Civilizational Politics in International Relations: the Social and Material Construction of the “Muslim world” in American Foreign Policy Practices and Institutions

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The article engages theoretically and empirically with the emerging field of civilizational analysis in international relations (IR). It divides the civilizational turn in IR into four developing research programs: i) ‘civilizational dynamics’; ii) ‘inter-civilizational ethics’; iii) ‘civilizational politics’; and iv) ‘the politics of civilization/s’. The article argues that out of these four research programs, ‘civilizational politics’ appears to be both the least developed and a highly promising one. This research program moves the ongoing debate beyond the current overwhelming focus on whether civilizations exist and matter, or not, in international relations. A ‘civilizational politics’ approach sheds instead much needed light on how emerging forms of civilizational-based thinking are contributing to socially and materially construct civilizations as meaningful entities in world politics by embedding them in new international practices and institutions. The empirical import of a ‘civilizational politics’ research program is offered in an analysis of American foreign policy. The case study explores how in the aftermath of 9/11, the “Muslim world” asserted itself not only as a civilizational strategic frame of reference in the consciousness of American policy-makers, but also as a civilizational organizing principle of American foreign policy practices and institutions.