What is your civilization? Perhaps that will be one of the “extreme vetting” questions asked in the future upon entering the United States. The “clash of civilizations” framework first articulated by Samuel Huntington in 1993 has made a public comeback thanks, apparently, to the improbable election of President Donald J. Trump. In his first major public speech in Europe, President Trump chose Warsaw, currently ruled by a right-wing, populist government that has defied the EU by refusing to accept refugees, as the backdrop to declare that “the West will never, ever be broken. Our values will prevail. Our people will thrive. And our civilization will triumph.” Among the many theories embraced by his administration, the fallacious clash-of-civilizations worldview ranks among the most dangerous, for reasons that are explained below: it distorts decision making, reinforces terrorist narratives, creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of discrimination, division, and conflict within the United States itself as well as across the wider world, and undermines U.S. foreign policy goals.

But the Trump administration is not the only guilty party here – civilizational myopia is an underappreciated, bipartisan weakness in the United States. Shedding this flawed framework and its biases requires recognizing the shared roots of our global civilization and a focus on human rights and dignity rather than exaggerating differences based on race, religion, culture, and ethnicity. The sooner policymakers and media professionals across the political spectrum do this, the better off we all will be.
Return of the Clash

For a candidate who took America’s domestic culture wars to a new level, it should come as no surprise that the international relations theory equivalent of culture wars – the clash of civilizations – best explains Trump’s worldview thus far. The Trump administration has embraced many aspects of Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory, a framework that views the world in broad “civilizational” groupings—like Western, Islamic, Sinic, Latin American, Orthodox, etc.—and posits that future conflicts will occur along civilizational fault lines, with patterns of cohesion occurring within civilizational groupings. In line with this thinking, many current and former members of the Trump administration view immigration as a demographic threat to white, “Anglo-Protestant” American culture. Some of his advisers believe that war with China is inevitable given its rising global power status. And Russia, leader of the Orthodox grouping in the Huntington framework, is seen by Trump and others as a natural ally in these higher-order conflicts because of President Vladimir Putin’s shared embrace of cultural traditionalist nationalism.

While many aspects of Trump’s agenda fit the clash framework, the idea of “the West” being at war with Islam is the administration’s most salient endorsement of the clash ideology. President Trump has said that he thinks “Islam hates us.” He campaigned for a “total and complete shutdown of the entry of Muslims to the United States” and said during the campaign that he would “certainly implement” a Muslim database or registry. In his inaugural address, Trump claimed that he would “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism.”

A number of former administration officials such as former senior political adviser Steve Bannon, former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, and former deputy assistant to the president Sebastian Gorka certainly hold these views. But other senior officials like Stephen Miller, senior adviser to the President who is reported to have drafted the Muslim travel bans and Trump’s major 2017 foreign policy speeches in Saudi Arabia and Warsaw, openly share these views too. A leaked National Security Council (NSC) memo from May 2017 on political warfare against Trump, written by then-NSC Director of Strategic Planning Rich Higgins, demonstrates the conspiratorial manner in which Islamists, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) are seen as political enemies of the president.
In Warsaw, the first stop before a G20 meeting in Germany in July 2017, Trump laid out his most open embrace and defense of the clash of civilizations worldview. He declared that the “fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive,” whether “we have the confidence in our values to defend them at any cost,” and the “desire and the courage to preserve our civilization in the face of those who would subvert and destroy it.” Trump described this challenge as first and foremost an ideological battle that “begins with our minds, our wills, and our souls.” And who or what is the threat to the West? First on his list was “radical Islamic terrorism,” but more broadly conceived, Trump believes the threat is “forces, whether they come from inside or out, from the South or the East, that threaten over time to undermine these values and to erase the bonds of culture, faith and tradition that make us who we are.”

Such talk is not just idle rhetoric – it reveals a worldview that is deeply flawed and that is the basis for many misguided policies. There certainly are senior members of the administration who reject this framework, and the ouster of officials like Bannon and Gorka are positive signs that these views may be facing internal opposition and checks. But overall, the influence of this ideology on the president, many of his advisers, and the overall direction of policy is plainly manifest. The clash ideology animates many of the Trump administration’s most identifiable policies like the border wall, curtailed immigration and intake of refugees, extreme vetting, the Muslim ban, increased military strikes in counterterrorism, undermining the Iran nuclear deal, the possible terrorist designation of the Muslim Brotherhood, aggressive posturing vis-à-vis China, and efforts to ally with Russia even at the expense of traditional alliances. Exposing the fundamental flaws and dangers of this framework is critical to foster a rational, fact-based assessment of U.S. national interests and foreign policy.

Wrong and Dangerous

The core assumptions of the clash theory are false. Culture and religion have not supplanted nationalism, economic interests, or balance-of-power politics as the leading global organizing principles. There are no monolithic “civilizations” that are in global competition with each other. On the contrary, the multitude of significant political, economic, ethnic, social, cultural, and religious rifts within the various “civilizations” devised by Huntington renders those groupings largely meaningless. Culture and religion play an important role in global politics, but they are by far not the most important ones.

A quick look around the world confirms this reality. The populist backlash to globalism in Europe and the United States – some of which is driven by fear of demographic and cultural changes due to immigration – has exposed a resurgent
economic nationalism that has threatened the unity of Western Europe and the North Atlantic alliance system. The abdication of leadership by the Trump administration on global issues, including climate change and human rights, has also shattered the idea of an ironclad Western block.

Most of the world’s conflicts are within the fictitious civilizational groupings, not between them. The notion of a unified “Islamic world,” for example, is more fantasy than reality. There is a rich diversity in the practice and understanding of Islam that defies stereotyping and essentialization. As the Acting U.S. Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), I observed first-hand the deep ideological and political divides – over democratic governance, the treatment of Islamist parties, regional hegemony, the Saudi-Iran rivalry, support for militant groups, among others – that dominate the politics among Muslim-majority countries. Even Trump’s attempt to unite the Sunni Arab states against Iran and the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) spectacularly failed mere weeks after his ostentatious May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia. Since his visit, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have led a coordinated campaign to blockade Qatar, a fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member and host of a major U.S. Air Force base, over various political disagreements.

Furthermore, the exaggerated emphasis on religion in the clash theory ignores the reality that religion is not geographically bound or static. Take Islam, for example: there are more than 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, but only about 20 percent live in the Middle East. The world’s third largest population of Muslims – over 170 million – resides in India, a Hindu-majority country. China has over 20 million Muslims; Russia has nearly 14 million; and Germany and France have almost 5 million Muslims each.

The world is a pluralistic, multi-faith, and multicultural place. We are all part of a shared, continuously evolving global civilization with diverse cultures and societies. While religion has often played a role in stoking conflict, the lived reality of interfaith coexistence throughout history and into the present day facially disproves the monolithic determinism of the clash of civilizations thesis.

Reasonable people can disagree on which values to prioritize in organizing their lives. But at the end of the day, there is more that unites us than divides us. Global interconnectedness ensures that we all participate in a global marketplace of ideas and inventions. And given the ubiquity of immigration and global travel, the diversity of global cultures is just as likely to appear within countries as between them. The great advances in science, technology, and the humanities that are
enjoyed around the world today are rooted in contributions and experiences from a diversity of sources globally – from places where civilizations engaged deeply together and where individuals had the freedom to think and innovate, in places like Andalusia, in shared medical journals and philosophical texts, and in international conferences in the twentieth century shaped by countries like Egypt, Indonesia, China, and India, as well as other powers.

Modern computers and advanced algorithms would be impossible without foundational mathematical developments like algebra, trigonometry, and the Arabic numeral and decimal systems, all of which trace their origin to Islamic societies. The practice of receiving a University degree originated in the Islamic practice of granting *ijazas* to teach as scholars passed on knowledge to their students. Coffee culture is ubiquitous in the world today, but few know that coffee was first consumed as a beverage in Ethiopia, and the earliest cultivation was in Yemen, where it got the name *qahwa*, or coffee. Sufi mystics in Yemen used and popularized it, and it spread throughout the Arabia peninsula, eventually leading to coffeehouses in Egypt, Constantinople, and now to every corner of the world.

These are but a few examples of the diverse origins of many of the foundations of our modern, global civilization. And as global barriers to communication, travel, and trade have fallen, talent from around the world has flocked to societies offering the most opportunity. A study from the National Foundation for American Policy found that of the current group of U.S.-based startup businesses worth over a billion dollars, more than half – 51 percent – were started by immigrants. And in those companies themselves, immigrants make up over 70 percent of key development and management positions. Steve Jobs, the founder of the company Apple, was the son of a Syrian immigrant to the United States. No country or culture has a monopoly on talent. It is access to education, resources, and opportunity in a free and enabling environment that allows individuals to reach their potential.

**Skews Decision Making**

The problem is that the clash of civilizations theory is more than just wrong; it is dangerous. International relations theory matters. A policymaker’s belief and understanding of how the world works shapes the ways in which that individual processes information and crafts as well as implements policy. Thus, the predominant foreign policy doctrine or ideology of a White House is critically important in understanding the direction of policy that administration will take. For example, neoconservative ideology drove the George W. Bush administration to the catastrophic invasion of Iraq. That ideological filter led to an overemphasis on certain facts, which were already dubious at best, that justified the ends sought
— regime change in Iraq — and inhibited a realistic assessment of, and planning for, the risks and potential outcomes associated with the invasion. Just as looking at the world through rose-colored glasses can lead to overly optimistic assessments, viewing the world in monochrome rather than color all but guarantees misunderstanding and mistaken policies.

An approach that internalizes the notion of deep, civilizational divisions perpetuates zero-sum thinking and notions of insurmountable barriers between and among various actors. It privileges explanations based on religious and cultural divisions rather than the more likely explanations rooted in fact-based political and economic realities. Those flawed assumptions can lead to missed opportunities for positive-sum policies and an embrace of unnecessarily, perhaps even inadvertently, confrontational policies.

We have already seen many instances in which Trump and his administration have applied a clash of civilizations filter when conveying their understanding of situations. In February, the White House released a list of global terrorist attacks from September 2014 to December 2016 in order to argue that the media was insufficiently covering terrorist attacks. But that list had two fundamental flaws. First, it omitted the vast majority of the victims of terrorism in that period, namely individuals from Muslim-majority countries. Terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria, and Nigeria were completely omitted from the list, and only one attack was listed for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. Second, Trump’s list omitted terrorist attacks by non-Muslims in the United States, despite the fact that terrorist attacks by white supremacists and far right anti-government extremists make up the majority of terrorist attacks in the United States. According to an April 2017 report from the Government Accountability Office to Congress on federal efforts to counter violent extremism, “Of the 85 violent extremist incidents that resulted in death since September 12, 2001, far right-wing violent extremist groups were responsible for 62 (73 percent) while radical Islamist violent extremists were responsible for 23 (27 percent).” The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security jointly reported on the ongoing lethal threat of white supremacist extremists in May.

Trump’s White House ignores these facts and this reality. In its worldview, Muslims are the terrorists, and Americans or Westerners are the victims. Anything that contradicts this narrative is ignored, distinguished, or dismissed as fake news. In Warsaw, when discussing the threat of terrorism, Trump said that “America and Europe have suffered one terror attack after another,” ignoring once again the predominantly Muslim victims of terrorism all over the world and the reality of right-wing terrorism in America.

Two terrorist attacks in London from June provide a stark, comparative example of this filter in operation. On June 3, terrorists drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and then exited the vehicle to attack more bystanders.
On June 18, a terrorist drove a van into a crowd of Muslim worshipers who were leaving the Finsbury Park mosque. President Trump issued several tweets about the June 3 attack, even as British officials were waiting for more information before reporting on the incident. He used the attack to justify his proposed Muslim travel ban, to tout his “extreme vetting” policies, and to attack the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. In contrast, Trump did not tweet at all about the June 18 event, where Muslims were the victims and the perpetrator was a Muslim-hating terrorist. That event did not fit his ideological worldview.

Similarly, neither did the mass shooting in January at a mosque in Quebec, or the murders of two men in Portland in May who intervened to disrupt an anti-Muslim hate crime. Perhaps it is also why Trump did not condemn the August bombing of a mosque in Minnesota; instead, Gorka opined that the attack might have been a fake hate crime to malign the right wing. And perhaps it is why Trump failed to call the August Charlottesville car attack “terrorism” – to do so would require admitting the existence of right-wing terrorism, something anathema to his worldview.

When facts are marshaled only to confirm ideology rather than reflect reality, rational decision making is lost. For example, rather than following the evidence and ensuring that federal countering violent extremism (CVE) programs include all sources of terrorist threats, the Trump administration plans to focus CVE efforts exclusively on “radical Islamic terrorism.” Because of this move, hundreds of thousands of dollars that were slated for deradicalizing neo-Nazis and white violent extremists have now been diverted, despite a reported twentyfold increase in demand for such services. So, because of the White House’s ideological cognitive dissonance, CVE programs under the Trump administration will ignore far right-wing terrorism, which accounts for 73 percent of domestic terrorist incidents according to the government’s own statistics.

Similarly, this administration’s clash-tainted lens has impacted its efforts to reform the State Department. In eliminating the positions of U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC and Special Representative to Muslim Communities with no specific justifications, the administration risks signaling a lack of interest in viewing Islam and Muslims with anything other than a counterterrorism or religious freedom lens. The robust relationship established with the OIC over two successive presidential administrations apparently is being abandoned for no articulated reason.

And counterterrorism is not the only policy area where decision making has been skewed by an ideological lens. The Trump administration has affirmatively sought to link immigration with rising rates of crime, even though in reality CVE programs will now ignore far right-wing terrorism (73 percent of domestic terrorist incidents).
immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born Americans. The White House has also consistently touted the potential benefits of greater cooperation with Russia, while downplaying obvious conflicting interests regarding Russia’s meddling in U.S. and European elections, its unlawful invasion of Ukraine and illegal occupation of Crimea, and its support for Bashar al Assad in Syria. The Trump administration’s desire to amplify military attacks on ISIS and similar groups has already led to an escalation of U.S. military involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, with reports of spikes in civilian casualties resulting from U.S. strikes. That aggressive posture, combined with a concerted effort to undermine the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal, also risks direct conflict with Iran, which President Trump described as a key supporter of terrorism across the region in his remarks in Riyadh.

Foreign policies built on alternative facts are a recipe for disaster. The Trump administration’s ideological commitment to the clash of civilizations framework has warped its ability to objectively assess facts and develop coherent national security policy.

**Feeds Terrorist Propaganda**

Terrorist groups like ISIS believe in the clash of civilizations framework. Their narrative hinges on the claim that Islam is incompatible and at war with “the West” and its Muslim-majority government allies, who they see as corrupt extensions of Western hegemony. Even though the vast majority of victims of terrorist groups like ISIS are Muslims living in Muslim-majority communities, these groups often seek to frame their conflict as with “the West” to externalize their perceived enemy and drive recruitment. They hope to provoke anti-Muslim policies by governments in America and Europe in order to confirm their propaganda and recruit individuals living there to join their cause and commit terrorist acts. Actions that confirm their narrative of a conflict between America and Islam—like the Trump administration’s shift to a radical Islam-only CVE policy—help to validate their worldview and increase the appeal of their recruitment efforts.

In embracing this same clash of civilizations worldview, the Trump administration risks a self-fulfilling prophecy of increased terrorist recruitment and violence. The attempted Muslim travel bans have been hailed by ISIS supporters online as the “blessed ban,” a confirmation of the prediction made by notorious U.S.-born preacher and al Qaeda propagandist Anwar al Awlaki that Western governments would turn on their Muslim populations. Al Shabab, an al Qaeda affiliate, has used Trump footage in its recruitment propaganda materials. The escalation in civilian casualties as a result of U.S. strikes in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen is sure to help terrorist propagandists make the case that the United States is at war with Islam and Muslims writ large. The Trump administration’s
close embrace of authoritarian leaders in the region will reconfirm the notion that governments in the Middle East are corrupt extensions of American power, and that America only pays lip service to democracy and human rights. The rise in domestic hate crimes in the United States targeting Muslims, combined with President Trump’s near total refusal to condemn such attacks, feeds the narrative of Muslims under attack in the West. And the White House’s exclusive focus on ISIS- or al Qaeda-inspired terrorism in Europe and America, to the exclusion of all other sources of terrorism, reinforces the narrative of a war against Islam.

There is a dangerous, closed ideological feedback loop between the Trump White House and terrorist groups like ISIS at play here: the administration’s policies, enacted under the guise of fighting terrorism, actually feed terrorist recruitment; and when ISIS- or al Qaeda-linked terrorists strike, the White House amplifies those attacks as confirmation of their belief in a global war against “radical Islam.” Those attacks are then used to promote and justify the very policies that are feeding terrorist recruitment, just like Trump did when he promoted his Muslim ban in a series of tweets following the June 3 London Bridge attacks.35

Breeds Division

The exclusivist, us-versus-them nature of the civilizational framework reinforces a notion of otherness and division. The construct of separate civilizations in competition with one another emphasizes differences over commonalities, and in particular fosters notions of cultural and racial supremacy. Pride in one’s heritage is natural, but when that pride morphs into claims of civilizational supremacy, conflict is not far off. That mindset is what leads people like U.S. Representative Steve King to tweet that “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”36 Civilization here is a substitute for race, and “our civilization” is the notion of a white, “Anglo-Protestant” America.

This fig leaf for racial or cultural supremacy presumes that certain groups are backwards and have not embraced the more advanced civilization. That attitude makes it easier to justify violent, militaristic policies that boil down to “I would bomb the shit out of ’em,”37 which is what Trump promised to do to ISIS while on the campaign trail in 2015. Trump boasted in Warsaw that the “world has never known anything like our community of nations,” and he issued a call to arms to defend it: “the West was saved with the blood of patriots; … each generation must rise up and play their part in its defense … and … every foot of ground, and every last inch of civilization, is worth defending with your life.”38

When pride morphs into claims of civilizational supremacy, conflict is not far off.
In this worldview, our own material and scientific achievements are seen historically as the unique products of our culture and civilization, while our shortcomings and mistakes are ignored along with advances and contributions from other parts of the world. That flawed worldview feeds into anti-American narratives of U.S. exploitation, arrogance, and dominance, and ignores the reality of our global interdependence and collaborative achievements.

**Undermines Human Rights Promotion**

The artificial construct of separate civilizations undermines the notion of universal human rights. According to the clash theory, the various civilizational groupings have their own core values rooted in culture and religion. For example, Sinic values might be seen as emphasizing community over the individual, or Islamic values might be seen as enforcing more rigid gender roles. Proponents of this worldview thus appropriate human rights as “Western” values, implying that acceptance of human rights standards elsewhere is a triumph of Western civilization over the other.

This dynamic, though based on a flawed worldview, has a tangible effect in the real world that I witnessed time and again when advocating on human rights issues at the UN and with OIC member states. Authoritarian governments seeking to suppress domestic dissent or micromanage civil society dismiss violations of human rights as a “Western” imposition, robbing local human rights defenders of credibility even where their positions are rooted within local culture, values, and history. Issues that should be open to civil debate – like governance, education, and human rights – are transformed into us-versus-them minefields for local human rights defenders and activists, who often have to worry about extremist elements in society in addition to governmental restrictions. For example, mere opposition to blasphemy and apostasy laws – even if that opposition is based on a critical reexamination of religious teachings and the colonial origins of many of those laws – can be life threatening for activists and officials in a country like Pakistan, where a federal minister and a provincial governor were murdered in separate incidents for their reform advocacy. Having spoken with hundreds of youth leaders from around the world, I know that the mental barriers erected by the clash worldview are real and significantly hinder the promotion of greater understanding and tolerance globally.  

By undermining the universality of human rights, the utility of human rights as an international standard diminishes. Consistent with this dynamic, the Trump
administration has virtually abandoned promotion of democracy and human rights as part of its foreign policy. In his speech in Saudi Arabia, Trump said “we are not here to tell other people how to live,” and he lived up to that promise by not mentioning any concerns about human rights or the lack of mechanisms for meaningful political participation. In remarks at the State Department in May, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson made clear that the administration was decoupling values from policy, explaining that “if you condition our national security efforts on someone adopting our values, we probably can’t achieve our national security goals or our national security interests.”

Trump has hosted several world leaders with troubling records – including Chinese President Xi Jinping, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – and none of those meetings included a discussion of human rights. Trump extended a White House visit invitation to Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, despite his open calls for and possible participation in extrajudicial killings. Trump also said that he would be “honored” to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, whose regime has arguably the worst human rights record in the world and has unjustly imprisoned several Americans, including Otto Warmbier who tragically died from injuries received in North Korea upon his return to the United States. Human rights-based restrictions on arms sales to Bahrain have been lifted, and Trump touted a new $110 billion arms deal signed on his trip to Saudi Arabia. The denial and delay of certain aid to Egypt in August 2017 is a welcome anomaly from the administration’s poor track record on human rights thus far.

For the most part, human rights have always taken a back seat to more pressing political goals. One could argue that the Trump administration’s lack of a human rights policy is just a more extreme version of such commonplace trade-offs in priorities. However, this administration’s abandonment of human rights altogether signals a deeper, ideological motivation, which is consistent with the clash of civilizations framework’s undermining of the universality of human rights.

**Discrimination at Home**

The clash of civilizations framework also negatively affects domestic policy and domestic stability. Because the exclusivist ideology is rooted in the assertion of a particular racial-religious-cultural construct, those who fall outside of that group pose a potential threat to the coherence of that artificial construct. Like Huntington, who viewed immigration as a threat to white, “Anglo-Protestant” American culture, Trump and many of his advisers view immigration as a demographic threat. This is particularly true for Stephen Miller, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and former senior adviser Steve Bannon, who have pushed for limits on both illegal and legal immigration in order to combat this perceived threat.
Trump’s anti-immigration policies – including the border wall, accelerated deportations, extreme vetting, the Muslim ban, limits on refugee admission, and limits on legal means of immigration – are best explained from the perspective of the clash of civilizations ideology. As mentioned above, crime is not a credible justification for these policies. Neither is national security – no credible security rationale has been put forward by the administration, and significant senior national security experts believe that these immigration restrictions will harm national security.\textsuperscript{45} Even the libertarian Cato Institute’s analysis of the travel ban concludes that it will not improve national security.\textsuperscript{46} Economic arguments also fail as a defense for these policies, as most economists believe that Trump’s immigration crackdown will slow economic growth.\textsuperscript{47} In contrast, the ideological desire to use immigration policy to counter perceived demographic threats to the Trump administration’s conception of America’s dominant culture fully explains these policies and are confirmed by the administration’s own rhetoric.\textsuperscript{48}

Immigration and the demographic threat to “the West” were central in Trump’s Warsaw remarks. Pivoting from Poland’s history of overcoming fascism and communism, Trump identified immigrants and refugees as the new threat to the West, saying, “You see what’s happening out there. They are threats. We will confront them.” The “they/them” he is referring to are predominantly Muslim refugees and immigrants, all of whom, in the clash ideology, are presumed to be responsible for terrorism in some way or other. To erase any doubt on that point, Trump said, “While we will always welcome new citizens who share our values and love our people, our borders will always be closed to terrorism and extremism of any kind.”\textsuperscript{49}

In addition to hurting U.S. national security and our economy, the clash-inspired anti-immigration rhetoric and policies also weaken domestic unity and stability by increasing discrimination, hate crimes, and social strife. The openly anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric of the Trump campaign and his subsequent administration gives license to hatred and bigotry, and it has resulted in a spike in discrimination and hate crimes against actual or perceived members of those groups. FBI hate crimes data, which are incomplete due to underreporting from police departments and victims, reveal that anti-Muslim bias crimes rose by 67 percent in 2015, when the presidential election campaign began in earnest. A Pew analysis of that data indicates that physical assaults against American Muslims in 2015 almost matched such reports in 2001, when attacks against Muslims spiked following the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{50} The Southern Poverty Law Center reported a surge in hate crimes in the week following the election, with anti-immigrant crimes
topping the list.\textsuperscript{51} The number of hate groups also increased in 2016, with anti-Muslim hate groups tripling in number.\textsuperscript{52} Civil society groups have reported a continued wave of anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2016.\textsuperscript{53}

Positive messaging about unity and nondiscrimination from the White House bully pulpit used to be a central tool in combating hatred and discrimination in America. But Trump’s inability to criticize white supremacists, including the KKK and Nazi groups, in clear, direct terms has provided those groups with a sense of comfort and legitimacy.\textsuperscript{54} His attempt to draw moral equivalence between the white supremacist groups and the counterprotesters in the aftermath of the Charlottesville terror attack encapsulates the warped nature of his worldview.

Lives have been lost amidst this wave of hate crimes. In Portland, three men were attacked, two fatally, when they intervened to stop a hate crime targeting a young Muslim woman and her friend. In February, two Indian-Americans in Kansas were shot, one fatally, for being perceived as Middle Eastern. A Sikh man in Washington was similarly shot earlier this year. Dozens of American mosques have been vandalized over the past year, with an average of nine mosques attacked each month.\textsuperscript{55} The clash ideology sets up an us-versus-them binary, which serves as a means to dehumanize the “other” and justify suspicion, discrimination, and violence. Domestic tranquility is among the very real casualties of this culture war that has now become governing doctrine in the White House.

\textbf{Mirror, Mirror …: It’s Not a Partisan Disease}

The Trump administration and many political conservatives are blatant in their embrace of this dangerous worldview, or at least aspects of it. The Wall Street Journal editorial board, for example, raved that Trump’s Warsaw remarks “offered the core of what could become a governing philosophy … a determined and affirmative defense of the Western tradition.”\textsuperscript{56} But the biases of this ideology can afflict people from any political party. Many so-called liberals harbor bigoted views about Islam and Muslims, believing Muslims to be culturally incompatible with “the West” and supporting policies that would limit the numbers of Muslims entering Europe and the United States. Comedian and television personality Bill Maher, whose views on Islam mirror those of Steve Bannon, is a vocal example of this type of liberal anti-Muslim bigotry.\textsuperscript{57}

There are many issues in which Islam and Muslims somehow bring out the illiberal in normally liberal people and societies. Some who normally would support equal rights for women take pause when it comes to a woman’s right to wear a headscarf or a burkini, as if a more conservative choice of dress is somehow anyone’s business other than the woman who chooses to wear it. Some on the left view Muslims as being inherently prone to anti-Semitism and suspect on
issues related to Israel. For example, such views may have played a role in the 2017 contest for the Chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), which featured an anti-Muslim smear campaign against Representative Keith Ellison, who was once the front-runner for the position but now holds the DNC Vice Chairmanship. Democrats are no less likely than Republicans to describe conflict and instability in the Middle East as being a product of centuries-long divisions rooted in religion, rather than disputes that are more readily explained by contemporary political and economic factors. Even President Obama, who is the ideological polar opposite of President Trump on foreign policy, slipped into such thinking in his 2016 State of the Union address when he said, “The Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back millennia.” Left-leaning European leaders are not immune either – French Prime Minister Emmanuel Macron blamed development challenges in Africa (with no qualification for a particular country) on “civilizational” problems.

One of the best recent examples of left-liberal civilizational supremacist thinking can be found in a Foreign Affairs article entitled “The Fusion of Civilizations,” which was co-authored by Kishore Mahbubani and Lawrence Summers, a veteran of the Clinton and Obama administrations. While seemingly meant to reject Huntington’s clash-of-civilizations framework, the authors unwittingly reinforce the very divisions asserted by the clash theory. They accept the premise of separate civilizations, and argue that rather than clashing along these cultural lines, the world has succumbed to the West’s superior civilization due to the “injection of Western DNA into other civilizations.” They praise the West for promoting “pragmatic problem-solving cultures” globally – as if problem-solving were a uniquely Western concept. They credit the West for other societies around the globe wanting education for their children, economic prosperity, and living “productive lives as members of stable, peaceful communities” – implying that only Westerners would dare harbor such aspirations.

Mahbubani and Summers acclaim the West for having replaced “superstition” with “reason” and science – as if science and rationality were unique to Western thought. The fact that President Trump purposefully obfuscates the truth and denies human-influenced climate change in the face of overwhelming scientific and global consensus makes this assertion rather ironic. They cite vaccines as an example of the triumph of “Western science and technology,” ignoring the Ottoman and North African origins of inoculation practices. (And now President

Democrats are no less likely to describe instability in the Middle East as being rooted in religion.
Trump gives a platform to the anti-vaccine movement, another depressingly ironic development.) They cite China’s development as “the ultimate triumph of the West,” appropriating Chinese advances as Western despite China’s distinct economic model. They champion the post-World War II multilateral architecture, but ignore the “Western” origins of World War II itself, including the horrors of Nazism, eugenics, the Holocaust, colonialism, the use of nuclear weapons, and over 80 million deaths attributed to that war globally. And, when it comes to crediting other civilizations for enhancing Western society, the best example they come up with is cuisine, an embarrassingly minute acknowledgment of the myriad advances from around the world that have enriched our lives.

Civilizational hubris crosses party lines. The pernicious influence of such thinking has real policy impact and must be addressed. The Trump administration’s open embrace of this perilous ideology provides a real opportunity for open public discourse and corrective reflection on the dangers of this flawed foreign policy doctrine.

How to Deal with It

The first step in correcting the bias resulting from the clash framework is to expose it to public scrutiny. A fuller understanding of the ideological filter in use in the White House can help shape the public discourse around foreign policy, allowing the public, analysts, and lawmakers to better assess the shortcomings of the administration’s policies and argue for better alternatives. Exposure is critical in removing the civilizational stain from policymaking lenses.

Second, the deep flaws and dangers of the clash framework must be widely disseminated so that the public understands the issues at stake. It should be shocking for people to learn that the White House and ISIS share a similar worldview. It should be unsettling to know that the White House views war against China as inevitable. It should be concerning to understand the underlying racial demographic project at work in the Trump administration’s immigration policies. It should cause outrage that the president ignores the number one source of terrorism in America: right-wing terrorism. Public discourse around international relations theory has withered to a facile dichotomy between realism and idealism, a binary that masks consequential differences in foreign policy doctrine. That type of public education is difficult, but not impossible, in our current polarized environment.
The third step in challenging the clash worldview is to put forward a more reality-based framework for understanding the role of culture and religion in global affairs. There is no doubt that culture and religion play a role in international relations, but asserting them to be the most important structural elements in global affairs is mistaken. Instead, culture and religion should be seen as part of the backdrop within which political actors operate, the social forces relevant to understanding various national and regional challenges and dynamics, and the rhetorical tools that various actors often employ. Religious actors should be engaged and treated just like any other civil society actors.

Beyond this, the fallacious concept of separate, distinct, monolithic civilizations must be put to rest. A more accurate reflection of reality is to acknowledge our shared global civilization, one that has been built by philosophical, scientific, artistic, and technological advances over time from various parts of the world, and one that encompasses a broad diversity of cultures, religions, and imagined communities. In line with this recognition, it would be ideal to reform existing international efforts – like the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) – to ensure that they do not implicitly accept the notion of separate and distinct civilizations. Dropping the “s” at the very end of the UNAOC may seem like a small change, but symbolically it would help reinforce the notion that we are all part of a shared, global civilization.

Such an embrace of our global civilization makes collaboration on shared challenges much easier. It makes promotion of human rights globally more effective because we can credibly acknowledge the global acceptance of human rights as a baseline international standard to which all nations are held. Notions of cultural relativism hold more sway when you accept differences at a level as fundamental as “civilization.” A shared civilizational framework also mitigates efforts to dismiss reformers in various societies as mere agents of the West. This allows more space for democracy advocates and civil society to operate. Conflict resolution and counter-sectarian efforts also improve when the notion of immutable cultural or religious blocks is rejected.

Counterterrorism efforts are enhanced when we operate on the basis of shared values and demonstrably reject the notion of the “West” being at war with Islam. We can recognize that terrorists, including right-wing terrorists, are the enemy of all societies, and that groups like ISIS are first and foremost at war with Muslim communities. President Trump acknowledged that reality in his Saudi remarks, but his administration’s articulated ideology and actual policies are in sharp contrast to those words, an indication that he only shifted rhetoric, not policy or worldview, in that speech. Indeed, his Warsaw remarks confirmed that the Riyadh rhetoric was a semantic aberration from his default ideology, as did his continued support for the Muslim ban and biased tweets on terrorist incidents.
With Trump’s perilous adoption of the clash of civilizations framework, the administration risks exacerbating the terrorist threat rather than mitigating it. We also risk endangering our allies, several of which are on the front lines of counterterrorism operations. Many of our closest allies are Muslim-majority nations, including two NATO allies (Turkey and Albania) and eight of America’s sixteen major non-NATO allies (Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, and Tunisia). Several Muslim-majority governments are among our most important counterterrorism partners, and we must continue to partner with rather than alienate and endanger them.

**Conclusion**

Embracing the “clash of civilizations” framework is dangerous. It is an erroneous worldview that skews decision making, weakens the universality of human rights, and breeds division and conflict. Policies driven by that ideology reinforce terrorist propaganda, drive discrimination domestically, and undermine U.S. national security. This ideology and its associated biases, which have adherents across the political spectrum, can and must be exposed. In so doing, we are more likely to collectively move beyond that divisive construct and adopt a more realistic understanding of the shared roots of our global civilization. Recognizing that reality would be the first step to enable a more effective, collective approach to addressing our shared global challenges.

**Notes**


44. Emily Bazelon, “Department of Justification.”


