A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilisations: Us and Them Beyond Orientalism

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam
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Of one Essence is the human race,
Thusly has Creation put the Base;
One Limb impacted is sufficient,
For all Others to feel the Mace.

Saadi Shirazi
Thirteenth-century poet
CONTENTS

About the Author ix
Preface xi

Introduction: The Clash Regime and its Pathologies 1
1. The Passions of History 27
2. The Temptations of Grammar 99
3. The Anger of Nations 169
4. Us and Them: The Art of Engagement 265

Bibliography 301
Index 329
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam is University Lecturer in Comparative- and International Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London where he convenes postgraduate courses on the ‘International Politics of the Middle East’ and ‘Islamic Political Thought’. He was born in the Taksim area of Istanbul to Iranian parents and was raised in Hamburg/Germany. In Hamburg he attended the Wichern School—a German-evangelical private institution and Persian and Arabic language courses at the Imam Ali mosque in the same city. His academic education began at the University of Hamburg where he read Political Science, Psychology and Economics culminating in a Masters Degree in Political Science in 2000. Between 1997 and 1998 he was a scholarship student at the American University in Washington DC. In the summer of 2000, a generous scholarship by the Cambridge European Trust Society, Trinity College under the auspices of HRH the Duke of Edinburgh and the Elizabeth Cherry Fellowship at Hughes Hall enabled him to pursue his academic studies at the University of Cambridge. Supervised by Charles Jones and mentored by Yezid Sayigh he was awarded an MPhil in late 2001 and a PhD in International Relations in early 2004 (accepted without corrections). His viva voce was examined by the late Peter Avery, OBE and Raymond Hinnebusch at the former’s legendary fellows’ suite at King’s College, Cambridge. After his PhD, Adib-Moghaddam lived, researched and lectured extensively in Iran. In 2005, he was elected the first Jarvis Doctorow Junior Research Fellow in International Relations and Peace Studies at St. Edmund Hall and the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford. Two years later in 2007, he accepted his current tenured position at SOAS. Adib-Moghaddam is
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

the author of *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A cultural genealogy* (Routledge, 2006, 2009), *Iran in World Politics: The question of the Islamic Republic* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2008, 2010) and numerous research articles which have been published in leading peer-reviewed journals. Adib-Moghaddam’s writings have been translated into many languages and he keeps a busy national and international lecture schedule. A member of several anti-war organisations, his commentary and opinion pieces appear regularly in the mainstream and alternative press in Europe, Asia, the United States and Latin America.
As I was finishing the final manuscript of this book, I received a curious leaflet through my letterbox at home in Cambridge. It was titled ‘Urgent and Important: What will you leave behind for the children?’ Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a part of a ‘marketing’ initiative by the ‘Creation Science Movement’, which presents itself—further research reveals—as the oldest creationist movement in the United Kingdom. The leaflet was folded into a six-page article on Charles Darwin, which attempts to prove the compatibility of the theory of evolution with the creation of Adam and Eve. The authors of the leaflet emphasise that ‘Britain is a country founded on the Christian faith’ and alert us about the ‘serious deterioration’ of the ‘general conduct of society’ compared to ‘forty years ago’. One of the main causes for this moral and social malaise, we are warned, ‘is the worship of false gods and idols such as Allah, the Islamic god, or the Virgin Mary. Muhammad ... based the religion of Islam originally around the superstition of worship of the “moon god”’. This explains, according to the authors, the crescent moon on the flag of many Islamic nations. ‘One only has to read the Qur’an (Koran) to see the aggressiveness of Muhammad’. Towards the end of the leaflet the authors anxiously add that ‘[f]uture generations of Britons are in danger of Islamic totalitarian intentions’. The only way to prevent this impending Islamic conquest is for parents to ‘plead for recovery of Biblical truth in this nation for their children’.  

I am not quoting from this intense and angry leaflet because I deem it in any way representative of public opinion in Britain, of course. The

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attitude displayed in it does not drive a political movement with mass appeal. It is as marginal to the consciousness of the rational majority in this country and beyond, as the message of Al Qaeda is in Muslim-majority societies. You will have surmised that the authors of the leaflet do not represent ‘Christianity’, not even ‘Evangelicals’, the German-protestant variant of which I learned to appreciate during my Gymnasium years in Germany. Nor can they be considered well versed in the symbolism of ‘Islam’. But the message is a minor surface effect of a shifting, yet historically surprisingly stable setting that no amount of scholarly aloofness can ignore. For not only do leaflets like that arouse our revulsion over the arbitrary semantic ambiances that continue to be exercised over complex systems such as ‘Islam’ or ‘Christianity’ itself, but we are also immediately transposed into the real world, there to battle with, if not the whole politico-cultural apparatus behind it, then at least the most central institutions and norms in which those angry narratives are spun.

Any discussion of that battle beyond the micro-politics of my home cannot ignore a larger constellation encapsulated in the seemingly uncanny idea of a ‘clash of civilisations’. When one mentions it, many self-respecting scholars have as dismissive and violent a reaction as the leaders of Al Qaeda have to women—to lash out, to call for disciplinary action, for confinement and enclosure. However, is it possible to think about contemporary (world) politics, the international media, and some proto-fascist discourse on the intransigent right-wing here and there without taking the clash idea into consideration analytically? It seems to me that if historians, in the near future, would come together in order to enquire into the development of world order in the twenty-first century, they would most certainly find it unavoidable to evaluate the interventions of some of the surprisingly contagious ideas suggesting that we are in the middle of some sort of ‘clash of civilisations’, especially, we are told, between Islam and the ‘West’.

One would have thought that the clash idea is too atrocious and too unspecified to make rational sense. It is all the more surprising that it continues to have a presence in many political discourses. Consequently, this study focuses on the way a range of talented, occasionally callous, certainly influential orators, academics, journalists, polemists, politicians, propagandists have habituated us to believe in the normality of conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. By all the conventional wisdom available, the disciples of this pervasive idea should not be so
successful. Surely, their prominence cannot be due to the ethical strength of their argument. Surely, trying to persuade us that the conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is inscribed in human nature is not an alluring or convincing prospect. So why is it that we are continuously confronted with the idea that we are embroiled in some eternal clash, between civilisations or other imagined concepts? This question is central to this book and will be engaged from a theoretical, epistemological, ontological and empirical angle.

It is my proposition that the argument put forward by Huntington in his highly influential Foreign Affairs essay in 1993 and his subsequent book is the product and element of a ‘regime of truth’ that sustains the clash idea today. I will explain the term ‘regime of truth’ which I have derived from Foucault more fully in the introduction. Suffice to say at this stage that the ‘regime of truth’ under focus here, refers to the apparatus of techniques, the strategies, policies, ideas and disciplinary constellations that compel ‘us’ into believing in some seemingly inevitable clash with ‘them’. It is that ‘clash regime’ that suggests a ‘clash of civilisations’ and whose aim is nothing less than political quiescence into the importance of a permanent war against the ‘other’. As we will see, the transmutation from myth to ‘pseudo-reality’ has been the task of the ‘clash regime’ and its disciples for a long time now. In order to investigate how we got to where we are, we have to write a metahistory of the ‘objectification’ of this ‘clash regime’ facing us at the very moment at which I ask these questions: In what ways has the ‘clash regime’ been engineered and reified throughout history? How does it appear, and in which disciplines and discourses does it anchor its structural force? How did formative events in history, for instance the Persian-Greek wars, the emergence of Islam in the seventh century AD, the Crusades, colonialism and imperialism, the ‘War on Terror’ contribute to the making of that clash regime? What is it that makes us believe in dichotomous constellations in the first place? To what extent have we overcome stringent notions of ‘our’ and ‘their’ ‘identity’? What are some of the strategies to battle with the structural violence of the clash regime?

If there is a cultural pre-disposition within society that delivers the clash idea and its corresponding mindset, as I have suggested, then we

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should be able to locate the institutions, norms and systems of thought, that perpetuate that idea. If the artificial engineering of the clash of civilisations from innumerable loci suggests its ontological force; if people from all walks of life—Silvio Berlusconi, Osama bin Laden, Martin Amis, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Christopher Hitchens, Geert Wilders, Glenn Beck to name a few—believe they can ‘see’ the clash between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’, than there must be a cultural constellation out there that valorises an inevitable conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them’. So in order to be able to analyse the giant historical field and institutional geography in which the idea of a clash is continuously cultivated, we have to step back and look at History from a fresh perspective. Such ‘histories of History’ (or metahistories) have only emerged very recently and this book intends to make a contribution to the many critical schools that have proliferated in opposition to mainstream writings of the past and present. Thus, the opportunity exists to resist and to emphasise that the making of our ‘self’ is entirely dependent on the ‘other’, and that our inevitable, quite biological and genetic interdependence—like any other sibling relationship—demands a politics of empathy. Killing the ‘other’, we have to protest, always also means killing a part of our ‘self’ much in the same way as killing a member of our family constitutes an act of genealogical self-mutilation. We should be aware that a world depleted of ‘otherness’ is the ‘ideal’ order that the racist imagines. In this order, which can only be delivered through a sustained, blood-trenched Gleichschaltung (synchronisation), the self would be entirely ‘purified’, depleted of any otherness. I for one would not want to live in such a sterilised world, would you?

So we stand in front of an awesome truth constellation, a system of control, constituted by many discourses, permeated by entrenched ideologies, and many disciplines including some of those that are being taught at this very moment, all of which ensure a permanent reactivation of the clash regime and its ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality. Today, we continue to be disciplined in valorising a continuous war against the ‘other’. At this very moment, we can see that the geography of violence has been seriously expanded in the ‘War on Terror’ and bin-Laden’s corresponding global terrorism campaign, from Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar and Baghdad, to Tavistock Square, Fort Hood and Manhattan. But the regime of truth producing and sustaining the idea that we are embroiled in an all-encompassing, zero-sum clash is less visible. And yet it is ‘everywhere’ inducing, on a continuous basis, factual
validity to some clash of civilisations. To that end, a technique of enmeshment is employed. Disparate conflicts, all with their own very specific historical and political dynamics, are artificially aggregated in order to legitimate and prescribe violence. The bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993, the bomb attack on the Paris Metro (St. Michel Station) in 1995, the attacks on American military personnel in Riyadh in November 1995, and Dhara in June 1996, the US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, the suicide attack on the USS Cole in the Port of Aden in December 2000, 11 September 2001, the bombing of the US Consulate and Marriott Hotel in Karachi in 2002, the Bali bombings in the same year, the war in Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the three bombings of railroads in Madrid in November 2004, the attacks on London in July 2005, the bloody siege of the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai in December 2008, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are not at all indicative of some clash of civilisations. Rather, the fact that some of us think they are, is indicative of the persistence of a clash regime that suggests a clash of civilisation, nothing more and nothing less. Hence, for my generation, it must be a priority to investigate how the clash regime has been constituted and perpetuated and to debunk its violent logic at the same time.

What many of the proponents of the ‘clash regime’, in East and West, North and South, have done is by far more decisive to world politics and global history more generally than one would think. Those who enlist an individual’s mind to the cause of conflict against another group command awesome powers. That is not necessarily because they swing the sword or wield the sceptre, but because of the devastating influence of their ideas; the disciples of the ‘clash regime’ are primarily interested in coding the way we think about difference. The wars of ideas thus engendered have devastated empires, enslaved whole continents and colonised cultures. So it must be an ambition of this book to identify these men and women and to delve into their discourses and theories in order to fight them from within.

What is strange is that in a world shaken by recurrent conflicts in the name of group affiliations—the ‘West’, ‘Islam’, the ‘nation’, ‘the free world’—we do not know enough about the way these conflicts are produced in the first place. One would have thought that in a world that continuously worries about war and terror and talks of the tensions between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’ in particular, the individuals who have lured us into this treacherous territory and their way of thinking
would be constantly challenged by the rational majority. Instead, they are offered columns in daily newspapers, magazines and enough air-time on TV to preach their angry message and to fog the brains of their consumers. The omnipresence of the clash regime is not at least a product of today’s global media culture that has catapulted the Osama bin Ladens of this world to unenviable stardom. But it is also an indication of the retreat and disempowerment of the University and critical discourse more generally.

It is the creation and legitimation of war and conflict that is the ultimate goal of the engineers of the clash regime. In order to combat this vast constellation at its contemporary sites—academia, the international media, History, Hollywood, discursive formations (or systems) such as Islamism or the ‘West’—this book presents a journey through the ideas, norms, institutions and myths that have habituated us to accept the current status quo as normality. It is a book that pays particular attention to the complex interaction between representations of ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘us’ and ‘them’ during formative periods of world history. It practises comparative politics in a metahistorical mode. To that end, we will encounter not only scholars on our way, but many revolutionaries, warriors, philosophers, orators, many propagandists both megalomaniac and brilliant, and even here and there the self-conscious terrorist. At the same time, I am aware that our subject matter is spread out on a vast canvas, and that the sketches holding the pages of this book together need to be redrawn in future studies.

No discourse is innocent, every idea has a political connotation, and any system of thought affects us all the way down to our very consciousness and preferences. This text battles with these rapturous powers unleashed primarily by the identity inducing cultures surrounding us. Ultimately, it is a book written in the middle of—yet in opposition to a period of major trepidation and rage; both here and over there.

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There is no uniform way of transliterating Persian and Arabic terms.
For the sake of consistency and clarity I have used the most prevalent
spelling and kept it throughout the study. All translations are mine
unless indicated otherwise in the references.

Arshin Adib-Moghaddam  Cambridge/London
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INTRODUCTION

THE CLASH REGIME AND ITS PATHOLOGIES

1. On the 2nd December, 1947, the Council of al-Azhar University proclaimed a world-wide holy war in defence of Arab Palestine, and it is perhaps worth noting that the appeal was to ‘Arabs and Muslims’.

2. The origin of the institution of Jihad, or holy war, is to be found in several of the suras of the Quran revealed to the Prophet Muhammad... Out of these ordinances and ‘traditions’ associated with the Prophet and the early Muslim period, there gradually evolved a general religious duty of performing the jihad incumbent on all free adult Muslims who had means of reaching the army. This duty had two aspects: the advancement of Islam by arms and the repelling of evil from the Muslims. Thus, if a Muslim country is invaded by unbelievers a general summons may be issued calling all Muslims to arms. And as the danger grows, so may the width of the summons grow until the whole Muslim world is involved. However, it must be remembered that the Islamic world, except in the first stages of its history, has never responded in its entirety to such a summons.

From Volume 7, Air Commodore K. Buss, Foreign Office Research Centre, 12 December 1947, ‘Partition in Palestine and the Declaration of a Jihad’

The first thing one notices apropos of the idea of the clash of civilisations is its contagious nature: the way many tend to engage with its premises, sometimes mockingly, sometimes in compliance, but always with an understanding that such phenomena are contemplated. ‘There is a partial truth to the notion of a “clash of civilisations” attested here’, writes even as self-consciously a ‘leftist’ writer as Slavoj Žižek. ‘Two philosophical references immediately impose themselves apropos of this ideological antagonism between Western consumerism and