Tracing Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Thesis in the Alternative for Germany

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JAN LüDERT, APR 25 2018

This is an excerpt from *The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal.* Download your free copy here

Founded in 2013 as a protest party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained representation in fourteen federal state parliaments and, since September 2017, holds 92 seats in the Bundestag, Germany's federal parliament. Similar to other European right-wing parties, like the Netherlands' Party for Freedom or France's National Front, the AfD has rapidly morphed into a populist party with a strong anti-Islam agenda and rhetoric. This chapter traces Samuel Huntington's civilization thesis of future conflict in the AfD's party program 'Islam is not a part of Germany'. The author argues that the party's fixed conception of Islam parallels Huntington's conceptualization of civilizations and fault line conflicts. By making this argument, the author explores whether and how AfD party members draw on Huntington's civilizational hypothesis in a broader attempt to entrench a German nationalist and anti-Islam agenda. Second, this chapter focuses on AfD proposals to ban minarets and burqas. These policy prescriptions are read against criticisms of the party's intrinsic 'clash of civilizations' logic by mainstream party members, leading German Islamic leaders, and other public actors. Third, the chapter ties these developments into a discussion of how the federal government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis offered AfD party members opportunities to gain political advantage by establishing an anti-Islam agenda – an agenda that is rooted in a 'clash of civilizations' thesis of perceived fault line conflicts and a deep-seated desire for cultural homogeneity. Finally, building on the above, this chapter briefly assesses the Alternative for Germany's prospects since entering the Bundestag in the fall of 2017.

The late Samuel Huntington put forth his 'Clash of Civilizations' (CoC) thesis in which he envisioned that the future of global politics would be based on inter-civilizational and cultural conflict; conflict that, in particular, would take place between the Islamic world and the West. The twenty-first century, accordingly, would no longer be a battleground between economic, ideological or political struggles. While many of Huntington's arguments are incontrovertible, his most contentious claim was that the fault lines of future discord would originate from the Islamic world, a civilization he asserts to be intrinsically violent and incorrigibly illiberal (Huntington, 1993, 21–49). On the surface, events such as 9/11, recent terrorist attacks around Europe and elsewhere, and the rise of ISIS all seem to validate his thesis.

Notwithstanding, scholars have criticized his overbroad conceptualizations of civilization and culture. These scholars contest his thesis because it lacks convincing empirical evidence (Russett, O'neal, and Cox 2000; Henderson and Tucker 2001; Chiozza 2002). A main line of contention against the CoC thesis is that it offers an impoverished and oversimplified view of pluralist cultures (Katzenstein 2009). Huntington, these scholars counter, assumes that civilizations are monolithic and homogenous and that there exists an unchanging duality between us and them. The religion of Islam, these authors go on to argue, is 'fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and antipathy' in the West (Said 2001, 9). I agree that a Huntingtonian worldview risks conflating violent extremisms with Islam itself. It ultimately offers insufficient leverage for understanding a complex world.

Despite its serious conceptual flaws and wanting empirical support, ideas espoused in the CoC thesis continue to resonate today. The focus of this chapter is to invite scholarly focus on how populist European figures and parties draw on an overbroad and fatalistic CoC logic. These actors, like Huntington, foresee the end of the West through a

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hostile takeover by radical Islam and, they would add, Muslim immigration to the West. This chapter traces these developments in light of the rapid ascent of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) on the German political scene. It focuses on the parallels between Samuel Huntington's civilizations thesis of conflict and the ideological framework of the AfD party's platform which overtly makes the claim that 'Islam is not a part of Germany'.

The Alternative for Germany: A Brief History

Following its establishment in the spring of 2013, the Alternative for Germany experienced an unprecedented ascent as a political party (Niedermayer 2015). The party originated against the backdrop of Greece's sovereign debt bailout and the pursuant Euro crisis. The AfD was at first perceived to be a party of academics – not least because an economist, Bernd Lucke, founded it. Although failing to secure a seat in the Bundestag by a small margin in 2014, the party secured seven seats in the European Parliament, and representation in 14 state parliaments between 2014 and 2016 (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2107). In Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, 24.2% and 20.8% of voters respectively cast their vote for the AfD. In other state elections, some five to fifteen percent of the electorate voted for the AfD. Most recently, in Germany's federal elections, held in late September 2017, the party received 12.6% of votes and as such is now the Bundestag's third largest fraction. Recent studies have revealed that the party was able to take votes from all of Germany's established mainstream parties, and it currently boasts more than 23,000 members. No other newly-formed party in German post-war politics has ever had as much electoral success.

With Lucke's departure following intense factional infighting in 2015, the AfD began to fixate less on the Euro crisis and reoriented its stance to offer voters a far-right nativist home. The one issue that brings AfD voters together is an intense concern over immigration and Islam. With such populist appeal, the AfD was predicted to join the Bundestag in September 2017. Surveys by INFRATEST DIMAP, a polling organization, show that the AfD's voter demographic fit a certain typology. Supporters are predominantly male, between the ages of 25 and 44. Voters over the age of 60 are less represented but are nevertheless present in the ranks of AfD supporters. INFRATEST DIMAP also showed that the AfD syphoned votes from all established parties and draws support from across all social classes. About a third of its supporters are laborers and another third are unemployed. Voter demographics illustrate that its base predominantly completed *Realschule* – a typical degree outcome for most Germans that does not qualify for entering universities.

AfD's appeal among voters and its political gains have not been the result of a sophisticated agenda and platform. Its success is a result of offering an outlet for disgruntled voters ('Wutbürger') for whom the AfD framed an anti-establishment and outsider identity. The party articulated a political home for these voters under the slogan 'a credo for truth' (Mut zur Wahrheit) which it focuses against the 'elite political caste', the 'lying' media and all those who use 'thought control' in the name of political correctness, which, the party contends, discourages public discourse on entire themes that are on the minds of German people (AfD 2016). The Syrian refugee crisis provided the AfD with a boost. This was particularly observable after chancellor Merkel's open-door policy of welcoming nearly a million refugees took effect in 2015.

The AfD has, following stark divisions within its leadership, taken a sharp right-wing populist and national-conservative turn based on a strong anti-Islam agenda. This move began when the far-right patriotic faction called for a tough stance against the 'Islamization of the occident' (Islamisierung des Abendlandes) by connecting it to a call 'against the delusion of a multicultural society' (Patriotische Platform 2014). The AfD, as such, co-evolved as a political ally of the protest movement 'Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West' (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, PEGIDA) (Grabow 2016). Under an umbrella of fighting a culture war ('Kulturkampf'), both forces have since mid-2015 mobilized a broad spectrum of Germans through their shared intent to fend off foreign infiltration, foremost by Muslim immigrants and refugees.

A basic fear the AfD and PEGIDA see on the horizon is what they have coined 'ethnic redeployment' ('Umvolkung'). By allowing for unchecked immigration, the Islamization of German society will lead to a consequential loss of German culture and identity and ultimately to a breakdown of state and society itself. The AfD centers this doomsday argument on what it views as the entrenchment of parallel Islamic societies within Germany – including the notion

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that Sharia will, one day, supplant the rule of law (Patzelt 2016). Frauke Petry, a former party leader, went as far as to call upon Germans to reclaim the word 'Volk' from its national-socialist connotations and to reassert a bottled-up patriotism instead (BBC 2016). Such pronouncements are not isolated. Bernd Höcke, a member of the far-right faction, repeatedly invokes the 'Fatherland' and 'Volk'. He stresses that Germany must overcome its collective national guilt and make a '180 degree' turn to regain its national pride (Taub and Fisher 2017). The AfD's portrayal of Germany's national identity as being undermined by migration and multiculturalism dovetails with one of Huntington's predictions: 'civilization rallying' by 'populist politicians, religious leaders and the media' will arouse 'mass support' and will be used to pressure governments (Huntington 1993, 38). The remainder of the chapter traces these and other overlapping CoC declarations through an analysis of the AfD's party program 'Islam is not a part of Germany'.

The AfD Fills the Gap between Reality and Perception

According to statistics, some 4.5 million Muslims reside in Germany. Given Germany's population of 82.2 million, this means that approximately 5.5% of its people have a religious background in Islam. A vast majority of the Muslim community in Germany are of Turkish origin and descent, first arriving as so-called guest workers (Gastarbeiter) in the 1960s, with a second group fleeing from war-torn regions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Almost one in four, or some 1.2 million Muslims, moved to Germany fairly recently and predominantly due to the Syrian refugee crisis (Stichs 2016). These statistics stand in stark contrast to perception, however. According to a recent IPSOS poll, Germans grossly overestimate the current number and projected growth of Muslims in Germany. The poll revealed that Germans think that some 21% of its population is Muslim (IPSOS 2016). This four-fold gap between reality and perception is bridged by the AfD with an anti-Islam agenda for a disgruntled and susceptible electorate.

In late April 2016, the AfD adopted a new party program for the 2017 federal elections which insists that 'Islam is not part of Germany'. Stating further that the 'spread of Islam' poses a 'great danger for our nation, our society and our values'. The party manifesto argued that Islamic states seek to broaden their own power bases by building and staffing mosques on German territory. These states, the AfD explains, are engaged in a cultural war and perpetuate a form of religious imperialism. A trend which has to be halted (AfD 2017, 34–35). The central political goal for the party is 'self-preservation, not self-destruction of our state and people' (AfD 2017, 28). To this end, the party proposes a tightening of border controls to avert the 'massive influx' of people and especially those from African and predominantly Muslim states: regions, the party alleges, that do not belong to the 'West and its values' (AfD 2017, 18).

Culture as a Great Divider

The cadence of these arguments bears a striking resemblance to realist assumptions of state survival, anarchy, and the inevitability of conflict. The AfD justify them as political prudence and draw upon Samuel Huntington's argument concerning the great divisions among humankind and the hypothesis that cultural blocs will become the primary source of future conflict. It is evident that a 'growth of civilization-consciousness' – or the 'trends toward a turning inward' – as espoused by Huntington shows up in the AfD's nationalist and nativist agenda (Huntington 1993, 26). Certainly, the AfD mobilizes its support via a Huntingtonian prescription of rallying around common religious and civilizational signifiers. For the AfD, a 'clash of civilizations' is imminent.

At the domestic, or micro-level, 'adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations struggle, often violently, over the control of territory and each other' (Huntington 1993, 29). Orthodox Islam, as the AfD echoes, makes a claim to power ('Herrschaftsanspruch') and is in militant opposition to all 'infidels'; read: the people of Europe and of the West. Huntington's micro-level conflict, the party agrees, is already common-place in German cities where 'Islamic parallel societies with Sharia judges' rule entire communities outside the rule of German law. Immigrants, in order to have a right to stay in Germany, the party demands, owe allegiance to German values ('Bringschuld') and must assimilate to its leading culture ('Leitkultur') (AfD 2017, 32). Integration, for the AfD, 'does not mean that Germany adjusts to Muslims. Integration, means that Muslims assimilate to Germany' (Afd 2017, 45). Huntington uses religion as the basic element of culture – apart from kin, language, values – to build a spurious and circular causal relationship in which religion is the cultural glue of civilizations. Just as the AfD, he describes the decline of the West and invokes a sense of urgency because immigration threatens Western civilization.

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By seeking to bolster a cultural core in which Germany is seen to be the center of the West, the AfD equally claims to draw upon the values of 'Christianity, antiquity, and principles of humanism and the enlightenment', 'the liberal rule of law, our appreciation for educations, the arts and sciences as well as social market capitalism as an expression of human creativity'. With this basis, the AfD's central goal is to 'protect' German culture from Muslim infiltration as well as the ideology of multiculturalism. Both of these, the party manifesto alleges, inevitably lead to 'domestic conflict and the dismemberment of the state' (AfD 2017, 47). AfD pronouncements are close to verbatim to Huntington's take on 'Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state', and as the AfD's view highlights, 'often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures' (Huntington 1993, 40).

Undoubtedly, Huntington's 'descriptive hypotheses' and his 'implications for Western policy' to mitigate against the CoC show up in AfD's policy statements:

The culture war between the West and Islam, which is already taking place in Europe, as a doctrine of salvation and the bearers of non-assimilative cultural traditions and rights, can only be averted by a series of defensive and restrictive measures which prevent a further destruction of European values [and] of the coexistence of enlightened citizens. The AfD will not allow Germany to lose its cultural face from misunderstood tolerance (AfD 2017, 47).

Micro-level and fault line conflicts perpetuated by illiberal Islam, as the AfD declares, are reality. They are a serious German domestic and European problem. They not only exist in Islam abroad but are more immediately dangerous because of their existence within states, the EU, the liberal West, and Christian civilization more broadly. As AfD party vice chairman Alexander Gauland put it, 'Islam' is problematic insofar as 'Muslim believers are not a problem, but Islam as a religion is' (Tagesschau 2017). Beatrix von Storch, an AfD representative to the European parliament, explains it this way: 'The biggest threat to democracy and freedom today stems from political Islam' (Handelsblatt 2017).

These understandings by leading AfD figures are worth noting because criticisms of the CoC equally apply to the AfD. Both use a reductive argument that essentializes Islam and especially as a religion with a propensity for conflict while equally ignoring Muslims' multifaceted identities, religious affiliations, and pluralistic cultures. Just as they view the West as a coherent and homogenous cultural bloc, so they disregard complexity in favor of broad-brush demarcations between the West and the rest. What permeates through the AfD's party program is a Huntingtonian worldview: a reified Islam, understood as a retrograde, barbarian and savage 'other', threatening the survival of a progressive and peaceful West that is retrenching and under attack. In the same vein as Huntington constructs his argument, the AfD also perceives a double threat: the West is in decline while Islam is a force introducing conflict. The AfD therefore also needs to be understood as a party that holds onto a nativist ideology within this civilization-based logic. The AfD harbors a deep-seated desire for a homogenous German core and 'leading culture', a culture that non-natives – by their presence, ideas and way of life – fundamentally undermine and threaten. As Huntington would have it, a world of clashing civilizations 'is inevitably a world of double standards: people apply one standard to their kin-countries and a different standard to others' (Huntington 1993, 36).

The AfD opposes criticism which claims that the party is Islamophobic, xenophobic or racist, asserting instead that it is engaged in a rational discourse of critiquing religion (AfD 2017, 34). The AfD's platform presents the following critiques of Islamic culture: the minaret is a symbol of dominance which institutes religious imperialism; Burqas and Niqabs should be banned from public because they do not conform with the principles of equality; and that the financing of mosques by foreign governments constitutes territorial encroachment on German territory – a practice that should be outlawed (AfD 2017a). These calls – apart from being difficult to reconcile with the German constitution, which guarantees religious freedom and expression – are at odds with the party's own commitment to the rule of law. Formulations chosen in the party program tread a fine line of constitutional conformity; party leaders and supporters are less nuanced. Jörg Meuthen, a party spokesman, is steadfast: conflict is inherent to Islam but not to other religions. He mused that although only a few Muslims are terrorists, almost all of recent terrorism has roots in Islam. More to the point, Albrecht Glaser, a member of the AfD's leadership circle, stated that Islam is a construction that does not know religious freedom and does not respect it, and where it reigns, stifles every kind of freedom of religion. One who treats the constitution in such a way forfeits their rights under the constitution (Leif, 2017).

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Unsurprisingly, such views invite criticism from all of the established German parties, religious leaders, and the media alike. For example, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) called the AfD's criticism of Islam an attempt to put an entire religion under general suspicion, to be not in conformity with the constitution, and to draw on unsubstantiated facts to make its case (SPD 2017). Die Linke countered, stating that to define an entire religion as conflictual is 'just as absurd' as to argue that Christianity and the Ku Klux Klan are one and the same (Die Linke 2017). Green party leadership member Katrin Göring-Eckhard noted that the AfD's reactionary political line would soon be uncovered as baseless in its assessment and ineffectual in its proposals. Religious leaders are equally united against the AfD. Aiman Mazyek, the head of Germany's Muslim Council, warned that the AfD is a divisive force without solutions to real problems. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, head of the Protestant church, declared that the AfD's views cannot be reconciled with a Christian moral compass and that hounding against Islam is unacceptable. He declared that he was taking a strong stance against the AfD's own 'fundamentalism'. Likewise, for Josef Schuster, President of the Central Council of Jews, the AfD's positions on Islam are 'unconstitutional' (evangelisch 2017).

Self-Fulling Prophecy or Political Prudence?

To conclude, the preceding discussion indicates that the Alternative for Germany embraced central tenets of Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis to mobilize a substantial part of German society. In this way, 25 years on, the 'clash of civilizations' remains a relevant topic for scholarly debate and political analysis. By drawing on Huntington's reductionist conceptualization of conflict originating from Islam, the AfD continues to activate political capital. In particular, the humanitarian gesture made by the German government to welcome Syrian refugees helped the party bolster the perception that the country was under threat. As such, the AfD was able to enter the Bundestag as the third largest party and main oppositional faction in September 2017. To this extent, Huntington provided some bearing on the forces of 'civilization rallying' by populist forces. Critically, the CoC has also, even if unwittingly, provided the AfD with fodder to drive a self-fulfilling prophecy: Germany, at the core of the West, is under threat from radical Islam. It is here that Huntington's theory and the party's manifesto and political discourse pander more to the electorate's perception than conform with reality.

Theory and party, this chapter has argued, are equally problematic in their use of oversimplified categories, essentialist understandings of complex political phenomena, as well as their spurious and selective use of evidence to make their claims. Perhaps most troubling, they thereby perpetuate a divisive worldview of us versus them. An understanding that the West is under siege by radical Islam has provided the AfD with a tool to drive a nationalist agenda, just as much as it offered Huntington a stand-in enemy for the evaporating communist threat of the post-Cold War era. The AfD understands and justifies its approach as politically prudent. Still, the inherent danger with this approach is similar to that which has been made against Huntington. The CoC and AfD are thus usefully understood as two sides of the same coin: they construct a conflict scenario for which only policies of containment and restriction are offered as solutions. What both misjudge is that unbridled intolerance and opposing differences are at the root of every extremism. In this moment of populist resurgence with the AfD in Germany, under the Trump administration in the US, the National Front in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, Jobbik in Hungary and elsewhere, the question becomes not whether Islam is an inherent threat to stability but whether radicalization within diverse cultures is at the heart of whipping up the very conflict they seek to end. In the final analysis then, and to respond to this chapter's title, the AfD is not an appropriate alternative for Germany.

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