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From Civilizational Essentialism to Ethno-nationalist Struggle: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Beyond Huntington

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ABSTRACT

Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' hypothesis did not merely predict the post-Cold War world order; it sought to define it, asserting that global politics would revert to inter-civilizational strife. In both political discourse and elements of international relations literature, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its broader regional spillovers are frequently erroneously subsumed within this paradigm, characterized as a quintessential fault-line war between Western and Islamic civilizations. This paper problematizes that ontological assumption. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of comparative religion, political sociology, and conflict studies, the paper contends that the conflict is sustained not by a monolithic clash of macro-civilizations but by historically embedded political antagonisms that resist any singular civilizational explanation. The paper further demonstrates that the events of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent escalation towards direct Iran-Israel-United States military confrontation between 2024 and 2026 do not merely fail to confirm the civilizational thesis but actively dismantle it. The conflict is not an intractable civilizational determinism but a hyper-localized collision of competing ethno-nationalisms, sustained by structural asymmetries and the primacy of state-centric realpolitik over civilizational solidarity.

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I. Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, international relations theory required new paradigms to explain emerging global conflicts. Only a few conflicts in contemporary world politics have attracted as much theoretical attention as the confrontation between Israelis and Palestinians. Scholars, policymakers, and public intellectuals have repeatedly reached for large-scale interpretive frameworks to make sense of a conflict that has resisted resolution for well over a century. Among these frameworks, Samuel P. Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis, first articulated in a seminal 1993 Foreign Affairs article and subsequently elaborated in a book-length treatment in 1996, holds a particularly prominent place. Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilizations hypothesis did not merely predict the post-Cold War world order; it sought to define it, asserting that global politics would revert to inter-civilizational strife. Huntington posited that ideological and economic stratification would yield to cultural and civilizational demarcations as the primary instigators of international friction. Within this framework, the Middle East is frequently portrayed as a monolithic Islamic bloc inherently antagonistic to the liberal-democratic order the West claims to represent. Consequently, Israel is historically framed as an outpost of Western civilization, while the Palestinians are positioned as representatives of the broader Islamic world, effectively reducing a localized territorial dispute to an intractable civilizational fault-line war.

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What made Huntington's thesis particularly consequential was not just its academic influence but its reach into the corridors of power. Senior statesmen and foreign policy practitioners took it seriously as a practical guide to understanding global conflicts. Henry Kissinger, whose influence on American foreign policy spanned decades, went so far as to describe it as one of the most significant works on international affairs published after the Cold War.[1] Though the thesis has faced considerable conceptual and empirical challenge, it remains a framework that continues to shape how contemporary conflicts are interpreted. It is that enduring influence, more than anything else, that makes a rigorous re-examination of its assumptions both timely and necessary.

Applying this macro-sociological lens to the Levant results in a severe distortion of empirical reality. Huntington's thesis relies on a static, essentialist conceptualization of culture that entirely bypasses the micro-dynamics of state-building, territoriality, and human geography. Both Robert Kaplan (1994) and Benjamin Barber (1995), writing roughly contemporaneously with Huntington, argued that the forces reshaping global order were far more particular and fragmented than any civilizational model could capture. Barber's notion of 'Jihad vs. McWorld' acknowledged cultural conflict while firmly rooting it in political economy rather than civilizational essence. Edward Said (2001) was more direct still, arguing that Huntington's framework amounted to a politically motivated act of cartography that imposed false coherence on diverse and internally contested cultural formations. Said's objection is especially relevant to the Israeli-Palestinian case, where both parties are characterized by profound internal pluralism that renders any civilizational generalization analytically misleading. The application of this framework to the Levant, however, fails not merely on empirical grounds but on the deeper ontological assumptions that make such an application possible.

The necessity of dismantling this macro-theoretical framework has become acutely apparent following the events of October 7, 2023. The subsequent escalation, cascading through to direct military confrontation between Israel, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the United States through 2026, far from confirming Huntington's thesis, exposes its most serious theoretical vulnerabilities. The failure of a unified Islamic bloc to materialize, coupled with the strategic decisions of Sunni Arab states to prioritize maritime security and domestic economic stability over pan-Islamic solidarity, definitively shatters the Huntingtonian premise. The contemporary crisis confirms that the region operates strictly on the logic of realist statecraft. To accurately conceptualize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, scholars must abandon the civilizational binary. This paper mounts a direct challenge to the sub-thesis of civilizational incompatibility upon which Huntington constructs his Middle Eastern framework. It contends that the persistence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including its most recent regional escalation, is driven fundamentally by localized, non-civilizational antagonisms, thereby necessitating a fundamental reconsideration of how regional issues in the Middle East are analyzed.

The Epistemological Limitations of the Civilizational Paradigm

The central concept of Samuel P. Huntington's theory is the division of the modern world into eight or nine civilizations, each defined by a distinct conception of collective identity. In his own words, Huntington defines civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined by both common objective aspects such as language, history, religion, customs, and institutions, as well as people's subjective self-identification...." (Huntington 1996, 43). At the same time, the author notes that the boundaries between civilizations are often vague. These boundaries fluctuate over time reflecting the historical dynamism that Huntington's own framework struggles to theorize consistently. Considering the characteristics of the contemporary world, Huntington identified nine major civilizational blocs- African, Buddhist, Sinic, Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Latin American, Orthodox, and Western. For Huntington, culture and religion were not background variables but constitutive determinants of political behaviour; what people fought for was shaped primarily by the civilization in which they were embedded.

[1] This commendation appears as a cover endorsement on Huntington (1996) and has been widely reproduced in subsequent commentary on the thesis.

The fundamental flaw of the Clash of Civilizations thesis lies in its epistemological homogenization. It assumes that "civilizations" operate as cohesive, unified political actors with shared strategic objectives. The application of this framework to the Israeli-Palestinian context has been attempted by several commentators, particularly in the years following the Second Intifada and, more intensively, following the September 11 attacks. By categorizing Israel strictly as "Western" and Palestinians strictly as "Islamic," the paradigm effectively erases the socio-political realities of the Levant. This macro-categorization fails to account for the origins of the conflict, which lie not in ancient religious enmity, but in late 19th-century and early 20th-century secular nationalisms. Both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism emerged as modern political movements concerning land, sovereignty, and self-determination, not religious crusade. By elevating the conflict to a civilizational clash, observers strip the dispute of its material and territorial realities, transforming a politically resolvable dispute over borders and political rights into an irreconcilable metaphysical war.

Evaluation of Huntington’s Baseline in the Levant

To evaluate the validity of the Clash of Civilizations thesis within the Levant, it is necessary to first examine how Samuel Huntington categorizes the actors involved. Huntington’s framework is structurally reliant on the concept of "fault lines"—geographic and cultural intersections where macro-civilizations allegedly collide. Within this paradigm, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is positioned as the quintessential frontier between a modern, institutionalized "West" and a resurgent "Islamic" civilization.

Huntington characterizes Islamic civilization as a historically expansive entity rooted in the seventh-century tradition of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He argues that Islamic civilization has experienced a modern political and cultural resurgence fundamentally driven by anti-Western sentiment. A critical structural feature of this civilization, according to his model, is the absence of a "core state" or a centralized religious authority capable of unifying the global Muslim population. Consequently, political organization and loyalty often revert to national, tribal, and kinship structures. Despite deep internal denominational divisions and the historical ineffectiveness of transnational bodies like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Huntington firmly groups the Palestinian population into this broader Islamic civilizational bloc based on shared religious and cultural heritage.

Defining the opposing Western civilization within Huntington's model is more complex, as it relies on a specific historical synthesis rather than strict geography. He identifies the "West" through a combination of classical heritage, Western Christianity, the rule of law, representative democracy, and social pluralism. Incorporating Israel into this Western bloc presents considerable geographical and theological contradictions, given its Middle Eastern location, Semitic language, and Jewish religious foundation. However, Huntington justifies this inclusion by emphasizing Israel's roots in secular Zionism and the profound structural, political, and cultural influence of Ashkenazi Jews who migrated from Europe. In this theoretical construct, Israel is positioned as a Western democratic enclave surrounded by what Huntington characterizes as an inherently hostile Islamic region.

The geographic and cultural intersection of these two blocs is what Huntington identifies as a "fault line," which he views as the primary catalyst for future global conflict. He posits that localized territorial disputes along these borders inevitably escalate into "fault line wars" through a process of civilizational rallying. In this scenario, local actors appeal to their broader cultural kin for support, transforming a regional dispute into a proxy war for global civilizational dominance. Huntington notes that these fault line conflicts are characterized by the physical proximity of different religions, the presence of distinct social structures, and deeply antagonistic historical memories. It is here, however, that the macro-level theory begins to fracture when applied to the Israeli-Palestinian context. While Huntington uses these criteria to argue for an inevitable clash of massive cultural blocs, a closer empirical examination reveals that these exact parameters point toward a highly localized, ethno-nationalist struggle.

To effectively dismantle the civilizational binary, the subsequent sections examine four analytical dimensions through which the conflict's actual dynamics are rendered visible: the internal demographic pluralism of both parties, the competing historical traumas that animate their respective political cultures, the structural asymmetries of their divergent institutional systems, and the deliberate political mobilization of religious identity by nationalist actors on both sides.

Internal Demographic Pluralism

Huntington's framework is contingent upon the presumption that civilizations possess homogeneous religious and cultural identities. However, an empirical demographic analysis of the populations involved dismantles this assumption. Categorizing Israel as an exclusively Western entity is a demographic fallacy. While early state institutions were heavily influenced by European Ashkenazi populations, contemporary Israeli society is deeply embedded in the Middle East. A majority of Israel's Jewish population claims Mizrahi or Sephardic descent— communities that were integrated into Arab and Islamic societies across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region for millennia prior to their migration or expulsion post-1948. Furthermore, the acute political polarization within Israel, evidenced by the systemic friction between secular liberals, religious Zionists, and ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) factions, demonstrates that Israel is not a monolithic civilizational vanguard but a highly fractured national entity grappling with its own internal structural contradictions.

Similarly, framing the Palestinian struggle as an exclusively "Islamic" endeavour erases the pluralism inherent within that society. Arab Christians have historically occupied vanguard positions within the Palestinian nationalist movement.[2] The Palestine Liberation Organization, the dominant Palestinian political institution from the late 1960s through the Oslo period, was founded on the principles of secular Arab nationalism. Yasser Arafat and the Fatah movement consistently resisted the Islamization of Palestinian national politics, positioning the Palestinian cause as a struggle for national liberation rather than a religious conflict. Hamas's subsequent rise to political prominence, culminating in its 2006 electoral victory, is frequently cited as evidence of the conflict's Islamic character. However, as Sara Roy (2007) has argued in her detailed study of Gazan society, Hamas's rise is inseparable from the specific socioeconomic and political conditions of the blockaded Gaza Strip, conditions produced by the Israeli occupation and the failure of the Oslo process, rather than from an abstract expression of Islamic civilizational impulse. The severe political bifurcation between the secular-nationalist Palestinian Authority and the Islamist Hamas highlights that the Palestinian polity is not a unified Islamic monolith, but a fragmented society managing competing ideological frameworks for achieving statehood.

The internal pluralism of both the parties' points to a fundamental theoretical problem with the civilizational framework: it systematically suppresses intra-civilizational diversity in order to produce the clear fault lines its model requires. This is not a minor analytical inconvenience but a structural deficiency that renders the framework incapable of explaining the internal political dynamics that determine how this conflict evolves.

Competing Historical Traumas

Perhaps the single most powerful force sustaining the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one that civilizational theory is structurally incapable of theorizing: the accumulated weight of collective historical traumas each party brings to the confrontation. Collective memory operates as a primary mechanism for national mobilization (Halbwachs 1992). Rather than a clash of macro-cultures, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is fundamentally a collision of mutually exclusive historical narratives and inherited traumas.

On one side, Israeli national identity is inextricably bound to the historical recollection of diaspora, systemic persecution, and the trauma of the Holocaust. Analyzed through the lens of memory studies,

[2] The prominent role of Arab Christians in the Palestinian nationalist movement is documented extensively in Khalidi (1997). George Habash, a Greek Orthodox Christian, founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; Nayef Hawatmeh, a Greek Catholic, led the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

the Zionist project was not a mandate to expand "Western civilization" into the Levant, but a localized imperative to secure a sovereign sanctuary for a historically disenfranchised population. Consequently, Israel's contemporary security apparatus is dictated by this internalized memory of statelessness. Vamik Volkan's (1997) concept of "chosen traumas"—historical injuries that become central to a group's collective identity, transmitted across generations, and reactivated in moments of perceived threat — provides the most analytically precise framework for understanding this dynamic. The Holocaust functions precisely in this capacity within Israeli-Jewish political culture, underwriting a security doctrine that prioritizes the pursuit of national preservation, rather than a broad ideological mandate to confront the Islamic world.[3]

Conversely, the Palestinian collective consciousness is anchored in the continuous memory of the 1948 Nakba (Catastrophe). For the Palestinian polity, this historical recollection is not a static past event but an ongoing structural reality of displacement and statelessness. Rashid Khalidi (1997), in his landmark study of Palestinian identity, demonstrates in meticulous detail how the Nakba and the subsequent decades of dispossession, occupation, and refugee existence have constructed a Palestinian national consciousness in which the demand for acknowledgment, redress, and return is inseparable from questions of dignity and political existence. The Palestinian national movement is animated by the pursuit of restorative justice, the right of return, and liberation from military administration.

When these two deeply entrenched historical narratives occupy identical geographic space, they generate a volatile, zero-sum political environment. The conflict persists because each population's foundational trauma interprets the other's national actualization as an existential threat. This localized clash of competing national memories exists entirely outside Huntington's civilizational parameters, requiring no input from broader Western or Islamic cultural spheres to sustain its momentum.

Structural Violence and Institutional Asymmetry

The intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be explained at the level of cultural abstraction; it demands engagement with the sociological and institutional realities that structure daily life for both populations. The conflict is perpetuated by the daily friction between two intertwined, yet fundamentally unequal, administrative systems. Johan Galtung's framework of structural violence[4] illuminates how the conflict is sustained by extreme institutional and material disparities rather than cultural incompatibility. Israel operates a highly developed, technologically advanced state apparatus characterized by sovereign governance, a globalized economy, and absolute military hegemony. Conversely, the Palestinian institutional system is geographically fragmented, economically constrained, and operates under varying degrees of external military jurisdiction and blockade.[5]

Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal (2003) emphasize that the Palestinian people have been subjected to repeated attempts at political disaggregation—through the displacement of 1948, the occupation of 1967, the fragmentation of the Oslo period, and the administrative and territorial separation of Gaza from the West Bank following the 2006-2007 political crisis.

[3] Jan Assmann's (2008) distinction between communicative and cultural memory is particularly relevant to the intergenerational transmission of the Holocaust and Nakba traumas analyzed here.
[4] The concept of structural violence was first systematically developed in Galtung (1969), who argued that violence need not involve a direct perpetrator but can be embedded within social, political, and economic structures that systematically deny certain populations access to resources and political agency
[5] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2023). Report on UNCTAD Assistance to the Palestinian People: Developments in the Economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Geneva: UNCTAD.

Each of these processes has operated to deny Palestinians the conditions for coherent state-formation, producing a structural asymmetry that no civilizational framework can account for because it is a product of specific political decisions and institutional arrangements rather than deep cultural incompatibilities. Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein (2006) argues that claims to universal civilizational difference have historically served to legitimize and naturalize political-economic hierarchies. Applied to this conflict, his argument suggests that civilizational framing functions, whether intentionally or not, to obscure the structural conditions of occupation and dispossession by recoding them as cultural incompatibility. This is not merely an analytical error; it is a political one, with real consequences for the possibility of resolution.

The true locus of the conflict exists at military checkpoints, in the differential allocation of water resources, in divergent legal jurisdictions, and in the spatial control of territory. The continuous expansion of Israeli settlements represents the physical encroachment of one institutional system into the geographic space of another, deliberately fragmenting Palestinian territorial contiguity to prevent the formation of a viable state. These are tangible, material disputes over spatial hegemony and resource extraction. Framing these systemic socio-economic inequities as a "civilizational conflict" serves only to mystify the concrete political and military mechanisms, and structural disparities that actually sustain the occupation and the broader dispute.

Political Mobilization of Religious Identity

A prominent dimension frequently misdiagnosed as evidence of an inherent civilizational clash is the intense religious friction surrounding sacred sites in the Levant. Huntington’s thesis assumes a fundamental theological incompatibility between Islam and the Judeo-Christian tradition, suggesting that religious conflict is an organic, unavoidable outcome of their geographic proximity. However, treating the religious dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute as an ancient, intractable holy war misrepresents the history of the region. Historically, both Zionism and Palestinian nationalism emerged as predominantly secular movements. The early Zionist enterprise, heavily influenced by European socialist ideals, sought to establish a pragmatic, secular sanctuary for Jews. Similarly, the foundational Palestinian national movement, institutionalized through the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was anchored in secular anti-colonialism and leftist political theory rather than Islamic doctrine.

The theological framing of the conflict is a relatively recent phenomenon, deliberately cultivated to serve specific political ends. The shift began in earnest following the 1967 War; the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank catalyzed the rise of religious Zionism, which gradually transformed a pragmatic territorial project into a messianic imperative for factions of the Israeli political right. Conversely, the late 1980s witnessed the emergence of Hamas, which strategically adopted Islamic rhetoric to challenge the secular PLO’s domestic hegemony and mobilize a population frustrated by diplomatic stagnation. This mutual shift toward religious rhetoric was not a sudden reversion to civilizational destiny. Rather, it represents the calculated instrumentalization of religion by political elites. By infusing territorial claims with divine sanction, nationalist leaders on both sides are able to consolidate domestic support, legitimize maximalist territorial ambitions, and effectively marginalize moderate constituencies who advocate for political compromise.

The city of Jerusalem, specifically the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif, provides the most concentrated illustration of this dynamic. The friction stems entirely from two competing national movements attempting to exercise sovereign jurisdiction over the exact same physical acreage. The recurring violence at this specific location is not the manifestation of a global civilizational war, but a highly localized, bitter dispute over spatial sovereignty. What is crucial to observe is that this entanglement of the religious with the political does not conform to Huntington's model of civilizational conflict. The dispute is not between Islam and the West as civilizational units; it is between two specific communities, each of which carries a historically grounded religious claim to the same physical space.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2003), in his comparative study of religious nationalism and political violence, argues that religious framing in modern political conflicts typically represents a transformation of pre-existing grievances into a sacred register rather than a distinct civilizational motivation. Applied to the Israeli-Palestinian context, this insight suggests that even where Hamas frames its resistance in Quranic terms, or where Israeli settlers invoke biblical land grants, the underlying disputes over territory, sovereignty, and recognition would exist, and have existed, independently of the religious language in which they are expressed. Religion in this conflict functions primarily as a symbolic resource for articulating and sustaining political claims whose underlying logic is territorial, juridical, and political rather than purely theological. It is a modern tactic of statecraft and resistance, fundamentally at odds with Huntington's vision of a broad, metaphysical confrontation between Western and Islamic civilizations.

The October 2023 Rupture and the Realpolitik of Regional Escalation

The events of October 7, 2023 mark a decisive moment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, for the purposes of this analysis, a critical empirical test of the competing analytical frameworks examined in this paper. The unprecedented incursion by Hamas into southern Israel, and the subsequent devastating Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip, generated an immediate political discourse that superficially appeared to validate Huntington's thesis. Political elites and certain geopolitical analysts hastily resurrected civilizational rhetoric to contextualize the violence. Israeli leadership frequently framed the military response as a frontline defence of Western democratic values against fundamentalist Islamic barbarism, while Hamas utilized religious nomenclature (Operation Al-Aqsa Flood) to appeal directly to a global pan-Islamic solidarity network. As scholars such as Jeffrey Haynes (2007) have observed regarding post-9/11 geopolitical crises, acute asymmetrical warfare inevitably tempts policymakers to fall back on essentialist, civilizational binaries to rapidly mobilize domestic populations and secure international alliances. In the immediate aftermath of the October attacks, the scale and character of the violence seemed, to neo-Huntingtonian observers, to confirm the existence of an irreconcilable fault line between the Judeo-Christian West and the Islamic world.

However, a rigorous structural assessment reveals that the October rupture and its aftermath were not manifestations of an inherent civilizational destiny, but rather the acute, violent convergence of the highly localized antagonisms outlined in the preceding sections. As Daniel Sobelman (2026) argues that the strategic calculation behind the October 7 attack was driven primarily by Hamas's assessment of structural conditions in the regional balance of power, specifically, its perception of Israeli deterrence as having weakened and its reading of the regional landscape as providing an opportunity to disrupt the emerging normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Sobelman characterizes this as strategic opportunism rooted in a particular reading of the regional military balance rather than as an expression of civilizational grievance. The initial explosion of violence was fundamentally driven by the collision of absolute memory politics. For the Israeli polity, the mass casualties of October 7 triggered an existential, survivalist mnemonic inextricably linked to historical persecution and the Holocaust, which subsequently dictated a military response unconstrained by conventional diplomatic calibration. Conversely, for the Palestinians, the ensuing destruction of civilian infrastructure and mass displacement in Gaza materialized as a literal, ongoing reiteration of the 1948 Nakba. Furthermore, the collapse of the pre-2023 status quo was the direct, predictable outcome of severe institutional asymmetry. The sustained policy of militarily and economically containing a densely populated, administratively fractured enclave proved structurally unviable. Federico Toth (2025), analyzing the attack through the lens of crisis management theory, further notes that the months preceding October 7 were marked by a series of concrete, politically specific provocations: Israeli police confrontations with Palestinian worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque in April 2023, increased settler violence in the West Bank, and Israeli blockage of exports from Gaza.

These are not civilizational triggers; they are the political and material conditions of an ongoing occupation, and they follow the logic of political grievance rather than cultural antagonism. The violence was, therefore, the physical manifestation of an unsustainable spatial hegemony and the systemic failure of an unequal administrative apparatus, rather than a theological dispute between macro-cultures.

The subsequent trajectory of the conflict, specifically its expansion into a sustained regional war involving the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel from 2024 through 2026, systematically dismantles the illusion of a unified Islamic civilizational bloc. If Huntington's paradigm held genuine predictive utility, the protracted humanitarian crisis in Gaza would have consolidated the broader Islamic world into a unified, material front against Israel and its Western allies. Instead, the regional geopolitical landscape fractured entirely along the lines of state-centric realpolitik. The unprecedented direct missile exchanges between Iran and Israel, alongside the activation of Iranian proxy networks across Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, were dictated by a strategic deterrence equation and the pursuit of regional hegemony, rather than religious solidarity. This pattern of direct state-on-state confrontation culminated in June 2025 with what has been termed the Twelve-Day War, in which the United States joined Israeli military operations targeting Iranian nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and senior leadership. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2025) described this as a strategic Rubicon, a transformation of a decades-long proxy struggle into direct interstate confrontation.

The geopolitical dynamics of this escalation sequence cannot be understood through a civilizational lens without immediate distortion. International relations scholars like Fawaz Gerges (1999) and Stephen Walt (1987) have consistently argued that the Middle Eastern security architectures, state survival, regime preservation, and the balance of power routinely supersede cultural or religious kinship. While the peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) initiated the trend of prioritizing national interest over pan-Arab or pan-Islamic solidarity, the recent Abraham Accords definitively shattered the illusion of an Islamic civilizational bloc. In direct contradiction to the Clash of Civilizations model, Sunni Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, have largely maintained their strategic alignments with the United States (Liu 2025). During the height of the Iranian-Israeli aerial exchanges, several of these Arab states implicitly cooperated with Western security architectures to intercept Iranian projectiles traversing their airspace.[6]

As a study published in the Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies observes, the 2024 Israel-Iran escalation has produced geopolitical reverberations whose logic is fundamentally economic and strategic rather than culturally determined (Liu 2025). These state actors prioritize domestic economic modernization, maritime security (e.g. in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz), and the containment of Iranian regional hegemony over civilizational allegiance to the Palestinian nationalist movement.

Finally, the ongoing Iran-US-Israel military confrontation highlights that the Western and Islamic civilizations are themselves deeply divided. Within the West, there is a profound internal cleavage between political elites supporting Israel and a younger generation of citizens, particularly in the US and Europe, who view the conflict through the lens of decolonization and human rights (Pew Research Center, 2024).[7] Within the Islamic world, the intense rivalry between the Shia-led Iranian axis and the Sunni-led Gulf states proves that religious kinship is secondary to state interest. Consequently, the contemporary Middle Eastern theatre is bifurcated not between the West and Islam, but between an authoritarian-revisionist axis led by Tehran and a status-quo normalization bloc reliant on Western security guarantees. This ongoing dynamic confirms the absolute primacy of realist geopolitics over civilizational identity, rendering Huntington's macro-framework empirically obsolete in the modern Levant.

[6] The Wall Street Journal reported that Israel repelled Iran's April 2024 attack only with assistance from the United States and Arab partners, with US and regional officials confirming Jordanian and Saudi airspace coordination.

[7] A 2024 Pew Research Center survey documented a statistically significant generational divergence across the United States, with respondents under thirty expressing substantially more critical views of Israeli military conduct than those over forty-five.

Conclusion

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has endured for well over a century, surviving the collapse of empires, the redrawing of borders, the rise and fall of ideological movements, and the repeated failure of internationally brokered peace processes. While Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations model has faced decades of scholarly criticism, it continues to exert a disproportionate influence on how policymakers and analysts interpret the Middle East. The enduring temptation in Western geopolitical discourse is to package the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the ultimate frontier war between a democratic West and a unified, antagonistic Islamic bloc. This reflex, however, does more than merely misread the region; it actively distorts the mechanics of the conflict. By elevating a localized territorial dispute to the level of cultural destiny, the civilizational paradigm treats systemic violence as an intractable symptom of inherent incompatibility, effectively absolving international actors of the responsibility to address concrete, material inequities.

This paper dismantles that ontological baseline, demonstrating that the conflict in the Levant is fiercely localized and functionally immune to macro-cultural generalizations. The intractability of the conflict is sustained by the collision of competing ethno-nationalist traumas, severe institutional asymmetries, and the calculated weaponization of sacred geography, not by a metaphysical clash of values. The events of October 7, 2023, and its subsequent escalation to direct Israel-Iran-United States military confrontation through 2026, have demonstrated in vivid and tragic terms that this conflict is capable of generating new catastrophes while remaining rooted in old grievances. The civilizational framework, far from illuminating these developments, obscures them. Furthermore, the contemporary strategic landscape, defined by Arab states prioritizing maritime security and the containment of Iranian revisionism over pan-Islamic solidarity, confirms that rigorous, state-centric realpolitik governs the Middle East.

Ultimately, the continued use of civilizational theory in academic and diplomatic circles represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict's origins. Moving beyond this paradigm is more than just a theoretical shift; it is a practical necessity. By stripping away the label of "civilizational warfare" and addressing the Israeli-Palestinian struggle as a modern dispute over territory, institutional power, and national rights, scholars and policymakers may finally begin to identify a path toward realistic and lasting political solutions.

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