

Reinforcing Violence

Indiscretions and Consequences of the Clash of Civilizations Theory

By A. E. SOUAIAIA

Abstract

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, politicians and scholars of international affairs have begun to look for new areas of conflict. The Second Gulf War that reacted to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991 brought with it the Bush doctrine of "new world order." Indeed it was new in that it created an alliance between many nations that would otherwise be enemies. For the first time, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and many other Arab and Islamic states were fighting side by side with the United States and its Western Allies to defeat an Arab regime that not that long before had enjoyed the political and financial support of all these nation states and administrations in order to help it defeat Iran. Those events set in motion a series of others leading to the emergence of a new conflict involving the same players: the Arab and Islamic regimes, the *Mujahidun* movements, and various Western governments. In order to place the new trends in context, a number of theories were introduced, including that which argued for the inevitable "clash of civilization" involving the West and the Islamic world. This essay will argue that these conflicts are limited cultural and political skirmishes, but they are not an inter-civilizations conflict. The "clash of civilization" theory is fundamentally flawed especially in its definitions of civilization and culture.

Samuel Huntington's paper that was published in the early 90's and circulated widely among laymen and academics was provoking enough that money-making publishers saw an opportunity in it and contracted the author to produce a book by the year 1998 (*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*; publisher: Simon and Schuster). Admittedly, wide distribution of written works does not necessarily imply that its author either possesses a sophisticated degree of intellect or entails that the proposed theory is sound. In fact, the wide acceptance of such a work is usually indicative of its simplistic approach and banal thesis that can be followed and understood by the ordinary informed citizen. However, the preaching-to-the-converted discourse that deals with war and

peace has serious consequences and for that reason its authors and proponents ought to exert a greater degree of responsibility. A very good example of this kind of work is Huntington's book that was published between last two Gulf wars and contextualized by the volatility of the Middle East region and the ongoing bloody conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This same work was widely used after the September 11, 2001 attacks in order to make sense out of the causes and motives of such indiscriminate murderous acts. For this reason, many renowned scholars felt the need to respond to the ideas advanced by Huntington. Arguably, the reactions to the paper and later the book ranged from adoration of a genius who sees the future of the world with prophetic clarity to detestation of an ignorant who misjudged the real fault lines of the ongoing conflicts (E. Said, *Clash of Ignorance*, published in *The Nation*, October 22, 2001).

Needless to say that both camps who reacted to the clash of civilization theory have invariably failed in terms of producing a systematic supporting evidence or critique. With the emerging war and peace situation post September 2001, any theory that would explain the emerging paradigm and predict future conflicts was desperately welcomed. There is little time and little interest in an intellectual debate in the face of real and manifest threat.

Regarding the predictability elements in Huntington's paper; only those shielded and isolated from the events taking place in the Middle East and the Muslim world would be impressed by the "prediction" that proposed that Muslims will be the next opponent of the West. For more than a half century, there were violent conflicts going on in the world, and Muslims, directly or indirectly, were

part of these conflicts. As we usher in the 21st century, there remain at least five peoples under occupation (Palestinians, Saharans, Kashmiri, Chechens, and the Tibetans); four of them involve Muslims and two of them are widely advertised in the Muslim world: Palestine and Kashmir. The plight of the Palestinian people coupled with the status of the holy sites that may fall under Israeli control makes that conflict by all accounts the most central for all Muslims around the world. Indeed, it cannot be seen as a prophetic forecast to argue that Muslims will be part of this ongoing conflict in the future especially now that the “Evil Empire” that required temporary alliance between Muslims and the West is no more. It was only a matter of time before the ongoing conflict will refine itself and look for a new front. In a sense, if one trains himself for war and spend wealth and blood in building defensive mechanisms and postures; that mental setting cannot simply be switched off. For many reasons or without reasons at all, governments around the world spend more money preparing for war than feeding the hungry and helping the sick. It is alarming to any concerned world citizen to realize that the “war” budget in one single advanced nation far exceeds the entire national net worth of many developing nations combined. In short the preparedness for an “enemy” has been the mantra of the modern times and it is feared that the theory of inter-civilization clash can only be reinforced.

The fall of the Soviet Union caused all the parties involved in that prolonged conflict to rethink their plans and re-evaluate their strategies. The United States was party in that conflict for economic and ideological reasons both of which had dissipated by the demise of communism and the disintegration of the

Soviet Union. The *Mujahidun* were in it for religious reasons and the Muslim states that were backing, financing, and recruiting the *Mujahidin* were in it for political and economic interests. That conflict was more or less polarized along the ideological fault lines because the superpowers that were at odds were indeed separated by politics and ideology, not culture. The Soviet Union went bankrupt and could not maintain its defensive posture any longer and that left all of the communist block unprotected, un-financed, unsupported. The efforts of the West immediately shifted from supporting the anti-communist regimes and groups to taking a bite out of the rapidly disintegrating Soviet Empire. Furthermore, the West quickly realized that a strong and stable inheritor of the Soviet Union is a must in order to stabilize the world economy and even make it grow. Billions and billions of dollars were granted or loaned to Russia, while the former Soviet protégés struggled. All former socialist states suffered economically and politically: in the Muslim world, socialist regimes crumbled in 1992 one after another; Yemen united in the face of growing economic crisis in the former socialist regime in the south. Algeria, Libya, Syria, and Iraq were all forced to re-adjust their policies and politics. Socialist and communist parties found themselves financially and ideologically bankrupt and the entire Arab world was suddenly emptied from legitimate and capable opposition parties. Once again, the only conduit for expressing frustration with the failing Arab states was the religious opposition that was being forced by necessity to tackle not only moral affairs but also political, economic and social matters.

Since the wars of independence, the Muslim world has yet to live in peace with itself and with its neighbors. Civil wars in Lebanon, Somalia, Chad, Sudan, Indonesia, Turkey, Iraq, Eritrea, and Nigeria; inter-states conflict like those between Iran and Iraq, India and Pakistan, Sahara and Morocco, and Kuwait and Iraq; and unresolved territorial disputes like those between Iran and the Gulf states, Tunisia and Libya, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, Morocco and Spain, and Turkey and Greece (over Cyprus) all have been keeping the Middle East and the Muslim world more focused on wars and less involved in development. All such ongoing conflicts cannot be categorized as a clash of civilizations pitting the West against Muslims; since the conflict between Muslims and Muslims has already taken place and has been going on for nearly half a century. What was happening during the post Soviet Union era is no more than an extension of the conflict: many would argue that Muslim regimes have been suppressing Islamists because the West does not want any religious or conservative regime in power. This trend then, is an expansion of the battle field to include the sources of support for the Arab and Muslim regimes.

One of the major errors of Huntington's analysis is his understanding of what is or is not a civilization. The theory would be accurate if he titled his paper the "clash of cultures". But again, had he done so, it would not have been as attractive a theory as when it is generalized to predict a universal conflict that pits one "civilization" against another. Indeed, this new conflict that we are witnessing is a cultural conflict, but which conflict is not?

All civil wars are cultural and religious conflicts. All the European wars can be classified as cultural and religious conflicts. Every war that happened in the past, ongoing now, or will take place in the future will be caused directly or indirectly by culture, religion, and/or politics. However, very few can be considered to be inter-civilization wars. Civilizations do not engage in wars. If there is a civilization engaged in a war; then that war is a civil war not a war between civilizations. In a world where full isolation can be achieved, two or more civilizations may co-exist. However, once communication channels are opened and knowledge and information are freely shared amongst the members of these civilizations, then one civilization will gain the upper hand while the other will be reduced to a reactionary force. There will always emerge a force that will serve to moderate the leading communities. There must be a force that will resist the drive of those who would appropriate the achievements of the global civilization to the service of the selected few.

In the light of this understanding, I submit that only intra-civilization wars are possible; for one of the characteristics of a true civilization is to be inclusive and obsessively humane in dealing with people of all backgrounds and all cultures. If a civilization were to rely on power and brute force to preserve its existence, then it is indeed doomed.

A civilization is ultimately *a manifest expression of collective values*. These values can be freely found in its cities, in its organization of labor, in its literature, in its representative government, in its icons and monuments, and finally in its complex and inclusive religious system. A true civilization must dominate in

all these areas to the point where the movement of ideas and values, if they were to be left to their own gravity, would flow to freely influence other cultures and other communities that make contact with the locus of this true civilization. With this kind of understanding of “civilization”, it ought to be clear that only a civilization can defeat itself. For there to be a true inter-civilization conflict, there must be two incongruent civilizations that antagonize each other in all the above six spheres.

A civilization means the refinement of taste, thought, and manners. It is the building of cultural and aesthetic centers, the writing of thought provoking ideas, and the maintaining of complex and inclusive religious systems. It is the crowded cities that manage order of the collective life, the physical and spiritual bridges that connect communities, and the technology that reaches out beyond the limits of time and space. A civilization is all the above face to face with abuse, violence, crimes, hate, greed, gluttony, and egoism. A civilization is made out of communities that would not give up their basic freedoms in order to protect their immediate interests, communities that would honor the rule of law instead of blind revenge, communities that would not self-destruct because of the fear of the other, communities that would recognize and protect the fundamental rights of everyone including those outside its immediate borders.

If we were to accept the above characteristics of “civilization”, it will be simple then to realize that these conflicts that are facing the world today cannot be considered inter-civilization wars. If we do, then we are making a “civilization” out of mass murderers, criminals, abusers, thieves, and reactionaries. We will be

legitimizing violence not only against the perpetrators of violence but against innocents. The very act of identifying the perpetrators of violence and murder as members of the larger community of Muslims is indeed an extension of guilt by association. The “clash of civilizations” is the discourse of isolationism, narrow-mindedness, and latent racism. It is conveniently petty and primeval to rediscover and swank about one’s ostentatious roots as a form of defense when threatened. A community that reacts to even mass slaughter and barbaric attacks on its civilians by appealing to racial superiority and by creating the artificial “other” is ultimately admitting defeat. It is the destiny of successful civilizations to withstand tests like these. It is the true test of real civilizations to defeat barbarism without embracing it.

For Huntington’s theory of inter-civilization wars to be true, the Islamic civilization must be resurrected first. There must be a clash between the Islamic civilization and the Western civilization on all fronts. That is not and cannot be the case. Whether they like or not, Muslims are members of the modern civilization that is led by the West. They are not the “other”, yet they are not the masters. For nearly a millennium, Muslims had led the world and had personified the collective human civilization. However no single community has a monopoly on the leadership of civilizations. Civilizations are beyond the individual influence of a single community. Civilizations are the outcome of the collective efforts of every ethnic, religious, and social group. Civilizations have no spokesperson, no capital, and no nationality; only a center of gravity. That center of gravity is no longer in the Muslim world.

The mere existence of a powerful and influential civilization does not necessarily imply the establishment of a utopia. In fact all world civilizations have featured the extreme of both: the positive and negative. It is how the positives and negatives are managed and how resilient members of the civilization are that will determine its achievement's floor and ceiling. Conflicts are either driven by the impact of the shortcomings or a reaction to the fast-paced and unbalanced development.

The modern civilization that is led by the West is suffering from selective globalization, unequal distribution of wealth, conscious marginalization of social classes, and undue restriction of the means of acquiring technology and furthering education. Because of these and other real or imagined deficiencies in the leadership of the Western civilization, varying degrees of resistance ensued. Without looking beyond the border of the exemplar of the Western civilization, namely the United States of America, we can easily see the symptoms and effects of the above stated problems. Poverty for instance, is rampant. The number of people living under the poverty level during the year 2002 has reached 34.6 million. Crimes and murder are highest compared to other advanced nations. More than six million people are incarcerated. Nearly forty million Americans are without healthcare plans. The Accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few is appalling and the gap in wages is increasing with the worsening economic conditions.

Worldwide, six percent of the population controls seventy-six percent of the earth's wealth and resources. African and many Asian countries are suffering

from poverty, disease, and illiteracy. In general, nearly seventy percent of the sub-Saharan states' population lives in abject poverty. Nigeria for instance, a country of more than 120 million; eighty million people suffer from poverty, illness, and all forms of social and economic malaise despite its huge reservoir of natural resources like oil and natural gas. In regards to the state of the Muslim world, none of the Arab and Muslim states has a true democratic and representative political system and most of them are still ruled by the inheritors of the colonial legacy.

In the Muslim world more than any other place, there is a depressing sense of loss of autonomy that is coupled with an absolute absence of the conduits for reacting to what is seen by many as an Intellectual Colonization (*ghazwun fikriyy*) targeting Muslim peoples. For societies where the fresh memories of physical occupation that caused the death of millions of lives is still fresh, seeing the remote influence of the same enemy they fought just a generation ago can be construed as a betrayal of everyone who died fighting for freedom and liberty. The imbalance in mass media and communication technologies is seen as placing Muslims at a disadvantage. It is argued that while immoral television programs, indecent images, profane content, and foreign ideologies are beamed around the clock to impressionable young minds; no Muslim organization is allowed to counteract these corrupting images. Muslim activists argue that only the negative aspects of the Western civilizations are being "imported" to the Muslim world while the real values and means that make the West prosperous are intentionally blocked. The net effect of this "filtered trade" is encouraging young Mus-

lims to live a symptomatic life instead of striving to learn and practice the real values that make the West successful. Muslims around the World know about Western music, Western movies, Western novels, Western fashion, Western diet, Western décor, Western socializing, Western leisure, Western sports, Western art, Western skyscrapers, Western socializing habits, Western languages, Western clichés, and Western comfort in general. However, Muslims around the world know very little about hardworking Americans who work two jobs, determined civil servants who manage gigantic infrastructures across an entire continent, specialized labor whose input positively transforms all lives, the sense of responsibility that is rocketing the productive power of the entire nation, and individual's respect for the life, privacy, and dignity of others. Not only is the Muslim world kept ignorant of the values that make the West successful, but it is also inhibited by dictatorial regimes from participating in empowering its own citizens through its own values to contribute to the collective life.

There is a surreal sense of hopelessness and self-pity that is reinforced by artificial concepts like “guided democracy” and condescending grandeur of elite governance. Muslims live in a fictitious reality where they are seen as either immature to govern themselves by themselves or blessed to have a genius, a God-given “leader” who would save them from themselves. Both of these attitudes have forced the dissenters and political activists to carry their activities on the margins. But even that limited space has been consistently violated by the intrusion of totalitarians and self-serving rulers forcing political and social activists to adopt radical approaches. As the barriers between communities are broken and

cultural and religious biases become more and more pronounced, Muslims appear to be prepared now more than any other time to end the internal and international *wisayah* and become full participants in the making of their own future. There is a chance for the Western leaders of this modern civilization to empower the peoples of the under-developed countries, the majority of whom are Muslims, to rise to the challenges and contribute to the stability and continued prosperity of the world instead of preparing for wars.

The short-sightedness of clash of civilization theory is dangerous. It identifies larger-than-life imaginary enemies and reinforces defensive postures that are harmful to the progress towards tolerance, inclusiveness, and world peace. It makes a villain out of every culture and discourages harmony among the members of this shrinking world. It suggests a “civilization” out of the few who subscribe to murderous thought, barbaric agencies, threatening cities, proscribing books, closed-minded discourse, puritanical creed, and culture of fright. It is reductionism to the extreme and calculated generalization that inflames rather than reduces conflict. To the dislike of many who are in power today, life in this interdependent and diverse world is not and will never be “black and white” choices even if we are tempted to make it so in order to find moral comfort in the hard decisions we make. Conflicts are either the manifestation of blinding misunderstanding or the result of selfish acts of aggressions. It is misunderstanding. Nonetheless, that unnecessarily instills fear, and fear breeds violence. Indeed encouraging understanding is a better investment than spending time and efforts identi-

ifying the “enemies” within and without. The world has lived through enough fear; let’s not add paranoia to the mix.

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