

*Clash of Civilizations*

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**Abstract:**

This essay analyzes Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis and argues that the theory did not sustain itself in the post-Cold War period. In this theory, Huntington argues that all post-Cold War conflicts will be between civilizations, declaring Islam as the primary challenger to the West. While his theory has sustained itself on some occasions, on most it has failed to live up to its expectations. Contrary to Huntington's predictions, the post-Cold War world has witnessed more intra-civilizational conflicts compared to inter-civilizational, with Islam fighting within itself. On the other hand, Islam's hostility towards the West has not been significant. In fact, many Muslim countries have begun to adopt Western values, even in the face of various Islamist Organizations. The essay concludes with the assertion that while Huntington's theory had components which warranted attention, the argument had significant flaws and deficiencies.

**Introduction:**

With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991, the United States became the dominant power in the world—militarily, politically and economically. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the United States was left with no competitor. Renowned political scientist Francis Fukuyama claimed “The End of History”, indicating the clear domination of a Western liberal democratic system with no other alternatives left to challenge it. At the same time, however, another political scientist, Samuel Huntington, offered a different hypothesis of what he believed would dominate the post-Cold War period (Bonney, 2008).

In 1993, Samuel Huntington developed the notion of a “Clash of Civilizations,” claiming that with the demise of the Soviet Union, the ideological conflict between Capitalism and Communism had come to a conclusion. According to him, the new conflict would be between civilizations. Amongst these civilizations, Huntington primarily singled out Islam, and to some extent Confucianism, as the main adversary to the West (Huntington, 1993). Huntington claims that it is not Fundamental Islam that poses a challenge to the West, but Islam itself, as it is incapable of integrating with the Western Liberal system (Huntington, 1996). While Huntington substantiates his theory regarding Islam's hostility towards the West with the various conflicts the Islamic World has appeared to be involved in, his hypothesis, however, seems to contradict what has actually been witnessed in the post-Cold War years. Firstly, since the creation of the theory, Islam has mostly conflicted not with Western powers, but rather with itself, indicating an increase in intra- civilizational conflicts, rather than inter-civilizational. Secondly, by claiming “Islam” to be the inherent enemy of the Western system, Huntington carelessly holds a large, diverse Muslim

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population as being anti-Western, even those allied with and welcoming of Western norms and values.

### **Clash of Civilizations:**

Before commencing with the critique, it is essential to understand the theory itself. Huntington first introduced the theory in his 1993 journal article, the “Clash of Civilizations”, which was transformed into a book in 1996 and renamed *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Bottici & Challand, 2010). The central component of the theory was that conflicts in the modern era were no longer to be based on ideological grounds, but rather on cultural grounds, between civilizations (Huntington, 1993).

Any next world war, Huntington claimed, if it were ever to transpire, would be between civilizations. Declaring that Islam has “bloody borders,” Huntington's suspicion of Islam as an adversary to Western dominance appears to be clear (Huntington, 1993). However, what generated more provocation appeared in his 1996 book, where Huntington argues that “the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power” (Huntington, 1996). With such an argument, Huntington claims that the Islamic system is inherently against Western values and systems. As long as Islam exists, he asserts, conflict with the West will prevail (Chiozza, 2002).

**Increase in Inter-Civilizational Conflict:**

Huntington's core argument in the *Clash of Civilizations* is that conflicts in the post-Cold War world would be inter-civilizational and not intra-civilizational. Coupled with his wariness around Islam, the conflict between the West and Islam is propagated in his hypothesis (Chiozza, 2002). Huntington supports his claims using the examples of Former Yugoslavia and the Gulf War, citing how Bosnian Muslims were supported by the Muslim World and how Muslims applauded Saddam Hussain as the champion of the Arab World when confronting America (Huntington, 1993). However, Huntington's arguments have been critiqued by many scholars. Vjekoslav Perica, an authority on the breakup of Yugoslavia, claims that it was not religion in Yugoslavia that led to its breakup, but rather religious institutions that failed to give allegiance to Post-Tito regimes (Bonney, 2008). For the Gulf War, a majority of scholars argue that the conflict originated as an intra-civilizational conflict between the Muslim-majority countries of Iraq and Kuwait, and remained as one even after the support of non-Muslim countries like Israel and the United States, due to the support of other Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia with Kuwait. Some scholars argue that in claiming the Gulf War as evidence of a "Clash of Civilizations", one agrees with Fundamental Islamists such as Osama Bin Laden (Bonney, 2008).

Contrary to Huntington's prediction of an increase in inter-civilizational conflict between the West and Islam in the post-Cold War period, many studies indicate that the number and depth of such conflicts have actually decreased since the Cold War. Investigating militarized interstate disputes between 1950 to 1992, Russett et al. (2000) claimed that inter-civilizational conflicts declined as a result of the end of the Cold War. Another study on violent domestic conflict by Professor Jonathan Fox

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(2003), observed that from 1985 to 1998 intra-civilizational conflicts were more likely than inter-civilizational conflicts. Fox further claimed that violent engagement of Muslims is more likely to be with their fellow Muslims than members of other religions or civilizations, thus providing evidence that inter-civilizational conflicts are less likely to occur (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). This trajectory has proven correct in the case of various Fundamentalist Islamist Organizations such as the Al-Qaeda during the first decade of the 21st century and ISIS in the second.

With the events of 9/11 and subsequent American invasion of the Middle East, Al-Qaeda seemed to progress much closer to its task of reigniting the flames of conflict between Islam and the West (Heck, 2007). While observers may claim that Al-Qaeda and 9/11 are symbols of a civilizational clash, one must remember that the majority of Al-Qaeda's terrorist, and in some cases insurgent, activities were actually conducted in Muslim countries. Fox (2005) claims that in the post-9/11 world, Al-Qaeda has overwhelmingly engaged with Muslims and Muslim states, with plans to replace the current regimes in Muslim countries. After Saddam Hussain's fall, the Iraqi insurgency involved various Islamist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), engaged against the American-backed government (Tosini, 2010). Interestingly, more Muslims were targeted by these Islamist organizations than occupying forces were targeted. From 2003 to 2008, attacks mounted by insurgent groups resulted in 12,447 to 13,403 casualties, involving mostly Iraqis (Tosini, 2010). Another important aspect to note is that most of the civilians killed as a result of AQI's bombing were from the Shi'ite community (Tosini, 2010). This calls into question the concept of civilization itself and how Huntington views the Islamic world as a singular civilization, when in reality, it is divided into groups such as Shi'ites and Sunnis.

In contemporary times, Iraq and Syria face the dilemma of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Though ISIS has claimed responsibilities for various attacks in the Western world, such as Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 (Cruickshank, 2017), its activities, just like Al-Qaeda, are mostly concentrated in Muslim-majority states. In Iraq, between 2014 and 2015, about 18,802 civilians were killed by ISIS according to the United Nations ("Staggering civilian death toll in Iraq – UN report", 2016).

With various conflicts continuing in the Middle East, it is doubtful that Huntington's forecast of Islam uniting against the West will be realized in the near future. Even with the conclusion of the Syrian Civil War and the Iraqi insurgency, it would still not be enough to unify the Muslim-majority states in the Middle East. Rivalry between the Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia and the Shia-majority Iran is likely to continue into the coming decades.

### **Islam towards the West:**

While one could agree that contemporary attacks involving Fundamental Islamist Organizations such as ISIS and Boko Haram on the West and Christians, respectively, provide support to Huntington's theory, the magnitude at which he places the incompatibility of Islam with the West is too broad. Huntington claims that the "underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam." (Huntington, 1996). By claiming Islam to be the root problem, Huntington renders more than a billion people to be an enemy of Western values and systems; a rather broad generalization. By framing it as such, he places Islam as being at odds with

the West, and in support of militant organizations like Al-Qaeda who reject Western ideas and thoughts.

Since the events of 9/11, various terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda, have worked as aggressors against the West. In 1998, Bin Laden claimed that the West, a threat to Islam that must be eliminated, had become vulnerable, and that it was the perfect moment to attack its dominance (Heck, 2007). For such a huge endeavour, Bin Laden expected support from Muslims around the world. However, support for such organizations has not been strong (Heck, 2007). Contrary to Bin Laden's hopes, the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) was at the forefront in denouncing the barbarities committed by the Islamist organization. Moreover, after 9/11, the OIC made various efforts to mediate between Islamist Organizations and the United States, going as far as to request the handover of Osama Bin Laden (Rehman, 2005). This support indicates that Muslim attitudes towards Islamic terrorism was hostile and on the issue of Islamic aggression against the West, it supported the West.

Huntington had claimed that Islam was "a religion of the sword" and Islamist Organizations like Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda effectively confirmed his narrative (Huntington, 1996). However, the OIC, which represents various Muslim countries, overwhelmingly condemned the atrocities committed by the Al-Qaeda and even offered help in return. Another indicator of Islam's rejection of Islamic extremism can be seen by the fact that Pakistan was able to run its anti-militant campaign very effectively, in a country where Islam is one of its core values (Novak, 2004).

Islamist Organizations, like Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, present no desire for reformation or accommodation for new ideas, which displays a grim future to Muslims under Islamist rule (Adib-



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Moghaddam, 2011). Because of their resistance to reform, these organizations have drawn criticism from Muslim-majority states, and Muslims in general, for the adverse conditions of people, just as the Taliban received for Afghanistan (Novak, 2004). Similarly, in Iran, where a fully-fledged Islamist government operates, the diminishing standard of living for people is moving people away from the concept of religion in politics and towards the notion of Secularism; a Western ideal (Hunter, 1998).

Other aspects of what are considered Western values have gained prominence in the Muslim World. A poll conducted by YouGov in April 2003 suggested that only around 40% of Iraqis believed that there were chances for American or British-style democracy succeeding in Iraq (Basham, 2003). On this point, Michael Noval, in his book *The Universal Hunger for Liberty*, argued that experience with elections would soon surely increase support for democracy in Iraq (Novak, 2004). And, indeed, his prediction has proven quite right. In 2018, Iraq held elections with 6,990 candidates from 87 parties, of which 25% per cent of seats were reserved for 2,011 women, showcasing not only democracy in the country but also an increase in civil liberties (Ibrahim, 2018).

Huntington had claimed that Islamic values were incompatible with the West, even to the extent that its adherents strove to protect themselves from its temptations and allures (Huntington, 1996). However, contrary to his belief, Islam saw its resurgence by adopting various Western ideas. Governments led by Islamists such as Iran and the Taliban saw its people adhere and ask for Western ideals and values. Even in Iraq, where people had their opposition and hatred towards Western democracies for overthrowing their leaders, Western values gained prominence with time. In 2011, various Muslim-majority countries would struggle to overthrow dictators

and call for democracy and other democratic values; events which came to be known as the Arab Spring (Whitaker, 2011).

**Counter-Argument:**

In his 1993 journal article, Huntington claimed that Islam has “bloody borders,” a statement which he supported by the fact that in the west, Islam is engaged in the Balkans with the Serbians; while in the East, it is engaged in the Philippines with the Catholics (Huntington, 1993). Though his statement received much criticism, he pointed towards various trends in the Muslim World that appeared as a result of the demise of the Cold War. The most prominent of these is what Huntington describes as the “Islamic Resurgence” (Huntington, 1996).

Since the end of the Cold War, the West has had to deal with the phenomena of International Islamic Terrorism, perpetrated by organizations such as the Al-Qaeda, and in recent times, ISIS. While it is correct to claim that the Al-Qaeda did not receive as much support from Muslim countries as they had hoped for, the organization still exercised much influence. According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2003, in the aftermath of the 9/11, people in the Muslim countries of Morocco, Indonesia, Pakistan, Palestinian Authority and Jordan considered Bin Laden as one of the top leaders understood to make correct judgments. Similarly, another poll conducted in the same year showed that only 1% of Jordanians and Palestinians had a pro-American view (Cox, Falconer & Stackhouse, 2009). One of the main reasons for such massive support for Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden was due to their significant and alluring

ambitions. Bin Laden's Pan-Islamist ideology attracted people because he wanted to revive the glory of the once-powerful Ottoman Empire (Burnell, Rakner & Randall, 2017). Support for such an endeavour was readily granted by the Muslims who felt as if the West dominated them. This domination was apparent as Western countries exercised great influence and strength in inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Bank. Moreover, with the illegal invasion of Iraq, which was condemned by even the United Nations Secretary- General (Straus & Driscoll, 2018), insecurity and grievances were established. In such a scenario, a prevailing Muslim opinion became one that claimed that the West saw its domination and development through the submission of Muslim governments to Western powers (Hunter, 1998). Such narratives supported Al-Qaeda's ambitions of removing non-Islamic Leaders (Burnell, Rakner & Randall, 2017).

In recent times, however, the fear and intimidation of Al-Qaeda has been replaced by another organization— ISIS. ISIS came into prominence in 2014 when its leader, Abu-Baker Al Baghdadi announced his Caliphate in Iraq (Karam, 2019). Since then, ISIS has been able to gain a credible amount of recruitment amongst Muslims, a substantial number of which has come from foreign lands. In 2014, an assessment by the CIA claimed that around 15,000 people have joined ISIS, with 2,000 of them being from the West (Sciutto, 2014). By another measure, as of December 2015, around 30,000 people, both Muslim and Non- Muslims, have travelled to enlist for ISIS, from 85 countries. Amongst the prominent Western countries are France with 1700, U.K with 760 and Belgium with 470 recruits (Benmelech & Klor, 2016).

To understand the reasons for such persuasions, we must acknowledge what ISIS has to offer. Against the Western model of democracy presented by Americans to Iraqis, and to an

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extent the secular dictatorship in Syria, ISIS offers an Islamic version of a utopian state where people are governed under strict Shariah Law and where universal rights and regulations (deemed as Western) are not heeded (Stern, 2016). As an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, this motivation more or less comes in line to what Bin Laden intended to achieve. The main agenda of ISIS remains to lift Muslims from the humiliation that they face at the hands of the West, which explains the roots of ISIS found in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The imposition of democracy, or Western values, and its subsequent failure, gives weight to the argument made by ISIS of the West's control and domination over Muslims (Stern, 2016). Similar to Al-Qaeda, while ISIS maintains its conflict in Iraq and Syria, it has also conducted various terrorist acts in the West, the most prominent being the 2016 Brussels and 2015 Paris attacks (Cruickshank, 2017).

### **Conclusion:**

Just like all theories and predictions, Huntington's Clash of Civilizations was bound to have its strengths and weaknesses. Amongst the various civilizations prophesied as coming into clash with the West, his attention towards Islam might have its credibility. Considering the contemporary world, it is not hard to observe that Islam seems the most conflicting of all the "civilizations," as prophesized by Huntington (1996). Islamic resurgence has allowed for various Islamic fundamentalist organizations to counter Western values and system.

However, as is being seen in the Middle East, the greatest threat that Muslims face is not the assumed Western imperialism but rather fundamentalist organizations in their own society, such as

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ISIS in the Middle East and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Adding more, the rejection of Western ideals by Islam, as Huntington puts it, is not due to incompatibility, but rather due to the way these Western elements are implemented. It must be noted that the broad generalizations made by Huntington make the subject of analysis too large. Nevertheless, Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* makes a remarkable counter-argument to the euphoria of the Western political scientists, in which they argued that the end of the Cold War meant Western domination. What has occurred instead is that the world has simply moved from one phase of struggle to another; there is no "End of History."

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