

Chapter 16: Chapter exercises

The US and Islam: A clash of civilizations?

The relationship between the West and large tracts of the Arab world has often been characterized as a clash of civilizations based upon diametrically opposed ideologies. This notion is mainly derived from Samuel Huntington's work, *The Clash of Civilizations*, which speaks of an inevitability of conflict between religions and cultures. It has been argued that from the perspective of the Arab world, the West, and principally the United States, is often viewed as depraved, corrupt, selfish, and materialistic. One of the leading proponents of this view was an Egyptian Islamic intellectual called Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), an individual who would later be seen as a principal ideological figurehead for factions of extremist Islam. Qutb had spent time in the United States in the late 1940s and early 1950s, firstly in Washington DC and later at the University of Northern Colorado, conducting graduate work into the American educational system. It was during this time that Qutb would formulate an extremely critical view of American society based on severe disenchantment with what he encountered. He argued that the very components of American society that made it appear outwardly prosperous and contented were in fact signs of internal corruption and decay that had been compounded by an overriding ideological emphasis on individual freedom, economic liberty, and the pursuit of material goods. Qutb explicitly saw the Western tradition of free markets, free speech, and the liberty of the individual as an ideological disease that was at risk of spreading into the Islamic areas of the Middle East and North Africa.

Upon return to his native Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization often criticized in the West as both violent and rigorously oppressive. The Brotherhood's fundamental belief structure is based upon the predominant importance of the writings of the Koran in Muslim culture. It is believed that God, via this text, has set out the perfect social and political way of life for mankind to follow. However, the early 1950s witnessed a transitional period for the Brotherhood between the continuance of its traditional belief in gradual steps and educational support to bring about an Islamic revolution (principally in Egypt), and the path of more direct violence.

Following the arrest, imprisonment, and torture of many of the Brotherhood's leaders (including Qutb) by the Nasser regime in Egypt in 1954, the path of violence as a means of achieving political legitimacy won out. Upon the release of Qutb and the other leading members of the Brotherhood in 1964, an assassination attempt on Nasser was instigated leading to the re-arrest, torture, and eventual execution of Qutb in 1966. Whilst incarcerated, Qutb had been allowed to indulge in his writings which often expressed a somewhat relentless insistence that all followers of the Koran were required to meet with its teachings unconditionally to be considered true Muslims. Most tellingly, Qutb deduced that large tracts of the Middle East were under the control of corrupted, westernized monarchs and dictators, whose ideological bias towards the West threatened to corrupt the overriding intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood. He also concluded that the Koran explicitly stated that all followers of Christianity were destined for hell whilst his other writings further criticized Christian, Jewish, and western society.

In the United States, the rise of the neo-Conservative movement under the teachings of Leo Strauss (based at the University of Chicago) would lead to what many have articulated as a clash of civilizations between the West (principally the United States), and the Middle East. Straussian ideology gave rise to neo-Conservatism and the re-emergence of the Conservative Right in American politics from the 1980s onwards. With a fervent belief in the freedom of the individual, liberal markets, minimal government, and democratic accountability, neo-Conservatism was on a collision course with large tracts of fundamentalist Islam from its very inception. Following the events of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent militarization of Afghanistan and Iraq, the two opposing ideological forces were brought into direct conflict with one another.

How far do you feel that the ideas of Sayyid Qutb have helped form a coherent opposing force to westernized democracy and how has this been adopted by the more radicalized factions of Muslim society?

Briefly outline the main tenets of Straussian liberalism, and explain how these concepts are so diametrically opposed to the ideas espoused by Qutb and his followers.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/nov/01/afghanistan.terrorism3>

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1253796>

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/~orr201/classweb/worldpolitics116/pages/leaders.html>

<http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/misc/135.pdf>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SNicJRcUqs>