

Has History Started Again?

Francis Fukuyama

Are we seeing the start of a decades-long 'clash of civilisations' between the West and radical Islam, or will modernity remain the dominant force in world politics?



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World politics, it would seem, shifted gears abruptly after September 11. During the dot-com era (which today seems like an enchanted, long-ago time), America was on a roll. Communism, the last big competitor to liberal democracy, had collapsed just like fascism and monarchy before it, the U.S. economy was going gangbusters and democratic institutions seemed to be making headway in all parts of the world. Technology, it was said, was bringing the global village closer together in ways that made traditional nation-states irrelevant.

Today, everything looks different. The United States has defeated the Taliban and is at war with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan after suffering an unprecedentedly successful attack on its own territory, and is now preparing to take on Iraq. Large numbers of Muslims are mobilised in opposition to the United States, and countries around the world are being asked to choose sides in the struggle. Security concerns have thrown sand in the gears of the just-in-time economy, which depends on open borders and the free movement of goods and people.

What is going on here? Are we seeing the beginning of a decades-long 'clash of civilisations' pitting the West against Islam, a conflict that expands remorselessly out of the Afghan swamp to engulf ever larger parts of the world? Will the very technologies that seemed to promote freedom, like airplanes and skyscrapers and biology laboratories, be turned against us in ways that we cannot ultimately stop? Or will the present conflict recede and the old world of an ever-integrating global

economy come back once Osama bin Laden is swept away and the terror network rolled up?

More than ten years ago, I argued that we had reached the 'end of history': not that historical events would stop, but that History understood as the evolution of human societies through different forms of government had culminated in modern liberal democracy and market-oriented capitalism. It is my view that this hypothesis remains correct, despite the events since September 11: modernity, as represented by the United States and other developed democracies, will remain the dominant force in world politics, and the institutions embodying the West's underlying principles of freedom and equality will continue to spread around the world.

The September 11 attacks represent a desperate backlash against the modern world, which appears to be a speeding freight train to those unwilling to get onboard. But we need to look seriously at the challenge we face. For a movement that has the power to wreak immense damage on the modern world, even if it represents only a small number of people, raises real questions about the viability of our civilisation. The existence of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of virulently anti-American or anti-Western forces and their possible use has become a real threat. The key

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questions that Americans face as they proceed forward with this 'war' on terrorism are how deep this fundamental challenge is, which sorts of allies it can recruit and what we must do to counter it.

A clash of civilisations

The distinguished political scientist Samuel Huntington argues that the present conflict could turn into a 'clash of civilisations', one of the cultural conflicts which, he predicted several years ago, would rack the post-Cold War world. While the Bush and Blair administrations have been correctly asserting that the current struggle is against terrorists, not a war between the West and Islam, there are clearly cultural issues at play.

Americans have tended to believe that their institutions and values—democracy, individual rights, the rule of law and prosperity based on economic freedom—represent universal aspirations that will ultimately be shared by people all over the world, if given the opportunity. They are inclined to think that American society appeals to people of all cultures. The millions of immigrants from countries all over the world who vote with their feet to move to America and to other developed societies seem to testify to this fact.

But events since September 11 challenge this view. Mohamed Atta and several of the other hijackers were educated people who lived and studied in the West. But not only were they not seduced by it, they were sufficiently repelled by what they saw to be willing to drive planes into buildings and kill thousands of the people among whom they lived. The cultural disconnect here, as for Osama bin Laden and his fellow Islamic fundamentalists, would seem to be absolute. Is it just our cultural myopia that makes us think that Western values are potentially universal ones?

The logic of history

There are, in fact, reasons for believing that Western values and institutions are immensely appealing to many if not most non-Western people. This is not to deny the historical tie between both democracy and capitalism to Christianity, or the fact that democracy has its cultural roots in Europe: as philosophers from Alexis de Tocqueville and Georg Hegel to Friedrich Nietzsche have pointed out, modern democracy is a secularised version of the Christian doctrine of universal human equality.

But Western institutions are like the scientific method, which, though discovered in the West, has universal applicability. There is an underlying historical

mechanism that encourages a long-term convergence across cultural boundaries, first and most powerfully in economics, then in the realm of politics and finally (and most distantly) in culture. What drives this process forward in the first instance is modern science and technology, whose ability to create material wealth and weapons of war is so great that virtually all societies must come to terms with it. The technology of semiconductors or biomedicine is not different for Muslims or Chinese than it is for Westerners, and the need to master it necessitates the adoption of certain economic institutions, like free markets and the rule of law, that promote growth. Modern technology-driven market economies thrive on individual freedom—that is, a system where individuals rather than governments or priests make decisions on prices or rates of interest.

Economic development in turn tends to engender liberal democracy—not inevitably, but often enough that the correlation between development and democracy constitutes one of the few generally accepted 'laws' of political science. Economic growth produces a middle class with property rights, a complex civil society and ever higher levels of education to maintain economic competitiveness. All these factors together create fertile ground in which demands for democratic political participation take shape, which eventually get institutionalised in democratic government.

Culture—religious beliefs, social habits, longstanding traditions—is the last area of convergence, and also the weakest. Societies are loath to give up deeply rooted values, and it would be extremely naive to think that American popular culture, seductive as it is, will soon engulf the entire world. Indeed, the spread of McDonald's and Hollywood around the world has provoked a considerable backlash against the very prospect of globalisation.

But while cultural differences remain in modern societies, they tend to be put in a box, separated from politics, and relegated to the realm of private life. The reason for this is simple: if politics is based on something like religion, there will never be any civil peace because people cannot agree on fundamental religious values. Secularism is a relatively recent development in the West: Christian princes and priests in Europe used to mandate their subjects' religious beliefs and persecute those who dissented. The modern secular democratic state emerged out of the bloody religious conflict in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries in which different Christian groups slaughtered one another mercilessly. The separation of church and state became

a necessary component of modernisation precisely because of the need for civil peace—a startling thesis that was argued by philosophers like Hobbes and Locke in a great tradition that culminated in the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

This underlying logic of modernisation suggests that Western values are not just arbitrary cultural offshoots of Western Christianity, but do embody a more universal process. What we need to ask then is, are there cultures or regions of the world that will resist or even prove impervious to the modernisation process?

The West and the rest

If we look at Asia, it is hard to see insuperable cultural barriers to modernisation. Former Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yew used to argue that there were ‘Asian values’ that supported authoritarianism, not democracy, but in recent years South Korea and Taiwan have democratised as they got richer. India has of course been a successful democracy since independence in 1948 and has recently embarked on a series of economic reforms that could help lift it out of poverty as well.

In Latin America and the former communist states of Europe, the cultural barriers are even less pronounced: for them the problem is more on-the-ground failure to achieve modernisation rather than unhappiness with the goal of modernisation itself. Sub-Saharan Africa has numerous problems, from AIDS to civil war to wretched government, but it is hard to see how its diverse cultural traditions will prevent societies there from modernising if they can get their acts together in other respects.

Islam is the one major world culture that arguably does have some very basic problems with modernity. For all the sophistication of Muslim societies, they can boast only one working democracy (Turkey), and have not seen any economic breakthroughs like Korea or Singapore. It is important to be precise, however, in specifying where the basic problem lies.

How Islam is different

It is doubtful that there is something inherent in Islam as a religion that makes it hostile to modernity. Islam, like Christianity, Hinduism, Confucianism or any of the world’s other great religious or cultural traditions, is a system of extraordinary complexity that has evolved

in manifold ways over time. In the period noted above, when Christian Europe was torn by wars of religion, different faiths were living peacefully under the Ottoman millet system. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were important liberal trends in Islam in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Kemal Ataturk’s Turkish Republic became one of the most thoroughly secular regimes in modern history.

The Islamic world differs from other world cultures today in one important respect. In recent years it alone has repeatedly produced significant radical movements that reject not just Western policies but the most basic principle of modernity itself, that of religious tolerance. These groups celebrated September 11 because it humbled a society that they believed was at its base corrupt. This corruption was not just a matter of sexual

permissiveness, homosexuality and women’s rights as they exist in the West, but stemmed in their view from secularism itself. What they hate is that the state in Western societies should be dedicated to religious tolerance and pluralism, rather than to serving religious truth. While people in Asia, Latin America, the former socialist bloc or Africa find Western consumerism appealing and would like to emulate it if only they could, fundamentalists like the Saudi Wahhabis, Osama bin Laden or the Taliban see it as evidence

of Western decadence.

So this is not simply a ‘war’ against terrorists, as the American and British governments understandably portray it. Nor, as many Muslims argue, is the real issue American foreign policy in Palestine or toward Iraq. Unfortunately, the basic conflict we face is much broader, and concerns not just a small group of terrorists, but a much larger group of radical Islamists and Muslims for whom religious identity overrides all other political values. It is radical Islamism that forms the backdrop to a broader sense of grievance that is far deeper and more disconnected from reality than elsewhere. It is this type of Islamist who refuses to believe that Muslims were involved in the World Trade Center attacks, attributing them instead to Israel. They may complain about U.S. policy, but they interpret that policy as part of a larger anti-Muslim conspiracy (conveniently forgetting that U.S. foreign policy has in the past supported Muslims in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya).

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If we recognise that the underlying struggle is not just with actual terrorists but with radical Islamists who see the world as a Manichaean struggle of believers and nonbelievers, then we are not talking about a small and isolated group of fanatics. Osama bin Laden has evoked substantial sympathy throughout the Muslim world since September 11 for standing up to the United States, from slum dwellers in Karachi to professionals in Beirut and Cairo, to Pakistani and Algerian citizens in Britain and France. The Middle East specialist Daniel Pipes estimates this radicalised population to be some 10 to 15% of the Muslim world.

Islamofascism

Why has this kind of radical Islamism suddenly emerged? Sociologically, the reasons may not be that different from those driving European fascism in the early 20th century. The Islamic world has seen large populations uprooted from traditional village or tribal life in the past generation. Many have been urbanised and exposed to a more abstract literary form of Islam that calls them back to a purer version of the religion, just as extremist German nationalism tried to resurrect a mythical, long-dead racial identity. This new form of radical Islam is immensely appealing because it purports to explain the loss of values and cultural disorientation that the modernisation process itself has engendered.

It may therefore clarify things to say that the present conflict is not simply a fight against terrorism, nor against Islam as a religion or civilisation, but rather with Islamofascism—that is, the radically intolerant and antimodern doctrine that has recently arisen in many parts of the Muslim world.

A strong finger of blame for the rise of Islamofascism must point at Saudi Arabia. The fortunes of the Saudi royal family have been intertwined with those of the puritanical Wahhabi sect for many years. The former have for years sought both legitimacy and protection from the clerics by advancing Wahhabism. But the Saudi rulers made huge new investments in promoting their brand of Islam during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly following the abortive takeover of the Great Mosque in Mecca in 1979. Wahhabi ideology easily qualifies as Islamofascist: a text book mandated for use in Saudi 10th-grade classes explains that 'it is

compulsory for the Muslims to be loyal to each other and to consider the infidels their enemies.' The Saudis have promoted this doctrine not just in the Middle East but in the United States as well, where they have reportedly invested hundreds of millions in building schools and mosques to promulgate their brand of Islam. All this money from the Gulf allowed Osama bin Laden and his followers in effect to buy themselves a country, Afghanistan, for use as a base to train a whole generation of Arab fanatics. In this, the United States is blamable as well for having walked away after the Soviet withdrawal and not taking responsibility for the emergence of a stable and moderate political order there.

A final reason Islamofascism took off in the 1980s and 1990s has to do with 'root causes' like poverty, economic stagnation and authoritarian politics in the Middle East that are combustible material for political extremism. But we need to be very clear as to what was actually at the root of these root causes, in light of the frequent charge that the United States and other Western countries could have acted to alleviate them in some significant way.

In fact, the outside community, through international agencies like the World Bank, has been assisting Muslim countries all along, as has the United States in its bilateral dealings with nations like Egypt and Jordan. Very little of this aid has done any good, however, because the underlying problem is a political one in the Muslim world itself. The opportunities for economic and political reform were always there, but few Muslim governments, and, in particular, no Arab governments, have undertaken the kinds of policies followed by countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Chile or Mexico to open up their countries to the global economy and lay the foundations for sustained development. No Arab governments have decided on their own to voluntarily step down in favour of democratic rule, like the Spanish monarchy after the dictator Franco or the Nationalists in Taiwan or the various military dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and other parts of Latin America. There is not a single instance of an oil-rich state in the Persian Gulf that has used its wealth to create a self-sustaining industrial society, instead of creating a society of corrupt rentiers who over time have become more and more fanatically Islamist. These failures, and not anything that the

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outside world has done or refrained from doing, is the root cause of the Muslim world's stagnation.

The future

The challenge faced by the United States and other Western governments today is more than a fight with a tiny band of terrorists. The Islamo-fascist sea within which the terrorists swim constitutes an ideological challenge that is in some ways more basic than the one posed by communism. What will be the broad march of history from this point forward? Will radical Islam pick up ever more adherents and new and more powerful weapons with which to attack the West? We obviously can't know, but certain factors will be key.

The first is the successful outcome of the military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and beyond them Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Much as people would like to believe that ideas live or die as a result of their inner moral rectitude, power matters a great deal. German fascism didn't collapse because of its internal moral contradictions; it died because Germany was bombed to rubble and occupied by Allied armies. Osama bin Laden gained an enormous popularity throughout the Muslim world by successfully attacking the Twin Towers. The destruction of his base of operations in Afghanistan and his eventual death or capture at the hands of U.S. forces makes all that he represents much less appealing. A military campaign against Iraq will have great radicalising potential, unless it is concluded quickly, cleanly, leaving in place a decent and democratic successor regime.

The second and more important development will have to come from inside Islam itself. The Muslim community will have to decide whether to make its peace with modernity, and in particular with the key principle of a secular state and religious tolerance. The Islamic world is at the juncture today where Christian Europe stood during the Thirty Years War in the 17th century: religious politics is driving potentially endless conflict, not just between Muslims and non-Muslims but between different sects of Muslims (many of the recent bombings in Pakistan have been the results of Sunni-Shiite feuds). In an age of biological and nuclear weapons, this could lead to disaster for everyone.

There is some hope that a more liberal strand of Islam will emerge because of the inner historical logic

to political secularism. An Islamic theocracy is something that appeals to people only in the abstract. Those who have actually had to live under such regimes, for example in Iran or Afghanistan, have experienced stifling dictatorships whose leaders are more clueless than most on how to overcome problems of poverty and stagnation. Even as the September 11 events have unfolded, there have been continuing demonstrations in Tehran and many other Iranian cities on the part of tens of thousands of young people fed up with the Islamic regime and wanting a more liberal political order. For them, earlier chants of 'Death to America' have been replaced with cries of 'We love you, America,' even as American bombs were raining down on the Taliban next door in Afghanistan.

Indeed, it seems that if there is any country that is going to lead the Islamic world out of its present predicament, it will be Iran, which 23 years ago initiated the current fundamentalist upsurge by toppling the shah and bringing Ayatollah Khomeini to power. A generation later, hardly anyone under the age of 30 in that country seems any longer to have sympathy for fundamentalism, and if Iran can create a more modern and

tolerant form of Islam, then it will serve as a powerful example to the rest of the Muslim world.

Muslims interested in a more liberal form of Islam must stop blaming the West for painting Islam with too broad a brush, and move themselves to isolate and delegitimize the extremists among them. There is some evidence that this is already happening. American Muslims are waking up to the extent of Wahhabi influence in their own community, and those abroad may come to this realisation if the tide turns decisively against the fundamentalists in Afghanistan.

The struggle between Western liberal democracy and Islamo-fascism is not one between two equally viable cultural systems, both of which can master modern science and technology, create wealth and deal with the de facto diversity of the contemporary world. In all these respects, Western institutions hold all the cards and for that reason will continue to spread across the globe in the long run. But to get to the long run we must survive the short run. And unfortunately, there is no inevitability to historical progress, and few good outcomes absent leadership, courage and a determination to fight for the values that make modern democratic societies possible. ■

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