

ISLAMICA

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Samuel Huntington

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SAMUEL
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FOR 13 YEARS, three words have dominated the discourse on cultural, international, and religious affairs as they relate to foreign policy in our times. The “clash of civilizations,” as argued by Harvard University Professor Samuel Huntington, has stirred heated debate across the globe, but particularly among many Muslim nations. His theory is often interpreted to proclaim a fundamental incompatibility between the “Christian West” and the “Muslim World.” The scale of impact it has had on global politics is sometimes difficult to comprehend. A Google search of “clash of civilizations,” for example, produced 2.62 million hits, and to this day, this famous phrase is quoted in newspapers, books, journals, and articles from around the world. One of the most recent global acknowledgements of Huntington’s theory is from the United Nations, which under the patronage of Kofi Annan, launched an initiative called the “The Alliance of Civilizations” — presumably as a means of countering this “clash.” The influence of Huntington’s ideas is readily apparent, and will most likely continue to remain at the forefront of international relations for decades.

I had the opportunity to sit with Professor Huntington and ask him to elaborate on this controversial theory.

AMINA CHAUDARY: I’d like to begin with a general question on your book *The Clash of Civilizations*. Your theory on the clash of civilizations argues that “current global politics should be understood as the result of deep-seated conflicts between the great cultures and religions of the world.” This thesis gained momentum as a result of Sept. 11, and now the war against terrorism is often defined in terms of the West against Islam as a fundamental clash between these two civilizations. Do you feel that your thesis is accurately used when describing the war against terrorism as a war of the West against Islam? If not, what modifications to that application of your theory would you make?

SAMUEL HUNTINGTON: The argument in my book on the clash of civilizations was well reflected in that short quote saying that the relations between countries in the coming decade are most likely to reflect their cultural commitments, their



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In the early 1990s, Professor Samuel Huntington ignited a major debate with an article that he published in *Foreign Affairs* on the “clash of civilizations”. He soon followed with a book where he deepened the analysis of cultural faultlines and their impact on international relations. Critics argued that his thesis provided legitimacy for the United States to pursue an aggressive foreign policy against China and the world of Islam, whilst others argued that he was only describing the dynamics of post-Cold War politics as they were. In an exclusive interview, Professor Huntington talks to Amina R. Chaudary about clashes, identities, and geopolitics.



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cultural ties and antagonism with other countries. Quite obviously power will continue to play a central role in global politics as it always does. But usually there is something else. In the 18th century in Europe, the issues to a large extent involved questions of monarchy and monarchy versus the emerging republican movements, first in America and then in France. In the 19th century it was basically nationality and people trying to define their nationalism and create states which would reflect their nationalism. In the 20th century, ideology came to the fore, largely, but not exclusively, as a result of the Russian Revolution and we have fascism, communism and liberal democracy competing with each other. Well that's pretty much over. The other two (fascism and communism) have not entirely disappeared but have been sidelined certainly, and liberal democracy has come to be accepted, in theory at least, around the world, if not always in practice. So the question really is what will be the central focus of global politics in the coming decades and my argument is that cultural identities and

cultural antagonisms and affiliations will play not the only role but a major role. Countries will cooperate with each other, and are more likely to cooperate with each other when they share a common culture, as is most dramatically illustrated in the European Union. But other groupings of countries are emerging in East Asia and in South America. Basically, as I said, these politics will be oriented around, in large part, cultural similarities and cultural antagonism.

AC: So, if your thesis entirely explains relations between states post 9/11, then how do you situate the alliance between, for example, Pakistan and the United States against Afghanistan for example, or similar types of relationships?

SH: Well, obviously Pakistan and the U.S. are very different countries, but we have common geopolitical interests in preventing communist take over in Afghanistan and hence, now that Pakistan has a government that we can cooperate with, even though it is a military government, we are working

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together with them in order to promote our common interests. But obviously we also differ with Pakistan on a number of issues.

AC: You said in your book, “For 45 years, the Iron Curtain was the central dividing line in Europe. That line has moved several hundred miles east. It is now the line separating the peoples of Western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslim and Orthodox peoples on

the other.” Some scholars have reacted to such an analysis by stating that making such a dichotomous distinction between the West and Islam implies that there is a great uniformity within those two categories. Additionally some argue that such a distinction implies that Islam does not exist within the Western world. I understand that this is a criticism you have often received. In general, how do you react to such an analysis?

SH: The implication, which you say some people draw, is totally wrong. I don’t say that the West is united, I don’t suggest that. Obviously there are divisions within the West and divisions within Islam—there are different sects, different communities, different countries. So neither one is homogenous at all. But they do have things in common. People everywhere talk about Islam and the West. Presumably that has some relationship to reality, that these are entities that have some meaning and they do. Of course the core of that reality is differences in religion.

AC: Is there any reconciliation or point of convergence between, as is often described, both sides of this “Iron Curtain”?

SH: First, you say “both sides,” but as I said, both sides are divided and Western countries collaborate with Muslim countries and vice versa. I think it’s a mistake, let me just repeat, to think in terms of two homogenous sides starkly confronting each other. Global politics remains extremely complex and countries have different interests, which will also lead them to make what might seem as rather bizarre friends and allies. The U.S. has and still is cooperating with various military dictatorships around the world. Obviously we would prefer to see them democratized, but we are doing it because we have national interests, whether it’s working with Pakistan on Afghanistan or whatever.

AC: You have also recently said that communism disintegrated because it relied on ideology as opposed to religion and culture as a means of binding a

society together. So as a result, when people became disillusioned by that ideology, as they always do, the countries fell apart. Similarly, you have argued that as civilization changes in America, it has moved toward focusing on democratic liberalism as an ideology. **SH:** That always has been the American ideology.

AC: Right. So how do you see this trend developing in America, in terms of the relation to the fall of the Soviet Union as they focused on communism as an ideology and what lessons do you think America should learn from that experience?

SH: That’s a very interesting question. As I said, since the revolution of the 18th century, America has basically had an ideology of liberal democracy and constitutionalism. Generally, in my other writings, however, I try to avoid the use of the term ideology to describe this. I talk of American beliefs and values. When you mention the word ideology, everyone has communism in the back of their minds, which was an entirely well formulated ideology and statement of belief. You read the Communist Manifesto and you know what the core of it is. What we have, however, is a looser set of values and beliefs, which have remained fairly constant for two and a half centuries or so. And that’s really rather striking. Obviously changes and adaptations in it have occurred as a result of economic development, industrialization, the huge wave of immigrants that have come to this country, economic crisis, depression, and world wars—all of these have had an effect. But the core of the American set of beliefs has remained pretty constant. If one of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence came back today, he would not be surprised about what Americans were saying and believing and articulating in their public statements. It would all sound rather familiar. Other countries have gone through rather dramatic changes in outlook, from the clash of the monarchies and their replacement by republican regimes or communist regimes in various parts of Eurasia.

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Nationalism is a central ideology for people who are trying to establish their own states in which they can play a dominant role. So as far as ideology or political beliefs are concerned, countries are very different. In addition, of course, two significant developments in the past several decades have been the collapse of communism as an ideology and the general acceptance, as you said, in rhetoric, if not practice, of liberal democracy.

AC: So how do you think the Muslim world fares in this regard?

SH: I think what I mentioned has all had an impact on the Muslim world and I think we’ve seen at least the beginnings of rather significant social and economic change in the Muslim world, which I think will in due course lead to more political change. Obviously Muslim societies, like societies elsewhere, are becoming increasingly urban, many are becoming industrial, but since so many have oil and gas, they don’t have a great impetus. But again, the revenue that natural resources produce gives them the capability and so countries like Iran are beginning to develop an industrial component.

AC: Okay, so given the interconnected world of our day, how do you feel that the Western and Muslim worlds can coexist in a mutually cooperative environment? You state in your book that some Westerners have argued that the Western opposition is not to Islam but to Islamic extremists. But you then say, “1,400 years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and

Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other's Other." Do you believe that the "Muslim World" and the "Christian West" will come to a point of partnership?

SH: Again, I think it's hard to talk about the Muslim world and Christian world as blocks. There will be associations and partnerships between some Muslim countries and some Christian countries. Those already exist. And they may shift as different regimes come and go and interests change. I don't think it is all that useful to think in terms of those two solid blocks.

AC: Do you think that the "Islamic civilization" will become increasingly coherent in the future?

SH: Certainly we've seen movements in that direction and certainly there are various trans-Islamic political movements, which try to appeal to Muslims in all societies. I am doubtful that there will be any sort of real coherence of Muslim societies into a single political system run by an elected or non-elected group of leaders. But I think we can expect leaders of Muslim societies to cooperate with each other on many issues just as Western societies cooperate with each other. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of Muslim or at least Arab countries developing some form of organization comparable to the European Union. I don't think that's very likely, but it conceivably could happen.

AC: So moving on from the clash of civilizations, I'd like to talk on a broader level about the "Western-Muslim" world relations. You say in your book, "Islamic culture explains, in large part, the failure of democracy to emerge in much of the Muslim world." It is not uncommon to hear some scholars argue that Islam is antithetical to democracy. Others counter this argument by stating that the majority of the Muslim world is, it seems, east of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Given that a large part of the Muslim world is participating in democracies — Indonesia, Mali, Senegal, and even India

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are very strong democracies — do you then think that Islam plays a role in the lack of democracy that we see in parts of the Muslim world? Do you think that this is in stark contrast to their Islamic heritage or can it be somehow connected to it?

SH: I don't know what the answer to that question is because I'm not an expert on Islam, but it is striking the relative slowness with which Muslim countries, particularly Arab countries, have moved toward democracy. Their cultural heritage and their ideologies may be in part responsible. The colonial experience they all went through may be a factor in the fight against Western domination, British, French or whatever. They were until recently largely rural societies with land owning governing elites in most of them. I think they are certainly moving toward urbanization and much more pluralistic political systems. In almost every Muslim country, that is occurring. Obviously they are increasing their involvement with non-Muslim societies. One peak aspect of this, of course, is the migration of Muslims into Europe.

AC: Right, I'll have a question about that in a bit, but let me ask you another one first. Your colleagues Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer have recently produced a controversial thesis about the Israeli lobby and international relations, arguing that U.S. foreign policy is disproportionately affected by pro-Israeli groups and ultimately not in

the best interest of America. How do you evaluate their argument and do you think it has any merit?

SH: They are both extremely knowledgeable and serious scholars so I think it's an argument that other people have to take seriously. They are not polemicists by any means. I am not entirely persuaded by their argument, but I guess the word that caught my attention is "disproportionately." I don't know how you judge that. I mean U.S. foreign policy is in every area impacted by ethnic groups of one sort or another as well as economic groups and regional groups. There has been an Irish lobby that has impacted U.S. foreign policy for a century and a half, and at times made our relations with Great Britain very difficult. Other comparable lobbies exist. So I don't think that the Israeli lobby is unique. It may differ from the others in the extent by which it is focused on just one issue, which is the survival of Israel, which is understandable, and promoting Israeli development and aid to Israel, and so forth and so on.

AC: There have been many diplomats, scholars, and even human rights activists who all argue that if the tension between Israel and Palestine were resolved, there would be a more stable and peaceful Middle East. Do you believe that the reason for instability is directly and primarily linked to this tension between Israelis and Palestinians?

SH: I don't know what they are referring to when they talk of instability. Obviously there have been and still are fault lines of conflict in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, but most of them, of course, have previously been between Israel and Egypt, the struggles between various religious factions in Lebanon, differences between Baathist regimes that exist and opposition movements and so forth. There are lots of conflicts going on in the Middle East. It is unclear as to which country will emerge, if any, as the dominant or hegemonic power in the Middle East. In South America we have Brazil; in Africa we have South Africa; in Central Africa we have Nigeria; in East



Asia we have China and Japan; South Asia, India. Now what is the comparable power in the Middle East? Israel has military capabilities including nuclear weapons, far surpassing any other power in the Middle East, but it's a small country. The rest of the Middle Eastern peoples are Muslim and Israelis are not, so it is hardly in any position to become the leading power. I mentioned Iran as a possibility. Iran of course is Shi'ite, while the bulk of the Arabs are Sunni, that is a problem or could be a problem. Also, there is the simple fact that Iran is non-Arab and most of the Muslims in the Middle East are Arab. Then there is the question of Turkey, which is an important state, but again it's not Arab and it has very concrete interests in the oil and gas in northern Iraq and in securing borders against secessionist movements. What are the prospects for an Arab state serving a leading role comparable to the role that other states place in other regions? There is no obvious candidate. Saudi Arabia has the money but a relatively small population. Iraq was a great

potential leader, as a sizable country with great oil resources and a highly educated population, but it went off in the wrong direction. Maybe Iraq will come back and become the dominant power among Arab countries. That seems to me as conceivable.

AC: How about Turkey? As you mentioned, they see themselves as a bridge between the Western world and the Muslim world.

SH: I wouldn't put a great deal of emphasis on that. Turkey has its own interests and historically, Turkey conquered most of the Arab world, and the Arabs had to fight wars of liberation to free themselves from the Turks. That's in the past and that doesn't necessarily shape what is going on but it's there and it's there in people's memories. The Turks, as I said, seem to have very specific interests, particularly in those portions of those Arab countries that border Turkey.

AC: Do you think it's in the interest of U.S. foreign policy to ensure that no

hegemonic, at least regionally hegemonic, leader does arise in that region?

SH: That all depends on who that hegemonic leader is. I think in theory, the United States finds it much easier to deal with situations where there is a leading country. You can go to the leaders of that country and say, for example, to India, "There are all these problems in Bangladesh, we really have to do something about it, what do you suggest we can do to work out a common policy?" But when you don't have the equivalent of India, you have to go capital to capital trying to put together a coalition, which is extraordinarily difficult, especially in the Arab world, because of the historic rivalries and branches of Islam.

AC: If you were to write this thesis 100 years from now, would you still argue that there is a clash of civilizations between the Western and Islamic world?

SH: I don't know. I don't know what will happen 100 years from now.

AC: Well, do you think that this thesis is historically specific to contemporary times?

SH: Well, I wrote that book in the 1980s. I was studying global politics and teaching courses on global politics and became convinced that the ideas I set forth in my “Clash of Civilizations” article in 1993 were ideas that deserved attention and many elaboration. They obviously got a lot of attention, much of it critical, but that showed they had a certain bite. So when I went on to elaborate them in the book, I did so in a more systematic way.

AC: In this final part of the interview, I would like to address identity and its relation to global politics. Your colleague Amartya Sen at Harvard recently published a book, *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, in which he criticizes your argument along the lines that “identity is not destiny” and that each individual can construct and reconstruct chosen identities. He argues that the clash of civilizations theory comes from “miniaturization of human beings,” meaning that all human beings are reduced to “unique and choiceless identity made to fit into the boxes of civilization.” In other words, Sen argues that humans have the ability to define themselves in numerous other ways. What is your perspective on citizens who have multiple identities?

SH: I think that statement by Amartya Sen is totally wrong. I never argue that and I realize that people have multiple identities. What I argue in my book, as I indicated earlier, is that the basis of association and antagonism among countries has changed over time. In the coming decades, questions of identity, meaning cultural heritage, language, and religion will play a central role in politics. I first elaborated this idea over 10 years ago, and much of what I said has been validated during that time.

AC: How do you negotiate people with multiple identities, say, a Muslim or a Jewish person who lives in America



and who may have these two identities. How do they negotiate that?

SH: They work out accommodations and that’s been done for the past two or three centuries at least. When you have increased migration of peoples and ethnic and religious minorities, you develop a set of rules and language the larger society can accept and the minority community can accept. The larger society has to recognize some degree of autonomy for the minority: the right to practice their own religion and way of life and to some extent their language. Many of the most difficult questions concerning the role of ethnic minorities centers on language. To what extent are they educated in their own language or in the national language? To what extent does the society formally or informally become a country of two national languages? Or is only one language used in the public proceedings, courts, legislatures, executive branch, and politics? These, as we know, can become very tricky issues.

AC: Your argument focuses on identity as one of the core movers in global politics. How do you think that fundamentalism—the radical idea that one’s own identity is superior to all others—influences global politics today? Do you think there is a particular radicalism that is only associated

with Islam or do you think it exists in all faiths?

SH: I think fundamentalism is what you said: this radical attitude toward one’s own identity and civilization as compared to other people’s identities and cultures. Fundamentalist tendencies and movements existed, so far as I know, in all societies and civilizations. Certainly here in the U.S., we’ve had fundamentalist movements that have taken very critical and hostile attitudes toward immigration and the assimilation of immigrants into our society and culture. So these tendencies are fairly universal. The problem is what if they get out of hand and become the dominant factor in a society, which can only lead to the oppression of minorities or even to war with neighboring societies with differing cultures. That’s why it seems to me it’s important to try to keep these tendencies toward extremism under control.

AC: In considering your most recent book, why are there more tensions among Muslims and other groups in European societies as opposed to America, where Muslims seem to be better adjusted? How would this relate to your thesis about identity and culture in regard to Hispanic communities in the United States?

SH: First of all, the biggest difference as

far as Muslims in Europe and America are concerned is that the number of Muslims in America is small compared to the number in Europe. Secondly, those that are here have come across several thousands of miles of oceans, not just walking across the border or taking a short boat ride across the Mediterranean. We don't border on Muslim countries. European countries do and that seems to be a fundamental difference. As you might have suggested, how does the position of Muslims compare to the position of Hispanics in the United States. That's an interesting question. I think that again there are fundamental differences, however, because the United States has been an immigrant country. The Hispanics who come here are largely from Mexico and South America. They are Catholics, but that is an American religion. One-third of our population is Catholic so that does not have the same impact as Muslims coming into Europe. They speak Spanish or Portuguese, which are languages we are familiar with, so it doesn't seem to pose the same types of problems as Arabic-speaking Muslims do in Europe. The major difference for us with respect to Hispanic immigration is that it is so large and that it is coming from neighboring countries rather than those countries off the Atlantic or Pacific. That creates different issues and different problems for us as compared to the past. It is still very different, however, from the situation in Europe where we see people with a very different non-European religion coming from neighboring countries.

AC: As a final thought, do you think your

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thesis, particularly the clash of civilizations theory, is used by people for their own agendas?

SH: Oh absolutely, all the time. There isn't much I can do about that. In the past, some of my other writings have also set forth ideas and arguments that people have found controversial and have criticized. Initially, with respect to these past writings, I would try to respond to them, but by doing so, I would call attention to their arguments. Instead of having one article in one magazine, we would have two or three articles in separate magazines and the whole thing would be blown out of proportion. So, except under rare circumstances, I don't write responses to criticism.

AC: What is one place that you've traveled to that you most enjoyed? Have you ever traveled to any parts of the Muslim world?

SH: When I think of countries that I enjoyed visiting, that I would want to go back to, Italy would be one, Japan would be another. I've only been to

Indonesia once or twice and it seems like such a fascinating country. I guess India certainly. I've been to Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait for brief visits at conferences, and they are very interesting countries.

AC: What is one thing about you that most people would be surprised to know?

SH: A lot of people tend to think I'm a dogmatic ideologue, which I'm not. ❖

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