

# The Crescent and the Cross: Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Twenty Years On

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SYED MANSOOB MURSHED, FEB 13 2013

It is now two decades since Samuel Huntington put forward his clash of civilizations hypothesis about the nature of future conflict being cultural; specifically between Confucianism, or with greater likelihood Islam, and the West.[1]

This piece contends that civilizational conflict occurs mainly between distinct cultural groups within (and not between) nation states, and this conflict does not occur in a socio-economic vacuum.

Since the attacks on the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Western countries have become increasingly fearful of the phenomenon of "home-grown terrorism" arising out of the radicalization of youthful first, second and even third generation Muslim immigrants. Radicalized individuals, born and bred in the West were involved in terrorism, such as the Madrid train bombings of March 2004, the murder of Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004, and the London bombings of July 2005.

In addition to these acts of violence, Islamic "radicalization" also finds expression in non-violent acts of defiance and statements of difference, such as the wearing of the *hijab* or headscarf and other distinct cultural practices. These symbolic actions produce discomfiture, as these are seen as aggressive rejections of Western civilization. Additionally, these developments help explain the rise in popularity of theories of civilizational clashes between the West and Islam[2], with migration and terror allegedly two new weapons in the Muslim armoury directed against the West. Furthermore, a heated debate over the possibility of harmonious integration of Muslim communities has emerged in the West.

Although there is a vast body of work on how Islamic radicalization functions, and an even larger literature on the dangers it poses, the development of radicalization is often assumed to have emerged in a socio-economic and political vacuum. The "culturalist"[3] view regards Islam as the source of a monolithic and innately violent mindset, using non-democratic means to achieve political objectives. The hatred for the West by some Muslim groups is treated as a given; hence conflict with the West necessarily follows. Some Western writers depict Muslims as wallowing in wounded pride about their historical decline. One states that: "the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilisation, whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power".[4]

Contrary to "culturalist" predictions, global religions, such as Islam, are not monolithic. Dichotomised identity categories, pitting Western culture ("us") against Islam ("them") and vice-versa, do not do justice to the fact that there are many faces of Islam across both historical and time and at present. Secondly, and more importantly, individual identity is regarded as a singular phenomenon, ignoring the multiplicity of identities that individuals may possibly possess.[5] Thus, it is conceivable for an individual to be simultaneously a Muslim, a Western citizen, a believer in democracy, as well as someone who respects difference and human rights. Furthermore, culture is not immutable; it evolves over time, and changes as material conditions alter.

The alternative explanation for disgruntled Muslim behaviour in Europe lies in wider socio-economic disadvantage, the underpinnings for which date back to Ted Gurr's classic work on relative deprivation as the source of rebellion.[6] Frances Stewart has documented the systematic disadvantage that Muslim groups face in Western countries.

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Muslim citizens in European countries are systematically poorer, suffer from greater unemployment and are less than proportionately represented in public life[7], in addition to the opprobrium their cultural identity attracts. Muslims, particularly in Western Europe, may be subject to systemic inequalities of opportunity in economic, political and social spheres.

## The Anatomy of Muslim Radicalization

Contemporary racism in the West, especially in Europe, is driven more by disdain for cultural identities such as Islam, rather than the traditional biologically based phenomenon, complexion. This explains the rise in anti-Muslim sentiment, which is not merely an indignant reaction to violence perpetrated by Muslims, but is symptomatic of a wider disdain for Muslim culture. According to surveys[8], negative perceptions about Muslims among non-Muslims had grown by 2008: 52% in Spain, 50% in Germany, 38% in France, but only 23% in the UK and the USA felt negative about Muslims. The same survey indicates growth in the Muslim sense of identity amongst Muslims immigrants.

It is widely believed, even in liberal circles, that Islam is an intolerant and violent religion. There is a long 'orientalist' tradition in this regard; for example Sir William Muir said in 1878: "the sword of Mahomet, and the Coran, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilization, Liberty and Truth".[9] Unfortunately, these notions are based on selective and limited interpretation. It can be equally argued that the Islam celebrates racial diversity,[10] and requires believers to accept other religions as an article of faith.[11] Some of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and his cousin and son-in-law Ali, during Islam's inception are testimony towards inclusiveness.[12] The important point is that a devout Muslim must eschew racism in all forms, should not hate Judeo-Christian civilization and reject universal values of toleration; rather the dislike of the West could emanate from injustices perpetrated thereof. Moreover, historically, Muslim countries and empires have exercised greater toleration towards other religions, compared to European practice until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (a good example would be Muslim ruled Medieval Spain).

Historical acts that may add to the sense of Muslim collective grievances include events such as the wholesale expulsion of Muslims who did not convert to Christianity from Spain (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries), Sicily (14<sup>th</sup> century) and the massacre and expulsion of Muslims in the Balkans (18-20<sup>th</sup> centuries). In the Middle East, the Anglo-French Sykes-Picot pact (during the First World War) resulted in an extremely unfair disposition of the former Ottoman territories.[13] Later, the emergence of Israel, and the West's lack of even handed behaviour towards the protagonists in the Arab-Israeli conflict spawned deep resentment. Other areas of Muslim disadvantage in the recent past include Kashmir in India, and Bosnia in the European Balkans. Their predicament is often blamed on Western double standards towards the plight of Muslims.

Terrorism is only part of the total set of actions adopted by radicalized Muslim groups in Europe, as many adopt strategies of peaceful protest, and some simply reject certain Western cultural practices. Muslim religious discourse that accompanies the retreat into confrontational behaviour towards the majority communities in their countries of adoption or birth can be linked to the spread of the *Salafiyya* movement (which means following those who went before, in this case early Muslims) among Muslim diasporas. Such dynamics should be analysed against the backdrop of the current three-fold manifestation of Islamic activism: political, missionary and jihadi.[14] Political Islam, as embodied by the Muslim Brotherhood usually aims to seek power through political rather than violent means. Missionary activism tends to refrain from political confrontation; rather it tends to concentrate on preaching and reviving the community of believers (*Ummah*). It includes the *Tablighi* (evangelical) and the *Sufi* (mystical) movements, which although theologically distinct, are both avowedly peaceful. Jihadi Islamists committed to violence with a view to defending (or expanding) *Dar-al-Islam* (the world of Islam).

## Identity and Collective Action

Individuals may derive utility not just from consumption or identification with a cause, but also from behaviour in conformity to their sense of identity, and the like minded behaviour of other members of the group they belong to; for example the performance of prayers by the individual and his co-religionists. Here the position that the group occupies in societal hierarchy is also crucial to their collective self-esteem. The individual not only derives utility from

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a set of his own actions, but also similar actions of other like-minded individuals belonging to his group, and above all his own identity or self image, which in turn depends on the group's social standing.[15] The last factor depends both on the group's economic disadvantage, and other factors such as the West's foreign policy towards the Muslim world. If another group member suffers disutility from inappropriate behaviour by another group member, they may lure the errant individual back to the fold. This is more likely amongst poor but culturally homogenous communities suffering from widespread unemployment, living proximate to each other in isolated ghettos with close kinship ties. Moreover, the dissident group may use this type of cooperative behaviour to resolve the collective action problem, which involves converting like-minded individuals into groups. Group grievances become individual grievances, and individuals act upon group grievances. It is useful to utilize the expression 'horizontal inequality', originating in the work of Frances Stewart. Horizontal inequality is inequality between culturally distinct groups, such as between Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Christians and so on.

From the viewpoint of the individual perpetrator of radicalized Islamic activities, intrinsic motivation, which is often the outcome of their collective sense of humiliation, plays a major role. Perpetrators of extremist violence are not always uneducated and poor. It is not their personal poverty that will necessarily drive individual membership of a radical group, but the disadvantage faced by the group at large. From the viewpoint of individual choice, extreme acts like suicide bombing may be rational. This is because the individual has made an all or nothing choice between solidarity and individual autonomy.

## **Interaction between Fear and Hatred**

Just as aggrieved Muslims, indoctrinated and herded by conflict entrepreneurs into groups for collective action, may feel a profound hatred for the West, certain politicians and political parties in the West seek their own political self-advancement by preaching the dangers posed by Islam in general, and Muslim migrants in particular. In 2001, for instance, the Danish People's Party campaigned with a poster showing a young blond girl and the statement "When she retires, we will be a Muslim majority nation." The party came in third in terms of seats in Parliament, experiencing a 70% increase in its vote bank. In the 2002 French Presidential elections, Jean-Marie Le Pen of the Front National – later convicted for spreading Islamophobic messages in an interview to the Newspaper Le Monde in 2003- won a place in the runoff against Chirac and received 17% of votes. In August 2007, the Governor of Carinthia in Austria, Joerg Haider promised to ban the construction of mosques and minarets in his Province; the Austrian right won 28% of votes in the September 2008 general elections. The appeal of anti-Muslim political parties is growing, for example the Dutch PVV gained 15% of the votes in the national election of 9<sup>th</sup> June 2010, making them the second largest party. This is the notion of fear of a minority, something that can be succinctly be described as the phobia for 'Eurabia', which in part is whipped up by exaggerated statements from hate-mongering politicians and exploited within electoral politics wherever feasible.

We can think of the hate message against Muslim migrants as originating in messages sent out by a demagogic politician. Its attractiveness to the public will depend on their need for scapegoats and their own personal life experiences of these minority groups. Not all these signals will be believed: the better educated among the public may discount part of the message and others with greater knowledge of minorities based upon personal interaction may similarly disregard this signal. Some individuals (older people, less educated, those whose jobs are vulnerable) are more likely to abandon the search for truth in favour of the hate message. If enough voters believe the signal then the state will act. These take the form of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant legislation making it difficult for families to join relatives in Europe, linguistic and cultural proficiency tests, and the banning of headscarves and veils.

## **Conclusions**

Against the backdrop of a politicised Muslim identity, and substantial socioeconomic and political disadvantage suffered by Muslims, domestic 'integrationist' policies aimed at 'moderate Muslims' are unlikely to curb radicalization – let alone fight terrorism. Rather, they may backfire. American-style integrationist (as opposed to multicultural) policies are gaining favour in Europe, but these are doomed to failure unless the objects of the integrationist policies are also offered equality of economic, political and social opportunities. Furthermore, and quite crucially, if individuals have multiple identities, then they are more likely to act on the basis of their other (Western) identity when they are

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less socio-economically deprived and less frowned upon. The presence of virulent Islamophobic messages not only instils fear, but also elicits hatred, undoing the pacific-integrationist effects of material progress amongst Muslims migrants in the West.

Two decades ago, after the end of the cold war, and the triumph of liberal free market democracy, Samuel Huntington predicted that future conflict would be purely civilizational, and between nation states. The West's antagonists in these future conflicts would be the world's remaining unassimilated non-Western cultures: Confucianism, but especially Islam.[16] In the past decade, civilizational conflict with Islam has, indeed, escalated. These struggles, however, are taking place, *within* and not between, nation states, including the internecine warfare (*Fitnah*) inside Islam. Finally, and most importantly, culture and civilization are inseparable from the economy, polity and society. Cultures are not shaped, nor do they ever evolve, in a socio-economic vacuum, making a purely civilizational conflict virtually impossible.

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[1] Huntington, Samuel P (1996) The Clash of Civilizations?, *Foreign Affairs*, 72 (3): 22-49.

[2] See Huntington, Samuel P (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster; Lewis, Bernard (2003) *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, London: Phoenix.

[3] Mamdani, M. (2004) *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*, Pantheon.

[4] Huntington 1996: 217.

[5] See: Sen, Amartya (2008) 'Violence, Identity and Poverty', *Journal of Peace Research*, 45(1): 5-15.

[6] Gurr, Ted Robert (1970) *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton: University Press.

[7] Stewart, Frances (2008) 'Global Aspects and Implications of Horizontal Inequalities (HIs): Inequalities Experienced by Muslims Worldwide', [www.microcon.eu](http://www.microcon.eu).

[8] <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=262>

[9] Muir, William (1878) *The Life of Mahomet: From Original Sources*, London: Smith, Elder, p235.

[10] "—We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another—the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct". Quran: 049.013. "And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your

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languages and colours". Quran: 030.022. English translations from Marmaduke Pickthall's, *The Glorious Quran*, <http://www.islam101.com/quran/QTP/index.htm>

[11] "Say (O Muhammad): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered". Quran: 003.084.

[12] Consider an excerpt from Muhammad's Last Sermon (circa 632 AD): "An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a black person has no superiority over a white person, nor a white person has any superiority over a black person, except by piety and good action. Indeed the best among you is the one with the best character..." [http://www.themodernreligion.com/prophet/prophet\\_lastsermon.htm](http://www.themodernreligion.com/prophet/prophet_lastsermon.htm).

Ali, the 4th Islamic Caliph in a letter to Malik-e-Ashtar, his governor designate to Egypt (circa 656-661 AD): "Remember, Malik, that amongst your subjects there are two kinds of people: those who have the same religion as you have; they are brothers to you, and those who have religions other than that of yours, they are human beings like you.— Let your mercy and compassion come to their rescue and help in the same way and to the same extent that you expect Allah to show mercy and forgiveness to you." (Nahjul Balagha) <http://www.al-islam.org/nahjul/letters/letter53.htm#letter53>.

[13] See, Salt, Jeremy (2008) *The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

[14] [http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle\\_east\\_\\_\\_north\\_africa/egypt\\_north\\_africa/37\\_understanding\\_islamism.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/egypt_north_africa/37_understanding_islamism.pdf).

[15] See: Akerlof, George and Rachel E. Kranton (2000) 'Economics and Identity', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115(3): 715-753.

[16] Interestingly it has been argued that Sinetic and Islamic societies are the most intrinsically averse to inequality of income among the world's various cultures, as delineated by Huntington. Both Judeo-Christian and Hindu cultures have a markedly greater tolerance for inequality. See, Gradstein, Mark, Branko Milanovic and Yvonne Ying (2001) 'Democracy and Income Inequality: An Empirical Analysis', World Bank Policy Research Paper no. 2561.