The Alliance of Civilizations: The Poverty of the Clash/Alliance Dichotomy?

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The term civilization came into the language in the 18th century. Its first usage was meant to differentiate the “civilized” people from the “savages.” Later, its meaning expanded to include culture, identity and state and the term civilization gained its current meaning. However, its high popularity in world politics is a relatively recent development. The term became popular with the publication of Samuel P. Huntington’s 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” Huntington claimed 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 …. The clash of civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.2

Before this article, the usage of the terms “clash” and “civilization” together was com-

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mon among some Orientalist authors and Huntington borrowed his article’s title and theme from Bernard Lewis. For Lewis,

…we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.3

A Myth: The Clash of Civilizations

The time span between the “re-invention” of the concept and its rise on the top of the world’s agenda has been relatively short. The term “clash of civilizations” was of course used before Lewis. For example, in 1979 the journal the Congressio-nal Quarterly published a special issue named “U.S. Foreign Policy: Future Direc-
tions” in which an article was entitled “A Clash of Civilizations”.4 Under this title, it was argued that “the conflict between Middle Eastern and Western civilizations would continue in Iran” after the 1979 revolution.5 The first usage of the concept “the clash of civilizations” dates back to the 1920s. Basil Matthews, then a missionary in India, used the phrase in the subtitle of his book, Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations, published in 1926. As pointed out by Ahmet Davutoğlu, there is a very interesting “imaginative continuity” between Mathews’ and Huntington’s approaches toward other civilizations.6 However, the usages of the concept in 1926 and 1979 respectively did not draw a wider attraction because the Orient was a “silent-Other.”7 The Orient was waiting to be conquered in 1926, while there was another clash in 1979 between two other ideologies, capitalism and communism, which overshadowed the tension between the East and the West.

There was nothing substantially new in Lewis’ claim aside from the fact that it rose to the top of the world’s agenda in a relatively short time span. Lewis’ phrase “assumes the unchanging character of the duality between us and them” as many Orientalist texts previously did.8 This is typically an “Orientalist distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’” according to which the pro-noun “we,” an idea from the Judeo-Christian heritage, “is used with the full weight of a distinguished, powerful man who feels himself to be representative of all that is best in his nation’s history” while “they” is described as uncivilized one.9 Then, Lewis’ distinction is just an extension of an old-fashioned tradition called Orientalism. For Edward Said,

[Orientalism] uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, and public policy. The result is usually to polarize the distinction (the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western)
and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. In short, from its earliest modern history to the present, Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown the altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions as “East” and “West”: to channel thought into a West or an East compartment. Because this tendency is right at the center of Orientalist theory, practice, and values found in the West, the sense of Western power over the Orient is taken for granted as having the status of scientific truth.¹⁰

However, Lewis and his many Orientalist contemporaries should be differentiated from the old tradition because they insist on the “clash” with the other. By stressing the clash, these new Orientalists have transformed conventional Orientalism, which used to perceive the East as the West’s silent-Other, and have begun to see the East as an active-Other. Thereby, Lewis turns Islamic civilization into an active-Other by defining Islam reductively and selectively focusing on Islamic arguments that makes Islam appear anti-Western.

In doing so, the new Orientalists have tried to legitimize the West’s interference in the Middle East in particular and in the Islamic world in general. In their view, the West has to meddle in Islamic world for the future of global system because “Muslim countries host the most terrorists and fewest democracies in the world.”¹¹ This is certainly similar with traditional Orientalism’s “200-year-old partnership with European imperialism.”¹² Then, one can identify that there is a relationship between the notion of “clash of civilizations” and the Western or American policies after the Cold War. This correlation became clearer when George Bush differentiated the “free world” from the rest after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. The Bush administration also resorted to a discourse reminiscent of the clash of civilizations thesis to justify the war on terror in the wake of 9/11.¹³

As a result, one can identify three characteristic features of the clash-based analysis of civilizations by the new Orientalist line. Firstly, they use the term civilization to describe wider cultures such as “Islam” and “the West.” Secondly, they describe the Islamic civilization as the supreme civilizational other of the Western civilization by using the self/other dichotomy. Lastly, new Orientalist authors take civilization as a “body in clash with its other” from the beginning of the 1990s to the present by arguing that civilizations can conflict with each other in the same way that states do. These three arguments have become dominant in Western literature, especially after the publication of Huntington’s article in 1993. Many scholars began to describe world politics after the Cold War by referencing Huntington’s article and focusing on the “conflicts” between the West and the Islamic
world, arguing that it would replace the Cold War as the main line of conflict in world politics. The terms such as “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic terrorism,” “Islamic extremism” and “radical Islam” were increasingly used to define the “other” side of the clash.

The De-mythization of the “Clash” Notion

It is clear that the “alliance” discourse came after the term “clash” had already gained a dominant position in the Western literature. Before the use of such terms as dialogue and alliance to alleviate the clash between civilizations became common, some scholars had attempted to free the term civilization from the “clash” and sought to undermine the concept of the “so-called separation of civilizations.” Fouad Ajami published an article after Huntington and argued that the clash is not between civilizations but the interests of different countries. For Ajami,

Civilizations do not control states, states control civilizations. States avert their gaze from blood ties when they need to; they see brotherhood and faith and kin when it is in their interest to do so. We remain in a world of self-help. The solitude of states continues … The phenomenon we have dubbed Islamic Fundamentalism is less a sign of resurgence than of panic and bewilderment and guilt that the border with ‘the other’ has been crossed.

Ajami did not necessarily use an “alliance” discourse to describe the relations between civilizations. A year later, Davutoğlu developed a similar argument to that of Ajami and argued that clash-based analyses of civilizations are just a “strategic exploitation of the civilizational clashes” to promote the “western strategic interests.” For Davutoğlu, this “strategic misuse of civilizational differences” was developed by some influential scholars to “suggest Western policy makers should manipulate, and sometimes provoke, these clashes in order to secure the strategic interests of western civilization.” Ajami and Davutoğlu did not use the term civilization in conjunction with “positive” terms such as “dialogue” and “alliance” although they freed the term civilization from the term “clash.”

Later, Said developed a more comprehensive and substantial criticism of the clash-based approaches to civilizations. For him,

…cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality. … this (the notion of “clash of civilizations”) was one of the implied messages of Orientalism, that any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way
in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the “Orient” or the “West”.18

Said deconstructs the ground on which the notion of clash of civilizations was founded by showing that civilizations or cultures are “hybrid and heterogeneous” and not independent bodies. For Said, clash-based arguments about civilizations are “futile” because they undertake an impossible job “to plow or divide [civilizations] with barriers” despite “the overwhelming evidence that today’s world is, in fact, a world of mixtures, of migrations and of crossings over, of boundaries traversed”.19 This argument exposes “the weakest part” of the clash of civilizations thesis because Huntington vacillates in drawing clear lines between different civilizations. Huntington accepts that “civilizations have no clear-cut boundaries and no precise beginnings and endings” although he argues that “civilizations are nonetheless meaningful entities, and while the lines between them are seldom sharp, they are real”.20

As a result, one can identify two kinds of attempts to free civilizations from an “inevitable clash.” Firstly, Ajami and Davutoğlu argue that current conflicts are the result of nation states’ interests and not civilizational reasons even though they recognize the existence of civilizations as separate entities. Secondly, some scholars, led by Said, undermine the self/other dichotomy which legitimizes and makes possible the “clash,” by taking the “other” as something within “self” and arguing the “other” is an integral part of the construction process of the “self.” Said and his followers advocate a total-rejection of “scholarly constructed” demarcations of civilizations. According to Said, “rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow”.21 The main difference between these two arguments is that the first one is more suitable for dialogue-based initiatives among civilizations while the last one advocates no alliance-based ideas because it leaves civilization as it is.

The Emergence of the “Dialogue” Notion

Expressions such as “dialogue among civilizations,” “the dialogue of civilizations” and “dialogue between civilizations” were not necessarily invented in the post-Huntington era. For example, in a 1981 article Johan Galtung had underlined “the obvious need for a dialogue among civilizations ... [to arrive] at richer peace concepts” because “the peace concepts become more and more introvert, inner-directed, away from global architectonics and towards concepts of inner
harmony... as one moves eastward from the Occident.”22 For Galtung, dialogue is possible among civilizations because he takes civilizations as separate entities after accepting that they have some similarities. Unlike this first usage, the term “dialogue among civilizations” was re-invented as a counter-reaction against the clash-based arguments, re-defined in accordance with the notion of clash of civilizations, and became as popular in the 1990s. This new usage of the term emerged as the main other of the clash-based ideas as clearly seen in the phrase “dialogue instead of clash” among civilizations.

A report entitled “Our Global Neighborhood” was published almost a year after Huntington’s article. The report was adopted by the Commission on Global Governance, composed of prestigious public figures from well over 20 countries, in October 1994.23 The report took “civilization” as a singular body and underlined an “opportunity to take human civilization to higher levels and to make the global neighborhood a more peaceful, just, and habitable place for all, now and in the future.” It used the term “culture” in explaining widespread misunderstandings about “foreign life-styles” all around the world. According to the report, “the world community should reassert the importance of tolerance and respect for ‘the other’: respect for other people, other races, other beliefs, other sexual orientations, other cultures.” The report can be situated outside of the clash/alliance dichotomy because it takes culture as a form of expression through which the “lifestyle” of a specific people is shown while at the same time it presents civilization as the sum of values and practices that is shared with other groups of people.

A year after the publication of the report, then German President Roman Herzog delivered a speech titled “Commonalities between Islamic and Western Cul-
tures” in which he argued that “our aim should not be the clash of cultures or civilizations but the development of a common civilization built on consensus and mutual trust.” He again took civilization as a singular body by using the term “common civilization.” Then, one can argue that there was no clear clash/alliance dichotomy until the year 1995. Although both the contributors to the report and Herzog discussed the clash of civilizations thesis, thanks to their treatment of civilization as a singular body, they did not situate themselves in the clash/alliance dichotomy. However, the emergence of the idea of dialogue among “different civilizations” in the context of the clash/alliance dichotomy did not have too long to wait.

In 1995, the Emirates Centre for Development and Strategic Research from the UAE and the German Friedrich Elbert Stiftung organized a panel under the title “The Dialogue between Civilizations” in Amman, Jordan. Yousef Al-Hassan, in his introductory chapter, argued that

…we are encouraging here dialogue between cultures and civilizations instead of clash or conflict… The dialogue between civilizations that we are seeking would prevent cultures from viewing one another through a broken mirror [by admitting] the validity of all civilizations, and [eliminating] the siege mentality existing in some cultures... Dialogue does not mean forgetting about or ignoring the differences between cultures... [it is] a clear answer to the so-called Islamic threat to Western Christian civilization.

According to this excerpt, there are many civilizations which are separable from each other and a dialogue must be developed between them. Because the need for a dialogue between civilizations is justified on the basis of an assumption that there is already a clash or conflict between civilizations, it can be argued that this panel symbolizes the emergence of the alliance part of the clash/alliance dichotomy. After this panel, an international conference focusing on the topic of conflict or cooperation among civilizations was held in London on June 14-16, 1996. Many conferences and panels which could be seen as counter-reactions against the clash-based depictions of civilizations followed from these forerunner dialog-based arguments.

Paralleling these scholarly arguments, some initiatives at the political level to foster dialogue “among civilizations” were undertaken. Following the proposal of Mohammad Khatami, then president of Iran, the United Nations designated the year 2001 as the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.” While making this proposal during his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 21, 1998, Khatami had expressed his “hope that such a dialogue would replace hostility and confrontation with discourse and understanding.” Nonetheless, it could not
prevent the 9/11 attacks. Following this notorious incident, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on November 21, 2001, entitled “Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations.” The program of action invited “states, the United Nations system and other international and regional organizations and civil society … to promote dialogue among civilizations.” In addition to the UN initiatives, the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) and European Union (EU) Joint Forum was convened on February 12–13, 2002, in Istanbul to promote understanding and harmony among civilizations.27

The Problems of a “Reactionary” Initiative

The evolution of the “dialogue” notion into “alliance” was accompanied by political attempts to establish the Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) initiative. However, the clash/alliance dichotomy had already been formed before the AoC initiative was established. The transformation was mainly semantical because although the words changed, their contents remained the same. The dialogue notion had already represented the alliance part of the clash/alliance dichotomy before this evolution. Thereby, the AoC initiative emerged from this clash/alliance dichotomy and was founded on dialogue-based ideas, which means that the AoC initiative walked into a stalemate set by the dichotomy. As shown before, some scholars following Said succeeded to escape from this dichotomy by advocating that the clash of civilizations is an ahistorical argument (or a strongly structured myth) because there is no clear distinction between civilizations.

The fact that the AoC initiative has been built on the clash/alliance dichotomy has rendered it captive to this dichotomy and has substantially shaped the main features and subsequent evolution of the AoC. Firstly, the term “alliance” implicitly accepts the existence of the clash as a starting point or takes the notion of a clash as an “out there” thing. Secondly, the survival of the AoC depends greatly on the continuation of the clash of civilizations because the notion of “alliance” is reintroduced in the notion of “clash.” Thirdly, the AoC became a body composed of the countries from Western and Islamic civilizations only because the clash notion is mostly about these two civilizations. Lastly, as will be discussed below, the emergence of the AoC out of the clash/alliance dichotomy indirectly legitimizes the arguments of new Orientalist scholars. These features not only determine the identity of the AoC initiative but at the same time expose the existential problems of the initiative.

A close examination of the discourse used by the two co-founders of the initiative shows that the main motivation behind their attempt is the clash/alliance
dichotomy. For example, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, one of the co-presidents of the initiative, articulated the main motivation by arguing that “an effective and strong answer could be given to apocalyptic scenarios based on the inevitability of a ‘Clash of Civilizations’ and a common basis that will enable us to act in alliance could be formed in response to theories that foresee the partition of humanity according to new demarcation lines,” in his address at the opening of the high level group meeting of the AoC in November 2005.28 Later, Spanish Prime Minister Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, the other co-president of the initiative, reiterated this motivation by saying that the AoC’s “objective was to avoid the fulfillment of a predicted clash of civilizations.”29 The founding motive of the AoC initiative, which is clearly stated in its co-presidents’ statements, shows that the AoC is a “reactionary” entity/institution against “the clash of civilizations” discourse.

Given that the overarching reason behind the existence of the initiative is a concern to prevent the clash, consequently, the initiative’s survival and continuation also depends on the presence and persistence of the clash. This creates a dilemma which suggests that the more the clash threatens to spread all around the world, the more the world needs the alliance. This is also clear in Zapatero’s motivation for the initiative after the Madrid train bombings by al-Qaeda-inspired terrorists that killed 191 people on March 11, 2004. That attack was the reason why he strongly advocated an alliance between the Western civilization and its Muslim counterpart. Another indicator of Zapatero’s motivation is that the “alliance” idea gradually lost its importance in Zapatero’s agenda within three years after the Madrid train bombings. For Zapatero, the lesser the clash threatens to spread in his country, the lesser Spain needs the alliance.

The immediate motivation behind the establishment of the AoC initiative was the Madrid train bombings. Within hours of taking power after his landslide victory in the general elections in Spain, Zapatero declared “the Alliance of Civilizations as a new way to combat terrorism.” Zapatero proposed the “Alliance of Civilizations between the Western and the Arab and Muslim world” to the secretary general of the United Nations in his speech at the fifty-ninth UN General Assembly on September 21, 2004.30 He reiterated the same argument in his speech
at the inauguration of the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum by saying that “this initiative aimed to correct the negative drift being experienced … between the Western and Arab-Islamic worlds.” Such expressions as “combating terrorism”, “the Western”, “Arab”, and “Muslim world” were prominent in Zapatero’s alliance-based discourse. This kind of discourse shows that the alliance was mainly established as a body between the two civilizations and also explains why other civilizations remained silent about the AoC initiative.

After its foundation, the AoC gained the most widespread popularity during the cartoon crisis. Cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist were printed in Magazinet, a Norwegian Christian newspaper, on January 10, 2006, and stirred a great crisis between the West and the Islamic world. Reactions and counter-reactions deepened the crisis. Numerous publications around Europe reprinted the cartoons to demonstrate their support for freedom of the press while the outcries in the Muslim world turned into violent protests targeting Western embassies and fast-food chains. The tension between the two civilizations brought the initiative to the top of the world’s agenda. Political leaders underlined the importance of the AoC in preventing such tensions or clash-based movements. This episode serves as the most vivid example to expose the dependency of the initiative on the spread of clash-based behaviors and discourses.

The dichotomy has limited the scope of the initiative in terms of membership as well. The AoC embraces mostly the West and the Muslim world while paying little attention to other civilizations such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Many conflicts have religious overtones all around the world, including, but not limited to, the Tibet question, the Kashmir problem, and the Palestinian question. Although Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism are involved in different ways in these conflicts, and they might be seen as yet other manifestations of a clash between civilizations, the AoC predominantly, if not exclusively, focused on “the clash between Christianity and Islam” and left other religions or civilizations out. This has resulted in a situation whereby other civilizations have at best remained silent about the AoC initiative from its beginning to this date. The role of the co-presidents in the initiative is the main sign of the AoC’s position among civilizations because Turkey has assumed the position of the spokesperson of the Islamic world, while Spain, the other co-sponsor of the initiative, has represented the Western world. Such a distribution of roles is partly an inevitable result of the motivation behind the AoC. This is also clear in the statements of Zapatero who claimed that terrorism is ultimately a product of the clash of civilizations and, more specifically, assumed that terrorism originated from the other side, i.e., the Muslim world. As a result, the AoC became a body composed of the Western and
Islamic civilizations because the clash is mostly perceived to be taking place between these two civilizations.

Let’s reiterate the three pillars on which the new Orientalist scholars grounded their conflict-based arguments: civilizations are wider cultures, Islamic civilization is the other of the Western civilization, and civilizations are in clash. A close examination of the main motivations behind the AoC shows that it indirectly legitimizes the arguments of the new Orientalist scholars. The AoC initiative takes civilizations as “wider cultures” which ignores the great differences between cultures within the so-called “wider culture.” The initiative mostly concentrates on Islamic and Western civilizations and takes them as separate bodies, which implicitly accepts the assumption that the Islamic civilization is the other of its Western counterpart and vice versa. The declared objective of the AoC, which is clearly reflected in the statements of the co-presidents of the AoC, is to prevent the clash, which suggests that the initiative takes the existence of a clash as reality.

Conclusion

The notion of “alliance” is an integral part of the clash of civilizations thesis whereby it forms a “dichotomy with clash” in which all parts mutually constitute each other. At a time when a discursive process for the de-mythization of the clash of civilizations thesis was underway at the intellectual level, the emergence of the AoC delivered an important disservice. The AoC has hindered this de-mythization process, and has instead served to consolidate the clash myth. It did so both by making possible the clash/alliance dichotomy and establishing a state-based institution to fight against a clash-based discourse. With the establishment of the AoC as a state-based institution, ironically, the clash of civilizations myth too found its institutional embodiment and thereby an ensemble consisting of discourses and non-discursive institutions has been completed. Then, one can see how the AoC, through its institutional history, knowingly or unknowingly has legitimizd the new Orientalists’ main arguments, on which this clash of civilizations myth was constructed. Although the AoC positions itself against the clash-based ideas, it in essence accepts the arguments behind the clash-based ideas.

The uncertainty over the other of the alliance, i.e., against whom the “alliance” was established, has been one of the major criticisms raised against the project.
The dominant role of the nation states remains the Achilles tendon for the emergence of the AoC as a global problem-solving initiative. That question also exposes the biggest vulnerability of the project. The AoC takes terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism as common enemies of civilizations and aims to eliminate the “false-image” of the Islamic world by insisting that terrorism is not part of the Islamic civilization. This is in line with the claims of new Orientalists that the clash of civilizations is between the Western civilization and its “active-Other”. The AoC borrows the active-Other of the Western civilization as the main target in its fight against the clash. Thereby, the AoC emerges as the major supporter of the Western civilization in its clash with this active-Other.

A critical question, however, remains unanswered. Is there any hope to free the AoC from this dead-end despite the fact that its existence depends on the persistence of the clash/alliance dichotomy? Or are existential problems an inevitable destiny of the initiative? Given the fact that institutions have a dynamic aspect, there are some way outs of this stalemate. The AoC can be transformed to an organization in which educators, intellectuals, scholars, opinion leaders and civil figures play the dominant role. By doing so, the discursive process can be brought back into line. The main obstacle before this avenue seems to be its identification with some countries such as Turkey and Spain. In other words, the dominant role of the nation states remains the Achilles tendon for the emergence of the AoC as a global problem-solving initiative. This situation has prevented its acceptability by other countries, and other civilizations. Turning the presidency of the AoC into a symbolic position and making it a rotating one can help free the initiative from some countries (or civilizations) own interests and as such increase its appeal to other countries and civilizations.

Endnotes


5. Ibid, p. 56.
10. Ibid, pp. 45-46.


28. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “Address by H. E. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey at the Opening of the High Level Group Meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative, Palma de Mallorca, 27 November 2005,” (2005), http://www.unaoc.org.


31. Zapatero, “Speech by the President of the Government at the inauguration of the First Alliance of Civilizations Forum”


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