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## Global politics

# Is the Arab Spring a ‘clash of civilisations’?

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You will find this article and accompanying activities useful if you are studying the Edexcel A2 global politics option.

## A ‘clash of civilisations’

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US invasions and occupation of Afghanistan and then Iraq, it appeared that Samuel Huntington — the Harvard political scientist — had been vindicated in his warnings about the ‘clash of civilisations as the principal conflicts of global politics’. The clash was between an increasingly radicalised and aggressive form of Islamic extremism and Western democracy. This narrative proved to be overblown and ultimately the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis has been discarded. However, a decade on, the fast-paced events of the Arab Spring have once again revived the question as to whether we are witnessing a ‘clash of civilisations’?

## Does the Arab Spring reflect a ‘clash of civilisations’?

On the face of it, the Arab Spring appeared to be heading into ‘clash of civilisations’ territory as Western-backed dictators fell like nine pins, and the revolts appeared to be pro-Islamic, anti-Western and anti-liberal. Recently, a violent string of protests across the middle east against a US-made film, which was held to denigrate the prophet Mohamed, culminated in a deadly arson attack that killed the US ambassador to Libya. Once again, some commentators have framed these events as a clash of cultures and a pivotal moment in ‘Western’ and ‘Islamic’ relations.

However, the evidence suggests that the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis is exaggerated. So in relation to the Arab Spring, it is more helpful to see it as a clash between people and governments *within* the Arab world, caused in large part by incompetent governance and an inability to listen to what the people want. Contrary to the ‘clash’ argument, the Arab Spring is not a clash between Islamic radicalism and the West.

Looking closely at the region reveals that each upheaval has its specific characteristics, each country its own history and ethnic mix. In Bahrain, for example, the Arab Spring has manifested itself in an explosion of long-held tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims. There is some interesting polling that popular concerns about democracy in Bahrain have decreased since the start of the troubles, while concerns about Iran have increased. In Egypt, people simply wanted a change — Mubarak was self-evidently time-expired and the longer the military try to hold on to power (prompted in part by their

large stake in the economy), the lower their popular support becomes. Similar, although more extreme, concerns apply in Libya, exacerbated by the tribal nature of Libyan society (a really big determinant). It's also instructive to note what is happening in Tunisia, which seems to be providing a very Arab/North African take on democracy but which seems to be working nonetheless. So in essence, the Arab Spring is not really 'clash of civilisations' territory at all.

## The role of Islam in the Arab Spring

Jane Kinninmont, Chatham House's middle east expert, comments in relation to Tunisia and Egypt that: 'The vague, catch-all term "Islamist" belies the diversity of movements that seek to draw inspiration, values and legitimacy from Islam. There are enormous differences in thinking both between different Islamist groups, and within them. Crucially, this diversity is likely to increase as a result of the new-found political opening in the Arab world'.

Islamist movements did not start the protests that have so far unseated three Arab dictators. The uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia succeeded precisely because they avoided the divisions — of ideology, class and, in Egypt, religion — that have traditionally fractured and weakened opposition movements in the Arab world. Certainly Islamist movements were more successful than any other parties in the recent parliamentary elections in Egypt and Tunisia, prompting some observers to accuse them of 'stealing the revolutions'. The protests that drove political changes in 2011 hoisted slogans with universal appeal — calling for freedom, dignity, social justice — more than they proffered specifically Islamic slogans. They were not Islamist, anti-Islamist or non-Islamist protests — Islamists participated alongside secularists, liberals and leftists and there were striking images of Muslims and Christians guarding each other's prayers in Tahrir Square. Neither Islamist movements nor other existing political parties can claim credit for these youth-led, spontaneously swelling street movements. Thus, what we are seeing is far from the rise of a monolithic civilisational identity, but rather an intra-civilisational splintering over political and economic ideas.

## Conclusion — a clash *within* the Arab world

The Arab Spring is not so much to be seen as a 'clash of civilisations' but rather a power struggle motivated by polarised sectarian differences within Arab countries. Ty McCormick in the *Huffington Post* argues: 'It is clear that a clash within civilisations helps to explain the Arab Spring more than a clash between them'. William McCants writing in the journal, *Foreign Affairs*, also questions the 'clash of civilisations' thesis: 'On 9/11, the global jihadist movement burst into the world's consciousness, but a decade later, thanks in part to the Arab Spring and the killing of Osama bin Laden, it is in crisis. With Western-backed dictators falling, al Qaeda might seem closer than ever to its goal of building Islamic states. But the revolutions have empowered the group's chief rivals instead: Islamist parliamentarians, who are willing to use ballots, not bombs'.

## Activities

(1) Follow on discussion: 'To what extent does the Arab Spring constitute a 'clash of civilisations'?

Given that this topic is in many ways just a footnote to the wider debate over the 'clash of civilisations' thesis, it might be worth asking groups to draw up precise lists of points both for and against this motion.

(2) Arab Spring mini-presentations: allocate members of the class to one of the Arab Spring countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria etc.) and ask them to do a 'one-slide presentation' outlining key events etc. Depending on numbers in the class, other 'one-slide presentations' that could be allocated include looking at the nature of key states such as Iran and Turkey (e.g. the type of states they have) and also recent events, such as the protests which culminated in the killing of the US ambassador to Libya and some of the nastier aspects of the Syrian conflagration.

(3) Have a look at the following timelines of the Arab Spring for reference:

*Guardian* (interactive timeline):

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline)

*Telegraph*:

[www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8839143/Arab-Spring-timeline-of-the-African-and-Middle-East-rebellions.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/8839143/Arab-Spring-timeline-of-the-African-and-Middle-East-rebellions.html)

*Huffington Post*:

[www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/12/16/arab-spring-timeline-\\_n\\_1153909.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/12/16/arab-spring-timeline-_n_1153909.html)

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