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# The Clash of Civilizations: A Historical Perspective

[1]Mohamad Zaidin Mohamad, [2]Kamaruzaman Yusoff, [1]Mohd Taufiq Abd. Talib,
[1]Raja Hazirah Raja Sulaiman, [1]Nik Murshidah Nik Din, [1]Zaiton Mustafa,
[1]Normila Noruddin Che Ahmad, [1]Noor Anida Awang, [1]Rahimah Embong and [1]Najihah Abdul Wahid
[1]Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Islamic Civilization, University Technology Malaysia, Malaysia

**Abstract:** Clash among humans, either individually or in groups is a normal phenomenon from forgotten times because interaction among humans is not always positive. Clashes can occur with the intention to control, protect interests to show-off to obtain natural resources and so forth. Thus, the question is why is this aspect of clashes exaggerated until, it has become a priority and imperative in interactions between humans and civilizations. Therefore, this study will survey the history behind the emergence of the term clash of civilizations from its beginning until recent times.

**Key words:** Clash of civilizations, Huntington, September 11, Islam, civilizations

## INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning, the idea of clashes was found to have emerged in the West (Nefeily, 2009). The writer observes three main reasons that might have attracted the interest of Western scholars to pursue vigorously and exaggerate the idea on the clash of civilizations. Firstly Western colonization, especially colonization of the 3rd world, needs some vindication in order to convince the international community about their actions. Secondly, due to the political and economic interests of the West, the vindication given in the form of the idea on the clash of civilizations would help the West to continue with their policy and agenda of colonization. Thirdly, the thinking and politics of the Western civilization is centred on the intention to solely fulfil the physical needs. In other words, it emphasises more on the question of gains only (the ideology of the dollar) (Nefeily, 2009).

Chronologically, the history of the clash of civilizations can be seen from 3 stages whereby the aspect of development and impact in these 3 stages has differences. The 3 stages are:

- Before the theory of clashes by Huntington
- After the theory of clashes by Huntington
- After the September 11 tragedy

## BEFORE THE THEORY OF CLASHES BY HUNTINGTON

Matthews (1926) 1st used the term clash of civilizations in his book Young Islam on Trek: A study in the clash of civilizations, published in 1926. This book focused on the issue of secularism in the Muslim world. He saw the Western influences that were spreading the culture of entertainment, promoting the spirit of a narrow form of nationalism, changing the culture of Muslim women and introducing a secular educational system which would eventually bring about the collapse of the Islamic civilization. With deep enmity and driven by an interpretation of the al-Qur'an that was unfair and inaccurate, he alleged that the al-Qur'an is the permissive gospel of Muhammad. Islam was portrayed, as expanding by using force, especially in North Africa, the Arab Peninsula, Syria, Iraq and Iran (Nefeily, 2009).

Francis Fukuyama is another scholar who played the role of rekindling the term clash of civilizations by patronizing the Western civilization and belittling other civilizations. Fukuyama's idea can be seen in the article entitled: The End of History which was published in Foreign Affairs in 1989. He expanded this idea into a book entitled: The End of History and the Last Man, published in 1992. He foresaw that with the fall of the Soviet regime, the democratic ideology cradled by the West would succeed in controlling the world. Fukuyama also envisioned that with the success of this ideology, the West would be at the pinnacle and no other ideology or power would be able to challenge the West. In his book, Islam is seen as an ideology that could pose a threat to the West. Hence, he then alleged that Islam was unable to rise again from the faltering and challenge the powers of the West (Fukuyama, 1989).

**Corresponding Author:** Mohamad Zaidin Mohamad, Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), 21300 Gong Badak, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

Then in September, 1990 (Sozen, 2007) Bernard Lewis, a historian from Princeton talked about the clash of civilizations by saying:

> It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against the Judeo-Christian heritage, the secular present and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on the side should not be provoked into an equally historic but equally irrational reaction against that rival

In this study, Lewis gave an extremely negative impression about Islam by alleging that Islam instils in its followers an attitude of hate and encourages violence. According to him, the hate is targeted towards the West because of the principles and beliefs held by the West. He also refuted that Islam advocates tolerance and instead accused Muslims of claiming that the principles and beliefs of the West are the devil's policy and an enemy of God. Attacks by Lewis on Islam are more characteristic of cradling the imperialistic idea whose intentions are towards economic and political interests. This is clear when he unreservedly justified the attacks by the West on the Muslim world, as a part of the natural development of human history and needs to be accepted with an open mind because it is a sort of treatment to what he refers to as the historical disease of past imperialistic experiences. He also assumed that the conflict between the West and Islam is a clash due to stubbornness, poverty, prosperity, wholesomeness, glamour and destitution (Nefeily, 2009).

Besides that Lewis, also accused the Muslims of being outraged with the West because Islam had rejected the principle of democracy and could not accept the competition from the West which possessed a competing world religion, a distinctive civilization inspired by that religion and an empire that was no less ambitious in its claims and aspirations. The fanaticism of Lewis can be evaluated easily when during an interview he asserted that Islam and Christianity would clash not only because of differences but also because of the resemblances that exists. According to Lewis these are 2 civilizations, geographically adjacent which are inevitably brought into conflict not because of their differences but because of their resemblances.

Nevertheless according to Said (1998), the writings of Lewis are too negative and loop-sided because Lewis assumes that Muslims only think about how they can destroy and annihilate the West and the whole world.

## AFTER THE THEORY OF CLASHES BY HUNTINGTON

Huntington (1993)'s article entitled 'The Clash of Civilizations' which was published in the Foreign Affairs journal had created much academic and political debate (Norris and Inglehart, 2002). This study was assumed to be among the colonizing strategies of the West which placed their colonizing policies, as a natural development of human history. Hence, Huntington had expanded the idea of clashes by scholars before him such as Matthews, Fukuyama and Lewis (Said, 1998). Huntington had indeed succeeded in overshadowing the reputation and controversy brought about by the scholars before him because of 2 reasons:

His status, as a professor and director of the strategic centre in one of the most prestigious universities in the world, namely Harvard University had worked in the White House under President Jimmy Carter with a significant influence on America's administrative policy (Etzioni, 2005).

The global situation after the Cold War was still unstable. Huntington's idea on clashes was provocative in nature and this gave way for more significant clashes from ideological clashes to clashes of civilizations (Naji and Jawan, 2011).

Huntington had succeeded in shocking the academic and political stage with his provocative and prejudiced exclamations (Etzioni, 2005). According to the chief editor of Foreign Affairs after Huntington's article was published in 1993, debate on the clash of civilizations became a hot topic of discussion and it continued for about 3 years. Although, after that the level of controversy had decreased, the issue concerning the clash of civilizations was continued to be discussed until the controversy resurfaced following the September 11 tragedy (Ashfaq and Hussein, 2014).

Numerous studies and papers on the clash of civilization were published from 1993-2001. This proves Huntington's success in rekindling the discussion on the clash of civilizations. Hence from the aspect of factual validity, credibility and accuracy of arguments are not at par with his success, as in the initial aspect. The last study on clash of civilizations before the September 11 tragedy was two civilizations and ethnic conflict: Islam and the West by Jonathan Fox. The findings of the study were published in the Journal of Peace Research in July, 2001. Fox summarized the findings by saying that from a global perspective, there were no significant changes that took place that involved ethnic clashes after the Cold War.

According to Fox (2001), this finding is consistent with previous studiesm, such as the study by Russet, Oneal and Cox which found that clashes in the same civilization were more prevalent compared to clashes between different civilizations; Henderson found that culture did not have a direct impact on clashes between civilizations, Henderson and Ellingsen showed that political aspects had a greater influence on clashes between civilizations. However according to Fox, findings had minimally supported Huntington's idea by showing that there was a slight increase in ethnic conflicts between Muslims and the West which was at a rate of increase of 1.3%, i.e., from 5.6-6.9%. Nevertheless for the researcher, the findings are not significant enough to conclude that Islam is the main threat to the West as mentioned by Huntington (1996). The researchers reasons are that a rate of increase of 1.3% is too small to support Huntington's assumptions which is so controversial by assuming that Islam will become the biggest threat to the West. Western scholars themselves among them being Prince Charles and Esposito (1997) had refuted Huntington's statement. In a study by Glynn, he said that cross-cultural conflict is not as serious, as envisioned by Huntington (Ellis, 2007).

Following are several conclusions from criticisms on the idea of clashes of civilizations by Huntington:

The clash of civilizations is assumed to be a concept that is inaccurate and incomplete. Critics find that the conflict was caused by various factors and the differences in the civilizations do not have a clear role in this issue (Hunter, 1998; Ahrari, 1997; Sezgin, 2002). For example, Shireen T. Hunter argued that the conflict between Islam and the West was caused by the imbalance in the political and economic structure. Huntington was also criticized for taking lightly the role of the West in debilitating the relationship with the Islamic world and exaggerating the differences that exist between the 2 civilizations (Ahrari, 1997). According to Ikenberry (1997), Huntington's idea is nothing more than a call for a new Cold War with military intervention (Rubeisten and Crocker, 1994). Huntington seems to hold on to a monolithic civilization concept that sees the West, as the ultimate civilization and denies the special characteristics that exist in the other civilizations (Halliday, 1996; Monshipouri, 2001). This kind of a stance leads to an Americanization policy which intends to Americanise the other civilizations and thus is the actual cause of the clashes (Kurth, 2001). Hence, if it is true that the differences in civilizations are the cause, then how can Huntington explain the horrible treatment received by the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq when they are from the same civilization? However, Turkey had formed a good relationship with Israel in the 1990's when Israel was having problems with the Arab world and Iran, although Turkey and Israel were from different civilizations (Hunter, 1998).

Inconsistent allegations, unreliable methods and unstable resources had become the point of criticism against Huntington (Erdem, 2002). For example, Robert Marks alleged that Huntington had depended extensively on secondary sources and he did not have the expertise on Islamic, Chinese or Japanese civilization (Said, 1998). According to Said, Huntington's view that Islam is a threat is an orientalist propaganda that intends to glorify the West and blind the other civilizations (Kalin, 2001). This is evident in writings by Bernard Lewis that seem to be prejudiced and unfair to Islam which became the main reference by Huntington (Said, 1998). The examples given by Huntington are disputable. The Gulf War for instance was more a clash of interests but Huntington sees it as a clash of civilizations. The question is why did the coalition that was formed to confront Saddam Hussein involve several Islamic countries, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Ahrari, 1997; Mohamadian, 2012). A similar criticism was made by Hunter regarding the issue of Armenia-Azerbaijan which Huntington saw, as a clash of civilizations. Hunter on the other hand was of the view that Iran had a closer relationship with Christian Armenia compared to Muslim Azerbaijan (Hunter, 1998). Sato (1997) had questioned how Huntington could suggest that the West seek the support of Japan to counter the Islamic-Confucius coalition, although he had previously labelled Japan, as the main economic threat to the West.

Hence, due to the weak points in Huntington's arguments as stated earlier, the clash of civilizations is not suitable to be considered a theory based on previous studies but more towards predicting future developments and suggestions to America in order to formulate foreign policy and national security (Yusoff and Soltani, 2012). This is not unusual because Huntington was among the advisers to the Pentagon in 1994 when his article was the topic of discussion around the world. This means that Huntington's writing has a political and economic motive regarding America and the West. Discussions on the clash of civilizations are just brief predictions that are justified by political, economic or even military action in the future. Most of the leaders from the West realize that with the end of the Cold War, the West needs to find new adversaries to safeguard its interests. Islam and China are the most suitable victims to replace the Soviet Union.

## AFTER THE SEPTEMBER 11 TRAGEDY

The September 11 tragedy in 2001 proved to be a turning point in discussions on the clash of civilizations. The tragedy not only rekindled the debate among academic and political scholars but more importantly, the tragedy seemed to substantiate the theory on the clash of civilizations, although in reality it is not so. This tragedy had also made room for those supporting Huntington to counter attack those against the clash of civilizations theory (Jones, 2002).

After the September 11 tragedy, the mainstream mass media's role has become more evident by elaborating again on Huntington's idea of clashes. The strong influence of Huntington's idea of clashes after the September 11 tragedy was seen in topics that emerged in the influential print media in America, such as the New York Times. Among the topics focused on in an effort to blame and humiliate Islam and to further increase the level of animosity towards the Muslim world were 'This is a Religious War, Yes, This is about Islam, Islamic Rage, Muslim Rage, Islamic Anger, Muslim Anger, The Core of Islamic Rage, Jihad 101, The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror, Faith and the Secular State, The Force of Islam, Kipling Knew What the US May Now Learn, Al-Jazeera: What the Muslim World Is Watching, The Real Cultural Wars, The Revolt of Islam, The One True Faith, The First Holy War and Feverish Protests Against the West Traced to Grievances Ancient and Modern'. After the September 11 tragedy, the clash of civilizations concept had became entrenched in the minds of the West, including the diplomats, academicians, analysts and world leaders.

Huntington's idea of clashes emphasises the differences, as the cause of the clashes between civilizations without first examining in-depth and fairly the actual factors that contribute towards the clashes, such as political and economic interest. The situation was similar in the West, especially regarding the American leadership after the September 11 tragedy. They tried to confuse the people and the world community instead of blaming their unfair policies especially those concerning the Muslim world. They tried to conceal the main cause of the Muslim community's anger which was the Palestine and Israel issue (Al-Bashayreh, 2012).

This is evident from the speech by Bush during the Congressional Meeting after September 11 in which he said, we are attacked not because of what we do but because of who we are enemies of freedom are threatening civilization because we believe in progress, pluralism and tolerance and we face enemies that hate not the policies, but the existence, tolerance of openness and creative culture (Abrahamian, 2003). These words clearly portray the adamant attitude of the American leadership that will not admit to its mistakes and adversities. The policies and actions of the West towards the Muslim world, particularly the Americans after the September 11 tragedy were highly influenced by Huntington's idea. The attack on Iraq and Afghanistan are 2 examples of the effect and influence of Huntington's idea of clashes on the thinking of leaders from the West, especially America and Britain.

The next question that needs to be discussed is whether the September 11 tragedy is a clash of civilizations, as it is believed and propagated. The researcher is of the view that the September 11 tragedy was actually not a clash of civilizations based on 3 main reasons such as:

Although, the West had tried to put Islam, as the target of stricture for the attack of Al-Qaeda, hence the Al-Qaeda does not represent Islam. The debate related to Islam and terrorism was frequently held after September 11. The conclusion is that Islam is a religion that dismisses violence. Islamic scholars and the West had substantiated this statement (Esposito, 1992; Boroumand and Boroumand, 2006).

The campaign to battle American violence in Afghanistan got the clear support from the Muslim world. Iran had given its support while Turkey played an active role in the campaign. This shows the coalition against violence surpasses the limits of the civilizations. On another note, anti-American sentiments were not only limited in the Muslim world but it also occurred in the Western Europe (Pfaff, 1999; Boniface, 2001). These sentiments evolved not due to the difference in civilizational values but more because of the American policies on Central Asia. America was criticized for its policy of supporting Israel in the Palestinian issue and also because of the understanding built with the local regimes that undermine the Palestinian sovereignty (Fuller, 2002).

Newsweek in its December, 2001 issue had published Huntington's article entitled, 'The Age of Muslim Wars'. This study is interesting enough to warrant a study on it because it can be the main reference in understanding Huntington's thoughts about September 11 and his relationship with the clash of civilizations. He seems to deny the idea on the clash of civilizations held before this. He stated that the clash of civilizations might occur but not necessarily occur. He also stated that wars that

involve Muslims are caused by general reasons, specifically political and not because of religion. He countered his previous views that Islam, West clashes were caused by differences in civilizations without discussing the political aspect. He also admitted that the Muslims outrage towards the West was because of the support of the West for governments that were corrupt, ineffective and tyrannical. More interestingly, Huntington also assumed that the outrage towards the West could be reduced if American policies towards Israel changes. In the same study, Huntington begins to talk about peace and world harmony. Briefly Huntington's article 'The Age of Muslim Wars', needs special attention towards revaluating the idea on the clash of civilizations (Erdem, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

What is interestingly observable in the emerging history of the clash of civilizations is that the term gets world attention when a world-class tragic event occurs or has occurred. The 2 events that reflect this situation are the article by Huntington, clash of civilization in 1993 which was prevocational and the September 11 incident in 2001 in America. The September 11 tragedy could be deemed, as a world political tsunami. Society should put issues pertaining to the clash of civilizations, as the main issue because it involves world stability and peace. The September 11 tragedy had in particular, raised the awareness of society that terrorism and its dangers can occur anytime and anywhere, if these issues that involve the question of peace, justice and truth are not given due attention.

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