

Encyclopaedia Entry for “The Clash of Civilizations” (Samuel P Huntington 1927 – 2008)

The Clash of Civilizations¹ was a theoretical and predictive paper written in 1993 by Samuel P. Huntington, a Harvard professor and former political advisor to former Vice President Hubert Humphrey (1965-69) and President Jimmy Carter (1976-80).

In his theory, Huntington argued that the nature of conflict in the post-Cold War period was changing. He later expanded these ideas into “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order”² published in 1996.

Huntington argued that the Western political and military dominance that had prevailed before and after the fall of the Soviet Union would be challenged by a new dominant source of conflict. This perspective contrasts with Francis Fukuyama³ who argued that the West had defeated the Soviet Union with democracy and capitalism.

To give historical context to Huntington’s theory, it was written during a period marked by significant global turmoil. Across the world, major conflicts were either ending or erupting. Examples of conflicts ending were the Iran–Iraq War in 1988; and the Soviet Union’s difficult and humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.

During the same period, new and highly consequential conflicts began. These included: the first Gulf War in 1991 that reshaped politics in the Middle East; and the Bosnian War in 1992 that brought devastating violence and genocide to Europe, events not seen since the second world war.

In short, his argument was written at a moment when international events were shifting rapidly, and the global order appeared particularly unstable.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs*, 72.3 (1993), 22-49, doi:10.2307/20045621.

² Samuel P Huntington and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³ Francis. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Penguin, 1992).

Huntington argued that the primary reasons conflicts occurred, such as competing political ideas or economic interests in the world, were moving into a new phase where culture would matter more than anything else.

In Huntingdon's own words, 'the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural'⁴. He thought that future tensions would come from differences in religion, ethnicity and nationalism between major cultural groups rather than from political or economic disputes.

Huntington grouped the world into seven civilisations as characterised by his cultural definitions of ethnicity, religion and nationality, namely: Western; Confucian (China); Japanese; Islamic; Hindu; Slavic-Orthodox ;and Latin America. He classed Africa as a possible eighth and predicted that 'The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future'⁵.

The article had a host of critics, but it also had its supporters. One criticism of the article was that it lacked empirical evidence, Richard Denemark et al (2023) argued:

the 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis is theoretically and empirically suspect. Ethnopolitical differences had long been an important element in political violence, but those that crossed 'civilizational' lines were neither dominant nor increasing with the USSR's disappearance.⁶

Other critics, such as Robert Kaplan⁷ postulated that other issues, such as the environment, poverty and inequality, would be the dominant factors of the 21st century, especially in Africa.

⁴ Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations?*, (New York, Foreign Affairs, 1993), p.22

⁵ Ibid.p.22

⁶ Robert A. Denemark, Matthew J. Hoffmann, and Hasan Yonten, *Religion and Diplomacy: The Clash of Civilizations as Historical Libel* (Basel: Histories MDPI, 2023), p.47

⁷ Robert D Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly*, 273.2 (1994), pp. 44–77

<<https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a4b53e11-7556-30cb-87cb-3969a6e9ada0>>.

Critics in the Islamic world argued that Huntington's description of Islam exaggerated cultural differences and contributed to growing tension between East and West. According to Minhas Khan⁸, Huntington's argument ignored the diversity of Muslim societies and overlooked political, economic, and historical reasons for conflict. As a result, they believed that his thesis risked spreading fear, reinforcing stereotypes, and making conflict more likely rather than helping to prevent it.

Supporters of the theory point to his predictions, specifically that of the rise of China both economically and militarily to challenge Western hegemony and Islamic fundamentalism. Their claim that Huntington's ideas, especially concerning Islam, may have influenced U.S. policymakers after 9/11 is reasonable, but it does need clarifying.

While no administration ever formally adopted his thesis, his arguments still helped shape the wider 'political discourse'⁹ at the time. Huntington's work influenced how some commentators interpreted 9/11, causing his civilizational definition to be used in debates. His theory may have produced the environment in which policy was discussed, rather than shaping policy itself.

Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* is still a significant reference point in discussions about global conflict and cultural identity. While still widely debated, the theory continues to shape how scholars and commentators think about the forces influencing international relations in the post-Cold War era.

⁸ Minhas Majeed Khan, 'Is a Clash between Islam and the West Inevitable', *Strategic Studies* (Islamabad), 36.2 (2016), pp. 1–23.

⁹ Zahra Seif-Amirhosseini, 'A Critical Reassessment of Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" Thesis', *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 30.2 (2013), pp. 42–76 (p.42) doi:10.35632/ajis.v30i2.306.

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