

# Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' Today: Responses and Developments

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## Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' Today: Responses and Developments

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

It is now a quarter of a century since Samuel Huntington first published his treatise about what he understood as an epochal event in international relations: the post-Cold War 'clash of civilizations'. Since the late 1970s, the talk has been of the impossibility of different sets of values, norms and beliefs living side-by-side in an increasingly globalized world. In 1993, the late Samuel Huntington published one of the most cited articles in international relations literature: 'The Clash of Civilizations?' (*Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp. 22–48), followed three years later by a book-length treatment of the same issue. Why are the article and book so important for our understanding of the post-Cold War world? Why are they collectively a touchstone for nearly all contemporary debates about the capacity of different groups to live together in relative amity not enmity?

### Origins and Development of the Clash of 'Clash of Civilizations'

Bernard Lewis (1990), the British orientalist, was the first to claim there was a 'clash between civilizations' in a speech at Johns Hopkins University in 1957. Lewis argued that Islam and the West had differing values which would only be resolved following conflict. Initially, however, Lewis's contention did not create much of a stir. This was hardly surprising given that the main foreign policy issue confronting the West in the late 1950s was dealing with what was widely perceived as an expansionist Soviet Union. Four decades later, Lewis's clash *between* civilizations had become a clash *of* civilizations. This was the claim of Samuel Huntington, who contended that a clash between the West and the 'Muslim world' would be the key foreign policy issue for the US (and the West more generally) after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. Like Lewis, 40 years earlier, Huntington argued that one of the two 'sides' was ideationally destined to prevail over the other. Because of their differing values, it would not be possible for them to unite to defeat humanity's myriad common problems (such as climate change, poverty, and gender inequality).

The relationship between a scholarly argument relating to, and popular understanding of, a phenomenon is not always clear. Had things turned out differently, Huntington's arguments on the 'clash of civilizations' would probably have been debated only by a few scholars, without much impact on policy-makers or popular understanding of how the world works. But the events of 9/11 made Huntington's arguments mainstream and centre stage. The 9/11 attacks had been preceded by others which, with hindsight, could be seen as initial signs of a 'civilizational war' between the West and the Muslim world. A first jihadi assault on the Twin Towers in 1993 was followed in 1998 by attacks on two US embassies in Africa. The 1993 and 1998 attacks, coupled with 9/11, seemed to some to be clear signs that Islamist extremists were willing to take the 'clash of civilizations' to the stage of open conflict with the US.

Neither President George W. Bush nor President Barack Obama responded to terrorism carried out by actors motivated by Islamist ideologies by declaring war on 'Islam'. President Bush stated a week after 9/11 that '[t]hese acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith'. The US response, Bush decreed, was to go to war with al-Qaeda terrorists, whose words and deeds perverted 'the peaceful teaching of

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Islam' (Bush 2001). A few years later, Obama also denied that there was a 'clash of civilizations' between the US and the Muslim world. In a major speech in Cairo in 2009, not long after assuming the presidency, Obama sought to reach out to Muslim-majority societies, aiming to set relations on an improved footing (Obama 2009). However, neither Bush nor Obama was successful in preventing a 'clash of civilizations' mentality from spreading and gaining strength at the popular level in America, especially among those who identify with the political and religious right. Right-wing political media such as Fox News and certain politically conservative evangelical leaders became more and more bluntly critical of Islam with each passing year.

By the time of the presidential campaign in 2016, the issue of the relationship between the US and the Muslim-majority world was very much in the spotlight. During the electoral process, the republican candidate for president, Donald Trump, stated (among many other things) that 'I think Islam hates us' (2017). There was no attempt to clarify that he was referring only to 'radical Islamic terrorists' (Trump 2017). Few on the hard-right thought he needed to offer any clarification or qualification.

My argument in this brief piece is not that Huntington's article and book were so important because his argument was 'correct' or 'right'. My claim is twofold: First, Huntington's article was and is important because it captured perfectly the end-of-the-Cold War *zeitgeist*, a way of seeing the world which has endured in the uncertain years which have followed, as exemplified by the hostility shown to 'Islam' by candidate (now President) Trump. Second, Huntington's argument has proved to be an abiding statement about globalisation and the hopes and fears that it conveys. It is almost irrelevant that his focal point: the impossibility of the West – read; the US – and 'Islam' – read; 'Islamic radicalism/fundamentalism' – living together in harmony was laughingly over-simplified, redolent of the paranoia of someone experiencing the shattering of a stable, safe and unchanging world suddenly and demonstrably confronted with the scenario of the post-World War II paradigm smashed to smithereens. What was a card-carrying Realist, such as Huntington, to do under these circumstances? The response was to find a new enemy and dress it up in the same preposterous 'baddy' clothes that had marked the treatment by US Realists of the Soviet Union from the start of the Cold War in the late 1940s and transfer the characteristics of conflict to a new 'actor': 'Islamic fundamentalism.'

It may be worth recalling that a quarter century ago in the early 1990s, the world was just emerging from a 50-year period of secular ideological polarization, focused on the US and the Soviet Union, the poster children of very different worldviews: 'liberal democracy' and 'global communism'. Contrary to today's triumphalist claims of some in the US, the US did not 'win' the Cold War; rather, the Soviet Union 'lost' it. Unable to compete with America in a competition for global dominance, its shaky, dysfunctional and misanthropic political/social/economic system spectacularly imploded within a seemingly impossibly short period of time: apparently as strong as ever in the mid-1980s, by 1991, the Soviet Union and its system as well as its parasitic coterie of attendant nations were no more. This left a gulf, a hole, a vacuum. How, and with what, to fill it?

Globalization, redolent of democracy, capitalism and freedom, was the heady force which defeated the USSR. In addition, globalization was also the factor which reinjected religion back into international relations, having been forced in the centuries following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 into marginalization. The sudden demise of the Cold War, as well as the Soviet Union and its attendant secular ideology, opened the way for a new focus on 'culture' and 'civilizations', of which religion is very often an integral aspect. The 9/11 attacks on the United States were a key event in the debate about the role of cultural and religious difference – especially, 'Islamic fundamentalism' – in international conflict, especially in the way that they focused attention on al-Qaeda's then dominant brand of globalized cultural terrorism. For some scholars, analysts and policy makers – especially but not exclusively in the United States – 9/11 marked the practical onset of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' between two cultural entities: the 'Christian West' and the 'Islamic world', with special concern directed at Islamic 'fundamentalists' or 'radical terrorists'. This is not to suggest that Huntington's arguments have had it all their own way. For some, 9/11 was not the *start* of a 'clash of civilizations' but rather the *last gasp* of transnational Islamist radicalism. (It remains to be seen if still unfolding events in Mali, Niger, Nigeria and elsewhere are the start of a new phase of Islamist radicalism.) On the other hand, it is hard to disagree with the claim that the events of September 11 thrust culture to the forefront of the international agenda, providing Huntington's thesis with a new lease of life. Henceforward, many commentators were no longer inhibited in attributing essentialist characteristics to the 'Christian West' and 'Islam'.

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After 9/11, there was a pronounced penchant to see the world in a Huntington-inspired simplistic division, with straight lines on maps – 'Islam has bloody borders', Huntington averred (1993, 35) – apparently the key to understanding what were increasingly portrayed as definitively ethically and racially defined lines across the globe.

September 11, 2001, as well as many subsequent terrorist outrages, were perpetrated by al-Qaeda or its followers; all involved extremist Muslims that wanted to cause destruction and loss of life against 'Western' targets that nevertheless often led to considerable loss of life, for example in Istanbul and Casablanca, among Muslims. The US response – the Bush administration's 'war on terror' – targeted Muslims, some believe rather indiscriminately, in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Some have claimed that these events 'prove' the correctness of Huntington's thesis. In such views, the 9/11 attacks and the US response suggested that Huntington's prophecy about clashing civilizations was now less abstract and more plausible than when first articulated in the early 1990s. Others contend, however, that 9/11 was not the start of the 'clash of civilizations' – but, as already noted, the last gasp of radical Islamists' attempts to foment revolutionary change which had begun with Iran's revolution in 1979 and carried on into the 1980s with determined attempts by Islamist radicals to gain state power in Algeria and Egypt. We can also note, however, that 9/11 not only had major effects on both the US and international relations but also contributed to a surge of Islamic radicalism in Saudi Arabia. This was a result not only of the presence of US troops in the kingdom, as highlighted by al-Qaeda's then leader, the late Osama bin Laden, but also due to a growing realization that the function of Saudi Arabia's *ulema* was and is overwhelmingly to underpin and explain away the unearned and unrepresentative dominance of the ruling king, his extended family and parasitic entourage.

## The United Nations' and 'Moderate' Muslims' Response to the 'Clash of Civilizations'

Huntington's argument about the 'clash of civilizations' coincided with what some have called the 'return' of religion to international relations. Higher profile for religion in international relations was manifested in various ways, including an increasing presence at the world's only global intergovernmental organization, the United Nations (UN). The role of religion at the UN expanded greatly after 9/11. The UN itself instituted a new entity in 2005: the Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), whose name was a direct riposte to Huntington's argument about the inevitability of civilizations clashing in the post-Cold War world. The UNAOC was created by the UN General Assembly and headed by the UN Secretary-General, following a request from the governments of Spain and Turkey. This is not to imply that the UN suddenly 'got' religion after decades of secular focus or that the UN is now the focus of a single, coordinated faith voice. Indeed, UNAOC's concern with civilizational disharmony is itself a manifestation of difference in this regard. A major analytical controversy in this regard is what is meant by the term 'civilization' and how do such entities act in international relations, including at the UN. For example, while today inter-civilizational tensions and conflicts are typically linked to the perceived polarizing effects of globalization, half a century ago the focus was on different values between the West and secular Arab nationalists. When Bernard Lewis coined the phrase 'clash between civilizations' six decades ago, he was referring to a then extant ideological issue, that is, the baleful relationship of contemporary Arab nationalists, such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, who led the country between 1956 until his death in 1970, and who frequently expressed hostility towards the West. By the early 1990s, the focus had changed from secular nationalist hostility to Western security concerns with 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

Petito (2007; 2009) notes that, partly in response to Huntington's claims of civilizational conflict, a counter narrative emerged stressing how vitally important it is for harmonious international relations that there is improved dialogue to deter a 'clash of civilizations'. A key milestone in this regard came in 1998, when the then-president of Iran, Seyed Muhammad Khatami, called for improved 'dialogue among civilizations' during an address to the UN General Assembly. Following Khatami's call, the General Assembly designated 2001 as the Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, an initiative strongly supported by the UN's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Yet, before Khatami's initiative could firmly take root and develop, his efforts were derailed by the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. They were quickly followed by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) which de facto killed Khatami's 'dialogue among civilizations' idea. Yet, international concern was too pronounced to give up on the idea of improved dialogue between civilizations and before long the Alliance of Civilizations initiative was announced under the auspices of the UN.<sup>[1]</sup> The UNAOC was initially suggested in 2004 at the 59th Session of the UN General Assembly by the then Prime Minister of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, supported by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's prime minister at the time. The UNAOC was formally launched a year

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later by the UN Secretary General at the time, Kofi Annan. In 2007, Annan's successor, Ban Ki-moon, appointed a former president of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio, as head of UNAOC. Sampaio held the position until September 2012, when he was replaced by Qatar's Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, a former leader of the UN General Assembly, who took up the role in March 2013.

UNAOC prioritizes building 'a global network of partners including States, International and regional organizations, civil society groups, foundations, and the private sector to improve cross-cultural relations between diverse nations and communities' (2017c). To this end, a 'Group of Friends' supports UNAOC, comprising, at the time of writing (October 2017), 120 governments and 26 international organizations (IOs) (2017a). In addition, UNAOC has 'memorandums of understanding' with 16 'Partner Organizations', including some IOs also listed in the Group of Friends<sup>[2]</sup>, such as the Council of Europe and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and some entities which are not, including the Anna Lindh Foundation, the Global Dialogue Foundation and La Francophonie (2017b). The aim of UNAOC reaching out to both state and non-state actors is to highlight its focus: not appearing to be solely a UN-focused, top-down body, remote from the concerns of governments, NGOs and 'ordinary' people. The overall aim is to roll back a putative or real 'clash of civilizations' and instead develop enhanced dialogue between cultural and religious groups for mutual, long-term benefit.

While the UN has sought fit to establish an entity with the express purpose of repudiating Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', 'moderate' Muslims have also responded to his contention by stressing the common 'moderate' ground which Christians and Muslims occupy. Kamali (2015, 9) argues that there are strong injunctions to moderation within the Islamic tradition:

*Wasatiyyah* ('moderation') is an important but somewhat neglected aspect of Islamic

teachings that has wide-ranging ramifications in almost all areas of concern

to Islam. 'Moderation' is primarily a moral virtue of relevance not only to personal

conduct of individuals but also to the integrity and self-image of communities

and nations. Moderation is an aspect, in its Qur'anic projections, of the self-identity

and worldview of the Muslim community, or *ummah*.

There have been several attempts since the early 2000s to pursue initiatives both within the Muslim world and in interfaith contexts, with the aim of highlighting and pursuing the path of 'moderation', to improve interfaith relations between Muslims and Christians. Several initiatives highlighting *wasatiyyah* followed 9/11: six institutional developments and four non-institutionalized initiatives. The institutional developments were: (1) International Assembly for Moderate Islamic Thought and Culture (based in Jordan, 2003); (2) International Centre for Moderation (Kuwait, 2004); (3) Centre for Islamic Moderation and Renewal (Doha, 2008); (4) Global Movement of Moderates Foundation (Malaysia, 2012); (5) Institute Wasatiyyah Malaysia (Malaysia, 2013); and (6) International Institute of Wasatiyyah (Malaysia, 2013). The four non-institutionalized initiatives were: (1) The Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association Charter of Moderation in Religious Practice (Singapore, 2003); (2) The Mecca Declaration (Saudi Arabia, 2005); (3) The Amman Message (Jordan, 2005); and (4) 'A Common Word between Us and You' (Jordan, 2007). These and other interfaith and inter-civilizational initiatives and reform measures are significant not only because of their ideas and orientations stressing moderation – in contrast to the 'clash of civilizations' thesis which stresses the lack of moderation and common ground between civilizations – but also because they explicitly expose incorrect, entrenched perceptions, such as: Islam is incapable of change; Islam is a violent religion; Muslims do not speak out against religious extremism and terrorism; and all Muslims reject religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue (Kamali 2015, 80).

The overall impact of assertions of Islamic 'moderation' is difficult or impossible to gauge accurately. However, one of the initiatives, 'A Common Word between Us and You', an open letter dated 13 October 2007, turned out to be

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controversial. The letter was organized and sent out by Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought. It was signed by 138 influential Muslim leaders and scholars from around the world, 'from a wide variety of denominations and schools of thought within Islam, and addressed to the contemporary leadership of Christian Churches, federations and organizations' (Marciewicz 2016, 23). It was clearly an attempt to stress the importance of common ground between the faiths and to try to undermine the 'clash of civilizations' argument.

The open letter called for peace between Muslim and Christians, contending that followers of both faiths should try to work together to find common ground between them. This is in line with the Qur'anic decree: 'Say: O People of the Scripture? Come to a common word between us and you: that we worship none but God' (Qur'an, Chapter three, Verse 64). It also accords with the Biblical commandment to love God and one's neighbour (Matthew, Chapter 22, Verses 37 and 39). The open letter set in train a spirited interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In 2008 'A Common Word' was awarded the Eugen Biser Award, given by a German foundation, and the Building Bridges Award from the UK-based Association of Muslim Social Scientists ("A Common Word" Receives AMSS (UK)' 2008). The initiative did not attract support from all Christians. According to Pavlischek (2008, 61), this was because, following 'the initial flurry of responses following its publication in November 2007, more careful measure has been taken of "Loving God and Neighbor"'. Pavlischek, an evangelical Christian, writing in the pages of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, contends that 'A Common Word' received 'withering theological criticism', including its ignoring of the crucial issue of religious liberty. Pavlischek notes that while the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute was sending out 'A Common Word' it was simultaneously issuing 'fatwas denouncing apostates on a website it sponsors'. The open letter was published in October 2007. By February 2008, the fatwas to which Pavlischek refers had been removed from the website (Durie 2008). The Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought (2009) issued a summary document on the open letter, which also included a commentary. It stated that '*takfir* (declarations of apostasy) between Muslims' are forbidden. It is not known why the fatwas were removed. However, for some Christians, this was the most crucial aspect of the open letter, highlighting what appeared to be a fundamental difference between Christians and Muslims and which supported the 'clash of civilizations' argument that the values of the different worldviews (Western and Muslim) were so different as to make the finding of common ground difficult or even impossible. Pavlischek (2008) argued that whereas Christians assert 'the right of individual human beings to choose, proclaim, and change their religion without fear of legal sanctions', in Islam there is nothing like the same freedom to move to another religion. In short, the issue of religious freedom is one of the main critiques of Islam from Christians. This is because, as Marshall (2016) explains, 'major factors in contemporary Christian persecution [include] Christianity's virtually intrinsic association with pluralism and freedom' (Paul Marshall 2016, quoted in Philpott and Shah 2017, 4).

## Conclusion

What of the goal of improved cross-cultural relations between diverse nations and communities, in direct riposte to Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' argument? Historically, neither the Christian/Western nor Muslim worlds have worked assiduously to achieve improved inter-civilizational dialogue and bridge building. Yet, a new and mutually rewarding relationship has the potential to emerge between the Muslim and Christian worlds, where accumulated wisdom and insights for necessary progress provide the basis of a valued coexistence. After 9/11, it is clear that such an improved relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural superiority, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural eclecticism. In other words, Muslims and Christians can learn from each other and cooperate in the pursuit of shared values. The goal is to engage meaningfully and consistently in inter-civilizational bridge-building so as to develop and deepen normatively desirable values and expand common understandings of truth, to transform an increasingly conflict-filled relationship to one with collective good works serving humanity and the demonstration of the soundness of common values and contribution to civilizations (Said 2002, 7). It remains a moot point, however, the extent to which the pursuit – and the finding – of common ground between the West and the Muslim world is destined to replace the confrontational rhetoric of Huntington's 'clash of civilizations'. We have seen that both the UN and 'moderate' Muslims have stressed that interreligious and intercultural dialogue is the way forward. But, will politicians like Donald Trump listen and act accordingly?

## Notes

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[1] It did not help that Khatami was a former president of Iran during an era when relations between Iran and the West, especially the US, became strained as a result of Iran's nuclear power aspirations.

[2] 'A *Group of Friends* is a usual practice both in the UN framework and in other international arenas by which the country which is sponsoring a particular international initiative – whereas it is Spain and Turkey at the Alliance of Civilizations process, Finland with the Helsinki Process, or Canada in the Responsibility to Protect – creates an informal group with those other member states supportive of the initiative to promote it, give support and content and ensure its advance in the agenda of the different intergovernmental bodies' (Manonelles, 2007: fn. 3).

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