

# The Cultural Dimensions of Conflicts from 1945 to 2007

## Introduction and Summary

### | Study

Culture and Conflict in Global Perspective summarizes a much more comprehensive study carried out on behalf of the Bertelsmann Stiftung by Aurel Croissant, Uwe Wagschal, et al in 2008 – the European Union’s Year of Intercultural Dialogue – at the University of Heidelberg’s Institute for Political Science. The study was published by Nomos Verlag under the title “Kulturelle Konflikte seit 1945” (Cultural Conflicts Since 1945).

The topic of culture and conflict has been the subject of discussion and controversy over the last two decades among both specialists and the public. A key element in the discourse, at least for a certain period, was the warning issued by Samuel Huntington in 1993 of a coming “clash of civilizations.” While other researchers spoke of the “end of history” following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Fukuyama 1992), Huntington was convinced that culture would serve as the driver of future international tensions. Above all, he viewed the lines of conflict between the Western and Islamic worlds as of critical importance.

More than 15 years later, this thesis has been examined numerous times by social scientists, who almost unanimously agree that the clash of civilizations as originally foreseen by Huntington is not to be discerned, neither on the international level nor within individual nation-states.

At the same time, however, it is clear that the media continue to make use of his model and that countries designated by Huntington as

key representatives of Western and Islamic culture – the United States, Afghanistan, Iraq – have been involved in the major international conflicts that have taken place after 1990. Moreover, following publication of cartoons in Denmark depicting Mohammed, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets in 2006, engaging in sometimes violent demonstrations against what was perceived as an insult to Islam. While less vociferous, similar reactions occurred following a speech given by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2006 at the University of Regensburg.

Even more frequently than on the international or transnational levels, examples of conflicts in which opposing values or identities seem to play a key role can be found within nation-states. Such “cultural” conflicts – sometimes imprecisely referred to as “ethnic,” “ethno-religious” or “ethno-national” – are hardly new and do not occur exclusively in “Islamic” nations or in countries with significant Muslim populations. Religion, language and varying interpretations of “historical identity” have become the subject of strife in many countries or regions home to a diversity of cultural influences – strife that, in many cases, turns violent. Well-known examples include the religious conflict in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics, the linguistic conflict in Canada’s French-speaking province of Québec, the historicity conflict (i.e. one that focuses on heritage or the history of the conflict itself) between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and the

linguistic and religious conflict between Tamil and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.

Social-scientific literature thus offers a wealth of analysis on how such conflicts arise and unfold, and the consequences that result. Against this background, the current study provides new empirical input for examining the significance of culture, focusing on the role cultural factors play in global conflicts.

Following in-depth examination of the approaches used in social-scientific research, the study defines cultural conflicts as those domestic, international or transnational political conflicts in which the participating actors make use of language, religion and/or historical contexts (hereafter referred to as “historicity”) as a basis for the conflict.

It must be emphasized that cultural conflicts are defined here by the issues involved in the conflict and not, as is often the case, by the underlying “causes.” Thus, cultural conflicts as seen here do not necessarily arise from cultural differences (such as language or religion) between social groups, while they can have socioeconomic or political roots.

Cultural conflicts are political conflicts in which culture is the conflict issue. Neither the causes nor the participating actors’ motives thus serve to define a conflict as “cultural”; such a definition ensues, instead, based on the *issues* that the actors reference over the course of the conflict through their statements and actions, and the way in which those statements and actions are conceived. Cultural factors such as religious or “ethnic” differences thus need not serve as the cause of the conflict .

Conceptualizing cultural conflicts and viewing culture as a social phenomenon in light of the three factors of language, religion and historicity (i.e. relating to the heritage and history of the conflict itself) allows cultural clashes to be differentiated from other types of non-cultural conflict. In addition, the use of these three factors allows cultural conflicts themselves to be categorized into different types. As an analytical tool, such differentiation has proven extremely practical for examining the conflicts taking place all around the globe.

The study was carried out to address three key points. First, it was meant to provide a theoretically well-founded method for identifying and defining cultural conflicts and for differentiating them from other types of conflict.

Second, it was meant to provide an assessment of conflicts across the globe between the years 1945 and 2007. The empiric basis for this assessment was provided by the CONIS (Conflict Information System) database developed by the Institute for Political Science at the University of Heidelberg, which offers both a qualitative conflict definition and a quantitative analysis of global events. Given its detailed definitions, the extensive scope of its data and its ranking of conflict into different levels of intensity – from non-violent disagreements to full-fledged warfare – the database is exceptionally well-suited to the research at hand.

Third, the study assessed whether or to what extent cultural factors can explain the appearance and progression of both political disputes in general and cultural conflicts in particular, a discussion that implicitly requires a shift in perspective. While the descriptive-empirical approach to cultural conflicts inquires into their real-world forms, frequencies and distributions, the cultural

approach focuses on culture as one of numerous possible causes of conflict.

Findings from the empirical-descriptive analysis – i.e. those relating to the first two points above – lead to the following five conclusions:

- Cultural conflicts – i.e. those conflicts in which culture is an issue – make up a considerable share of the conflicts taking place around the globe. Since the mid-1980s, the total number of cultural conflicts (i.e. the sum of all forms of cultural conflict around the globe) has surpassed the number of non-cultural conflicts. In 2007, the number of cultural conflicts reached a historic high.
- Cultural conflicts are overwhelmingly a domestic phenomenon, with more than four out of five taking place within national borders. Cultural strife between countries – the form representing the “clash of civilizations” that Huntington pointedly described as the problem defining international relations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is, from a quantitative standpoint, the exception rather than the rule.
- Cultural conflicts occur both within individual countries and between them, above all in the form of religious and historicity conflicts. The end of the Cold War marks a caesura in the development of cultural conflicts. This is particularly true for religious and historicity conflicts on the domestic level, in that they have increased considerably in number since the collapse of the Eastern bloc.

- On both the domestic and international level, cultural conflicts are particularly prone to violence. While the number of non-cultural conflicts decreases as the level of violence rises, exactly the opposite is true for cultural conflicts: the greater the level of violence, the greater the number of cultural conflicts.
- The findings relating to global conflicts must be differentiated based on geography. Domestic conflicts in particular exhibit considerable differences across regions. Religious conflicts, for example, are typical of the Near and Middle East. Among cultural conflicts in Asia, historicity disputes tend to dominate, while linguistic conflicts are more prevalent in Europe. In North and South America (referred to in the study as “America”), conflicts clearly tend to be non-cultural in nature. Only Africa lacks a dominant paradigm.

In terms of the third point – the significance of culture in explaining the occurrence of conflict – the study provides five main findings:

- First and foremost, cultural structures are critical factors explaining the occurrence of conflict – for both cultural *and* non-cultural disputes. In its main finding, the study’s analysis shows that as cultural fragmentation increases within a society, in particular the degree of linguistic fragmentation, the probability rises of both domestic cultural conflicts and interstate disputes.
- In terms of which cultural variable goes furthest in explaining conflict, the study shows that language is of key

significance and is more important than religious fragmentation. A higher level of linguistic fragmentation significantly increases the probability of conflict both within and between states.

- Cultural factors, however, are not “master variables” capable of explaining conflict on their own. Since conflicts are usually of a complex nature, several variables can influence them. Non-cultural factors can often play a more significant role than cultural ones, in particular the “youth bulge,” i.e. when young men make up a relatively large share of a given population.
- Cultural conflicts can reinforce each other, often in conjunction with non-cultural influences. The interaction of cultural fragmentation and the youth bulge, for example, correlates strongly to the occurrence of domestic conflicts.
- The final finding addresses the thesis often expressed in the literature that sees a linear relationship between religious fragmentation and the chances that conflict will ensue, i.e. that a society is more likely to experience conflict the more heterogeneous its religious structures are. The current study, however, suggests a non-linear relationship between religious diversity and conflict, since its findings show that countries that are particularly fragmented or particularly homogenous tend to be less affected by conflict than those with a moderate level of religious fragmentation.

The introductory chapters explain the study’s theoretical and definitional assumptions. In a second step, an empirical topography of how cultural conflict manifests is described and then illustrated using several case studies. Exemplary of the different conflict types, four cases are discussed in greater detail: the historicity conflict in Aceh, Indonesia; the linguistic conflict in Belgium; the religious conflict in Nigeria; and, as an example of transnational cultural disagreements, the conflict resulting from the depiction of Mohammed in Danish cartoons. Subsequently, the causes of cultural conflict are analyzed, and the significance of specific cultural factors is examined. In conclusion, the study’s findings are discussed in light of their practical implications on a political level.

## Summary conclusion

The study examines cultural conflicts from an empirical standpoint, using a comprehensive dataset to shed light on the often highly emotionalized debate surrounding cultural coexistence. The findings show that cultural conflicts did not commence with the demise of the Cold War, but instead played a significant role during the entire period under observation (1945 – 2007). While the frequency of cultural conflicts did increase during this period, this does not necessarily imply that the globe’s cultures are having greater difficulty coexisting.

Over the last sixty years, for example, technological progress, greater opportunities for travel and growing prosperity have made it increasingly possible for the globe’s cultures to come into contact, also increasing the risk that intolerance and misunderstandings will lead to violence. Consequently, in light of the countless opportunities for intercultural

contact and communication and the resulting potential for strife, the number of violent conflicts that have actually taken place can be considered miniscule instead.

It goes without saying that the current study cannot answer all questions relating to the topic. It does show, however, that certain factors such as a history of cultural coexistence often lead to escalation and that certain related circumstances can have a positive or negative effect. More research will be needed, however, to determine how efforts to instrumentalize and promote conflict are impacted by intercultural dialogue designed to promote peace. Further research is also needed to show where, in a constantly changing world, flashpoints resulting from cultural conflicts are to be found and whether the potential for conflict is increasing.

One point must be kept in mind: The findings show that cultural conflicts do not automatically lead to violence, meaning that no specific sociocultural configuration must necessarily result in conflict or violence. Thus, the study's core message is that culturally influenced conflicts must be examined in a differentiated manner to ascertain how factors such as religion might escalate or defuse them – since that is the only way to prevent them from being instrumentalized for political purposes. The best means for achieving this is intercultural dialogue combined with improved sociopolitical conditions. One's cultural background might be a given, as Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, once observed, but cultural conflicts are not.

Guetersloh, September 2009