

# Clash of Civilizations without Civilizational Groups: Revisiting Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Theory

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**Abstract**—This paper is largely a response/critique of Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis. The overriding argument is that Huntington's thesis is characterized by failure to distinguish between 'groups' and 'categories'. Multinational civilizations overcoming their internal collective action problems, which would enable them to pursue a unified strategy vis-à-vis the West, is a rather foundational assumption in his theory. Without assigning sufficient intellectual attention to the processes through which multinational civilizations may gain capacity for concerted action i.e. become a group, he contended that the post-cold-war world would be shaped in large measure by interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. Thus, failure in providing a convincing analysis of multi-national civilizations' transition from categories to groups is a significant weakness in Huntington's clash theory. It is also suggested that so-called Islamic terrorism and the war on terror is not to be taken as an expression of presence of clash between a Western and an Islamic civilization, as terrorist organizations would be superfluous in a world characterized by clash of civilizations. Consequences of multinational civilizations becoming a group are discussed in relation to contemporary Western superiority.

**Keywords**—Clash of civilizations, groups, categories, groupism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

SAMUEL P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis, first published in 1993, was largely a response to Francis Fukuyama's End of History thesis. Fukuyama saw the fall of communism as the end of ideological battles. Western liberalism and capitalism had emerged victorious. Briefly speaking, history had ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Huntington was futuristic in his approach and focused on civilizations as the main unit of analysis [1]. He argued that the fundamental source of conflict in the post-Cold-War world would not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. Instead, he argued that the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict would be cultural. Although nation-states would remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, he argued that principal conflicts of global politics would occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. In short, Huntington predicted a world where global politics is dominated by clash of civilizations [2]. He goes as far as suggesting that the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations [3]. The civilizations identified by Huntington include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American

and possibly African [3]. Huntington's clash of civilizations theory has been criticized by many academics for being a broad-brush approach to conflict analysis and for being vulnerable to manipulation as a conflict intensifying cliché [4]. For others the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001, by so-called Islamic fundamentalists, constitute sufficient evidence for the presence of clash between a Western civilization and an Islamic civilization in the contemporary world [4]. The present paper is organized around three sections. First, it is argued that contemporary world affairs are not characterized by clash of civilizations as predicted by Huntington in 1993. So-called Islamic terrorism and the war on terror are not to be taken as an expression of presence of clash of civilizations. Second, it is argued that failure to provide an adequate, credible and convincing analysis of multinational civilizations' transition from categories to groups constitutes a significant weakness in Huntington's theory. Third, consequences of multinational civilizations becoming a group, characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action, are discussed in relation to contemporary Western dominance.

## II. CONTEMPORARY CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

There is little evidence suggesting a contemporary clash of civilizations of the kind predicted by Samuel P. Huntington in 1993. The U.S and its European partners, what Huntington labelled "Western civilization", remain far superior to other states, regions and civilizations in terms of economic, political, military, normative and structural power in contemporary world affairs. Apart from China, the West faces no significant challenge. The West continues to dominate international political, security and international economic institutions. Three out of the five permanent member seats of the United Nations Security Council are still held by members of the so-called Western civilization or simply the West. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization continue to reflect the interests of the West. Decisions made at the U.N. Security Council also continue to reflect the interests of the world's great powers although often portrayed as reflecting the general interest of international society. In short, despite the rise of China and Russia's attempts to revitalize as a great power in international politics, the West remains far superior vis-à-vis the "rest". Some African societies have made significant achievements, while others remain characterized by intra-state conflicts or politicization of ethnicity, often resulting from the West's

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divide and rule strategies. The Middle East, or the Arab world, remains socio-politically fractured and is also characterized by politicization of social identities, intra-civilizational animosity, rivalry and competition. We are witnessing a fierce competition between a Sunni-Islamic Saudi Arabia and a Shia-Islamic Iran, resulting in proxy wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. The bloody civil-war in Syria gives credence to the contention that political realism and its fundamental assumption of self-interest, remains rather crucial in comprehending contemporary world affairs. Both regional and other great-powers are heavily involved in the Syrian civil-war in pursuit of national interests. All the while the U.S. seems preoccupied with Asia i.e. North Korea's nuclear programs and the rise of China. In other words, the dominating source of conflict in contemporary world affairs is not cultural, as predicted by Huntington in 1993. Consequently, there is little evidence suggesting presence of clash of civilizations in contemporary world affairs. Huntington's clash of civilizations theory has been criticized by many academics who hold that it is a broad-brush approach to conflict analysis and is vulnerable to manipulation as a conflict intensifying cliché, e.g. [5]. For others the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in September 2001, by so-called Islamic fundamentalists, constitute sufficient evidence for the presence of clash of civilizations in the contemporary world [4].

Great deal of clash-literature, suggesting that the world is amidst clash of civilizations has surfaced since the attacks on the U.S. in September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Sharify-Funk summarizes the sum of this clash literature as follows:

"At the core of the new clash literature is an attempt to define Western values and identity in relation to—and at the expense of—a threatening Islamic "other". "The West" is portrayed as a fundamentally sound civilization, embodying the peak of idealism and human achievement, whereas Islam is characterized as a confounding diseased tradition that is rotten to the core. Whereas the West is inherently benign, peaceful (there is no critique of colonialism and the imperial era), and focused on the liberation of human potential, Islam is equated with violence, an irrational drive towards world domination, and an absence of human liberty. For each attributed virtue or positive quality of the West, Islam provides an idealized foil or contrast. The West appears without the taint of historical errors or injustices, while Islam is essentialized as the West's antithesis, or shadow" [4].

If multi-national civilizations overcome their internal collective action problems so that they can pursue a unified strategy vis-à-vis the West, clash of civilizations would be likely and possible. The West remains the sole multi-national civilization, capable of pursuing a unified strategy vis-à-vis other states, regions and civilizations. The common denominator of civilizations, capable of challenging the West seems to be that they are not multi-national e.g. China. Thus, so-called Islamic terrorism is not to be taken as an expression of a clash between a Western civilization and an Islamic civilization. Such clash would require that the Islamic civilization had become a unitary actor with capacity for

concerted action i.e. a group. In such world there would be little need for Al-Qaeda and the like. Consequently, it could be argued that so-called Islamic terrorism indicates absence of clash of civilizations in contemporary world affairs rather than presence of clash of civilizations. A unified Islamic civilization with capacity for concerted action would challenge the global domination of the West in a world characterized by clash of civilizations. In such world, terrorist organizations would be superfluous.

### III. CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS WITHOUT CIVILIZATIONAL GROUPS

It is too early to tell whether clash of civilizations will occur in the future and in which form. The contemporary absence of clash of civilizations does not constitute sufficient evidence in defense of the contention that clash of civilizations will not occur in the future. We simply do not know yet. It appears quite evident, however, that the contemporary world is not characterized by clash of civilizations, as predicted by Huntington in 1993. Moreover, Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis is characterized by failure to distinguish between 'groups' and 'categories'. He fails in providing a sufficient, credible and convincing analysis on multi-national civilizations' transition from categories to groups. Speaking on distinction between groups and categories, Brubaker writes:

"If by 'group' we mean a mutually interacting, mutually recognizing, mutually oriented, effectively communicating, bounded collectivity with a sense of solidarity, corporate identity and capacity for concerted action, or even if we adopt a less exigent understanding of 'group', it should be clear that a category is not a group [5].

Following the distinction between groups and categories, it becomes sound to suggest that the West remains the sole multi-national civilization that constitutes a group. This was also the case in 1993 when Huntington first published his theory. Without assigning sufficient intellectual attention to the processes through which multi-national civilizations may gain capacity for concerted action, he assumed that they will attempt to challenge the West's global dominance and compete with one another i.e. clash of civilizations. He goes as far as suggesting that the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations [3]. Multi-national civilizations overcoming their internal collective action problems, which would enable them to pursue a unified strategy vis-à-vis the West, is thus a rather foundational assumption in his theory. However, he failed in providing an adequate, credible and convincing analysis of multi-national civilizations' transition from categories to groups. It appears hard to imagine a world characterized by clash of civilizations in the absence of civilizational groups. Construction and crystallization of groupness on a national level i.e. nationalism is a prerequisite for the construction and crystallization of regional groupness. By the same token, construction and crystallization of regional groupness is a prerequisite for the construction and crystallization of civilizational groupness. Hence, the

essentiality of the following questions: Through which means and strategies may multi-national civilizations gain capacity for concerted action i.e. become a group? How can nations, regions and civilizations overcome their internal collective action problems? Huntington's ideas are largely underdeveloped in this regard. He essentially assumed that Western imperialism in the post-cold-war world would turn other civilizations into groups, resulting in a clash of civilizations. As previously discussed, this does not reflect contemporary world affairs. Multi-national civilizations have not turned into groups and have yet to overcome their internal collective action problems. In fact, most nations in Africa and the Middle East have yet to transcend ethnicity.

#### IV. REGIONAL OR CIVILIZATIONAL GROUPS AND WESTERN SUPERIORITY

So far it has been argued that the contemporary world is not characterized by clash of civilizations, as predicted by Huntington in 1993. So-called Islamic terrorism is not to be taken as an expression of presence of clash of civilizations. Rather, it could be taken as the quite opposite, as terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and the like would be superfluous in a world characterized by clash of civilizations. Failure to provide an adequate, credible and convincing analysis of multi-national civilizations' transition from categories to groups constitutes a significant weakness in Huntington's theory. He assumed that Western imperialism, in the post-Cold-War, world would prove sufficient in uniting other civilizations. This has yet to occur. What if, however, multi-national civilizations or merely regions became a group-characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action? This question constitutes the point of departure in what follows.

Evidently, the West is far superior vis-à-vis the 'rest' in terms of military, economic, political, normative and structural power. Two highly connected factors are crucial in relation to the comprehension of Western dominance in the contemporary world:

1. The West remains superior in terms of economic, political, military, normative and structural power.
2. Equally important but often underemphasized is that the West remains the sole multi-national civilization that constitutes a group, characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action. In other words, other multi-national civilizations, regions etc. do not constitute a group, as they are not characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action. They have yet to overcome their internal collective action problems.

These two factors are inextricably linked. They make sense only in a complementary relation. One is virtually insignificant in the absence of the other. The former tells a great deal about the means through which the West ensures its dominance and superiority. The latter tells a great deal about the ability to pursue a unified strategy. Equally important, it tells that other civilizations, regions etc. lack the ability to pursue a unified strategy vis-à-vis the West. Study of wars that have involved U.S. ground troops on foreign land since the

Second World War shows a pattern that is rather noteworthy in relation to the present discussion. Since the Second World War, the U.S. has only invaded societies characterized by internal division i.e. politicization of social identities. There are very few empirical examples, if any, of the U.S. invading a society that is characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action i.e. a nation that constitutes a group. Therefore, the common denominator between societies invaded by the U.S. since the Second World War appears to be lack of crystallization of groupness on a national level.

Majority of such societies are characterized by politicization of various forms of social identities e.g. religion, ethnicity etc. prior to U.S. invasion. Put differently, an inclusive supra-ethnic national identity had either not emerged or not crystallized prior to U.S. invasion. In a nutshell, such societies did not constitute a group prior to U.S. invasion. Either the U.S. lacks significant economic and political incentives to invade societies, characterized by inner solidarity and capacity for concerted action or the preceding indicates that crystallization of nationalism constitutes a significant shield against foreign intervention. The latter explanation appears more convincing. Lack of internal socio-political division i.e. crystallization of nationalism neutralizes the West's divide and rule strategies, which have so far proved rather efficient in ensuring Western supremacy. As already noted, substantial empirical evidence suggests that absence of internal socio-political division in a given society is sufficient in deterring U.S. invasion. Consequently, it appears rather difficult to envisage the U.S. or its Western partners invading a whole region, or an entire civilization that has become a group. Other states, regions and civilizations becoming a group constitute therefore a significant threat to contemporary Western superiority. Particularly, economic and military superiority has been instrumental in ensuring Western dominance. Evidently, states that have acted against the interests of the West have systematically been subjected to either economic sanctions or full-scale occupation and war. If crystallization of nationalism is sufficient in deterring invasion from the U.S., there is little, if anything, the U.S. and its Western partners can do once regional or civilizational groupness has crystallized. It would enable entire regions or civilizations to pursue a unified strategy vis-à-vis the West. Consequently, military or economic superiority of the West will be of limited significance. For instance, economic sanctions against the Middle East will prove inefficient provided that supra-national Arab groupness has crystallized. Full-scale war against a billion plus Africans makes even less sense provided that national and regional groupness has crystallized. In conclusion, the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict in the contemporary world is not cultural. In other words, global politics is not characterized by clash of civilizations. The West remains the sole multi-national civilization that constitutes a group. Other multi-national civilizations have yet to overcome their internal collective action problems and become a group. Multi-national civilizations or merely regions becoming a group poses a significant threat to the prevailing world order

i.e. Western dominance and superiority. Multi-national civilizations or regions will not match the economic and military strength of the West in the foreseeable future, even if they turned into groups. However, the ability to pursue a unified strategy enhances their leverage power significantly, which could potentially shift the global balance of power dramatically.

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