

The Clash of Civilizations: A Conflictology Perspective

Abbas Aroua

Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies – Cordoba Foundation of Geneva

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The "The Clash of Civilizations" thesis prompted a wide debate when Samuel P. Huntington publicised it with his 1993 controversial paper in *Foreign Affairs* (1), followed by his essay on "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" published in 1996 (2). This thesis gained a renewed interest in the aftermath of the 9/11 event.

The thesis can be summarized by the idea that: "In the post-Cold War world the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural". It predicts that "conflict between groups in different civilizations will be more frequent, more sustained and more violent than conflicts between groups in the same civilization". Huntington divides the world into nine "major civilizations": African, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Latin American, Orthodox, Sinic, and Western.

According to Huntington "the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future," and "a central focus of conflict for the immediate future will be between the West and several Islamic- Confucian states," with an emphasis on the Muslim world which displays "bloody borders". Based on this thesis the author issued a set of recommendations that should be followed in the interest of the West among which: a) "to promote greater cooperation and unity within its own civilization, particularly between its European and North American components"; b) "to limit the expansion of the military strength of Confucian and Islamic states"; c) "to exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states"; d) "to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to Western values and interests"; and d) "to strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate Western interests and values".

The "Clash of civilizations" thesis gained some support from a number of academics in the West but many of them opposed it from various intellectual standpoints. Part of the opponents to Huntington criticized his approach to civilization and his perception to its relationship with culture (3). Others challenged his classification of civilizations and his tendency to consider them as static entities with no internal dynamics and no capacity to interact with each other. A third category of opponents focused on the hidden political agenda behind the "Clash of civilizations" thesis, considering it as a tool for the re-shaping of the US foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Edward Said concluded his paper "The Clash of Ignorance", published in 2001, by saying that: " '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." (4)

But the fiercest opposition to the "Clash of Civilization" thesis came from the empirical side. It was criticized by a number of academics who considered that it was based on "anecdotic evidence" and was not well grounded at the experimental level. Mohamed Braou for example sees that "the examples used in the thesis are partially selected or suffer inaccuracy" (5). Most empirical studies published recently in the field of conflictology (6-11), which addressed international conflicts of the past decades, led to results that tend to invalidate the thesis and showed that the frequency of conflicts between groups from different civilizations did not register any significant relative increase in the post-Cold War era.

There is no one single conflict between the Muslim world and the Western world – as monolithic blocs – that could be attributed exclusively or mainly to culture. There are however various

conflicts between parties from the Muslim world and other parties from the Western world. These can be explained within the framework of history and geography, by considering ideological, political and economic factors. Muslims' perception of the West differs from one region to another and from one class to another within the same society, according to the level of contact and the degree of friction with Western civilization. Similarly, the Western perception of the Muslim world is not the same in different countries, social spheres and ideological currents; it is correlated to the level of knowledge of the Islamic civilization. If we consider for example the Algerian and Egyptian perceptions of France and Great-Britain, we notice that they are in opposition. Another example is the Muslims' perception of the USA and the UK which is completely different from their perception of Switzerland and Sweden. Similarly, the Greeks or the Germans' perception of Turkey is different from that of the Britons or the Canadians.

Peace scientists define conflict as "a relation between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have, or think they have, incompatible goals". The goals may be at the level of positions (what you say you want), interests (what you really want), or needs (what you must have), or values (what you believe in). But contrary to the general belief in the Arab and Muslim world, a conflict is not necessarily negative. Differences, disagreements and conflicts between individuals and groups are a fact of human life that should be acknowledged. They may contribute in re-establishing the balances in human relations and interests and tend in general to improve the situation of the parties involved. According to conflictologists, peace is not the absence of conflict but rather its good management. In fact what should be prevented is that a conflict ends up in a violent (sometimes bloody) one. Violence is defined as consisting of "actions, words, attitudes, structures, or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevent people from reaching their full human potential."

The conflicts between the Muslim world and the Western world that are attributed to the "clash of civilizations" can be easily analysed using the three basic components of the conflict (12): a) context, structure or contradiction; b) attitude; c) behaviour. Consequently, after the detailed analysis of the structure, dynamics, and context of a given conflict, its management must go through three processes: a) conflict settlement (ending the violent behaviour); b) conflict resolution (treatment of the causes of the conflict); c) reconciliation (treatment of the psychological effects of the conflict).

Obviously, in an open conflict with the widespread of visible violence, conflict settlement is an urgent issue and the priority is to end violent actions. But if the intervention is limited to this first step, this will result only in a "negative peace" with no guarantee that it will be a lasting one. In fact it is almost certain that the conflict will reappear some time later. A "positive peace" can be achieved only when the hidden aspects of violence are removed through conflict resolution and reconciliation. Conflict settlement may be the fastest step in conflict management, compared to both conflict resolution, aiming at removing all the structural obstacles to peace, and reconciliation, aiming at healing both shallow and deep "collective injuries or trauma" caused by the conflict, which constitute slow and lengthy processes that may take years or even decades.

Reconciliation requires the use of a number of recognized tools such as: a) truth commissions, b) trials, c) reparation, d) public apology, e) amnesty, f) recovery of historical memory, g) education. Moreover, reconciliation must address also the old "collective trauma" that had been ignored and hence could not be healed. If we consider for instance that recent events such as "9/11" in the USA, "3/11" in Spain, "7/7" in the UK, the shelling of Afghanistan and Irak, the Palestinian massacres, "Guantanamo", "Baghram", "Abu Ghraib", the "Danish cartoons" have caused deep "collective trauma" in Western and Muslim societies, there are also old "collective trauma" caused by historical conflicts that prevent peace between these peoples, such as those related to the Crusades in the Middle East, the Inquisition in medieval Spain, Ottoman invasion of Eastern Europe, the Palestinian *Nakba*, and the colonial massacres in Algeria. Concerning the latter example, not only the "collective trauma" caused by French colonialism was ignored but the French Parliament "poured salt on them" by adopting in 10 February 2005 - more than four decades after the independence of Algeria - a bill glorifying the "positive role" of the French presence in Algeria.

The contribution of the Muslim world in reducing the tensions at the international level could be through the following processes:

a) The proper management of the huge number of conflicts in the Muslim world, a space where live more than 1.2 billion people, which registers a high density of inter- and intra-state conflicts. This requires the training of conflictologists and the setting up of research centres for a better approach to conflict, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and the transformation of the conflict into a positive driving force in the society, based on the new principles and techniques developed in the West and their projection and adaptation to Muslim societies taking into account their historical context and cultural specificities.

b) The proper management of the conflicts between parties from the Muslim world and other parties from the West, based on a set of ethical requirements, mainly justice and impartiality in approaching a conflict, and on the accurate evaluation of the legitimacy of the incompatible goals of the two parties. If the conflict is between one party with legitimate goals and a second party with illegitimate goals, then the resolution of the conflict requires necessarily the achievement of the goals of the first party, especially if they are of the order of basic needs, and all legitimate means, including resistance, can be used to this effect. For conflictologists "basic needs cannot be negotiated". However, if the incompatible goals of both parties have some legitimacy content, then the resolution of the conflict requires a dialogue between the parties and a great deal of creativity in order to explore ways and means for transcending the goals' incompatibility. But in both cases the parties in conflict should go through conflict settlement, conflict resolution and reconciliation. Then only, an efficient process of "dialogue of civilizations" could be launched, otherwise it would represent nothing but political and media agitation or an unproductive intellectual exchange between elites.

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