

Islamic Revivalism in the Arab World and Its Dialogue with the West: The *Homo Culturus* Perspective

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Abstract

This paper seeks to underline two features of transformation in the Arab world since the late 1960s. First, that region's religious transformation or *ṣaḥwah* (awakening) has been a general and overwhelming phenomenon. The pulse of Islam's global surge can be easily observed at various levels of contemporary Arab countries: the individual and the collective, as well as their political behavior and organization. Second, the great tension between the West and Islam, particularly after 9/11, constituted a sort of change in the relationship between these two parties. I argue that these tensions could be reduced and minimized if the West were to improve its linguistic and cultural ties with Arab societies. The perspective of cultural sociology is very helpful in clarifying how to enhance such a dialogue. I shed light on these two topics through what I call a *Homo Culturus* perspective.

Keywords: *Homo culturus*, Arab awakening, political Islam, Arab Spring, dialogue, the West, Islam, cultural sociology

Introduction

This article looks at the Islamic awakening/revivalism that has become so visible on the informal public front since the 1960s across most of the Middle East and North Africa (hereinafter “the region”).¹ Given that Islamic revivalism has widely affected its inhabitants, it is legitimate to speak here of a large-

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scale religious change/transformation which the Arab countries have witnessed since that time.² The Arab world has also confronted another large change/transformation in its relations with the West in the post-9/11 era, the impact of which supports Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis. A discussion of this will be presented in the last part of this article.³

Methodologically, I need at the outset to put forward my new theoretical framework (viz., the *Homo culturus* perspective) as a mariner's compass that will guide my approach, analysis, and discussion. This intellectual compass should persuade readers not to rush to criticize it for dealing with multiple issues at once, for this proposed perspective requires that I outline my new theory right away. By definition, a theory is a thoughtful framework that can explain several different phenomena. I shall now present it below.

The *Homo Culturus* Theoretical Framework

My theoretical thesis claims that human beings are by nature cultural symbolic beings⁴ in the sense that each person's very deep central identity core lies in a set of human symbols (HS) that radically distinguish him/her from all other human beings. The basic symbols in question are the spoken and written language, thought, religion, knowledge/science, laws, myths, and cultural values and norms.

This HS system occupies the very center of the human identity, which is composed of HS and the physical body.⁵ Due to their assumed centrality to a person's identity, these symbols' impact on human beings is expected to be of a global nature, for their effect is not limited only to their individual or collective behaviors, but also extends to their bodily makeup.

Thus, any serious scientific analysis of humanity's social, political, psychological, economic, and cultural affairs must prioritize these symbols' impact. In fact, HS should be considered the crucial central basis that makes up the very distinguished human nature itself.⁶ I have noted an almost total silence on this view in contemporary social sciences. Economists and those who have a materialist view of things describe Man as *Homo oeconomicus*. Political scientists and those interested in political issues label Man as *Homo politicus*. Sociologists see Man as a very social being or *Homo sociologus*. Due to the ever increasing use of numbers, some have called Man *Homo numericus*.⁷ Despite their great interest in studying culture, modern anthropologists do not use terms related to culture to describe man as, first and foremost, a *Homo culturus*.⁸

This marginalization of culture's importance and its central and decisive role in helping us understand and explain human phenomena is likely to

damage the credibility of these soft/social sciences. It could be argued that social sciences can hardly secure a theoretically and empirically sound understanding and explanation of human and social phenomena without giving a central role to culture in their formation. Such marginalization can be explained by social scientists' failure to conduct basic research on HS in order to pursue their own interests in the less central dimensions of human identity. In other words, the thought of these social sciences may be described as one that gives a priori attention to what is close to the important element instead of giving their entire attention to the most important dimensions, namely, human symbols.⁹

The special issue of the French review *Science & Avenir* (Jan.-Feb. 2012) asked 100 eminent natural and social scientists the following question: "Qu'est-ce que l'Homme" ("What is Man")? None of them replied that Man, first and foremost, is a cultural being. The answer of French sociologist Edgar Morin was no exception. Because of his great interest in the complexity of phenomena, Morin labels Man as *Homo complexus*.¹⁰

The Author's Thesis and Cultural Sociology

My theoretical perspective belongs to cultural sociology, as opposed to the sociology of culture. Cultural sociology considers culture an independent and central variable in human identity, something "hard" instead of "soft," which has a very significant role for human individual behaviors and the social dynamics of human societies. In cultural sociologists' terms, social scientists must give culture a "strong" as opposed to a "weak" program in their theoretical and empirical research.¹¹ In other words, they must make culture the focus of their studies. This has never been the case in western sociology. The pre-1960 theorists of culture such as Max Weber (d. 1920), Émile Durkheim (d. 1917), Karl Marx (d. 1883), Talcott Parsons (d. 1979), and C. Wright Mills (d. 1962), not to mention the communists, fascists, and other groups, all had a "weak" program as regards the importance of culture in their published works.¹² In fact, they ascribed only a minor importance to it in their analyses.¹³ This "weak" program trend still dominates contemporary sociological studies of culture, even though the "strong" program of cultural sociology has been gaining more ground (especially among American sociologists) since the birth of what has become known as the "cultural turn" of the late 1990s.¹⁴

Sociologists' "weak" program for culture may be explained, in part, by what Alain Touraine considers their negligence to focus on social actors due

to their far greater interest in studying systems, such as those found in industrial and capitalist societies. He argues that contemporary thought minimized the subjective side of social actors, just as Marx, Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), and Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900) did.¹⁵ Touraine stresses the need for social scientists to combine the social system and the social actors in their analysis to understand and explain social action in society.

It is neither excessive nor paradoxical to say that the idea of society is a major obstacle which bothers the development of social sciences because they are based on the separation and even the opposition between the system and the social actors, while the idea of society implies their direct link.¹⁶

It could just as easily be argued that early western social thinkers' negligence of culture was influenced by their epistemological materialistic perspective of phenomena, which was drawn from the dominant natural sciences of physics and biology. Thus, culture as a non-materialistic substance of the existence of human beings and their societies would not attract a great deal of attention among the western founders of the social sciences. In contrast to this attitude, my observations and reflections have led me to the discovery that humanity was *Homo culturus* before becoming *Homo oeconomicus*, *Homo politicus*, or *Homo sociologus*.¹⁷

Given the founders and their followers' low level of interest in the parameter of culture, they did very little to develop their own cultural paradigms and theories.

Basic Observations on Human Distinctiveness

My thesis that human beings are cultural symbolic beings by nature and that humanity is *Homo culturus* is based upon a set of five observations/concepts. To my knowledge, the following demonstration of human symbols' centrality to human identity, as illustrated below, is utterly new and innovative in the contemporary social sciences.¹⁸ I say this because my conceptualization of culture and its place as regards human identity has practically no match in the social sciences. Here is how I have been led to develop this fresh conceptualization of the centrality of culture in human identities (*Homo culturus*):

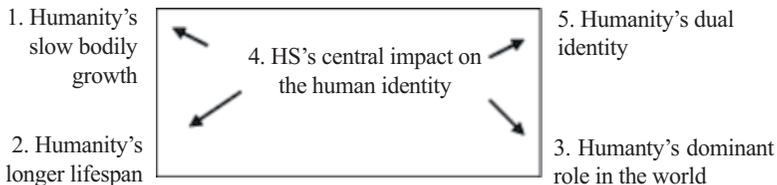
1. The processes of human bodily growth and maturation is very slow compared with those for other living beings. For instance, on average human babies begin walking at the age of one year, whereas animal babies may walk right away or within a few hours or days after their birth.

2. In general, human beings have longer lifespans than most animals.
3. The human race has an uncontested dominant role on this planet.
4. Human beings are privileged by HS.
5. In my own conceptualization, human identity comprises the physical body and HS. Thus, it is fully a dualistic identity that various religions and philosophies often refer to as an identity made of body and soul.

HS Insightful Explanation

The human being's slow bodily growth and maturation could be accounted for by the fact that human bodily growth and maturation involve two fronts: that of the body and that of human symbols. In short, the growth and maturation of non-human species are unidimensional (body) because they have no HS in the most complex human sense of the term. In contrast, the growth and maturation of humans are bidimensional, for they involve two levels: the body level and the HS level. I consider this two-level process to be behind these two human processes. That is, the process of human bodily growth and maturation is slowed down, so to speak, because human beings are involved in a second process of growth and maturation represented by HS. This interpretation has an insightful quality and certainly a lot of novel spirit, both of which are more likely to promote its scientific credibility. To my knowledge, the two ideas are absent in contemporary social science literature: Why does it take longer for human babies to learn how to walk than it does for animal babies, and how can HS/culture offer a sound explanation for this phenomenon?¹⁹ The following drawing describes the central position and role of human symbols in the making of human identity.

Figure 1: The central position and role of human symbols in the making of human identity.



Based on the above self-constructed theoretical cultural framework as a mariner's compass for the thesis of this article, it is rather appropriate now to look respectively through its vision at the two issues in question: Islamic revivalism and the dialogue between the West and the Arab Muslim world.

Vision and Claims of Islamic Revivalism

By most accounts, Islamic revivalism begun to spread in the Arab world during the late 1960s. Its two main features, religion and politics, have gradually come to dominate the region's religious and political discourses. For many contemporary Muslims, a "return to Islam" means a greater awareness and observance of their faith (e.g., studying the Qur'an, praying, fasting, dressing in "Islamic" clothing, Sufism, and abiding by the Shari'ah). The movement is strongly committed to a greater affirmation of Islam in one's personal and community life. This implies the recognition that Islam does not separate the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the mundane. Movement members believe that restoring Islam to its rightful place in the individual and society's life requires bridging the secular gap between religion and the state by implementing the Shari'ah. They also stress that the subsequent reorientation of the state and its institutions would require organization and political action in order to persuade, pressure, and push the political and the religious establishments to comply. In a nutshell, Islamic revivalism calls for the full return of the ethics and the global exercise of Islamic culture in Muslim societies. That is, the latter must be *Homo islamocus*, just like human beings who are *Homo cultururus*. This gives legitimacy and credit to the use of the cultural perspective/compass in the analysis of different features of this paper.

Ideological Beliefs

To understand what has been outlined as regards some aspects of Islamic revivalism in the Arab world, one needs to identify some of its main beliefs:

1. Islam is a comprehensive way of life and thus integral to politics, laws, and society.
2. The failure of contemporary Arab Muslim societies has been caused by their exchanging the straight path of Islam for a western secular path based on materialistic ideologies and values.
3. Their renewal requires a return to Islam, a religious, political, and social reformation or revolution that draws its inspiration from the Qur'an and the spirit of the original Islamic movement.
4. The true Islamic social order needs to be restored. Western-inspired civil codes must be replaced by Islamic law, which is the only acceptable blueprint for Muslim society.
5. The westernization of Muslim societies is condemned, but modernization, as such, is not. Science and technology are perfectly acceptable if

they do not undermine Islamic beliefs and values. This approach will protect Muslim societies from western-style secularization.

6. The process of re-Islamization requires organizations or associations of dedicated and trained Muslims who can explain to others why adhering to Islamic principles helps oppose corruption and social injustice.

Again, these six points insist on the prevailing fulfillment priority of the principles of Islamic culture in contemporary Muslim societies.

Empirical Indicators

The call for Islamic culture finds its materialization on the ground. Since the late 1960s, Islamic revivalism has become an empirical phenomenon that one can observe on a daily basis in any Arab society's social, political, and intellectual aspects. Arab universities have experienced great tension between students who hold Islamic and leftist ideas and thoughts. Arab courts are full of cases and trials dealing with members of Islamic movements, and prisons in, for example, Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria have housed many members of Islamic movements and even Islamic thinkers.

Prayer attendance has increased significantly since the 1960s in various Arab societies. Both young men and women are well represented in this surge. As an observer of Tunisia's social life throughout the country, I have consistently noticed Friday prayer services overflowing with both old and young people. This is somewhat striking for the sociologist, because Tunisia is considered to be the Arab world's most secular and westernized society. The wearing of Islamic attire, particularly by women, has gradually become a collective phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa.

Given the above, one can say that Islamic revivalism is not an isolated religious movement led by a minority of Muslims detached from contemporary reality. In fact, it has a visible presence both among elite and popular circles nationwide. As such, Islamic revivalism movements in different Arab countries have become a factor of change and transformation in the Arab world. Many observers have accurately described it as "a movement of religious foundation and social change."²⁰ It is also seen as a widespread phenomenon that has touched Arab elites, working classes, and university students. Thus, one can say that it has become a middle-class feature in most Arab societies. In statistical terms, one can say that it has become a widespread public phenomenon that Arab governments as well as political parties should take into account and with which they should ally themselves.²¹ Thus, Islamic re-

vivalism seeks to become an instrument of political change and transformation as well as a factor of social change that could lead to the establishment of an Islamic state and a true Muslim society.²²

According to Tunisian sociologist Elbaki Hermassi, “the Sahwa represents for its leaders the language of the marginalized Islam in the deep consciousness of the common people who wish to affirm themselves and to take revenge, so to speak.”²³ The successes of the 2010-11 Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen appear, in part, to be a kind of revenge against the decades-long rule of anti-Islamic political regimes. Their major electoral victories during 2011-12 in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Kuwait were thought to favor the increasing spread of the movement and, consequently, the establishment of governing political Islam in these countries. But the Egyptian military anti-Muslim Brotherhood coup in July 2013 has changed and complicated the future of that country’s political scene and Islamic movement.

Given that all Arab revolts and uprisings happen in predominantly Sunni societies, the nature of political Islam’s method(s) of governing will very likely differ from what happened in Iran after its 1979 Islamic revolution. Tunisia’s three-party governing political coalition after the uprising of January 14, 2011, is an example of a different kind of political Islam that has, to date, been the most successful of the Arab Spring uprisings.

Islam and Politics

The impact of the Islamic resurgence has not been limited only to the popular classes, for it affected the political domain in both the Arab and Muslim worlds well before the upheaval of the Arab Spring. Islamic symbols, slogans, ideology (i.e., the *Homo culturatus* perspective), and actors have become prominent political figures. Islam has been used by both governments and opposition movements. Rulers in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Tunisia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia have increasingly used Islam to enhance their legitimacy and policies. For instance, political coalitions operating under the banner of Islam toppled the shah and contributed to the downfall of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government in 1977 and the assassination of his daughter Benazir in 2008. An Islamist also assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981. On the other hand, political opposition movements and Islamically oriented parties are now found in Tunisia (the Tahrir party), Egypt, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Jordan, Kuwait, Algeria, and Lebanon. As mentioned above, after the 2011 Arab revolts and protests Islamic political parties achieved electoral victories in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Kuwait. Due to the strong-rooted Islamic culture among these

countries' people, there is a strong correlation between the spread of democracy and the push for Islamic revivalism. That is, the exercise of authentic democracy in post-Arab Spring countries works in favor of Islamic revivalism. Thus, Egypt's post-Morsi military-backed government can hardly claim to be democratic while excluding the Muslim Brotherhood from participating in the country's political life.

Major Reasons behind Revivalism

The causes of this revivalism are many and need to be understood within the specific contexts of individual countries and regions. However, certain region-wide common factors can be identified: (1) disillusionment with the West, as seen in the failure of many Arab Muslim rulers and their western-inspired governments to respond adequately to their societies' political and socio-economic needs; (2) the significant success of Egypt's military against the Israelis in October 1973 that took place during Ramadan. Many Muslims perceived this as an important factor that helped the Egyptians cross the Suez Canal and push the Israelis back into the Sinai; (3) the massive defeat of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan by Israel in 1967 (remembered in Arab literature as the disaster [*al-nakba*]). This defeat undermined the basis of Arab nationalism and socialism led by Nasser and the Ba'ath Party. Dessouki affirms that this disaster was not the defeat of the Arab nation or the Arab armies, but rather a symptom of the failure of imported western ideological trends (e.g., secularism, liberalism, socialism, and nationalism), because all of them contradict the basic principles of Islam.²⁴ Based on the overwhelming impact of Islamic culture, the region's large Arab Muslim population has come to see that the only solution to its dilemma lies in the return to Islam.

This envisaged solution can be explained within my theoretical cultural framework. I have argued that HS are central to the human identity, because human beings are by nature cultural symbolic beings. Islam and Arabic are the most important cultural markers that determine the collective identity of the Arab world's majority population.²⁵ Therefore Islam is central in the HS system of Arab Muslims in the region. Ibn Khaldun stressed the great importance of Islam in the formation of Arab leadership: "Bedouins can acquire royal authority only by making use of some religious coloring, such as prophethood, or sainthood, or some great religious event in general."²⁶ The Islamic factor constitutes, therefore, the most important force in shaping their cultural identity and in formulating their individual and collective actions. Islam spread throughout the region not only as a religion, but also as a lin-

guistic force, for it gradually became the region's official language. In other words, Islam provided the region with its most two important cultural markers of its collective identity: religion and language. As such, Arabic is far more than just a simple language because it has another element: a sacred touch for the Arab Muslims due to its being the language of the Qur'an. Consequently, there is an organic intimate relationship between Islam and Arabic in the Arab world to the extent that speaking Arabic equals being Muslim and vice versa, particularly in Tunisia and North Africa at large. This strong interaction is clear in Tunisia and Algeria, respectively. President Habib Bourguiba's (r. 1957-87) prominent French education made him pro-French in language and culture, which may explain his rather weak commitment to Islam. In contrast, President Boumedienne's (r. 1965-76) strong Arabic Islamic education at Ezzeituna and al-Azhar made him adopt policies that favored Arabization in Algeria as well as adhering to Islamic principles in the constitution. For instance, it considered socialism to be compatible with the spirit of Islam.

The issue of Islam's link with Arabic in the Arab Muslim world is quite different from Christianity, which has spread only as a religious faith. Islam's centrality in the HS framework of the Arab Muslims makes it a legitimate strong pole of attraction for them and a lasting salvation resort when they are threatened, especially by the West and other outsiders. This is true not only of the present outbreak of Islamic revivalism, but also of the earlier modern Islamic movements in both the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Modern Islamic Movements

From the cultural sociology point of view stressed above, I have determined that the importance of Islamic culture is also behind earlier Islamic movements. Esposito believes that Islam possesses a long tradition of revival and reform.²⁷ Throughout many centuries, a rich revivalist tradition expressed itself in a variety of concepts and beliefs in the lives and teachings of individual reformers and in the activities of various Islamic movements. For instance, the concepts of renewal (*tajdīd*) and reform (*iṣlāḥ*) are well rooted in the Qur'an and the Sunnah and thus fundamental components of Islam's worldview. Both concepts stress the importance of returning to Islam's fundamentals. On the one hand, Q. 4:35, 114 and Q. 11:88 use *iṣlāḥ* to describe the reform preached and undertaken by the prophets. On the other hand, *tajdīd* is based on a well-known saying of the Prophet: "Allah will raise, at the head of each century, such people for this Ummah as will revive its religion for it."²⁸

The responses of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Islamic reformers to the western impact resulted in substantial attempts to reinterpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of Muslim life. Legal, educational, and social reforms sought to rescue Muslim societies from their downward spiral and demonstrate Islam's compatibility with modern western thought and values. For some Muslims, none of the conservative, secular, or Islamic modernist positions were acceptable. Their reaction to what they considered the "westernization" of Islam and Muslim society led to the formation of such movements as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-i Islami (the Islamic Society). These organizations have served as catalysts for Islamic revivalism since the 1960s and have had a major impact on the interpretation and implementation of Islam in recent years.

The Middle East and South Asia produced major modernist Islamic movements, the themes and activities of which can be illustrated by several key figures. In the Middle East, the tireless activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) roamed the Muslim world calling for internal reform in order to defend and eventually drive out the West. He preached in Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey, Persia, India, Russia, France, and England. He sought to bridge the gap between secular modernists and religious traditionalists by asserting that Muslims could repel the West by reclaiming and re-appropriating reason, science, and technology, as opposed to ignoring or rejecting the sources of western strength (viz., science and technology). After all, he reminded his audiences, those elements had been integral to Islam and the remarkable accomplishments of the civilization it produced.

Islamic Revivalism's Difference from Other Movements

The type of Islamic revivalism that appeared during the 1960s has certain features that are either of low profile or absent in al-Afghani and his follower's movement. The contemporary movement stresses Islam's importance and role in the political life of Muslim societies. Given this strong concern with politics, it has prioritized issues related to the state and the political system. This is quite compatible with the revivalists' claim that Islam is *dīn wa dawlah* (religion and state). The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria has strongly advocated a return to the caliphal system that characterized the Muslim world until Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished it in 1923.

The leading revivalists see themselves as different from the reform movements led by al-Afghani, which they consider to be predominantly thought-oriented. Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, described al-

Afghani and his followers as merely religious and moralistic reformers who lacked Islam's global view. The failure of al-Azhar is manifested in the fact that its graduates are simply religious individuals who can read and write, but can hardly be held up as spiritual leaders.²⁹ The head of al-Azhar University's support for the military's overthrow of the democratically elected Muhammad Morsi on July 3, 2013, could be cited as an example.

As spelled out above, the revivalist movement has brought about a change and transformation in the sociopolitical scene of most Arab societies by giving Islam an important role in redesigning the sociopolitical life of both Arab and Muslim societies. The sweeping post-Arab Spring electoral victories of Islamic parties in several Muslim countries are bound to strengthen the movement's bid and the action in the Arab world, if the new Arab rulers respect the ethics of genuine democracy. Recent events in Egypt, however, do not favor the genuine promotion of an open and free democratic process.

The decisive role of Islamic culture in Islamic revivalism consolidates the key claim of my theoretical thesis: Human symbols are central to human identity. Given that Islam is central to the Muslim identity, it is a strong motivating force behind the calls to establish social orders and political regimes that are compatible with its worldview and moral ethics. It may be argued in this context that political behavior is often the outcome of its actors' HS, for the HS/cultural map in the minds of political leaders determines which policies they will adopt and pursue. Thus, culture determines politics and not vice versa, as is often claimed. Having shown how HS forms the crux of forming the human identity and how Islamic revivalism is inspired by the theoretical vision of HS's centrality to human action,³⁰ I now apply the HS paradigm to this paper's second issue: the dialogue between the western and the Arab Muslim worlds.

Dialogue between the Western and Arab Muslim Worlds

In this context, my HS thesis is based on the assumption that common cultures (e.g., languages, religious beliefs, and cultural values) among peoples, societies, and nations are essential factors that encourage and facilitate mutual contact and dialogue. Their lack or absence discourages and hampers this development, a reality that may create conditions that might favor mutual tension, clashes, and conflict. I will explain later how the widespread knowledge of western languages, Christian beliefs, and western knowledge-science cultural values system held throughout the Arab Muslim world motivate Arabs

and Muslims alike to desire contact and dialogue with westerners and their civilization. These claimed assertions are obviously based on this paper's main theoretical thesis: Human beings are *Homo culturatus*.

HS and the Dialogue of Cultures

The concept of the HS system helps put the issue of dialogue or the "clash of civilizations" into perspective. First, based on HS's centrality to human identity, it is more appropriate to use *culture* instead of *civilization* when analyzing the theme of dialogue among contemporary peoples, societies, and civilizations. I make this distinction because culture is, on the one hand, the basic founding element of a given civilization and, on the other, the decisive force in determining and encouraging the dialogue process (or vice versa) among human beings. Thus one may argue that it is more accurate to speak of a *cultural*, instead of a *civilizational*, dialogue.

Since the end of the twentieth century many books and articles have been published on this subject, and numerous seminars, colloquia, and congresses have been held worldwide. The success of a civilizational dialogue could hardly crystallize and become fruitful in the absence of a cultural dialogue, because cultures/HS represent the core of the identities of individuals, as well as of their societies and civilizations.

Given that languages are, according to the assumptions of the HS system, the essential creating forces of human cultures, one must at least consider learning each other's language(s), for such knowledge serves as a practical and effective visa that facilitates any dialogue undertaken among those who wish to engage their counterparts in another civilization.³¹ Unfortunately, advanced western societies and developing countries are not equal in this regard. On the one hand, some large social Third World groups have a pretty good knowledge of some of the major European languages, especially English and French, whereas the West's social groups and classes lack even a basic knowledge of the Third World's major languages.

This is also the case as regards dialogue between the western world and the Arab Muslim world. Calls for such a dialogue have become stronger since the 9/11 tragedy. From the viewpoint of the HS system, the West is less skilled linguistically and thus less culturally motivated to enter into a serious and wide-ranging dialogue with the Arab Muslim world. The majority of western social classes do not know any of the major Islamic languages. The very likely consequence of this is the widespread western ignorance of Arab Muslim cultures.³² Such a reality hardly encourages and enables westerners to participate

in such a dialogue. In contrast, many middle- and higher-class Arabs have a solid and genuine knowledge of western cultures due to their familiarity with English and/or French. The Arabs' greater knowledge of western languages and cultures give them a greater motivation and aspiration to welcome such an undertaking. As such, both parties' desire for civilizational dialogue is not equal.

The Arab Muslim world also scores better on religious knowledge. Muslims strongly believe in Moses and Jesus as prophets and messengers. This belief in the authenticity of earlier prophets and messengers is a fundamental component of Islam. Thus, Christians and Jews are considered "People of the Book" even though they reject Islam and Muhammad. In other words, as social psychologists would surely point out, westerners' widespread ignorance of the Arab world's majority language, religion, and culture are a major source of long-standing prejudices, stereotypical attitudes, and baseless accusations.³³

Given that the West is currently the world's dominant power, these factors tend to reinforce each other and often lead westerners to see themselves as superior to Arabs. The net result of this is that, in general, they have more difficulty linguistically and religiously when it comes to engaging in an open grassroots dialogue with the Arab world. Consequently, the West is nowhere near prepared to advocate, in a spontaneous and motivated manner, an open and sincere dialogue, one based on respect and equality.

Western Science's Appeal Opens Dialogue with the Arab World

In addition to the above-mentioned cultural factors, there is also the factor of the West's great advancement and leadership in science and knowledge. This current reality requires the Arab world to open a wide-ranging dialogue with it both for pragmatic and beneficial reasons, as do the two parties' similar cultural value systems, both of which promote knowledge and science as the central and first priority in human societies and civilizations. Such similarity not only strengthens the desire for dialogue, but may also solicit western respect for the Arab and Muslim pioneers who helped develop the scientific and other knowledge that many regard as making the European Renaissance possible.

Given the numerous positive factors that favor an Arab dialogue instead of a clash with the West, the crude application of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory needs to be questioned in relation to the Arab Muslim world. The latter, as my cultural thesis explains, has many more strong reasons than the West does for favoring a dialogue.

Huntington's Theory in Question

The "clash of civilizations" theory currently enjoys an international status among media outlets, intellectual circles, and even the average person's daily life. Its popularity may have been boosted by 9/11, particularly in the United States.³⁴ The debate over its credibility remains ongoing between (1) those who strongly believe in its importance, especially with regard to understanding the West's relation with the Muslim world, and (2) those who seriously question its credibility. For example, some argue that this theory is the outcome of an attempt to create a new paradigm after the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States "won" the Cold War. Given this, Huntington's thesis can hardly be considered scientific. Furthermore, others hold that his theory has a philosophical background related to the thinking of Thomas Kuhn (d. 1996), Oswald Spengler (d. 1936), Arnold Toynbee (d. 1983), and Fernand Braudel (d. 1985). This background may have overstretched the application of the theory's assumptions to Arab Muslim civilization, given that many of the latter's present parameters oppose any such clash with western civilization.³⁵

An Islamic East and Christian West Dialogue

To complete my assessment, I will now to take a closer look at the similarity factor in the knowledge-science cultural value systems of Arab Muslim and western civilizations to determine why the former are seriously asking for such a dialogue. This is clearly different from the claim of Huntington's theory. This factor of similarity in the knowledge-science cultural values systems of both Islam and the West is hardly ever mentioned, let alone analyzed and discussed, in the studies of dialogue or clash between them.

I examine here the attitudes of both civilizations with regard to one important issue for human civilization's progress and dynamics. This should greatly enhance an accurate evaluation of the degree of clash or convergence. The criterion here is the place of knowledge and science in their cultural value systems. The overwhelming evidence that their acquisition constitutes a central cultural value of modern western civilization explains the West's current leadership due to the tremendous explosion of both of them within its societies. The West's domination of the world scene, therefore, is not limited only to military and economic matters; it extends well beyond those due to its superiority in knowledge and science. This superiority is certainly more strategic, in the long run, for its continuing domination.

The origins of this leadership began with the clash between the Catholic church and scientists during Europe's late Middle Ages. The latter's victory ushered in the Renaissance, which emphasized the cultivation of secular knowl-

edge and science, both of which have become the guiding ethics of modern western civilization. Ever since that time, the experiences and the countless discoveries made by natural and social scientists have led to the development of a general attitude of praising learning and education among advanced western societies. This is the case to such an extent that they have an almost inexhaustible determination to explore practically everything in the world. In other words, the whole world/universe has become an open vista for the western mind.

The thirst for knowledge and science is also a fundamental feature of Arab Muslim civilization. However, their roots are the very opposite of western civilization's, as they are found in the essence of Islam itself. In fact, this search is a core religious value, for the very first revelation was "Read in the name of your Lord and Cherisher ... He Who taught the use of the Pen, taught humanity what it did not know" (Q. 96: 1, 4-5). In this first encounter between the Prophet and the Divine, top priority was not given to economics or material issues (e.g., trade and agriculture), but to reading and writing as crucial tools for acquiring knowledge and science. Modern social psychology's insights greatly help us to understand why these skills had to be mentioned before anything else: One's first impressions last longer in one's memory. Therefore the first revelation ought to strongly draw Muhammad's attention to the most important thing for humans to acquire and master, and thus avoid marginalizing and eventually forgetting, to be truly God's vicegerent. In other words, from a social psychological outlook the Qur'an's emphasis on acquiring science and knowledge as humanity's first priority has to be taken as fully intentional and not just an arbitrary proclamation.

The stand of the Qur'an and the Hadith literature on this activity is so strong as to be breathtaking. It is estimated that about one-sixth of the Qur'an is directly or indirectly concerned with science and knowledge and their central role in improving human destiny. The text, which uses *science* to mean both knowledge and science, also uses derivative forms of the latter, as well as adjectival and verbal forms, in the hundreds of its verses related to this topic. For example, "are people who have knowledge/science equal to those who do not have them?" and "among all people, only true scholars/scientists revere God the most."

The Prophet's hadiths, in turn, fully support knowledge and science as Islam's primary cultural value: "Seeking knowledge and science is a religious duty for every Muslim," "Seek knowledge and science from the cradle to the grave," "Seek knowledge and science as far as China," and "Scientists and scholars are the true inheritors of the prophets." As their core importance to Islam's value system is clear, one should not be surprised at the intellectual

milestones achieved during Islamic civilization's golden age. Ibn Sina's (Lat. Avicenna, d. 1037) *Canon of Medicine* was Medieval Europe's standard medical text. Ibn Rushd's (Lat. Averroes, d. 1198) rational thinking is seen by many as the preview of Europe's Renaissance. Ibn Khaldun's (d. 1406) sociological thought, as propounded in his *Al-Muqaddimah*, preceded that of Auguste Comte (e. 1857), the founder of contemporary western sociology, by over four centuries. According to A. Toynbee and other highly respected western thinkers, it also surpasses Comte's thought on many levels. In fact, Toynbee wrote of Ibn Khaldun: "He has conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is certainly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time and place."³⁶

This strong convergence between these two civilizations' attention to knowledge and science should legitimately discredit the often taken-for-granted stand of Huntington's theory. If western societies improve their knowledge of the cultures and major languages of the Arab and Muslim worlds, this would allow a solid basis for rapprochement and solidarity as well as constitute a positive change and transformation in their relationship. What is certain in this regard is that contemporary Arabs and Muslims are strongly attracted to western civilization because many of them know some of its major languages, its modern knowledge and science, and its cultures. According to my cultural theoretical framework, these linguistic-cultural values can, at present, promote a spirit of mutual dialogue.

The Cultural Politics of Conflict and Tension

In modern times, tensions between the West and the Arab Muslim world appear largely to be political in nature. Huntington himself mentioned:

[H]owever, the age of Muslim wars has its roots in more general causes. These do not include the inherent nature of Islamic doctrine and beliefs... The causes of contemporary Muslim wars lie in politics, not in seventh-century religious doctrines.³⁷

There is no question that a primary cause of the Arab and Muslim worlds' recent anger toward the United States is the Bush administration's often unconditional support for Israel and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. All signs could lead one to predict that relations between people on both sides would rapidly change for the better if the United States and the West at large were to adopt an even-handed foreign policy toward the Middle East and end the occupation of Afghanistan, for such shifts would certainly convince all skeptics and create a genuine dialogue. Yet, given the West's lack of knowl-

edge of Islam's major languages as well as of the positive religious and cultural values held by Arabs and Muslims, western governments and communities continue to favor Israel. Analysts often explain this stance as one based on the strategic military and political benefits that it offers the West in this very strategic region. But this explanation reflects a limited vision. As stressed above, it would be more credible and comprehensive if were to take into account the cultural factors between the West and Islam. These can be grouped into two levels: (1) The West feels culturally very close to Israel, whereas (2) it hardly feels friendly toward Islam and Arab Muslim civilization and culture, which it has viewed as a threat and an enemy ever since the latter began conquering Christian-majority lands. Some prominent western politicians and intellectuals have bragged of western civilization's superiority. Consequently, the roots of the longstanding tensions and conflicts originate, in both their macro- and micro-dimensions, in humanity's cultural/human symbols.

Esposito's Silence on the HS Role in This Dialogue

This paper's thesis is completely absent in Esposito's new article, "The Future of Islam and U.S.- Muslim Relations."³⁸ He does not mention the role of human symbols (HS) in bringing about the envisaged present and future dialogue as outlined above. Instead, he adopts a conventional approach to dealing with the West's relations with Islam and offers the following advice:

The challenge for American and European policymakers will be to move beyond fear of the unknown, of a process whose outcome they cannot control. Despite inevitable differences, relations must be based on mutual understanding and respect, a recognition and acceptance that all countries have the right to act in their own national interest and that it is in the national interest of all to find a common ground of strategic political, economic, and military interests. Policymakers will need to be more aware not only of the sentiments of governments but of the aspirations and expectations of their peoples, of political parties, and civil society organizations.³⁹

Esposito is a well-known scholar on Islam as well as the Arab world. But this piece of advice ignores the importance of cultural/HS factors in creating mutual understanding, respect, recognition, and acceptance between societies and civilizations as spelled out earlier in this article: the insufficient knowledge of Islam's major languages (linguistic visas) and a favorable attitude toward Islam. This situation would hardly encourage the West to begin a dialogue with the Arab and Muslim worlds. In other words, those linguistic and religious factors are key forces for initiating a solid and continuing rapprochement

between these worlds. On the other hand, Muslims and Arabs are pro-dialogue because many of them know and speak major western languages and have a fair knowledge of its major religions: Judaism and Christianity.

Esposito's Silence on the Cultural Domino Theory

In his reference to Arab Spring, Esposito also puts aside the HS viewpoint. So there is no mention of what I call the “cultural domino theory,” although it helps explain recent events in the region. I argue here that the drift of the ongoing protests and revolutions are strongly cultural in nature. That is, the vast majority of Arab societies share two basic cultural components: Arabic and Islam. The Arab Basic Personality is the outcome of the melting pot of Arabic Islamic culture. This explains why such individuals, groups, communities, and countries react with a strong solidarity toward sad or happy events taking place in the Arab Muslim world. In 1948, Arab Muslim volunteers – over 12,000 alone in Tunisia – were ready to fight in Palestine. In 1967, Arabs and Muslims in general were horrified by the Arab defeat in the Six Day War. Massive public and official solidarity with Jordan, Syria, and Egypt were expressed throughout the Arab world.

Likewise, happy events make Arab solidarity very assertive. Two examples are sufficient to make the point: (1) the compelling Arab solidarity with Tunisia due to France's military withdrawal in 1963. As a sign of Arab solidarity, President Nasser led other Arab leaders to Tunisia to celebrate the event; and (2) full Arab solidarity with Egypt reached its peak when its army crossed the Suez Canal in 1973 and pushed the Israeli occupiers back into Sinai.

The active role of Arabic and Islam in creating this pan-Arab solidarity can be illustrated by the following comparison: Compared with their strong solidarity with the Palestinians, Arab Muslims show far less solidarity with Muslims fighting for autonomy or independence in Kashmir, Chechnya, and the Philippines. The missing cultural link here is obviously Arabic. Thus, Arabic and Islam are the two cultural cornerstones that create the strong solidarity seen among Arab Muslim societies.

In Ibn Khaldun's terms, this strong *'aṣabīyah* (group feeling/solidarity) is very likely to motivate them to imitate each other, even in revolts. Egyptians have repeatedly said they were inspired by the revolt in Tunisia and wanted to imitate them. Similarly, the uprisings in Yemen, Libya, and Syria could be interpreted as a sort of imitation and solidarity with the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt. In other words, these Arab uprisings were/are not only the obvious direct outcome of the region's political despotism and widespread regime corruption, as Esposito and most other analysts and commentators have stated.

The impact of these hidden cultural factors (intervening variables) should not be excluded from the underlying reasons for the ongoing Arab Spring. In sociological terms, Arab revolts are the result of both manifest and latent causes. Thus one can say that Syria's civil war was not only caused and maintained by so-called objective reasons (viz., political despotism and the lack of democracy), but that it was also generated by subjective common forces of a cultural nature (viz., Arabic and Islam).

Endnotes

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