

# Culture Clash

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*Personal Values are Shaping Our Times*



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In his provocative and highly influential 1993 essay “The Clash of Civilizations?,” Samuel J. Huntington, author of several important textbooks, advisor to President Johnson, and a professor emeritus in political science at Harvard, argued that in the future the fundamental source of international conflict

will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.

In developing his thesis, Huntington repeatedly referred to the gulf between Western and Islamic cultures.

Within political science circles, Huntington's thesis, which appeared in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs* and was expanded into a book in 1996, became quite controversial. Many questioned Huntington's penchant for vast generalizations and found his arguments lacking in nuance.

However, in the wake of September 11, Huntington's essay began enjoying a new, popular vogue. Soon afterward, Edward Said, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University and prominent observer of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and one of Huntington's chief detractors, issued a rebuttal. Writing in the October 22, 2001, issue of *The Nation* ("A Clash of Ignorance"), Said asserted:

How finally inadequate are the labels, generalizations and cultural assertions. At some level, for instance, primitive passions and sophisticated know-how converge in ways that give the lie to a fortified boundary not only between 'West' and 'Islam' but also between past and present, us and them, to say nothing of the very concepts of identity and nationality about which there is unending disagreement and debate.

The "clash of civilizations" thesis, he continued, "is a gimmick like 'The War of the Worlds,' better for reinforcing defensive self-pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time."

So do clearly delineated "civilizations" exist or not? If they do, are they really in conflict with one another? And what light can be shed on the way Western and Islamic societies view one another through the prism of this debate?

At RoperASW, we conduct an annual worldwide survey called Roper Reports Worldwide, which comprises 30,000 in-person interviews, 1,000 in each of 30 countries across five continents. Though primarily designed for clients

In one series of questions, respondents were asked how close they felt to the cultures and ways of life of various countries—very close, somewhat close, somewhat distant, or very distant. All respondents were asked to

"Islamic presence in the United States has done little to foster a feeling among the larger population of closeness to this cultural group."

who wish to discover cultural commonalities in very different parts of the world for commercial purposes, Roper Reports Worldwide also reveals the many profound differences that exist among countries, cultures, and even, perhaps, "civilizations."

Though hardly able to resolve the "clash of civilizations" argument, data from the 1998 Roper Reports Worldwide study offer an empirical, methodologically consistent means of assessing some of the differences that exist between the United States and Saudi Arabia—societies that are central to though not perfectly representative of their "civilizations"—with regard to two cornerstones of Huntington's thesis: cultural kinship and personal values.

According to Huntington, people of different ethnic backgrounds and religions are likely to see their relationships with other groups in terms of "us" versus "them." In the post-Cold War world, he says, "civilization commonality... is replacing political ideology and traditional balance of power considerations as the principal basis for cooperation and coalitions."

What sort of light does Roper Reports Worldwide shed on this notion?

rate their own countries, plus the US, the UK, and a fourth, randomly selected country.

Virtually all Americans (93%) felt very or somewhat close to the culture and way of life of the United States. Moreover, fewer than half felt as close to any other specific culture, suggesting that even a country as ethnically diverse as America views the world in an "us" and "them" fashion.

On the face of them, these results might be seen as expected, even obvious. And,

#### Methodological Note

Fieldwork for Roper Reports Worldwide is conducted annually in November and December (with fieldwork occasionally starting in October or continuing into January in some markets).

The samples of 1,000 are designed to represent the national population ages 13 to 65 in countries where national samples are drawn and the national urban population ages 13 to 65 where urban samples are drawn. In Saudi Arabia, all interviews are conducted in the Jeddah, Riyadh, Dammam/Al Khobar metropolitan areas.

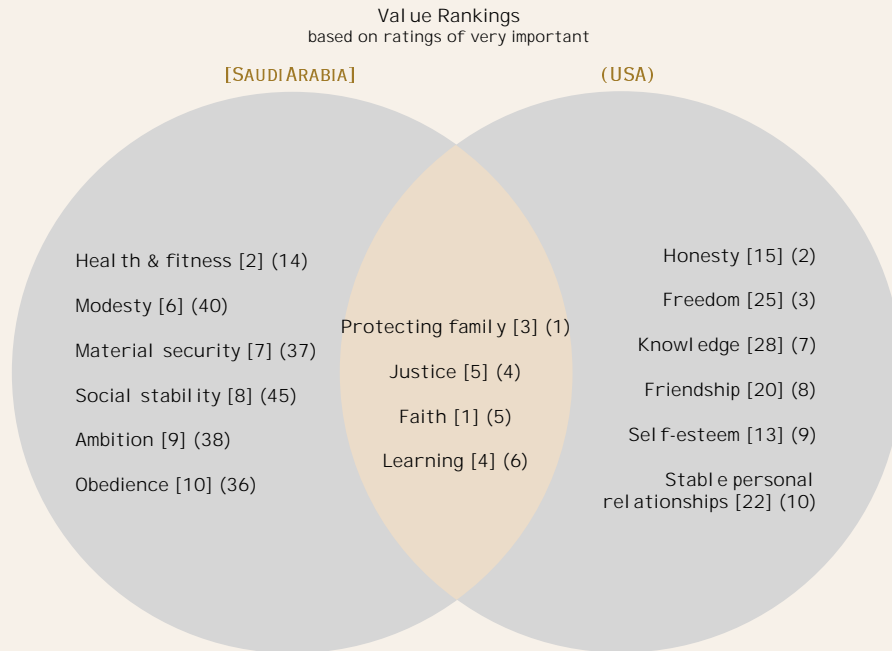
All interviews are conducted face-to-face at respondents' homes, except in Saudi Arabia where, since it is customary to interview males outside the home, many male respondents are interviewed at their places of work. Due to cultural restraints—Saudi females are reluctant to meet strangers at home—a snowballing technique through referrals is followed to gain home-interviewing access to female respondents.

Figure 1

## Shared—and Unshared—Values

### Question:

Here are some cards with some different values on them. I would like you to divide these cards into... piles containing values that are very important to you... somewhat important to you..., [and] not at all important to you as guiding principles in your life. Finally, in the fourth pile, put the cards containing values that are opposed to your values.



Note: Asked of respondents in the United States and Saudi Arabia  
Source: Surveys by RoperASW, October 1998-January 1999.

indeed, the pattern of cultural kinship found in the US was similar to that of almost every other country: strong majorities felt close to their own culture, while *no* majorities felt close to other cultures.

But when we compare ratings of the closeness people in all the countries surveyed felt to American and their own cultures, we see significant differences in degree. In Japan, for instance, only 82% of respondents felt very or somewhat close to their own culture, and in Brazil the figure was 80%.

Although the US was relatively open to other cultures compared to other countries, for Americans the lack of kinship was particularly pronounced with regard to Arab culture—very few (4%) felt very or somewhat close to Arab culture. Indeed, from no other

culture in the survey were Americans more likely to feel distant, suggesting that Islamic presence in the United States has done little to foster a feeling among the larger population of closeness to this cultural group, and arguing against Said's assertion that "Islam is no longer on the fringes of the West but at its center."

Like Americans, Saudis were also nearly unanimous in their feeling of kinship toward their own culture (98% felt very or somewhat close to "Arab culture"), and few (7%) felt as close to American culture. Fewer still felt close to British, European, Hindu, Japanese, Latin American, Chinese or Russian culture, indicating that Saudis, even more than Americans, view themselves as part of a culture that has little in common with the rest of the world.

Not only were citizens of the United States and Saudi Arabia especially likely to feel close to their respective cultures, but, of all countries surveyed, Saudis felt most distant from the American way of life.

These findings do not, of course, definitively prove Huntington's thesis of Western and Islamic civilizations in conflict. But they do demonstrate that within the US and Saudi Arabia there exists close kinship to the local culture and a great deal of perceived distance from each other, lending at least some empirical support to Huntington's theory of opposing "civilizations."

Huntington also argues that civilizations are defined in large part by their collective personal values. "The people of different civilizations," he says,

have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy.

Central to the Roper Reports Worldwide survey instrument is an exercise in which respondents are asked to rate the importance of 57 values as "guiding principles" in their lives. When we compare the top ten values in each country, we observe that Americans and Saudis share four—protecting the family, justice, faith, and learning (see Figure 1).

But on other values, the two countries clearly diverge. Whereas Americans rank freedom as a top ten value, Saudis do not. Instead, Saudis put obedience in their top ten. And whereas Americans put self-esteem in their top ten, Saudis put modesty in theirs. And, perhaps contrary to conventional wisdom, Americans put particular value

important personal values. In other words, are the values systems of individuals and their countries “in sync?”

In the United States, 84% of the values respondents said were “very important” to them personally were ascribed to the country in general, indicating a great deal of consonance be-

lower than in the United States. While not the most notable level of “alienation” from one’s own culture in the world, it was still a significant gap.

Furthermore, as Figure 2 also shows, compared to the rest of the world, Saudis indicated they had the least in common with the United States when it came to personal values, ascribing only 42% of the values very important to them to be very important to Americans as well.

Where were the differences? Interestingly, stereotypes commonly attributed to each country were corroborated by the citizens of those countries. For example, Americans were far more likely than Saudis to ascribe “typically American” values such as freedom, individuality, and self-reliance to the United States.

By contrast, Saudis, far more than Americans, ascribed to their country values we often attribute to Islamic societies—faith, modesty, obedience, and tradition. These findings again point to a major culture gap, both real and perceived, between the two cultures and peoples.

On balance, our findings suggest that Huntington is on to something in several important respects. First, the US and Saudi Arabia feel close to their own cultures and distant from each other’s, supporting his thesis of “us” versus “them” cultural kinship. Second, while there are some commonalities, Americans and Saudis place importance on a very different set of personal values, indicating that cultural differences are real, not just perceived.

And finally, what countries and cultures seem to stand for is very different depending upon where you live, and whom you are judging. ●

Figure 2

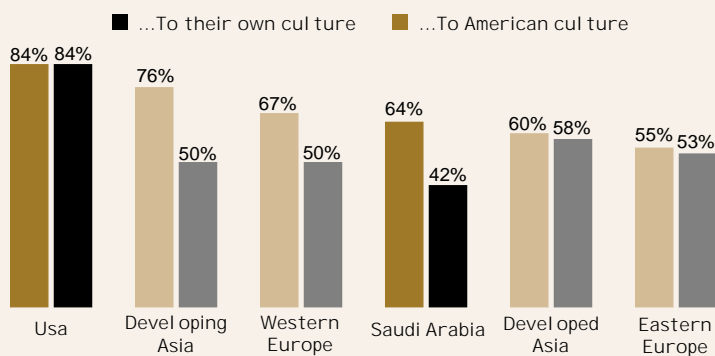
## Cultural Commonalities Vary in Degree

### Questions:

Here are some cards with some different values on them. I would like you to divide these cards into... piles containing values that are very important to you... somewhat important to you..., [and] not at all important to you as guiding principles in your life. Finally, in the fourth pile, put the cards containing values that are opposed to your values.

I would like you to think about the different national cultures listed on this card and the values that are very or extremely important for you. Which of these cultures would you say also believes that [value] is just as important as it is for you?

PERCENT OF VALUES VERY IMPORTANT TO RESPONDENTS THAT THEY ALSO SAY ARE VERY IMPORTANT...



Note: Multiple responses were allowed

Source: Surveys by RoperASW, October 1998-January 1999.

on friendship and stable personal relationships, whereas Saudis are more likely to value ambition and material security. Such disparities indicate that the peoples of the US and Saudi Arabia do have fundamentally different personal values, which may explain, in part, the lack of felt kinship between the two countries.

We also asked people whether they thought their own cultures share their own most

tween personal and national value structures in America (see Figure 2). In fact, this figure was by far the highest in the world, showing that American respondents felt they lived in a country where almost all of their values were shared by their fellow citizens—a clear sign of an open, tolerant society.

In Saudi Arabia, the level of consonance between personal values and ascribed national values (64%) was far