ISLAM AND THE WEST:
THE Clash of Civilization?

by Ali Akbar Mahdi

The attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, increased the Islamist challenge for the United States and the other Western countries to a new height. Subsequent attacks by Al Qaeda and other Islamist radical groups on the Western citizens and interests in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Afghanistan, and now Iraq have forced the US to a direct confrontation with terrorist groups operating with an Islamic identity. These attacks are often viewed as a reaction to the US hegemony and its foreign policies in the Muslim countries. Undoubtedly, this is a new and serious challenge for the Western world, especially the United States. The invasion and occupation of Iraq, with vague motivations and on questionable grounds, have transformed this political challenge to a serious military confrontation and security threat—a confrontation fueled by a great deal of fear and a misconception of an “Islamic threat.”

Before the September 11, it was Samuel P. Huntington, the Albert J. Weatherhead III University Professor of politics at Harvard University, who had warned of the coming clash of civilization. His book, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (Simon and Schuster, 1996), predicated that the demise of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union would lead to a new conflict among civilizations, especially between the Western and Islamic civilizations. Huntington’s thesis attracted foreign policy circles and
the events since September 11 have brought more attention to his views and recommendations.

Huntington believes that the imperatives of the post-Cold War global power arrangement politicize various ethnic and sectarian groups around the globe and make the international scene more conflict-ridden by nature. Ethnic clashes in Africa, Balkan, and the new independent countries of Central Asia in the past decade lend themselves to Huntington’s prediction of the rise of various ethnic frenzies and religious fundamentalism. He emphasizes that these cultural conflicts entice various cultural factions of a particular civilization to ally their forces against rival civilizations. Specifically, since the current international arrangement favors the interests of the Western countries, the non-Western civilizations will ally against the Western hegemony. Thus, he prescribes to the political leaders of the Western democracies to make a civilizational alliance in order to counter the alliance of the Islamic and Chinese civilizations. In a more recent piece, Huntington defended his theory of the clash of civilizations by citing the past and present conflicts between the West and the Islamic countries (“The Age of Muslim Wars,” Newsweek, April 2002).

It is my contention that Huntington’s argument for a civilizational confrontation is flawed and based on wrong evidence. The relations between the Islamic world and the West are not approaching the status of a civilizational conflict. Surely, further escalation of current conflicts could lead to more intense clashes, especially if the US presence and involvement in the Muslim world fuel further frustration among Muslims. However, a realistic assessment of the current capabilities and interests of the Muslim countries, as well as those of the Western countries, renders such a predication unrealistic. There are several reasons to believe that the argument for a clash of civilizations is flawed:

1. Despite Huntington’s predication, events since his initial writing have proven the predication of an alliance of the Islamic world and China wrong. First, it is not clear that China has not cast its lot with the West. China has become a major world power and has every interest to remain an active participant in the current
international system. It was in the week after the attack on the World Trade Center that China joined the World Trade Organization. Second, in most recent crises between the West and the Muslim countries, China has either sided with the Western countries or remained neutral to the conflict.

2. Extremist views promoting conflicts between the West and Islamic world are limited to fringe groups in both worlds. The majority of politicians and religious figures in both worlds reject these extremist tendencies. It is true that to the extent these extremist views find their way into power centers, we might expect polarized policies and actions, as is the case with the Bush Administration. However, on balance and in the long run, the national interests of these nations override the narrow ideological tendencies of small power elites.

3. The fundamentalist groups like Al-Qaeda and other Islamicist groups in the Muslim world do not represent the mainstream Islam. Despite the widespread belief that the West has been unfair to the Muslim world, most Muslims reject violent means in addressing their grievances and expressing their opposition to Western meddling in their internal affairs.

4. Islamic countries do not represent a cohesive power block. Despite their religious commonality, Muslim states have territorial, cultural, and political differences and many remain engaged in conflict with one another. The major political entity capable of engaging in conventional war and confrontation in the Muslim world is still the nation-state. In the objective field of action, national loyalties remain the real frame of action rather than religious, cultural, or civilizational identifications. Many of the contemporary wars in both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds are within rather than between civilizations. Confrontation between Islam and the West is only possible when there exists a large Islamic state with several territorial integrities that enjoy enough military and economic power to face the West. The last Islamic state with such qualities was the Ottomans, whose challenge to the West in 1683 ended in its fall in 1918.
5. Wars of choice happen when the opposing parties perceive their relative military, political, and economic strengths to be competitive. A powerful force that wishes to eradicate its real or perceived enemy often initiates wars of non-choice. Despite all the rhetoric of the irrationality of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein in the West, neither Afghanistan nor Iraq chose to engage in a war with the United States and its allies. The latter saw these regimes opposed to their interests and decided to replace them with arrangements friendlier to the Western interests.

6. Wars fought by states are often political and not ideological. According to Huntington, the Islamic motivation for a confrontation with the West is ideological. Neither the claim that Islam is more ideological than other religions can be substantiated nor the fact that Muslim national states engage in a war despite their real military weakness. Although radical Islamist movements, unlike countries within which they have emerged, wish to actualize their ideological principles, they lack sufficient political power to challenge the West. Despite their widespread networks, the most these fringe groups can achieve is scattered attacks against Western interests. These attacks, as harmful and tragic as they are, do not cause serious and long-lasting damage to Western countries and will often result in further military retaliations, thus weakening the political status of the entire Muslim community.

7. Today’s globalized world marks the peak of state interdependence in the international arena. Islamic and Western states are dependent upon one another in economic, military, and even political aspects. Confrontation with the West does not look promising for any of the Muslim countries. Given the economic and military dependence of many Muslim countries on the West, it is unlikely that any of the Muslim state will initiate hostile action against a Western country.

8. With the expansion of transportation and communication, Muslim migration to Western countries has increased tremendously. The presence of large Muslim enclaves within the Western countries
will lead to further dilution of the ideological camps on both sides and a decline in the current polarization.

9. Muslim countries are achieving sociological characters much closer to those in the West than to their own past. Muslim ideas are going through unprecedented transformations, moving away from old traditions toward more modern and Western ideas. Western public opinion also has become more familiar with the non-Western world and more critical of past Western intervention in the Muslim world. With further expansion of globalization and the increase in the diversity of cultures around the globe, a confrontation of the type predicted by Huntington will receive less and less support in both worlds.

Given these flaws, then, why should one worry about Huntington’s thesis? Huntington’s thesis is worrisome because a) it is constructionist and carries suggestions for action and prescriptions; b) these suggestions are taken seriously by the neo-conservatives within the Bush Administration; and c) the reinforcement of Huntington’s thesis by other Orientalist theorist has already contributed to a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is little doubt that the United States and its Western allies will be able to militarily overcome the challenge posed by the Islamist forces. The question, however, is not a military one. The real challenge in the battle against the Islamist forces is a moral one. Are the Western countries willing to accept responsibility for harms that have come to Muslims due to their colonial policies of the past? Will they continue to treat the Muslims with an imperial attitude? Are Western promises of democracy and respect for Muslims continue to remain rhetoric?

Muslims and non-Muslims, we are bound to live, and get along with, one another in a globalized world. That world remains humane and offers our children a chance to experience peace and prosperity, if we will adhere to our professed democratic values, both at home and abroad, without any discrimination based on religion, race, or nationality.