



THE **CLASH** OF **CULTURES**

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The author would like to thank Dr. Allison Greene-Sands and Darby Arakelian for their insightful commentary and constructive critique of this article. Trust me if I had taken all of their suggestions it more than likely would have been a better paper, wait, I did incorporate all. However, any omission or glaring mistake, I can only blame on myself, or our dogs for getting up on the desk and by paw on keyboard inserting their own “dogma.”

*"It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. 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."*¹

Samuel Huntington penned this iconic passage in his 1993 Foreign Policy article, "Clash of Civilizations," which thrust into academic and public discourse his notion of the West versus Islam. A fringe academician and writer at the publication of his article, Huntington was seen as prescient on the day after 9/11 when the perception of "Islam" went from being a religion to an entire civilization bent on the destruction of "the West." In Huntington's 1996 book of the same title, his thesis received more attention and references, but the notion of a civilization identity persisted. Huntington saw monolithic and monotheistic civilizations whose "fault lines" of culture grinded and grated against each other, shearing away little of the core granite of civilization identity. Edward Said saw Huntington's "civilizations" as "...the shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents

and countercurrents that animate human history..."² Or, more simply, the old Cold War bipolar frame with new faces.

Much ink was and still is being spilled over the notion of civilizations, more ancient in genesis and stronger in indemnity than nations, clashing at momentous times in the history of humanity, with the biggest civilizations on the block being the West and Islam. The amount of ink indicates still powerful beliefs at work when it comes to explaining current events, whether they be borne of conflict such as the activity of ISIS, or isolated singular terrorists attacks. Wrote Huntington, "The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other's Other. The 20th-century conflict between liberal democracy and Marxist-Leninism is only a fleeting and superficial historical phenomenon compared to the continuing and deeply conflictual relation between Islam and Christianity."⁴

The clash of anything sells, from the band of the same name to the Clash of Clans video game. But it is hard to clash with anything that isn't "clashable" or unified enough to represent contrary and enduring beliefs and values. In Huntington's case, deeply-seated religious thought has been grafted on a billion Muslims. As such,

1. Huntington, S. "Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs, 1993, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>

2. Said, E. "The Clash of Ignorance." The Nation, October 22, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/>

3. Huntington, S. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

Islamists and Islamic extremists are wrongly painted with the same brush of Islam. The demarcation between age-old civilizations withstands weathering. It plays well to those looking to find a clash or an enemy.

Fouad Ajami wrote in 2008, “Rather than Westernizing their societies, Islamic lands had developed a powerful consensus in favor of Islamizing modernity. There was no ‘universal civilization,’ Huntington had observed...”⁴ Attributing a supra-cultural phenomenon to “the West,” and casting a sweeping geography as the home and purveyor of a religion, Ajami agreed with Huntington. Humanity, however, is not universal, nor is it expressed in thousands of messy culture groups. Instead, it is just a reflection of the survival of the fittest civilizations. Countered scholar Edward Said, shortly before his death, “...the major contest in most modern cultures concerns the definition or interpretation of each culture, or for the unattractive possibility that a great deal of demagoguery and downright ignorance is involved in presuming to speak for a whole religion or civilization. No, the West is the West, and Islam Islam.”⁵

One of the primary problems with Clash of Civilizations is that Huntington called his fault lines “cultural” and defaulted to the tried notions of religion and the economy promoting yawning divides that starkly separate out huge

chunks of people. The divides first sequester then reinforce civilization identity and to Huntington, that identity is expressed in very few global permutations.

We are two years past when the notion of Counter-Insurgency or “COIN” dominated the conversation in the security arena, and yet Islamic extremists seem to proliferate everywhere and often. If one’s gaze can be interrupted from headlines and videos of ISIS, Boko Haram, Al- Qa’ida and turned toward what is reported back from the Department of Defense and other US government deployments and assignments overseas, the West vs. Islam polarization loses its luster. If anything, the clash of civilizations has become a clash of cultures (the use of clash here has no relevance to the expected violence from the West and Islamic apocalypse), where groups align based on local beliefs and features like kinship, land, or shifting alliances based on cultivation or herding of lands that do have antiquity. Or, perhaps their alliance is based on religion that is a mix of local ritual and belief, whereas connections to any ideal monotheism may be in name only. These are the variables that define cultures, and clashes do erupt and run the gamut - from violence to negotiations. But Huntington and his followers try to get us to bundle all of these groups and identities together and brand them a civilization because the world has been explained to us this way.

In 2013, the reigning Generals of US land forces, Ray Odierno, James Amos and William McRaven, penned

4. Said, E. “The Clash of Ignorance.” The Nation, October 22, 2001, <http://www.thenation.com/article/clash-ignorance/>

5. Huntington, S. The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

Strategic Landpower: Clash of Wills as a rudder shift in how the US goes to war; as a preamble, it defined a much different and more complex geopolitical landscape than one filled with metaphorical arks that go bump in the waters - some more often and with violent consequences. The Landpower whitepaper is instead a response to the messiness of an unsettled world filled, “.... with the threat of hybrid warfare, involving multiple entities; the increasing ability of non-state actors to de-stabilize entire regions and challenge national forces; the complexity of rules of engagement that constrain one side and enable the other to operate with near impunity “amongst the people”; and, importantly, the increasing pace and mutability of human interactions across boundaries, through virtual connectivity, to form, act, dissolve, and re-form in pursuit of hostile purposes.”⁶ Whereas supposedly singular entities, or civilizations, have remained static for ages, the velocity of interdependence between human groups slows not.

At the heart of the Clash of Wills whitepaper is the human domain, a concept that is further defined in a 2015 future concept paper, Operating in the Human Domain, by Special Operations Forces (SOF) as people (individuals, groups and populations) in the environment, including their perceptions, decision-making, and behavior.⁷ In fact,

6. Odierno, R., Amos, J. and McRaven, W. Strategic Landpower: Clash of Wills, 2013, <http://www.tradoc.army.mil/FrontPageContent/Docs/Strategic%20Landpower%20White%20Paper.pdf>

7. Special Operations Forces, Operating in the Human Domain: A Future Concept Paper, JSOU, August 2015.

the human domain has also become a discipline for SOF. The domain is comprised of social, cultural, informational, psychological and physical elements. In other words, all the ways humans can interact with self, others and the mountains and fields and grazing lands that surround them. Granted the perspective of the human domain is from a military operation, and tied to location (not so much terrain, and labeling a group of people “terrain” by the DoD perhaps was not the wisest of labels), the hard reality is that at some point, boots do go on the ground. Said newly appointed Army Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley, “War is an act of politics, where one side tries to impose its political will on the other. And politics is all about people. And people live on the ground. We may wish it were otherwise, but it is not. Wars are ultimately decided on the ground, where people live, and it is on the ground where the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Special Operations Forces must never, ever fail.”⁸

If there were “fault lines,” and resultant conflict, they would run through the human domain. This is where we would see cracks and fractures of the tectonic plates of civilizations as they slipped and slid upon meeting. Flags would fly, waving symbols of deep abiding allegiance (how can one not think of the Crusades right now) to the West or Islam. Obviously, in this reality of the human domain, those in battle are extremists, the advance guard of the Islamic Army. Conflict in the domain may represent the

8. Lopez, C. T. Ground Forces 'Must Never, Ever Fail,' New Army Chief Says, Army News Service, August 14, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/613672/ground-forces-must-never-ever-fail-new-army-chief-says>

confusion of battle, but the enemy is known because they carry the flag, or so goes the Clash of Civilizations.

Suspend the military perspective of the human domain for a second, as well as the need to draw boundaries, any kind of boundaries, around people and their behavior. In fact, lose entirely the label of domain and instead consider just how intricate and messy the relations are between families and lineages, between villages, between communities and essentially everywhere. Now consider the various identities that form around ethnic and tribal affiliations, history, and yes, even religion. They are not mutually exclusive, but are drivers of behavior when engaged, such as when these identities interface with kinship. Then consider the various mechanisms of social control that define local behavior, and consider how family, religion and gender, for example, also are factored into social control. This is just a start to trying to untangle and tease out the meaning of culture groups; not touched were notions of conflict, honor, shame, a sense of what is family, and myriad other elements. Suffice it to say that the ramifications of behavior are deeply contextualized and layered. When the definition of the human domain includes the “sum” total of human environments as variables impacting human behavior, the thought of incredible complexity and an impossible task – to understand the human domain – is a significant consideration. Latching on to a primer of expediency can only make comprehending the complexity of behaviors, and their meaning, harder. “These two-dimensional

representations do nothing to help us make sense of what is actually going on,” David Wearing writes.⁹

This is the concept of culture that Huntington should have considered, but instead fell back on the bias of focus, harking back to religion as the culture cleaver. Wrote David Brooks, “I’d say Huntington was [also] wrong in the way he defined culture. Huntington minimized the power of universal political values and exaggerated the influence of distinct cultural values. He was arguing against global elites who sometimes refuse to acknowledge the power of culture.”¹⁰

Now consider just the label “Islam.” In Afghanistan and Iraq, Islam was a label that US forces found inadequate to accurately apply to the different tribal groups (Shi’a and Sunni should have been a clue), but how the U.S. forces applied a common perspective of “Islam” to the different villages and regions of each of the countries. In this human domain, the only ones confused and misguided about Islam and its different expressions were the ones just arriving with weapons and some sort of a plan. “Labels like “Islam” and “the West” serve only to confuse us about a disorderly reality,” Said wrote.¹¹

Identity is never static for very long, for most of us. There are far more interesting and important identities that

9. Wearing, David. “No ‘clash of civilizations’ in Paris attacks,” CNN , Jan 10, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/10/opinion/wearing-paris-attack/>

10. Brooks, D. Huntington’s Clash Revisited. New York Times, March 3, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/opinion/04brooks.html>

11. Said, 2001.

beckon to us, depending on the context, from attributes that define self, to those that define birthright, tribe, or ethnic affiliation. For instance, rarely do I think of myself as an American - It's not that I deny or ignore it. I embrace it fully when forces create need. I never walk around thinking I am from "the West," nor have I ever claimed that identity to anyone.

I claim to being a Democrat a lot more, especially as the 2016 political campaign heats up, but as is the case, that too will fade or at least bow to other identity facets that may usurp it in immediacy or importance. Some identities, such as Democrat or Chicago Cubs fan, although lifelong, become "stronger" when context determines expression, and fade in relevance; for the Cub fan to only emerge every 20 years or so, like a locust, for a brief period of time. This cultural roulette of identity is universal. This same round and round we go, follow the ball till it stops, occurs as well in groups where Islam is just one of many identities. I know some unwaveringly devout evangelicals whose faith strongly dictates their identity, but their passion does not extend to the violent and horrible expressions of allegiance seen in ISIS or Boko Haram. Similarly, there are equally devout and conservative Muslims who also do not express their faith in negative or destructive way. Interestingly, if you take away the pretenses of faith, there could be more similarities than differences between the two groups. Amarta Sen agreed in his quote, "Perhaps the worst impairment comes from the neglect—and denial—of the roles of reasoning and

choice, which follow from the recognition of our plural identities. The illusion of unique identity is much more divisive than the universe of plural and diverse classifications that characterize the world in which we actually live. The descriptive weakness of choiceless singularity has the effect of momentarily impoverishing the power and reach of our social and political reasoning. The illusion of destiny exacts a remarkably heavy price."¹²

There are over a billion Muslims in the world, and most of them feel some level of affinity to Islam. But the minority who are Islamic extremists today are not the advance guards to an Islamic invasion, just like the West is not a hegemonic movement to take back whatever colonial land they once controlled. Robert Wright wrote about the fallacy of extremism equaling a much broader and diverse Islam. "When people think of extremism as some kind of organic expression of Islam, the belligerence of radical Muslims starts to seem like an autonomous, intrinsically motivated force—something whose momentum doesn't derive from mundane socioeconomic and geopolitical factors," Wright wrote. "It's something that you can stop, if at all, only with physical counter-force. In other words: by killing lots of people. I don't think it's a coincidence that commentators who dismiss attempts to understand the "root causes" of extremism tend to be emphatic in linking the extremism to Islam, and often favor a massively violent response to it."

12. Amartya, S. "What Clash of Civilizations? Why religious identity isn't destiny, Amartya Sen." Slate, March 29, 2006, <http://slate.me/1JdPGZe>

With ISIS, or the Taliban, Al-Qaida, they are not fault lines of a civilization, fronting a surge of Muslims. These extremists are part of the human domain where they exist, Johnny come lately and a blip on the edge of time, where there was a past and there will be a future after the extremists and/or their extreme worldviews die out or the original residents leave to find a haven somewhere without the violence and suffering. And to all groups at a location on planet earth, extremists included, there is a sometimes a clash of cultures, more often a reconciling of differences fueled by beliefs, local more than global identity, and expressed in different patterns of practice. There may be tugs and pulls on those nation-states that Huntington lumped into the monolithic civilizations, but present-day international relations feature less about borders and boundaries and more about genocides, terrorist attacks, bombings, and a muddled piece of land in a Middle East desert where scorecards are needed and updated frequently to identify which Islamic group is attacking and killing another Islamic group, or to further complicate things, add in the Israelis and Kurds to this volatile mix. “It seems to me, the best argument against Huntington's thesis is that it's very hard to pin down exactly what the civilizations are,” Gideon Rose said and continued, “that the borders are fuzzy, and that people can be many things simultaneously, and that the specifics of the argument - when it tries to become predictive - quickly get very either fuzzy or inaccurate.”¹³

13. Robert Siegal/Gideon Rose, A Look Back At A Predicted 'Clash Of Civilizations' 9/3/2013 <http://n.pr/1I5t6An>

Clash of Civilizations and its message of a bipolar world still influences how many filter the events that swirl around us. The January 2015 attack on *Charlie Hebdo* was just one instance of the clash. Likewise in the US, there have been far too many attacks by lone perpetrators, or wolves (self-radicalized) who have been used to support this narrative. “The ‘clash of civilizations’ has become a popularized frame that is wheeled out whenever an attack by Islamic extremists is carried out against a Western target,” wrote David Wearing. “It casts a democratic, liberal West as being locked in an epic struggle with a backward and violently intolerant Muslim world. According to this narrative, “the West, which treasures freedom of speech, has come under attack from an Islamic culture that refuses to accept any instance of what it regards as blasphemy.”¹⁴ Wearing’s criticism further underscores the inaccurate ‘one size fits all’ explanation depicted in Huntington’s theory.

So, in a roundabout way, we have arrived at the message of this commentary and issue: the world does NOT in fact present itself as one that is overrun by civilizations, nor dominated by Huntington’s two primary mega-civilizations. Indeed, how the US military is going to war now and for the foreseeable future requires preparation for a world with a plethora of “domains” that reflect more a clash (and we use that term loosely to keep with the commentary) of cultures than civilizations. U.S. military

14. David Wearing, No 'clash of civilizations' in Paris attacks, Jan 10, 2015, CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/10/opinion/wearing-paris-attack/>

and even other U.S Agencies will encounter a whole slew of behaviors and identities that really have nothing to do with either the West or Islam, or for that matter any of the other civilizations Huntington envisioned. The DoD has enough problems with the cultural biases of its members distorting the reality of behavior encountered in deployment, assignments and exercises, let alone having to defuse the fictional view of a bipolar world held by a few.

The human domain, for as compact or as pervasive we or the mission want it to be, is more like water filled with a flotsam of cultures with no real demarcation on a map or sets of coordinates. Edward Said conveyed best the lack of need to draw artificial boundaries that live only in the minds of those who believe in Huntington's civilization paradigm in the following: "But we are all swimming in those waters, Westerners and Muslims and others alike. And since the waters are part of the ocean of history, trying to plow or divide them with barriers is futile. These are tense times, but it is better to think in terms of powerful and powerless communities, the secular politics of reason and ignorance, and universal principles of justice and injustice, than to wander off in search of vast abstractions that may give momentary satisfaction but little self-knowledge or informed analysis. 'The Clash of Civilizations' thesis is a gimmick like 'The War of the Worlds,' better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for

critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time."¹⁵

The human domain, for all its imperfections related to military perspective and utility, forces us to confront Huntington's fiction of civilizations too great to back down from each other when fault lines grow distinct. The U.S. deploys into these fault lines that are manifestations of a chaotic clash of wills, varied beliefs, and histories. Adhering to bipolar constructs of the West/Islam will guarantee missing the significance of the many different alliances, allegiance, and loyalties to group identities critical to countering instability, insurgency, terrorism. This makes it imperative to navigate in difficult and uncertain interpersonal situations, express or interpret ideas/concepts across cultures, make sense of familiar and foreign social and cultural behavior, and know the extent and influence of possible cultural biases, including the biases against the complexity of the human domain.

15. Said, 2001.

Author Biography



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Sands has authored seven books and numerous chapters and articles on topics such as cross-cultural competence, environmental security, building partnerships and sustainability, sport and culture, ethnographic theory, and the cognitive origins of religion. His seventh book (co-authored with Allison Greene-Sands) is *Cross-Cultural Competence for a 21st Century Military Culture: the Flipside of COIN* (2014, Lexington Books). His current research and development efforts center on bringing language, region and culture (LRC) together in learning events and assessment and the importance of cross-cultural competence to promoting alternate and different ways of thinking to the military mission. Dr. Sands holds a PhD from University of Illinois.