

It's the *Women*, Stupid

SOCIAL SCIENCE SHOWS THAT THE WESTERN-MUSLIM CULTURE CLASH IS NOT ABOUT DEMOCRATIC IDEALS.

BY PIPPA NORRIS AND RONALD INGLEHART

IN THE AFTERMATH OF 9/11 AND AMERICAN MILITARY intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, many have characterized the current state of world affairs as a “clash of civilizations.” Simplistically, on one side stands the Western world of democratic ideals; on the other, Muslim fundamentalist beliefs.

It is a flawed analysis. In fact, it is the matter of gender equality—women’s rights—that stands at the fulcrum of this divide.

In making the “clash of civilizations” analysis, popular commentators commonly cite the thesis of Harvard University professor Samuel Huntington, who wrote in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*: “In the new world... the most pervasive, important and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes... but between people belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal wars and ethnic conflicts will occur within civilizations. ... And the most dangerous cultural conflicts are those along the fault lines between civilizations.”

For 45 years, Huntington pointed out, the central fault line in Europe had been the Iron Curtain created by the Soviet Union; now, he suggested, that line had moved east: “[It] is now the line separating peoples of Western Christianity... from Muslim and Orthodox peoples.”

Huntington’s “clash” thesis, has been used to interpret the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center as a reaction by Muslim fundamentalists against Western culture itself. Moreover, his prediction of cultural rifts has been used to explain violent ethnic conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Caucasus, Israel/Palestine and Kashmir. But even if Huntington weren’t literally predictive, many fear that the Bush administration has made his forecast self-fulfilling after 9/11 by invading two Muslim countries.

But is Huntington’s thesis correct?

According to our analysis of research, no—at least not in the ways he defined the clash of cultures.

For Huntington, the gap between the West and the

Muslim East is caused by a lack of shared *political* values, which, combined, create democracy. They include separation of church and state, respect for the rule of law, social pluralism, parliamentary institutions and the protection of individual rights and civil liberties. “Individually almost none of these factors was unique to the West,” Huntington argued, but “the combination of them was, however, and this is what gave the West its distinctive quality.”

We believe he’s mistaken: New evidence reveals a surprising consensus that both Muslim and Western societies find democracy to be the best form of government. The cultural fault line that *does* divide the world—and deeply—is the one labeled “gender equality.” Muslim nations remain the most traditional societies in the world when it comes to determining the role of women or tolerating divorce and homosexuality. And the gap is widening, because as younger generations in the West become far more liberal on these issues, the Muslim world stands firm against any such change.

Democracy? Yes!

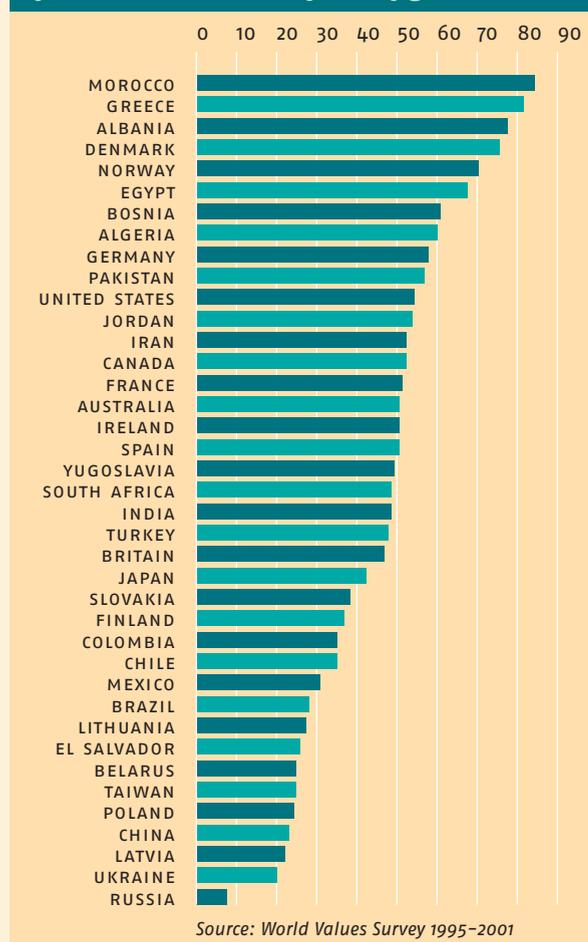
It’s easy to see what inspired Huntington’s thesis about democracy, given the failure of electoral democracy to take root in most states of the Middle East and North Africa. In 2002 about two-thirds of the 192 countries around the globe were electoral democracies, yet only one-quarter of the 47 countries with Muslim majority populations were. And *none* of the core Arabic-speaking societies fell into this category. Although Saudi Arabia has announced that it will hold local elections, the Middle East remains decades behind electoral developments in Latin America, Asia and much of sub-Saharan Africa.

It’s often assumed that Muslim countries are lacking in electoral democracies because their citizens have little desire for democracy. Huntington developed his provocative argument without any systematic evidence of such public opinion, probably, in part, because few representative surveys were available that examined social and political attitudes in both Western and Muslim states.

In recent years, however, surveys have been conducted in several Muslim nations by Gallup and by Pew. Also, the World Values Survey (WVS), which has collected evidence from more than 65 countries since 1981, has added research in the past four years from 13 majority Muslim states (Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey). Culture *does* matter, as Huntington claimed, in that predominant religious traditions leave an enduring imprint on contemporary values. People living in traditionally Christian nations, as well as in Muslim and Buddhist societies, continue to display distinct values from these religious systems even if they've never set foot in a church, temple or mosque. But that doesn't mean they're anti-democratic.

In fact, the World Values Survey shows that people in Muslim states highly support the statement that having a democratic political system would be "very good" for their country. Indeed, support for that notion in countries such as Morocco, Algeria and Egypt is far greater than in many established democracies, while attitudes in Jordan and Iran are very similar to those in the United States. The coun-

FIGURE 1 Percentage who believe having a democratic system for their own country is "very good"



tries most critical of the notion are not Muslim ones but the ex-Soviet states of Eastern Europe, which have experienced radical economic dislocation and a flawed and incomplete transition to electoral democracy.

Support for democracy involves many complex elements, however, and any single survey question may prove unreliable. So we also examined a broader range of social and political topics, including evaluations of democratic performance, since people may believe democracy is the best form of government but remain dissatisfied with the way it works in practice. Still, there is virtually no difference between Muslim and Western publics on these measurements. The country least enthusiastic toward democratic ideals turns out to be Russia, not a Muslim state. Even though it remains unclear exactly what people, given their varied cultural experience, mean when they express approval (or disapproval) for democratic ideals, the loosely defined notion of democracy nonetheless maintains an overwhelmingly positive image throughout the world.

The WVS also includes two items monitoring respondents' attitudes toward the religious leaders in government, and only here are Muslim states in variance with the West: The less-secular Muslim publics prove far more favorable toward active public engagement by religious figures. It would be an exaggeration, though, to claim that this represents a clash only of Western-Muslim values; in fact, the survey shows widespread agreement with the idea of religious leadership in many other parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Gender Equity? No!

When survey questions turn to gender and sexuality issues, the gap between Western and Muslim publics widens into a gulf.

Support for gender equality was determined by weighing people's attitudes toward women and men in the workforce, education, politics, and the family. The WVS also includes a 10-point scale, ranked from "never justifiable" to "always justifiable," that measures people's approval of homosexuality, abortion and divorce. It asks respondents to agree or disagree with five statements:

- On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.
- When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.
- A university education is more important for a boy than a girl.
- Do you think that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled or is this not necessary?
- If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn't want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove?

The survey results show two striking and significant pat-

terns: First, there is a persistent gap in support for gender equality and sexual liberalization between Western (most liberal), Muslim (most traditional) and all other societies (in the middle). More important, the gap between Western and Muslim publics steadily widens as we move from older to younger birth cohorts. Younger generations in Western societies become progressively more egalitarian than their elders, while younger generations in Muslim societies remain almost as traditional as their parents and grandparents. Moreover, breaking down survey results by gender, younger *women* prove just as traditional in their attitudes toward sex roles as do younger men.

The differences revealed in the survey results remain significant even after controlling for factors that could potentially affect them, including levels of human and political development, age, gender, education, income and degree of religiosity.

Policy Implications

The events of 9/11 caused immense interest in the root causes of conflict between the Muslim world and the United States, and Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis was but one way of understanding them. Any interpretation, by Huntington or others, carries important policy implications, especially in deciding whether the failure of democracy to take root in many Middle Eastern states reflects the hegemonic grip of governing regimes or deeper currents of public opinion.

But what does it mean when research shows that issues involving gender and sexual liberalization create more Muslim-Western divisiveness than do beliefs about democratic ideals?

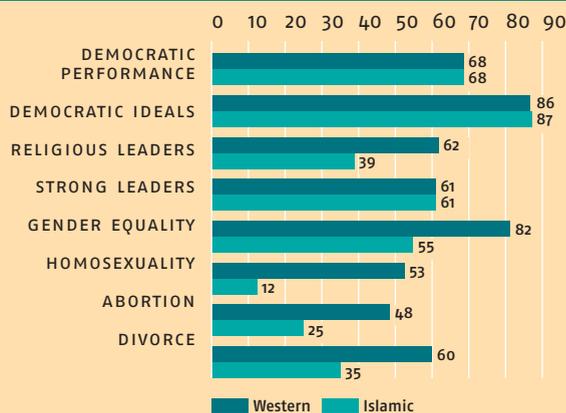
For one thing, although vitally important for the process of social change, as well as for progress in human rights, the gender attitude gap is unlikely to prompt international conflict of the sort predicted by the "clash" thesis.

No matter how misguided the U.S. military intervention, analysis of political attitudes in a wide range of comparable Middle Eastern societies suggests that support for democratic ideals does exist in the region. Whether these ideals can ever be translated into stable democratic institutions, however, remains a core challenge. **Ms.**

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FIGURE 2 Approval of political and social values in Western and Muslim societies



Democratic performance

- Democracies are indecisive and have too much squabbling. (Disagree scored high.)
- Democracies aren't good at maintaining order. (Disagree scored high.)

Democratic ideal

- Democracy may have its problems, but it's better than any other form of government. (Agree scored high.)
- Approve of having a democratic political system (Agree scored high.)

Religious leadership

- Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office. (Disagree scored high.)
- It would be better for [this country] if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office. (Disagree scored high.)

Strong, authoritarian leadership

- Approve of having experts, not government, make decisions (Disagree scored high.)
- Approve of having a strong leaders who does not have to bother with parliament and elections (Disagree scored high.)

FIGURE 3 Gender equality scale by birth cohort and society type

