

Clash Of Civilizations, Orientalism, and the “Civilized” and “Uncivilized”

Comparing International Reactions Through the Cases of the Middle East and Europe

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ABSTRACT: This article examines Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory which suggests that the world will be divided into two opposing civilizations, the West and East, in the post-Cold War era. Huntington advocates for Western society to exert control over Eastern civilization, particularly the Islamic world, in order to maintain Western values and beliefs. Additionally, I examine Edward Said’s criticism of this theory, which argues that Huntington’s theory is based on ignorance and portrays non-Western societies as backward and uncivilized. This article demonstrates how Samuel Huntington’s theory is very much present in the way conflict is viewed in different regions and civilizations around the world, as observed through modern Orientalism. This is demonstrated by the double standards and differential treatment of Eastern and Western conflict by Western nations and their media’s portrayal of Eastern conflicts as upholding the norm. I then highlight these differences in treatment by comparing the reaction and action of Western nations to the Russian invasion of Ukraine versus the invasion of Iraq by the United States.

KEYWORDS: Islamophobia, Clash of Civilizations, Orientalism, Global Response, Political Theory, Post-Colonial Theory, Media Representation, Identity

Samuel Huntington's (1993) *Clash of Civilizations* theory emerged during the post-Cold War era as an argument that stipulates a transfer or shift in our political system: from one rooted in ideology to one that is based on the domination of opposing civilizations. The struggle for domination of culture contributes to Islamophobia by influencing members of society and its institutions. This theory is framed "as a symptom rather than a root cause" (Bazian 2018, 1). On the contrary, Huntington's argument was the catalyst of Islamophobia by citing the *Clash of Civilizations* as something inevitable due to non-Western societies' inability to modernize and function to Western ideals and standards, causing these societies to be categorized as backward. In this paper, I will explore and highlight Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* argument. Secondly, I will examine how Huntington's theory is refuted by Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Lastly, I will examine and highlight the effects of Huntington's theory on the normalization of war in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA)/Islamic societies. This is because of the ways his theory highlights the Eastern Orient as inherently uncivilized, and in need of intervention and modernization of society. I will do this through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism by comparing and contrasting the reaction and action of two major conflicts—the US invasion of Iraq and the Russian invasion of Ukraine—thus highlighting the double standards of refugee policy concerning these distinct conflicts.

Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations Argument

Samuel Huntington's (1993) *Clash of Civilizations* thesis is a derivative of his view that there are several civilizations, and in the 21st century, they will clash over their differences. Huntington's (1993) thesis states that Western civilization, which he defines as Europe and North America, dominate the world, while Eastern civilization represents China, Russia, the Middle East and many other 'less developed' countries. Huntington (1993) argues that these two civilizations will inevitably clash due to their contrasting values and views. Accordingly, this would posit that the West is more liberal and democratic than the East, while the East is more traditional and authoritarian. He argues that this contrast is inevitable in all civilizations, but there are important differences between them (Huntington 1993). His first argument is that Westerners and Easterners have distinct

experiences of history. He states that Westerners tend to view history as a timeline in which societies obtained civil and human rights (Huntington 1993). He also states that this is the case in most of Latin America and the Caribbean, all of Western and Central Europe, Japan, and Israel (Huntington 1993, 24). He argues that in most of Eastern Europe as well as China, India, Iran, and Iraq, the cycle of history produces different truths and these differing views on history are natural causes for tension (Huntington 1996). These justifications are problematic because they pose the idea that the Middle East inherently and inevitably in contrast the culture, politics, and overall beliefs of the West. In simpler terms, this paints the Orient as the opposite of the Occident, the West.

Huntington's (1993) second argument is that the two civilizations have different economic interests and therefore will differ in their foreign policy. He argues that Western civilization values economic and technological growth, while Eastern civilization places more emphasis on cultural preservation and stability (Huntington 1993). He suggests that this means that Eastern civilizations will be less inclined to enter military alliances with Western nations (Huntington 1993). However, Huntington (1993) argues, without sufficient evidence, that Eastern countries are culturally inferior because their cultures are founded on the premise of collectivism and survival of the fittest, rather than on Western philosophies of individuality and self-determination. He says that Eastern countries refuse to give up old traditions, such as communism in China or feudalism in Korea (Huntington 1993). At the same time, they refuse to adopt Western ideals like democracy, free trade, and capitalism, which he believes will lead them to become more developed (Huntington 1993). Huntington (1993) also asserts that Asian countries are far less tolerant of each other and their differences.

Huntington (1993) describes non-Western society as barbaric, savage, and uncivilized. In his view, the only way for these countries to improve is by receiving guidance from Western religion and culture. He concludes that it is their destiny to be tied to the West due to its greater ability and natural inclination towards civilized society and that areas of culture that differ from Western society must be rejected as inferior (Huntington 1993). Huntington (1993) questions the decisions of non-

Western countries to oppose Western influence, which he interprets as resisting destiny. According to Huntington (1993), the West has a right to spread its values and cultures as it is beneficial to all nations. He believes that many people outside the West have a misconception about their own interests and value systems, in effect working against their own welfare (Huntington 1993). Islamic society is depicted as torn by internal strife, which he says can only be settled with 'external pressure' (Huntington 1993, 31). In Huntington's (1993) view, uncivilized countries may receive assistance to help them overcome their difficulties and come up to par with Western standards. However, they must also be forced to accept the cultural superiority of Western society, and the West should do whatever it takes to maintain its dominance in global affairs, as failure to dominate would allow non-Western countries to revert to their uncivilized ways (Huntington 1993).

Edward Said's Theory of Orientalism and How it Refutes Huntington's Argument

The influence of postcolonial thought and subjugation of the Orient (non-Western societies) has played a foundational and critical role in how the Orient is subjugated to negative and downright harmful narratives that serve to alienate and promote otherness, thus serving the perpetrators of the dominant discourse. The "Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West and North America) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1979, 1-2). As such, the West was able to take hold of the dominant mainstream idea of what it means to be civilized and modernized and was then able to justify their perspective of the Orient as uncivilized and backward, providing a vehicle to further their colonial ambitions. Edward Said's (1979) starting point in *Orientalism* is that the existence and development of every culture impel the existence of a different and inevitably competitive 'other' or 'alter ego'. Therefore, the West, mainly Europe, in attempting to construct its self-image, created the Middle East (the Orient) as the ultimate 'other'. The Middle East (the Orient) and the West (the Occident) do not correspond to any stable reality that exists as a natural fact but are merely products of construction. The Orient is constructed in order to establish a hierarchical relationship between the West and East, firmly labelling

non-Western practices and society as a whole, as a product of underdevelopment. This needed to be addressed by 'aiding' the East by imposing Western views and exploiting its natural resources in the name of modernizing its economy. Through Said's theory of Orientalism, Huntington's Clash of Civilizations argument is nothing more than a clash of ignorance. As explained above, Huntington understands the Orient's practices of non-Western society as inherently dangerous and negative due to them not being in line with Western standards. Said (1979) advances the argument that both colonial and post-colonial schools pose that cultures within respective societies adhere to a strict idea of what society looks like and how it may function, which may lead them to reject each other for the cause of preserving identity. This highlights how Huntington's theory predicates the idea that where there are inherent cultural differences, there is inevitable war because of the failure to comprehend these different ways of life. He goes on to argue that without this 'us versus them' mentality, there would be no war (Said 1979).

Analyzing the Inaction Regarding the Iraq War

Orientalism influences the narrative of Middle Eastern conflicts by observing the differences in the public and informal discourse such as the media, and formal discourse and action such as United Nations (UN) resolutions and sanctions.

The reaction to the Iraq invasion is important to compare with the responses following the Ukrainian invasion primarily because of its stark differences, despite having similar legal justifications and narratives. During and after the Iraq invasion, there has been a never-ending and contentious debate among theorists and scholars as to why the US invaded; these range from actual 'sincere' concerns regarding possible weapons of mass destruction to the US's desire to placate materialist interests (Butt 2019). As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared the invasion a violation of the UN Charter, it went ahead with no clear UN backing (MacAskill and Borger 2004). While there was definitive pushback against the invasion, as the US and its ally Britain were able to veto resolutions made in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC 2002), no definitive formal action in the form of sanctions or resolutions could be made against the Coalition of the

Willing (Wivel and Pest 2010, 429). Nouri's (2021) analysis of the invasion, applying Orientalism, is concerned "that there is selectivity in the interpretation and application of international law in the Middle East" (186). Additionally, the Coalition of the Willing members involved small states who were incentivized by economic rewards from the US and therefore were compelled to participate and support. But the glaring lack of tangible ramifications the US could have faced by the international community is not solely due to Iraq's isolation from the international community, compared to contemporary Ukraine's comparatively wider recognition. In addition, it is due to the othering of Iraqi culture that Western society was unable to empathize with them, due to political influences causing them to see their cultures at odds.

Analyzing Action Taken Regarding Ukraine

In the face of Russian aggression, there has been united indignation from Western media, popular culture, and academia, which runs in contrast to the mixed, aloof discussions and even celebrations of the American invasion of Iraq (Mitrovica 2022; Farhat 2022; Cook 2023). The US's reaction against the Ukrainian invasion continues to be fierce, existentialist, and binary; US President Joe Biden's March 26th speech in Poland was interpreted by many as a call for an end to Vladimir Putin's regime and reignited the Cold War and World War II narrative of the democracies of the West fighting against autocracy and oppression (Megerian, Gera, and Madhani 2022). The significance of UNSC resolution 2623 and the subsequent widely supported UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution was a signal that the international community was united in calling for an end to the war and the dispatch of humanitarian aid (UNSC 2022; Al Jazeera 2022). Formal international pressure through sanctions has also pressured multinational corporations into suspending operations in Russia. More than 450 multinational companies have either scaled back, suspended, or entirely halted operations in Russia a month after the invasion (Sonnenfeld and Yale Research Team 2022). Additionally, more than 3.7 million Ukrainian citizens have fled to the European Union (France 24 2022). The bombardment of wide-ranging sanctions (ranging from energy embargos to targeting the Russian financial system directly), the acceptance of millions of refugees from

supposedly anti-immigrant governments in Poland and Hungary, and the united calls for peace, lie in stark contrast to not only Iraq, but to current wars and conflicts in the Middle East (Funakoshi, Lawson, and Deka 2022). Thus, it is necessary to directly compare and contrast these reactions.

Comparing Reactions

The US and Russian invasions had disturbingly similar legal justifications for violating Section 51 of the UN Charter under the argument that a "pre-emptive" strike was necessary to eliminate those planning to attack (Farhat 2022). Yet the evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was refuted by the international community, including long-standing allies of the US such as Canada and Germany (Cook 2023). Similarly, Russia's claims of Ukraine's "Nazi" regime and alleged genocide against Russians have been rejected as Russian propaganda (Reuters 2022). Indeed, the Iraq invasion was seen as the swift end to a post-Cold War multilateral front headed by the US and instead questioned and instigated tensions against the US's unipolarity (Ambrosio 2006, 1206). However, these two narratives both attempted to justify a war in the environment of the international system that makes it exceedingly difficult for conventional wars to be conducted. This is because, in a "Westernized" global order, wars are "treated as opposite to usual (conventional) wars being waged for saving and assertion of identity (nationalism, patriotism), ideas (national interest) and ideology" (Poiarkova 2022, 24). In Poiarkova's (2022) article on otherness with regard to identity politics in the Russo-Ukrainian war, she asserts that modern warfare is more to do with "state ruining" (23) rather than all-out conquering. This is true because Russia's haphazard and limited use of its complete military arsenal in Ukraine suggests it is in the pursuit of regime change, as was the US's explicit goals of regime change in Iraq and, by extension, its entire Middle Eastern strategy (Bala 2022; Weiss 2022; Heilbrunn 2020). Both wars aim for a destabilized state apparatus using limited conventional means. This is evident in Russia's strategy of limited, strategic strikes and incursions, and the US's precise attacks and invasions into Iraq. While there are essential differences in the geography, strategy, and overall doctrine, these are two fundamentally similar, Western, and imperialist states seeking domination in a domination-averse world.

Applying Orientalism to Civil Discourse

To demonstrate why Edward Said's theory of Orientalism soundly applies to this comparative analysis, mainstream media's coverage of Ukrainian refugees compared to Arab and Middle Eastern refugees is a potent point of criticism for many Middle Eastern scholars and observers. The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) condemned the "orientalist and racist implications that any population or country is 'uncivilized' that justifies conflict as a natural expectation or condition for Syrians, Palestinians, Lebanese, and countless other "Orient" peoples (Bayoumi 2022). In this condemnation, it refers to several quotes by news correspondents, commenting on how "[Europeans] seem so like us," and that they are "Europeans leaving in cars that look like ours" (Bayoumi 2022). These notions of 'us' versus 'them' are what Said (1979) explicitly warns against throughout Orientalism. Granted, there are fundamental differences with Iraq's invasion, nevertheless, the obvious differences in the narrative are striking and undeniable. In a 2003 preface, Edward Said cites the warmongering of "screaming headlines" and books of the "Muslim menace," and the attempts to link Islam and terror in the wake of the 2003 Iraq Invasion as the "very core of traditional Orientalist dogma" (XVI). Without this 'us' versus 'them' mentality buried deep in the mindset ranging from hawkish policymakers to moderate commentators on CNN, Said argues there would be no war. In addition, his pretext links the mantra of Orientalism of American advisors in the Pentagon and White House to British, Dutch, and French imperialism; the notions, demeaning stereotypes, and similar understandings of power and violence dictate American national security advisors the same way it dictated colonialism (Said 1979).

Continuing the discourse on this racial bias is the public outcry and UN acknowledgement of racism targeted at Black and Brown refugees of colour—mainly international students—during their escape from war-torn cities in Ukraine (UN News 2022). There has been evidence of flagrant abuse against people of colour and preference for White Ukrainian refugees at the border. While racism in refugee settlement is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that the narrative of the innocent, White and Christian European who is fleeing war is seen as more pressing, concerning,

and "surprising" than Muslims crossing the Mediterranean, or stuck at the Belarussian-Polish border, for instance in 2021 (Mitrovica 2022; Reality Check 2021). Post-colonial theory ascertains that this is no isolated incident but is an intentional and societally driven facet of both policymakers and civilians; that the lives of those who 'look like us' are paramount to the 'others. Poiarkova (2022) uses the "otherness" (24) example to illustrate how Russia utilizes this in policy decision-making regarding Ukraine, however, it is important not to understate that this otherness feeds the perspectives towards the Middle East, rather than merely dictating them.

Applying Orientalism to Formal Discourse

Despite some indignation from Western powers, the Iraq war was nevertheless a catalyst that Orientalists latched onto under the guise of national interest strategy; that is what Edward Said warns about in a 2003 pretext in Orientalism. Arab and Muslim societies have faced "massive and calculatedly aggressive [attacks]" for their "backwardness," yet those same attackers forget that enlightenment, democracy, and Western values in general, "are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts" (Said 2003, xv). Nouri (2021) argues that the US uses this same narrative of backwardness and "abrogation of women's rights" (186) to justify "imperial expansion" (Said 2003, 14). The global response to the subsequent War on Terror's language is replete with binarism and existentialism; it is a bad ideology because it is a threat to democracy and civilization, and therefore, justifies utter war and destruction. This does not mean the binarism of 'us versus them' and the creation of others is limited to the United States. Following the 9/11 attacks, the global community, including and especially Russia, fed into the "bandwagon" of the West's narrative of Islam as an existential threat to the West, and by extension the "civilized nations" of the world (Ambrosio 2006, 1189-1190). Ambrosio (2006) argues that before Iraq, Russia self-identified as a fundamentally Western nation, with a society and history connected to the West, and goes as far as to say it is still fundamentally Western. Despite Vladimir Putin's claims of the 'us versus them' between Russia and the "collective West" (Ambrosio 2006, 1193-1194). Through their shared eyes of imperialist dogma, it is still Arabs and Middle Eastern people that are disproportionately ostracized and

dehumanized (Kaonga 2022). While neighbouring European countries accept, house, and support Ukrainian refugees, those same governments deplore, insult, and deny millions of Arab and Muslim people fleeing from war (BBC News 2021; Schmitz 2022). An article published by Deutsche Welle on the glaring disparity between “[g]ood refugee, bad refugee” (contrasting Ukrainian refugees with Afghan refugees) in Greece underscores the real implications of Orientalist influence in decision-making policy (Schmitz 2022). While the US announced it was to accept 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, millions of Latin-American refugees fleeing cartels on the Southern border are denied every year (Al Jazeera 2022a; UNHCR 2021).

Conclusion

Samuel Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations was argued to be the new reality the world will be put into during the post-Cold War era, mainly due to the shifts from an ideology-based international political system to one of two fundamentally opposing civilizations: the East and West. Huntington justifies and advocates for Western society to do everything possible to exert control over the Eastern Orient in order to secure Western values and beliefs while simultaneously civilizing the East; primarily the ‘Islamic world’. This then creates a domino effect which strengthens Islamophobia in the West. Edward Said criticizes Huntington’s theory and advances that the Clash of Civilizations theory is merely a construction of ideas stemming from ignorance and the view of non-Western societies as inherently backward and uncivilized. The effects of circulating ignorant thoughts stemming from ideas advanced by Huntington’s theory can clearly be seen in this comparison. Orientalism is seen in the modern-day through the double standards displayed through the welcoming of Ukrainian refugees into neighbouring countries in Europe and North America that claim to have tight immigration policies such as Hungary and Poland, and through the media’s depiction of Ukrainian refugees as ‘people like us’ while shutting out Eastern Orient refugees and depicting conflicts in their respective regions as the norm.

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