

# Was Huntington Right? Revisiting the Clash of Civilizations

MOHAMMED AYOOB\*

### ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt to revisit Samuel Huntington's controversial thesis about a clash of civilizations. Though the author has been an early critique of Huntington, he finds substantial evidence that corroborates Huntington's central thesis when he analyzes the American policy toward the Middle East through the prism of the clash of civilizations paradigm. He suggests that the pattern of double standards that are witnessed in American foreign policy toward the Middle East is an integral part of a world where supposedly immutable differences based on civilizations form the primary source of conflict. In order to support his argument the author draws on examples from several cases, such as the American policies toward the Israel-Palestine issue, America's position on Iran's nuclear enrichment program, American reaction to the Israeli raid on the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara, as well as Turkey's long-standing candidacy for membership in the European Union. In all, he finds startling double standards that fit Huntington's paradigm, for as he pointed out double standards are an integral part of a mindset that sees conflict in terms of clashing civilizations.

In this book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said states "nations... are narratives."<sup>1</sup> Civilizations are also narratives because they are nations writ large. As in the case of nations so in the case of civilizations the way one tells "stories" about "us" and "them," "heroes" and "villains" forms the basis on which the notion of civilizations colliding with each other is constructed. Even the term "dialogue of civilizations" denotes the need for inter-civilization conversation in order to avoid conflict. Conflict between civilizations is, therefore, a built in assumption that undergirds the concept of "dialogue of civilizations."

The term civilization may be fuzzier than that of nation, which is also slippery and malleable and is often dependent upon context for its definition, but that is the nature of all concepts based on subjective feelings rather than irrefutable objective criteria. However, for

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\* University Distinguished Professor of International Relations, Michigan State University, [ayoob@msu.edu](mailto:ayoob@msu.edu)

those who harbor these feelings they are nonetheless real and often deep-seated. The more convincing the narrative and the longer it has been in existence the

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greater attachment individuals have to their “nation” or their “civilization.”

Civilizations normally go beyond the boundaries of states and nations and often encompass more than one nation and/or state. Nonetheless, like the “nation” they evoke a “we” feeling often at the expense of denigrating and often demonizing “them,” that is those belonging to other civilizations. This is particularly the case with imperial civilizations, namely those that have ruled over peoples belonging to other civilizations. Intra-civilization conflicts among imperial powers do not detract from the commonality of their perceptions regarding their “subjects,” namely the people they rule over or have ruled over in the past. In modern terminology this is known as “racism.”

In fact, the Europeans appropriated the concept of “civilized,” a derivative of the term “civilization,” and applied it to themselves during the colonial era. In the colonial discourse, Europeans were referred to as the only “civilized” people with the subject peoples relegated to the categories of “barbarians” and “savages.” Eminent Scottish jurist, James Lorimer, justified European coloniza-

tion of Asia and Africa by arguing that powerful civilized nations had the duty of “guardianship” over savage and barbarian peoples.<sup>2</sup> A whole new theory of the “standard of civilization” was developed by European thinkers and colonial officials to deny non-European peoples and states juridical personality in international law and, thereby, “legally” subject them to discriminatory treatment.<sup>3</sup>

There are multiple factors that go into molding different peoples into one civilization. These include selective historical memories of shared experiences, perceived racial similarity, linguistic affinity, and common religion. Factors that contribute to shaping a common civilization do not remain immutable. They change over time and so does the definition of the boundaries of particular civilizations. Until recently Jews were excluded from the civilization known sequentially as Christendom, Europe, or simply the West. In fact, they were seen as the quintessential “other,” polluters of civilization, as portrayed for example in the character of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. This definition of Western civilization underwent a sea change in the second half of the last century and has been replaced in public discourse by the concept of a common Judeo-Christian civilization. Factors responsible for this change are too numerous and complex for me to address in this paper but they include the Christian West’s guilty conscience about the Holocaust and the increas-

ing financial and political clout of the American Jewish community.

By the 1990s, the idea of a common Judeo-Christian civilization was commonly accepted in the West and following the collapse of Soviet Communism political Islam was beginning to be perceived as the main challenger to Western ideological hegemony.<sup>4</sup> It was in this context that Samuel Huntington published in 1993 what was probably the most influential political essay of the 1990s in *Foreign Affairs*. Huntington argued that henceforth “The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.”<sup>5</sup>

To be honest I was not merely skeptical but hostile toward this thesis when it was first published in the summer of 1993 in *Foreign Affairs*. Like a whole host of academics, journalists, and public persons I considered Huntington’s analysis too simplistic. I was also critical of the fact that he had made religion the primary marker for his concept of “civilization.” I felt that while religion is no doubt important there are other indicators such as perceived racial and

linguistic affinity that are equally important in defining civilizations. I did not fully comprehend at the time how often in Western perceptions race and religion go together especially in European accounts of the encounter between Christendom and Islamdom and how terms such as “Saracens” and “Turks” were used in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Western discourse as synonyms for the terms Muslims or Islam. Even when “Christendom” mor-

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phed into “Europe” and eventually into the “West” its encounter with its immediate neighbor to the east was referred to as one between the West and Islam.

As a consequence of this realization, over the past few years I have been pondering over Huntington’s thesis and gradually revising my views. A few weeks ago I finally saw the light on the road to Damascus (more appropriately on the road to Jerusalem). The light shone in the form of the statement made by US Presidential-hopeful Mitt Romney in the Holy City that “Culture makes all the difference” an explanation he used to elucidate the difference between the development levels of Is-

raelis and Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> This statement combined with Romney's unqualified support for Netanyahu's bellicose policy toward Iran and his endorsement of Israel's stand that Jerusalem is the undivided and eternal capital of Israel made me realize that such a stand,

ply one standard to their kin countries and a different standard to others."<sup>7</sup> One of the greatest achievements of the Israel lobby and of Jewish Americans, in general, has been to transform the idea of America based on the Anglo-Saxon variety of a Christian civilization into

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one based on a common Judeo-Christian civilization. Multiple factors including American guilt about the Holocaust, the high motivation demonstrated by Jewish Americans to assimilate into American society and become "normal" Ameri-

cans, and the Evangelical obsession with the ingathering of the Jews in Palestine as a pre-requisite for the return of Jesus and the "end of days" helped in this transformation. America's largely unquestioning support for Israel is a corollary of the broad acceptance on the part of the American public that Christians and Jews, and therefore the United States and Israel, share a strong bond of cultural kinship and that this bond trumped all strategic considerations in American policy toward the Middle East, in general, and the Arab world, in particular.

As a consequence, American policies toward Israel, whether on the issue of Palestine or of Iran, have been remarkably skewed for reasons of perceived affinity based on a supposedly common civilization. It should have been clear from any objective perspective that from the time of its establishment Israel has been a strategic liability rather than a strategic asset when it comes to Amer-

which incidentally is not too different from President Obama's, could not be explained except by the variable of kinship based on a perception of common culture ("civilization" in Huntington's words). I also realized that any analysis of American policy toward the Middle East that excluded the variable of "civilizational affinity" between Christians and Jews and consequently between the United States and Israel will not be able to portray completely and honestly the main motive force behind many of America's policies toward that region. I realized then that the pattern of double standards that I had been witnessing in American foreign policy toward the Middle East was an integral part of a world where supposedly immutable differences based on civilizations form the primary source of conflict. Huntington had stated presciently that "A world of clashing civilizations...is inevitably a world of double standards: people ap-

ica's relations with the large majority of countries in the Middle East. This has been brought into sharper focus since the end of the Cold War when in Arab and Muslim perceptions the American-Israeli relationship has been reversed. Israel is no longer perceived as America's surrogate in the Middle East, as it was before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now, it is the other way around. The United States is seen as a willing tool of Israel when it comes to Middle Eastern issues.

This reality did not undergo change under President Obama despite the latter's initial rhetoric, especially his speeches in Istanbul and Cairo directed toward Muslim audiences during the first year of his presidency that may have suggested otherwise.<sup>8</sup> The ease with which Netanyahu has bullied Obama into making American policy conform to Israeli interests and the alacrity with which Obama has allowed himself to be bullied can only be explained through the medium of cultural kinship. Different analysts have explained this kinship with reference to different phenomena ranging from the power of the Israeli lobby to the clout of evangelical Christians and neo-conservatives. The outcome has been the same: American policy toward the Israel-Palestine issue has been largely dictated by Israel. This has permitted Netanyahu to act on the issues of occupation and settlements "like a man who, while negotiating the division of a pizza, continues to eat it."<sup>9</sup>

The fact that the Israeli narrative of the conflict is accepted hook, line, and sinker by Senators and Congressmen as well as most members of the executive branch in the United States can be explained only through the medium of cultural affinity. Even those American policy makers and publicists who have been mildly critical of Israeli policies that increasingly preclude a two-state solution have done so to save Israel from itself by preventing the Palestinian demographic time bomb from exploding in its face. The Palestinian narrative of dispossession, exile, and occupation and, indeed, of the demographic transformation of Palestine under the British

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mandate is not only ignored but treated as fictional.

This amnesia regarding the Palestine case is a direct descendant of the mindset that led Lord Balfour to declare that Britain was committed to establishing a homeland for European Jews in Palestine. This declaration that gave away another people's land to a third party not only ignored the existence of the huge Arab majority in Palestine – 90 percent at the beginning of the British mandate – it became the operative tool for the implementation of the agenda devised by the World Zionist Organization and encapsulated in the slogan that Palestine

was “a land without people for a people without land.” People that belonged to an “inferior” civilization were thus denied not only their legitimate rights

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over land but their very right to exist – they were turned into “non-people” by a stroke of a Balfour’s pen. Jewish settlement of Palestinian territories occupied in 1967 is a product of the same logic that shaped the Balfour Declaration and led to Jewish colonization of that part of Palestine that is now Israel. But all this is never factored into American policy because of its cultural links with Israel through the medium of a common Judeo-Christian civilization.

I can state with confidence that even if the situation had been reversed and the Arab lobby had possessed the degree of financial and political clout in Washington that the Israel lobby has today, American policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict would not have been much different from what it is today. This would be the case because Arabs and Palestinians are viewed by the majority of the American public as belonging to an alien civilization. The attempt by a hypothetically strong Arab lobby to use its financial and political power to shape America’s Middle East policy would have been seen as foreign interference in the American policy-making process – a label that does not apply to those groups that lobby on behalf

of the Israeli government. The inability of Saudi Arabia to affect American policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict despite its purchase of American arms amounting to hundreds of billions of dollars and its equally huge investment in the American economy bears clear testimony to this fact.

It is interesting to note in this context that the largest recipient of American largesse – Israel – has far more influence on American policy than the largest purchaser of American arms, Saudi Arabia. According to the latest figures provided by the Congressional Research Service, Saudi Arabia bought \$33.4 billion worth of arms from the United States in 2011 helping to raise the total arms sales by the United States in that year to an unprecedented whopping \$66.3 billion, more than three-quarters of the global arms market.<sup>10</sup>

The same set of double standards that determines American policy toward the Israel-Palestine issue is at work in relation to Iran’s nuclear enrichment program that is presumed by many in the West to be a stepping-stone towards nuclear weapons capability. What is remarkable in this case is that the sole country in possession of nuclear weapons in the Middle East – Israel – has led the charge in threatening attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities with the United States and Europe playing supportive indeed submissive roles. Hardly any mainstream commentator in the United States, except some brave souls like Kenneth Waltz, have dared to criticize





Photo: REUTERS, Jason Reed

Osbourne and Islam wave onstage during the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" on the Washington Mall.

the stupidity of this policy and argue that nuclear deterrence may actually make the Middle East a safer place.<sup>11</sup>

Israel's current rhetoric would have made sense had it put its own nuclear weapons on the table, accepted the idea of a NWFZ in all of the Middle East including Israel and Iran, and offered to sign the NPT and then made the point that it had the right to attack Iran if the latter did not accept this offer. But, denying Iran's right to go nuclear (assuming that that is what Tehran desires) while holding on to its own nuclear arsenal and delivery systems makes Israel appear self-righteous and devious at the same time. The argument that Israel needs nuclear weapons because enemies

surround it makes little sense in light of the fact that Israel is the dominant conventional military power in its neighborhood and perpetuating this dominance is an integral part of American policy toward the Middle East.

What makes the Israeli stance even "curiouser," to borrow a term from Alice in Wonderland, is the fact that thanks to its "kinship" with the United States and by extension with the West, Israel is repeatedly threatening a military attack on another member of the UN, Iran, without any fear of negative repercussions from the members of that august body for threatening international peace and security. Such repeated aggressive rhetoric by any other member of the UN

would have led the Security Council to go into overdrive and pass resolutions threatening the state expressing such aggressive intent with action, including military action, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

In this case, on the contrary, every escalation in the aggressive Israeli rhetoric has led to senior American officials rushing to Jerusalem not to warn it of dire consequences if it attacked Iran but to plead with the Israeli government to give the P5+1 more time through economic sanctions and by other means to prevent Iran from going nuclear.<sup>12</sup> Just

by Washington and other members of the P5+1. If this conclusion is correct, then should the same logic not apply to Israeli threats against Iran's nuclear facilities? No variable other than civilizational affinity can explain America's double standard policy on this issue.

An even more startling case of double standards – because it involved a member of NATO – was the American stance on the Israeli raid on the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara that was engaged in providing relief to a besieged Gaza. Nine persons of Turkish origin – including an American citizen – were killed in

international waters without a whimper of condemnation or even protest on the part of Washington. This is possibly the first time in recent history that the killing of a

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imagine if Iran or Egypt made the case that Israel is in violation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 by not withdrawing from occupied Palestinian territories and that this gives them the right to bomb Tel Aviv. Would Defense Secretary Leon Panetta be rushing to Tehran or Cairo to plead with Khamenei or Morsi to give the US and its allies more time to force Israel to withdraw by imposing ever more stringent economic sanctions on it? Or would the United States immediately convene a meeting of the UN Security Council to undertake harsh measures under Chapter VII of the Charter against Iran or Egypt for threatening international peace and security? One can reasonably assume that the latter would be the course of action followed

U.S. citizen by foreigners has not resulted in at least a formal public protest by the American administration. Was it because the American citizen was of Turkish origin and, therefore, perceived as outside the sphere of Western civilization even though Turkey has been a loyal American ally for half a century? Or was it because the tension between Turkey and Israel is perceived in the United States as part of a clash of civilizations in which the United States has to stick by its kith and kin? Both these explanations fit Huntington's paradigm for as he pointed out double standards are an integral part of a mindset that sees conflict in terms of clashing civilizations. One has to support one's kith and kin right or wrong.



However, the matter does not end there. There is evidence of a deep-seated ambivalence bordering on apprehension in Western policy making and opinion molding circles regarding Turkey despite the latter's membership of NATO and its long-standing candidacy for membership in the European Union (EU). This reflects the common Western perception that Turkey belongs to an alien civilization and, therefore, cannot be considered a trustworthy ally. The way Turkey's application for EU membership has been treated by that organization is a clear indication that the major European powers do not consider Turkey to be worthy of membership because it is not "European" in the sense that it does not belong to the Judeo-Christian civilization. In fact, French and German leaders have made this amply clear in their public statements.<sup>13</sup> The fact that applicants from the former Soviet bloc, several of them with dubious human rights records, who applied much later than Turkey have been awarded membership while Turkey has been kept waiting at the gates on one excuse or another clearly signifies that EU members consider Turkey to belong to a different civilization and, therefore, not worthy of membership of the European Union.

Western suspicions about Turkey surfaced very openly following the post-Islamist AKP's victory in the Turkish elections of 2002 and were heightened after its return to power in 2007. These

elections signaled a major re-orientation in Turkish foreign policy as Ankara, primarily because of economic and strategic imperatives and only secondarily because of religious affinity, sought to improve its relations with its Muslim neighbors in the Middle East. But, equally important, these elections also signaled the increasing consolidation of Turkish democracy and thus added to the Europeans' unease that their pet excuse of Turkey not being sufficiently democratic for entry into the EU may not work much longer. The roots of

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the current Western denigration of Turkey can be traced at least in part to this fear of the successful democratization of predominantly Muslim Turkey that would make its case for EU membership irrefutable.

Concurrently with democratic consolidation and the adoption of a more balanced foreign policy, Turkey's relations with Israel nose-dived following the brutal Israeli invasion of Gaza in December 2008 and the raid on the Mavi Marmara in May 2010. The democratically elected Turkish government had to respond strongly to these events because of public pressure. Many American policy makers and publicists, unable or unwilling to distinguish Turkish-Is-

raeli relations from Turkish-American relations, interpreted Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's condemnation of Israel's blockade of Gaza as a bid to cozy up to his Arab neighbors at the expense of Turkey's relations with not only Israel but also with the West in general. By conflating the

policy. Turkey's attempt to improve relations with its neighbors to the east and south was pejoratively termed "neo-Ottomanism" by the Western press and its prime exponent Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was harshly criticized for turning Turkey away from its traditional pro-western foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

### American policy toward the Middle East when analyzed through the prism of the clash of civilizations paradigm yields substantial evidence that corroborates Huntington's central thesis

This dichotomous portrayal of Turkey's foreign policy options, namely, that it had to choose between its relations with Western powers and its relations with its Muslim neighbors since good relations with both

two issues they signaled that for them Turkey's relationship with Israel was the yardstick they used to judge Turkey's relations with the United States, thus, demonstrating the close cultural affinity between Israel and the United States based on perceived common civilizational bonds. Therefore, it came as no surprise that Turkey's strong stand against Israeli policies and actions were interpreted by the Western press as Ankara's "betrayal" of the West.

Turkey's attempt to mediate between the major Western powers and Iran concerning the Islamic Republic's uranium stockpile went unappreciated in the West; indeed, the United States scuttled the effort in 2010 just as it seemed to be bearing fruit. And Turkey's subsequent vote in the United Nations Security Council against imposing additional sanctions on Iran seemed to offer further proof to Western powers that Turkey had adopted an "Islamic" foreign

were irreconcilable, was a clear indication of the "we" versus "them" syndrome typical of a clash of civilizations mindset among Western policy makers and publicists.

Even the recent deterioration in Turkey's relations with Iran over Syria is insufficient to convince many in Washington that Ankara has not in some way "sold out" to the Muslim world at the expense of its relations with the West. This zero-sum approach is once again a clear indication of a clash of civilizations mindset that demands that Turkey demonstrate its loyalty (often unrequited) to the West by distancing itself from its Muslim neighbors. When such an approach based on a rigid "we" versus "them" assumption is witnessed in the Middle East or Africa it is called "tribalism." When the same approach determines the policies of Western nations it is termed the "clash of civilizations."

American policy toward the Middle

East when analyzed through the prism of the clash of civilizations paradigm yields substantial evidence that corroborates Huntington's central thesis. While such an exercise may not be able to provide explanations for all American actions in the Middle East, it does demonstrate that one cannot fully comprehend the logic of American policy toward the Middle East, especially as it pertains to issues affecting Israel, unless one factors in the cultural kinship based on a common civilization, to use Huntington's term, that American policy makers strongly feel toward Israel and that acts as the filter through which they perceive Middle Eastern realities. This has been the guiding approach for America's policy toward the Middle East despite the fact that it often flies in the face of strategic logic and is politically counter-productive. In this case civilizational affinity trumps strategic logic and political reasoning. It seems that Huntington was right at least on this issue.

## Endnotes

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), p. xiii.
2. James Lorimer quoted in Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 49.
3. Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society*.
4. Mohammed Ayoob, "Challenging Hegemony: Political Islam and the North-South Divide," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), pp. 629-643.
5. Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), p. 22.
6. For details of Romney's remarks, see "Romney's 'Racist' Reference to Palestine Cul-

ture," *FactCheck.org*, (August 1, 2012), retrieved from <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/08/romneys-racist-reference-to-palestinian-culture/>

7. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," p. 36.

8. For a glowing tribute to Obama's support for Israel by a very influential member of the Israel lobby, see Haim Saban, "The Truth About Obama and Israel," *International Herald Tribune*, (September 4, 2012), retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/opinion/the-truth-about-obama-and-israel.html>

9. Avi Shlaim, "Obama and Israel: The Pessimistic Perspective," *The Antonian*, (Michaelmas Term 2010), p. 7, retrieved from [http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/Antonian\\_Michaelmas2010.pdf](http://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/Antonian_Michaelmas2010.pdf)

10. Thom Shanker, "U.S. Arms Sales Make UP Most of Global Market," *New York Times*, (August 26, 2012), retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/world/middleeast/us-foreign-arms-sales-reach-66-3-billion-in-2011.html?\\_r=1&emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/world/middleeast/us-foreign-arms-sales-reach-66-3-billion-in-2011.html?_r=1&emc=eta1)

11. Kenneth Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 4, (July/August 2012), pp. 2-5.

12. For example, see David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "To Calm Israel, U.S. Offers Ways to Restrain Iran," *New York Times*, (September 2, 2012), retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/03/world/middleeast/us-is-weighing-new-curbs-on-iran-in-nod-to-israel.html?emc=eta1>

13. For example, see "German, French Leaders Emphasize Opposition to Turkey Joining EU," *Hurriyet Daily News*, (May 11, 2009), retrieved from [http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/11621541\\_p.asp](http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/11621541_p.asp)

14. The term "neo-Ottoman" used in a pejorative sense especially to refer to Turkish foreign minister Davutoglu's conception of his country's foreign policy even found its way into multiple cables sent by the American embassy in Ankara to the State Department. See Robert Mackay, "Reaction to Leak of U.S. Diplomatic Cables, Day 2," *The Lede*, (November 29, 2010), accessed on *The New York Times* website at <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/29/updates-on-the-global-reaction-to-leaked-u-s-cables/?scp=1&sq=neo-ottoman&st=cse>. Also, see "The Davutoglu Effect," *The Economist*, (October 21, 2010), retrieved from <http://www.economist.com/node/17276420>