

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Dialectic of the Relationship Between Civilizations: The Power of History and the Dominance of Politics

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Abstract:

This article examines the dialectical relationship between civilizations—between convergence and conflict—which became clearly evident during the last century and the present one. One of its manifestations was the colonial movement, which created an atmosphere of hatred and superiority, leading to increased alienation. Under such circumstances, humanity was compelled to deeply reconsider the necessity of returning to the concepts and values of tolerance and coexistence.

These concepts, whether taken together or separately, create opportunities for dialogue, strengthen it, and make it possible at all levels. Through this, human beings can meet one another, making rapprochement between civilizations attainable and achievable.

Keywords : Dialogue , civilizations , Relationship , Rapprochement , Tolerance

INTRODUCTION :

An attentive observer concerned with human history and its heritage can note an

important observation: the nature of civilizations does not recognize the political borders of the states encompassed within them, nor does it

assign significant weight to the principle of sovereignty to which these states cling. In no way does it affirm the unity of the territories of the political entities that belong to its sphere.

Accordingly, international relations are fundamentally built between sovereign states possessing territorial unity—principles that should be respected by any party entering into relations with them. Likewise, the concept of a “dialogue of civilizations,” whether actual, presumed, or desired, implies the establishment of international interaction between political entities that are independent from one another and that enjoy sovereignty and territorial unity. This makes it appear as an alternative to “globalization,” which emerged from the new world order, and positions it as the most suitable path for overcoming the crises experienced by the peoples of the Global South. Consequently, it becomes a competitor to globalization in the century that marks the beginning of the third millennium.

Moreover, civilizations in general rely on temporal continuity that encompasses the past and the present and extends into the future. Meanwhile, discussion of current international relations places us before an immediate perspective that does not fully align with the historical outlook implied by the concept of civilization.

Thus, with all these facts, multiple and varied questions arise. The first among them is whether this anticipated and theorized “dialogue” between civilizations is truly a dialogue—or is it, in fact, a clash?

It therefore becomes necessary to examine the concepts included in this study in order to clarify their meanings for any researcher engaging with this intriguing and intricate subject.

Let us begin with the concept of “dialogue.” We are speaking of a human activity that takes place between civilizational entities, and thus we must understand the nature of this activity—its function and its limits.

Do we imagine a “dialogue” taking place between civilizations based on the Bakhtinian understanding¹ of dialogue (as an inherent characteristic of human language), which emphasizes the continuous generative-interactive aspect of language through the constant presupposition of another party receiving what one utters—even when one is speaking to oneself?

Do we imagine a “dialogue” taking place between civilizations based on the Platonic

model, as we know it from Plato’s enchanting dialogues, which illuminate, clarify, and deepen consciousness through an exchange between a conscious, knowledgeable, and experienced party and another who possesses lesser awareness, knowledge, and experience, and who elevates himself to the appropriate level of understanding—sometimes through seeking clarification, at other times by raising objections, and at yet other times by following the suggestions of the other?

Do we imagine a “dialogue” taking place between civilizations founded upon the Qur’anic model and the prophetic conduct in addressing the Other—inviting him to the true religion and guiding him to the straight path?

Do we imagine a “dialogue” taking place between civilizations based on cultural encounter? In that case, we would be compelled to consider the question of its effectiveness and efficiency, and to develop the necessary methods for conducting such dialogue in accordance with the required conditions for its success².

Or should we consider developing a new “model” specific to this dialogue? In that case, we may need to consider which parties should participate in formulating this model and defining its nature, its function, its tools, its channels, its levels, and other elements necessary for its effective performance in developing human relations.

Moreover, we must think about the purpose we seek to achieve through practicing this human activity. Do we want the dialogue of

¹ See examples of the meaning of this concept in: Jamil Saliba – *Al-Mu’jam al-Falsafi* (Philosophical Dictionary), Vol. 1, entry “Civilization,” Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, Beirut, Lebanon, 1982, pp. 475–477.

² Abdallah Al-Ash‘al, *Toward a Serious Dialogue Between ‘Islam and the West’*, Hot Issues, *Al-Hayat*, Issue 13282, Tuesday, July 20, 1999, p. 23.

civilizations to transform the “Other” into a likeness of the “Self”? Or to reduce the gap between the “Self” and the “Other”? Or should it strive to reach a “common word” between the Self and the Other—a principle to which both willingly consent and adhere? And finally, will the “dialogue of civilizations” we seek function primarily as a means of forming a cultural consciousness that provides a framework for the human relations we hope for in the third millennium? Or will it serve to revive the spirit of the “cultural state”¹ once again—a role envisioned for it in the protection of global peace? Or is “dialogue” itself the aim and the ultimate goal between the Self and the Other, with no purpose beyond dialogue itself?

Another matter is that dialogue between civilizations will inevitably unfold in the temporal realms of the “present” and the “future,” which will become present when it arrives. Yet time is a continuum and a flow, and the participants in the dialogue cannot, under any circumstances, leave the past aside. It will inevitably remain present in their minds in one form or another, casting its shadow on both the present and the dialogue at the same time. This also means that the participants must adopt a position regarding this past, which may be one of the main obstacles preventing the realization of dialogue between civilizations.

Results of a Reading of “Huntington’s Theses:

Huntington’s theses * and, more broadly, Western thought regarding the reality of the “Islamic threat” represent an intellectual current that provides a global vision—or a vision of the world from a Western perspective, placing the West within it—and, consequently, a vision of the relationship with Islam and Muslims and its implications for the West’s global position and role.

This intellectual current—due to the close relationship between thought and action in the West—does not remain separate from Western global policies and what they represent for the current situation of the Islamic nation. But what is new in this article that has provoked such extensive discussion and controversy?²

It may be that the concepts of civilization, culture, and identity proposed by Huntington have attracted criticism for their lack of precision and for their intertwinement. It may also be that the envisioned future of a conflictual world—between civilizations, cultures, and religions—knows less reason and negotiation and more of the self-centered fanaticism against the Other.

The model that projects this future may be rejected by proponents of global pluralistic models for interpreting international politics,

¹ See: His Royal Highness Prince Charles, *A Sense of the Sacred: Building Bridges Between Islam and the West*, Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Oxford, 1997, p. 10.

* The origin of Huntington’s book was an article published in the *Foreign Affairs* journal, which generated an unprecedented resonance that the journal had not experienced since its founding. Huntington later presented this theory to the public in a substantial volume under the same title, after removing the question mark. This is a

semiological indication that the proposal moved from the level of a hypothesis—which carried different viewpoints—to the level of an established theory based on a large number of facts and accepted axioms. (Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Dialogue of Civilizations in Light of Current International Relations*, Dar al-Kitab al-Marja‘, Damascus, 1st ed., 2001, p. 182)

² Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Dialogue of Civilizations in Light of Current International Relations*, Dar al-Kitab al-Marja‘, Damascus, 1st ed., 2001, p. 182.

who emphasize dialogue and cooperation. Huntington's characterization of Islamic borders as "bloody borders" centered on conflict—whether at the macro level (between civilizations) or at the micro level (between states from different civilizations)—may also be the subject of attack from defenders of Islam, aiming to counter accusations directed at Islam and Muslims, especially given the portrayal of Islam as the enemy of the future according to the West.

Furthermore, Huntington may be seen as representing the model of Western civilization, defending the necessity of maintaining its power, values, and interests. This position has been subject to philosophical and critical attack from those challenging the philosophical and intellectual foundations of this secular-materialist model and rejecting its consequences for humanity.

All of these, among others of course, were the main channels through which debate and discussion about the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis took place. Here, we raise the following question: what is new in the topics of this debate that makes them occupy such prominence, especially considering that many of them had already been addressed previously in studies by others and in various fields of knowledge?

For example, as Huntington himself noted, citing certain thinkers, interest in the role of religion and identity in societies and in international relations rose in the post-Cold War world. Numerous studies examined the effects of ethnic and religious conflicts as sources of threats to the stability of the new international

order. Even the events, facts, and developments they represented did not prevent Western and non-Western studies from analyzing them—albeit from different perspectives.

The results of this critical reading show that these theses constitute an acknowledgment that conflict is the West's approach toward the world and toward Muslims in particular, as it sees them and Islam as a uniquely characterized threat. This perspective stems from the way in which the civilizational and cultural dimensions inherent in the Islamic nation are perceived.

The findings of this critical reading can be summarized in the following set of points:

1. If some have rejected the "Clash of Civilizations" theses because they are based on a civilizational rather than a material perspective—allowing space for religion¹ — which is unusual in Western thought and theorizing under the "secularization of the study of international relations," Huntington's emphasis on the civilizational factor as a driving force for civilizations represents a fundamental shift in theoretical foundations. This is an issue that requires careful consideration and raises the question of the rationale behind this approach: is it related to what has come to afflict Western civilization in terms of weakness and erosion of power compared to other civilizations that have begun to reawaken their strength? ² .

In this regard, we observe that Huntington, at the conclusion of his analysis of the reasons for his focus on civilizations as drivers of international interactions, links the impact of the disappearance of the ideological foundations of

¹ Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Dialogue of Civilizations in Light of Current International Relations*, Dar al-Kitab al-Marja', Damascus, 1st ed., 2001, p. 182.

² Ibid, p. 183.

global conflict with the West's efforts to promote its values as universal values, maintain its military dominance, and support its economic interests—while generating counter-reactions from other civilizations on the other hand¹.

2. Under the heading “Civilizational Fault Lines,” the models and events he cites to illustrate the two levels of conflict—between Islamic civilization and Western civilization, and between the former and other civilizations²—are merely events and facts that analysts have traditionally interpreted based on factors other than the “clash of civilizations.” This raises the following question: why does Huntington now give them their “true” name, which he claims is the appropriate one? Does this mean that, after the West exhausted its political and economic tools and achieved its objectives through them, all that remains is civilizational masking? Does this not imply that Huntington perceives that Western dominance will not be complete through political and economic hegemony alone, but that civilizational—and thereby cultural—hegemony is also necessary for its full realization?

Along with this question, and at this point, the significance of other parallel questions previously raised regarding the same issue accumulates. Huntington mentions examples of clashes and confrontations—but he does not specify who is responsible for triggering them: the West or the Muslims? The Muslims or other peoples? However, he cites two conclusions—one from a Muslim thinker and another from a

Jewish Orientalist—both conveying the same meaning.

He quotes Akbar Ahmed as saying:

“The next confrontation will inevitably come from the Islamic world. The conflict will begin over a new international order, driven by the sweeping wave that extends across Muslim nations from Morocco to Pakistan.”³

He then cites Bernard Lewis saying:

“We are facing a void and a movement that far exceeds the level of issues, policies, and governments that pursue them. This is nothing less than a clash of civilizations—perhaps unofficial, but certainly a historical reaction from an old adversary of the Judeo-Christian heritage and the secular present, as well as their joint global expansion.”

Citing these two statements, in light of Huntington’s earlier analysis that one of the causes of the “clash of civilizations” is the West reaching the height of its power, implies that the clash is in fact a response and reaction to the challenge represented by Western secular power and expansion⁴.

I believe that reading this part of Huntington’s analysis in this manner may move us away from attacking his proposition of a clash between Islam and the West—as some critiques did in defense of Islam, rejecting the idea that Islam is conflict-driven, coercive, aggressive, or violent⁵. Rather, in light of this reading, we may shift to another kind of critique: one that targets Western hegemony and its manifestations, which

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

² Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³ Akbar Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege*, Al-Saqi Publishing, Beirut, Lebanon, 2004, p. 51.

⁴ Akbar Ahmed, *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵ Akbar Ahmed, *Ibid.*, p. 53.

the author himself acknowledges and admits as having effects on the “other,” as we shall see later.

Thus, we move from apologetic, defensive positions to offensive ones. We are not the source of the threat; rather, we are the ones exposed to threats. Consequently, our response and our reaction are what appear to constitute the “conflict.”

3. Under the following four headings: “*The West vs. the Rest*”, “*Torn Countries*”, “*The Confucian-Islamic Connection*”, and “*Implications for the West*”¹, our reading of Huntington’s analysis under these headings confirms what we have concluded earlier in this study regarding their purpose and significance: namely, the establishment of Western dominance in the “clash of civilizations,” and consequently, the responsibility of this dominance for triggering the clash on the part of the West, thereby warning and alerting the West to the necessity of taking appropriate measures against the Other. In other words², what requires attention in Huntington’s thought are his explicit, clear, and decisive statements regarding the clash between Islam and the West as a civilizational and religious confrontation; the solidarity among the peoples of a single civilization in facing other civilizations; and the anticipated Western policies toward other civilizations, especially the Islamic one.

However, an important point to note is that Huntington does not only portray Islam as a prospective enemy of the West—prompting some to defend Islam—but also highlights what

must be strongly considered: namely, how the West itself acts as an adversary toward Islam, Muslims, and other civilizations.

In fact, in both his first and second articles, Huntington issues multiple warnings to the West: the Other is awakening and is no longer a passive entity, but has become an active force returning to its roots and seeking to shape the world in non-Western ways. He therefore warns of a cultural threat coming from the South, which replaces the ideological threat that came from the East after the end of European colonialism. Given that American hegemony is waning, it follows that all of Western culture is affected. What we can record as even more significant are the measures that Huntington recommends. Here lies the main challenge for contemporary Islamic thought in confronting contemporary Western thought³.

There is no doubt that the issue of dialogue between civilizations and its predominance over the idea of clash or conflict has become a subject of intellectual debate and enjoys global attention today more than ever, especially in Third World countries⁴, particularly the Arab and Islamic nation. This is for several reasons, the most important of which are:

- In the past, expansionist ambitions and the desire for global dominance were limited in scope and irregular, pursued by conquerors within empires or ancient civilizations composed of peoples of multiple nationalities, religions, and cultures. These peoples coexisted within a tribal-political framework that

¹ Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Dialogue of Civilizations in Light of Current International Relations*, p. 201.

² Fadia Mahmoud Mustafa, *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³ Tariq al-Bishri, *The Concept of Modernity Between the Western and Islamic Worlds*, Dar al-Shorouk, 1996, pp. 47, 65.

⁴ Tariq al-Bishri, *Ibid.*, p. 3.

preserved their cultural autonomy and managed their own affairs. Today, for the first time in human history, the Western civilization—concentrated around its own ethnic core—appears more organized, effective, and realistic in marginalizing these cultures and dismantling their economic foundations on a global scale¹.

What is particularly notable and striking about this civilization, unlike its predecessor, is that it employed culture and food as essential weapons in its strategy for domination and the greedy exploitation of other peoples, aiming to destroy their culture and reduce it to mere folkloric artifacts², confined to retrogressive, nostalgic ideas that plunged us into the slippery slope of glorifying past ideologies³.

It is necessary to survey the most important writings that shaped the principal theoretical conceptions underpinning political behavior. This is justified by the fact that any intellectual or political behavior is invariably supported by a specific interpretive thought. The most significant writings can be summarized as follows:

1- The work *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama⁴. According to

Fukuyama, the “end of history” occurs when history reaches its peak—the “absolute moment”—which signifies the triumph of the rational form represented by liberal democracy in history. This, as he understands it, is a human experience that evolves in a continuous and coherent manner, and he believes this concept aligns with the thesis of the German philosopher Hegel on history⁵.

However, this rational form, realized in the absolute historical moment, is not the same as that presented and defined by Hegel in the state as the embodiment of objective right, nor that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Kant. Huntington’s thesis, in this context, represents merely the tip of the floating iceberg that captured attention and stimulated theoretical efforts and political initiatives, at a time when the international system was witnessing violent and bloody conflicts between peoples or ethnic groups that culminated in different civilizations, alongside a series of economic, military, and cultural policies reflecting attempts to impose the dominance of one civilizational model over others⁶.

On the other hand, numerous publications, global, regional, and local conferences and seminars have repeatedly addressed the issue of relations between the Self and the Other,

¹ Tariq al-Bishri, *Ibid.*, p. 348.

² Tariq al-Bishri, *Ibid.*, p. 349.

³ *Manbar al-Hiwar* Journal, Issue: *Science and Philosophy*, No. 27, 1993, Dar Al-Kawthar, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 4.

⁴ The origin of this book lies in an article of the same title, *The End of History*, which he wrote in 1989. In it, he addressed the inherent consensus within the liberal capitalist system as a human form of governance that was expanding across the rest of the world. He also proposed another idea: that this system represents the final stage in the ideological development of humankind and, consequently, becomes the ideal form of governance. In

other words, achieving this system constitutes the “end of history” in terms of further expansion, according to Francis Fukuyama.

The End of History and the Last Man, translated by Hussein Ahmed Amin, Al-Ahram Translation and Publishing Center, Cairo, Egypt, 1st ed., 1993, pp. 23–67.

⁵ Waduda Badran, *The Different Visions of the World Order*, Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo, Egypt, 1995, p. 139.

⁶ Abdel-Moneim El-Mashat, *The Structure of the New World Order*, Center for Political Research and Studies, Cairo, Egypt, 2006, p. 86.

between “us” and “them,” that is, between dialogue or conflict. In parallel, initiatives emerged from various international benevolent actors to reflect the meanings and objectives of dialogue: interfaith dialogue, cultural dialogue, cultural pluralism, and the promotion of a culture of peace and tolerance.

The intellectual and political arenas have been stirred by debates over the nature of relations between civilizations, between proponents of dialogue and advocates of conflict. Recording the comparative dimensions between the diverse approaches regarding the discourse on relations between civilizations is essential.

2- *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, Samuel Huntington – this book has been discussed previously.

3- *Reengineering the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis¹ : Although the term “clash of civilizations” is associated with the conservative thinker Samuel Huntington, Lewis was the first to introduce this term into public discourse. In Huntington’s book, the author refers to a key idea from an article Lewis wrote in 1990 titled *The Roots of Muslim Rage*:

“This is nothing less than a clash of civilizations, perhaps illogical, but certainly a historical reaction of an old rival to our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the global expansion of both.”²

Bernard Lewis developed close ties with the political camp of the neoconservatives in the United States since the 1970s. It is worth noting that the project of reengineering the Middle East is a product of this thinker. The U.S. Congress unanimously approved this project in 1983, adopting and integrating it into the strategic policy files for the following years.

It is also noteworthy that Lewis built all his theses on an interpretive framework asserting that Islamic thought has been antagonistic to Western thought—a view that, in his opinion, has deep roots going back to the revelation of the Qur'an. In his perspective, the claim that the Prophet Muhammad ε is the final prophet represents an exclusion of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

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¹ Born in 1916 in London, he came from a Jewish family. He developed an early interest in the Hebrew language, then studied Aramaic and Arabic, followed by Latin, Greek, Persian, and Turkish. He graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 1936,

specializing in the Near and Middle East, and later obtained a PhD in 1939 with a specialization in Islamic history.

² *Ma‘aber Journal – Online Journal*, Bernard Lewis, *The Roots of Muslim Rage*, translated by Akram Al-Taki.

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