

Interview - Arshin Adib-Moghaddam

Written by E-International Relations

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E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 7 2013

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam has emerged as one of the leading intellectuals of his generation. His writings have penetrated many fields including Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations, Post-Colonial studies, Comparative Politics and Historiography. Currently, Adib-Moghaddam is Reader in Comparative Politics and International Relations at SOAS, University of London and the Chair of the Centre for Iranian Studies. He is the author of *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and them beyond Orientalism* which has been published by Hurst & Co. in London and Columbia University Press in New York. He has also written *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy* (Routledge, 2006, 2009) and *Iran in World Politics: The question of the Islamic Republic* (Columbia University Press/Hurst, 2008, 2010). Educated at the Universities of Hamburg, American University (Washington DC) and Cambridge, he was the first Jarvis Doctorow Fellow in International Relations and Peace Studies at St. Edmund Hall and the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. At Cambridge, where he completed his MPhil and PhD as a scholarship student, he was elected Honorary Fellow of the Cambridge European Trust Society.

His writings have been translated into many languages and he is a frequent contributor to leading and alternative newspapers and TV channels around the world. Adib-Moghaddam has lectured globally on topics ranging from Iranian and west-Asian politics, US foreign policy, Islamophobia, critical theory, comparative political thought and the myth of a clash of civilisations. He is also active in digital engagement through his website (www.adib-moghaddam.info), facebook, and twitter.

His newest book, *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution: Power and Resistance Today*, will be published by Bloomsbury.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam answers questions as part of an ongoing series marking the 20th anniversary of the publication of Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations?" in Foreign Affairs.

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You have authored "The Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations," from your perspective: What does the "Clash of Civilizations" mean? More specifically, what did Huntington mean by it? What is meant by those who continue to employ it today?

With *The Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations* I was tracing how the idea that we are embroiled in a civilisational battle between "us" and "them" came about. I researched and wrote the book during a period when the so called "wars on terror" in Afghanistan and Iraq recreated the myth that there is such a thing as a civilisational war between Islam and the west. I read the book of Huntington for the first time in German as a student at the University of Hamburg and then again in English as a PhD student at Cambridge. In both instances I found it utterly unconvincing. Huntington presented a theory of conflict without an empirical basis. As a student of political science and international relations this seemed unacceptable to me. The idea that there is such a thing as civilisational entities and that they can clash didn't seem to appreciate the complexities of world politics.

So I took the opportunity of a generous research fellowship at Oxford University to start writing the book. I came to

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the conclusion that Huntington presented a theory of conflict nurtured by a good deal of unscholarly ignorance of other cultures. Huntington's thesis is deceptively facile. It follows three methodological steps: Civilisations are cultural entities; cultures don't change; given that "our" culture is different from "theirs" we are bound to be embroiled in a recurrent battle over supremacy in world politics. It seemed to me that the historical context was important too. Huntington wrote the article and the subsequent book after the demise of the Soviet Union. As a Cold War theorist who was always also close to decision-making circles in the United States, he wanted to alert policy makers that the end of the global competition between the Soviet Union and the west will usher into a new period characterised by civilisational conflicts, primarily between the west and Islam and what Huntington terms the "Confucian world." From this perspective, the west is pitted against an increasingly assertive "rest".

More research into representations of "self" and "other" both in Europe and in texts written by Muslim thinkers revealed that the theory of Huntington was not isolated; that it perpetuates an ancient myth that there is such a thing as civilisational entities and that they can clash. I started to conduct this second phase of my research upon my acceptance of my current position at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London about three years before I finished the book. This period informed the historical sections. I was increasingly convinced that the clash of civilisations is one of the most inaccurate theories ever invented. Huntington was not educated in the history of Islam. In his writings he routinely conflated being Arab with being Muslim, and vice versa. He even went as far as to say that Operation Desert Storm, the Second Gulf War in 1990, was indicative of a clash of civilisations. Of course, the western alliance was aided and abetted by more Muslim countries than Saddam was, and the Ba'athist regime in Iraq was anything but Islamic adopting as it did a version of nationalism that was closer to the ideas of German romanticists such as Fichte and Herder than to Islamic forms of governance. The ideology of Saddam's Iraq was based on a secular nationalist ideology and it was in constant opposition to Islamist forces. How could this be an instance of a clash of civilisations between Islam and the west?

Huntington, in typically Americo-centric fashion, did not deem it necessary to educate himself in the histories of cultures that he took the liberty to write about. As such, his book appears as a semi-educated attempt to rally together an imagined Americo-centric west in order to ward off an equally imagined other. The theory of the clash of civilisations is based on an outdated us-versus-them illogic which has lost traction, certainly for progressive intellectuals of my generation. Post-modernity has created hybrid areas that are largely liberated from the pressures of civilisational identities and which do not readily respond to political manipulation couched in civilisational language. At the same time, there has been a resurgence of the clash thesis espoused by the right-wing in Europe. Politicians such as Geert Wilders, for instance, wholeheartedly embrace the idea that we are engaged in a continuous war between the west and Islam. Osama bin-Laden spoke of a clash of civilisations as well; indeed the clash disciples in east and west are in full agreement that there is a war between the west and Islam; a truly Orwellian irony. These digressions are not attributable to Huntington of course, but as a seasoned scholar he must have known that a theory accentuating perpetual conflict and insurmountable cultural divisions can be easily hijacked for rather more destructive agendas than he had in mind. As such, he must be seen as a culprit in the perpetuation of the clash myth today and the histories of cultural conflicts that it continues to provoke.

Some would point to Huntington or slightly earlier with Bernard Lewis, as the origin of the "Clash of Civilizations" formulation. Where would you say the origin of the idea begins?

The myth of the clash of civilisations has an ancient presence. This is what I tried to show in *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations*. I was attempting to write a history of the history of the clash, that is I was tracing the strategies, institutional sites and normative systems that have anchored the myth in our archives of history. Lewis and Huntington are merely contemporary disciples of the clash thesis. It is exactly because the myth has had an ancient presence that it was so easy for them to repackage it for contemporary consumption. Their ideas lodged into a pre-existing mentality that accentuates conflict between us and them. I hate to speak in momentous terms but really as a human species we have not managed to invent a world order yet, that would eliminate the idea that we have to be at war with the "other". To my mind, critical scholarship has to contribute to forging such an alternative world-view. To that end, the university continues to be the only laboratory of thought where we can attempt to experiment with theories of peace and reconciliation. We have that luxury and yet a whole cast of academics continue to stage-act epic dramas of conflict and mythical battles between the forces of good (the west) versus the forces of evil (the rest),

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seemingly unaware of recent strides in “global history”, scholarship that appreciates the interconnectedness of cultures and the interdependence between east and west, north and south. I think their intransigent efforts to re-inscribe the west into a narrative of superiority a waste of intellectual talent and material resources. To make matters worse, our educational institutions are competing with an uncritical culture industry which produces cults and celebrity, rather than criticism and knowledge. So the onus is on us; democracy, after all, suffocates without the voices of critique.

Why has this narrative had such a lasting impact and influence on cultural discourse? What are the elements that have perpetuated this idea across centuries and cultures?

This is exactly the topic of *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations* which deconstructs how and why notions of a perpetual war between us and them continue to be so popular. The book demonstrates how theories such as the clash of civilisation lodge into a pre-existing mentality, a culture of thought that has habituated us to accept war as a normal condition. I have termed this a “clash regime”, a regime of truth that invents the idea of a clash on a continuous basis. The power of the clash regime explains why large sections of society have been educated and tamed into accepting the status quo: foreign invasions, antagonism towards the other, and at the margins racism and misogyny. As such, History books as well continue to be replete with notions of us versus them, starting from antiquity with the myth of a cosmic battle between the democratic and civilised “Greeks” and the barbarian and autocratic Persians. This epic falsehood was recently re-enacted in the Hollywood blockbuster 300 which reinvigorates the myth of Thermopylae that Herodotus, the so called father of history invented. But it is not only such comic depictions of history that contributes to facile notions sustaining the us versus them logic. As indicated, academic studies are complicit too. A host of classicists and historians continue to subscribe to the notion that the west is somehow distinct from the rest and they continue to refer to the myths of antiquity in order to sustain their arguments. In his most recent book on the myth of Thermopylae, the Cambridge classicist Paul Cartledge deems my position on the clash of civilisation “wildly overoptimistic” and yet in none of his books on the topic has he presented convincing evidence for the coherence of “western” history that he and others such as Niall Ferguson continue to narrate. Western history became “western” because it was written as such and not due to a pre-ordained teleology. If Herodotus was the father of History, he was also the father of the myth of History. Of course, he was immensely talented as a narrator, but he also consulted oracles to further his understanding of historical events. Surely, we have better devices at hand to comprehend our common past. Yet in the absence of a critical understanding of our archives, we are confronted with a huge deluge of half-truths, romanticised tales and mythical narratives that entrench seemingly insurmountable cultural differences. I don’t belong to the class of scholars that thinks that way. I insist on the moral right of the other to express herself in what we have misrepresented as the “western” canon.

The task has to be to reconstruct the historical debris that confronts us with an empathetic appreciation of the presence of “the other” in our archives. Emphasising “our” interdependence with “them” allows us to reassemble the interconnections of our common existence. This can’t be but an intellectual battle centred on the last bastion of sanity: the university. But it can’t be confined to a specialist audience. Hence, my continuous emphasis on activist scholarship, an intellectualised discourse that has transversal presence beyond the university and which penetrates as many layers of society as possible. This is one of the reasons why I do interviews like this, conscious that the odds are stacked against all of us who attempt to disentangle the tightly woven web of lies and deceit that has nurtured the politics of aggression towards our neighbours for far too long now. After all we experience the world primarily as human beings and not as members of seemingly coherent civilisations. This is our common bond and it is about time that it is represented as such.

As you indicate, one of the primary faults in a generalized formulation such as Huntington’s is that it tends to create monolithic ‘us’ versus ‘them’ categories. In the increasingly ‘inter-connected’ world are these monolithic conceptions being broken down or further hardened through greater interaction?

There is a dual tendency, a paradox if you want. On the one side, we are experiencing hybridisation, the break-down of grand narratives and ideational systems in an increasingly networked, post-modernised order, where ideational factors such as religious affiliation and nationality play a secondary role. The Arab revolts that spread like a wildfire throughout the region and from there to southern Europe and elsewhere is indicative of this post-ideological and trans-

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ideational world. The demonstrations were carried by universal themes such as democracy, social justice, empowerment, pluralism etc. At the same time they were local, steeped in the secular and Islamic symbols and imagery that permeate the societies in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. It has been one of the great fallacies of Eurocentric theories of globalisation to assume that “the local” will evaporate in the great stream of the global. Rather, globality and locality are increasingly intermingled and inseparable. The properties of both are being changed in a grand dialectical firework. We are there and they are here. This is the brave new world that Huntington and other clash theorists don’t want to accept.

It is no coincidence that Huntington was a great critic of what he called the “Hispanisation” of the United States. The right-wing wants the “other” out of here exactly in order to cleanse the self from any undue impingement. This is what the Enlightenment did to “History” as we know it here: it contributed to the great fallacy that the “west” stands alone, that Europe is unique, that our history can be detached from theirs. Today, we stand in front of a majestic abstract painting where the contours of our existence blend in with other cultures in a great display of mutual engagement. It is just a matter to bring this reality out more forcefully in the name of a common humanity that binds us all together, so that the clash theorists here and there are contained.

What are some possible ways forward in attempts to minimize the “clash” while recognizing there are differences among peoples in terms of history, beliefs, and practices?

Differences should be celebrated; it is difference that sustains a diverse and progressive culture. Lest we forget: sameness resembles the sanitised world that racists imagine where everyone is Aryan, blonde, members of a Herrenrasse. For the European racists of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century this Herrenrasse was biologically distinct. For today’s racists, for instance Anders Breivik, a great admirer of Geert Wilders and the English Defence League, or the various neo-fascist outfits that are re-appearing all over Europe it is cultural and national distinction that need to be accentuated and fortified. Racism contracts space and solidifies categories. This is the reason why it was central to fascist ideology which denied the interdependence of humanity. In the Islamic worlds there have been tendencies towards fascism as well; the ideas of Bin-Laden have more in common with those of Mussolini than with the canon of Islamic political thought. The right-wing here and there craves sameness and worships categorisation, whereas the dialectical mind opens up spaces, contact points, an interspersed territory devoid of racial and cultural hierarchies.

Let me point out that the dialectics that I am referring to are “negative” in the sense that they do not resolve themselves in a grand Hegelian synthesis, an end of history where one side defeats the other. Once it is acknowledged that winning history is futile – human beings have tried in vain to co-opt each other for millennia – peace with our neighbours remains the only rational alternative. In concrete terms this requires constant resistance to the policies of aggression, racism, wars, economic exploitation etc: Disseminating critical literature and scholarship, revealing the lies of government, countering racism in local and national politics, organising peaceful vigils and demonstrations in support of world peace, blogging in the name of equality, self-education about foreign cultures, tweeting about social injustices, a Facebook site covering human rights abuses in your country, collecting critical literature and donating them to local libraries, organising reading sessions covering radical art and books; all of these are insurrectionary guerrilla tactics that each and every one of us here can pursue and they are all very effective in countering the clash mentality. In short: What we need is an army of empathetic peace disciples equipped with a dialectical mind-set which thinks between cultures and not exclusively within them.

One of the observations Huntington made in the opening of his article is that the Post-Cold War world and the non-Western world are no longer the objects of history but “join the West as movers and shapers of history.” Would this observation fit with arguments you make in your newest book that we have been living in the end times of unitary categories such as “west” and “east”? What implications does this have?

It seems to me that Huntington makes the argument in order to alert the “west” of a threat out there, to suggest a non-existent civilisational challenge from what he calls “the rest”. Beware of our revolting neighbours he seems to say. Let’s unite in the name of the west and fortify our polis from the barbarian hordes threatening us from the outside

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(Arabs, Iranians, Chinese etc.) and from within (e.g. Hispanics, Muslims). This seems the logic behind Huntington's warning that the other has awakened to history. Yet it is not that the non-Western world never had agency; even during the colonial period they resisted. Even an astute scholar such as Edward Said was wrong in *Orientalism* to suggest that the subaltern was muted. Power and resistance go hand in hand, where there was Orientalist silence about the other, there was a cacophony of voices that resisted the colonial system on the ground. Luminaries such as Mohammad Abduh in Egypt and Jamal-ad Din Afghani in Iran, Turkey and elsewhere resisted in word and deed and were never really subsumed or "pacified" by the colonial system or a discourse such as Orientalism.

This never ending battle between systems of power and modes of resistance is the topic of *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution* which proclaims the end times of monoliths such as "west" and "east" as you rightly point out. I simply don't think that after the revolts of the past years, in the Arab world, in southern Europe and the various Occupy Movements in the UK and the USA which evolved in a distinctly global field, it is analytically prudent to think in terms of geographical entities. Threats such as terrorism, environmental deprivation and hyper-neoliberal capitalism are truly global. Opportunities such as the increasingly internationalised stop the war movements and grassroots NGO's in the fields of social justice, human rights and democracy are global too. *On the Arab Revolts and the Iranian Revolution* looks at this mesmerising, brave new world and tries to differentiate this global field from local expressions of protest. In the final analysis the book tries to show that we have to adjust our culture and our governing systems to the challenges of post-modernity and that we have to discard the sturdy thought patterns of yesterday. Our world is changing at a fast pace and it is about time that our mind-sets adapt to the complexity of our contemporary world disorder. My work claims a humble contribution to that end.

Our first interview with Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is available [here](#).

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This interview was conducted by J. Paul Barker. He is an Associate Editor for e-IR and recently completed his M.A. in International Relations focusing on the convergence of religion and politics.