take place along with civil wars, and all of these are no less than the continuation of politics in different means. All of this applies to the Muslim states and groups. Cannot we think that the Western culture has bloody border as was obvious in the bombing of Hiroshima?

The generalization that has been applied to Islamic civilization is equal to the simplification about the West, for there is no one Western culture.

If we are convinced that the concept of the clash of civilization does not offer us any help, we would not gain much. For there is in Europe and the United States many individuals who believe in the existence of this conflict. There are as well many in the Arab and Asian countries who believe in the same conflict. There are many Muslims who believe in the clash between Islam and the West. But we know very well that conflicts and wars start only as ideas before they turn into bloody realities. Then we should ask ourselves about the role of intellectuals in defusing the clash of civilizations.

## **2 Can we do some thing to defuse the clash of civilizations?**

We must here make an important distinction. The issue does not revolve around the culture being the same or about eliminating the differences and

contradictions among cultures. There is an acceptable peaceful competition, a competition among all cultures. This, however, is completely different from bloody wars. For cultures and civilizations are not in themselves antagonistic and do not tend to war or peace by themselves. Thus a behavior should not be attributed to this or that culture but to its followers. According to this understanding, we find that dialogue among people of different civilizations, religions, worldviews, and philosophies that can contribute to avoiding the spread of conflict. We must work to encourage dialogue among humankind with all its diverse cultures. What we should do as intellectuals must focus on three domains:

- 1- Dissemination of knowledge about the other's culture,
- 2- avoid generalization,
- 3- readiness for self criticism.

### **1-Dissemination of knowledge**

one of the marvelous example about disseminating knowledge over the other is what professor Dr. Anne Marie Schimmel has done in Germany till her death. He taught at the Faculty of Fundamentals of Religion in Ankara and in Turkish from 1954 till 1959. He taught the history of comparative religion in more than five languages. She authored over one hundred books, all of which and without exception dealt with Islamic subjects. Among the many honorary Ph.D.s and other academic and non-academic awards, I remember the Peace Prize given to her by the Union of German Publishers. Practically, she became very famous because of her studies on Islamic mysticism and Islamic civilization in South Asia. Her goal was to build bridges between peoples in the East and West. She was also active in translating works from Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Sindi languages in order to serve the cause of understanding among world religions. She believed in the pow-



er of dialogue and peace through knowledge to confront prejudgments and hatred.

Dr. Schimmel did not write books and articles only for the specialists. Her lectures as well, which are innumerable, were directed toward the large audience. These lectures called on the German intellectuals to meet with their counterparts from the Islamic world. Her linguistic skills were beyond comparisons, and her inventive poetical interaction was comprehension. There is no other German who can match her.

Dr. Schimmel did earn the Peace Prize of the Union of German Publishers in 1995 because throughout her life she worked towards reviving European understanding of Islamic religion and Islamic culture. In her speech on that occasion, which became a public topic, the former German President said that the Peace Prize is dedicated to the explorer among cultures and therefore to preventing the horrific image about the world clash of civilizations.

If we want to speak about dialogue, we mean many forms of it. For instance, Dr. Schimmel's interest was focused on the dialogue among cultures rather than dialogue among religions. In addition, she was strongly interested in literature as a form of dialogue, and she encouraged this through her translations of Arabic poetry and Persian and Turkish mysticism.

## **2-Avoiding Generalization**

This could only be the product of knowing the other. Generalizations depend normally on ignorance and bad will. Discussions that start with sentences like 'Muslims are so or the West is so' are meaningless. Nonetheless, many still use them in the polemical attacks. This happens because generalizations are positive for those who make them and negative about the other. Therefore, generalizations are very influential in certain domains such as

conflicts and wars. But it is deadly for dialogue, for a dialogue between two parties requires that everyone takes the other seriously, and not from a negative perspective.

### **3-Readiness for Self Criticism**

Perhaps this principle is the most important condition for any dialogue. For the individual who is not ready to exercise criticism of his own group and position, his dialogue would be meaningless and would be the dialogue of the deaf. This principle depends upon on equal treatment, which means that if one of the parties of the dialogue does not perform self-criticism, the other party will not do that as well. This is a simple psychological fact.

### **4-The Necessity of Dialogue**

We are in need of dialogue today in all domains. I would like to give you the example of Germany. As you know, in Germany there are about three million Muslims, mostly of Turkish origins. By the way, this is an example of globalization. Islam is found in Germany, France, Britain, Holland and others. It is not possible that people live in such societies without a dialogue that leads to more understanding, co-existence and mutual respect. For canceling the dialogue means increasing previous judgments and suspicions among the parties. There is no alternative to dialogue because it is the prelude to understanding and a necessity for canceling the conflict.

Dialogue is the correct prelude to avoid conflict, and when dialogue is absent, the idea of conflict emerges among people and civilization.