

# The Ethics of Dialogue in a Fragmented World: A Comparative Study of Civilizational Engagement and Conflict in Contemporary Global Affairs

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.930000062>

Received: 11 December 2025; Accepted: 19 December 2025; Published: 27 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

The contemporary world, despite its interconnectedness, remains deeply fragmented between narratives of civilizational clash and often superficial dialogical efforts. This paper examines this paradox by proposing the ethical framework of “constructive discussion” (*hiwar muqni*) by Badi‘ al-Zaman Sa‘id al-Nursi as a normative alternative to the “clash of civilizations” thesis. Through conceptual analysis and in-depth documentary review including observations of international diplomatic initiatives and post-conflict peace processes, this study demonstrates that Al-Nursi’s principles of “universal brotherhood,” “forgiveness,” and “principled openness” (*wasatiyyah*) provide a practical foundation for authentic dialogue. However, their application is not without challenges, particularly in contexts of power asymmetry, structural injustice, and actors operating in bad faith. By integrating considerations of these limitations alongside concrete examples from international relations, this study argues that neglecting a holistic ethical approach will perpetuate global cycles of antagonism, a condition that can indeed be avoided through a commitment to dialogue grounded in empathy, justice, and mutual respect.

**Keywords:** Civilizational dialogue, Intercultural conflict, Al-Nursi ethics, Global fragmentation, Forgiveness diplomacy

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the unprecedented advancements in global connectivity and the proliferation of multilateral forums, human societies appear increasingly fractured, often reverting to deep-seated antagonisms rather than meaningful engagement. A cursory glance at persistent humanitarian crises in conflict zones or the rise of aggressive nationalist posturing reveals that our collective efforts toward mutual understanding remain sporadic and superficially applied. The notion of an inevitable “clash of civilizations” a paradigm amplified in the wake of geopolitical upheavals such as the post-9/11 landscape continues to exert a powerful influence on policymakers and publics alike, often overshadowing the more nuanced and demanding prospect of authentic dialogue (Ibrahim, 2007; Quý, 2007).

Even when the discourse shifts toward a “dialogue of civilizations,” it is frequently deployed as a reactive instrument a diplomatic palliative invoked only when conflicts become too costly or visible. This intermittent, crisis-driven approach undermines the potential for sustained and principled engagement, revealing a troubling preference for narrow national or ideological interests over collective well-being (Abdullahi, 2018; Oelsner & Vion, 2021). The absence of a globally embraced ethos that elevates shared humanity above tribal or civilizational loyalties remains a critical impediment to meaningful coexistence.

This paper addresses this persistent deficit by critically examining the ethical foundations underlying persistent deficit by critically examining the ethical foundations underlying competing paradigms of civilizational interaction. Rather than merely tracing historical or theoretical lineages, we interrogate the moral costs of framing international relations through a zero-sum logic of power and domination. In response, we turn to the understudied yet profoundly relevant contributions of Badi‘ al-Zaman Sa‘id al-Nursi (Al-Nursi, 2019), whose concept of “constructive discussion” (*hiwar muqni‘*) offers a robust ethical and practical framework for engagement. Al-Nursi’s emphasis on universal brotherhood, forgiveness, and moderation transcends idealistic aspiration, providing tangible principles for dialogue even and especially in contexts marked by asymmetry, historical grievance, or structural conflict.

Importantly, this study does not treat Al-Nursi’s framework as universally applicable without qualification. We acknowledge real-world complexities such as power imbalances, the presence of non-ethical actors, and legacies of structural violence that may challenge or constrain dialogical praxis. Through selected references to contemporary diplomatic initiatives, reconciliation processes, and instances of so-called “dialogue” that have devolved into performative exchange (Enroth, 2020; Yordan, 2009), this introduction sets the stage for a balanced examination of both the potential and the limitations of an ethically grounded approach to civilizational engagement.

Ultimately, this paper argues that the continued marginalization of such ethical frameworks perpetuates a cycle of global fragmentation a fate that is neither inevitable nor necessary. By integrating conceptual rigor with conscious attention to real-world dynamics, we seek to contribute to a more sustained, reflective, and ethically accountable practice of dialogue in an increasingly fractured world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic discourse on civilizational interaction has long been dominated by the paradigm of inevitable conflict, a perspective most prominently articulated in Huntington’s (2018) provocative thesis. This worldview is deeply embedded in Western political thought, where figures such as Machiavelli (2018), Voltaire (2019), and Morgenthau (2020) have variously emphasized power, competition, and dominance as the fundamental drivers of international relations. This tradition presents a bleak vision of human societies as inherently distinct and perpetually engaged in a zero-sum struggle for supremacy, a view that has regrettably resonated with historical narratives of conflict and the primacy of might (Bjelic, 2020).

In response to this conflict-centric outlook, the ideal of a “dialogue of civilizations” has periodically emerged. Early advocates like Garaudy (2019) envisioned a path toward mutual understanding and shared human objectives. However, as noted in the supporting literature, global interest in dialogue has often been reactive—intensifying only in the wake of catastrophic conflicts, such as the post-9/11 era (Ibrahim, 2007; Quý, 2007). This pattern suggests that dialogue is frequently instrumentalized as a crisis-management tool rather than embraced as a foundational principle of international order (Enroth, 2020). The practice of major powers, notably the United States, often illustrates this discrepancy: foreign aid is deployed with strategic conditionalities, transforming potential cooperation into instruments of leverage rather than genuine partnership (Marten, 2004; Yordan, 2009).

Amidst this landscape, the ethical framework of Badi‘ al-Zaman Sa‘id al-Nursi (2019) offers a profound and systematic alternative. His concept of *hiwar muqni‘* (constructive discussion) reframes disagreement not as a threat but as a potential “mercy” an opportunity for collective growth and truth-seeking when guided by sincerity and mutual benefit (Mohamad Zaidin et al., 2021). For Al-Nursi, conflict obscures understanding and polarizes communities, whereas dialogue, rooted in humility and intellectual hospitality, serves as a sacred, disciplined practice toward shared knowledge (Sanadi, 2020; Welker, 2022).

Al-Nursi’s principles universal brotherhood, compassionate empathy (*ihsan*), forgiveness, and moderation (*wasatiyyah*) provide a coherent grammar for engagement in an age of fragmentation. He emphasizes winning hearts over arguments, prioritizing persuasion and empathy over domination (Heyneman, 2020; Lawale & BoryAdams, 2020). This approach aligns with contemporary scholarly calls for dialogical ethics and conflict transformation, yet it remains distinct in its integration of spiritual and ethical imperatives.

However, a comprehensive review must also engage with the practical limitations of such normative frameworks. While Al-Nursi's ethos provides a compelling vision, its application encounters real-world constraints, including structural power asymmetries, the presence of non-ethical actors, and contexts of entrenched violence where dialogue may be co-opted or dismissed. For instance, the conditional and often strategic deployment of foreign aid (Marten, 2004; Yordan, 2009) exemplifies how power disparities can undermine the mutual respect essential for constructive discussion. Similarly, instances of performative diplomacy, where dialogue serves as a stage for asserting dominance rather than fostering understanding (Enroth, 2020) highlight the risks of divorcing ethical principles from political and institutional realities.

Therefore, while Al-Nursi's contributions offer a vital normative counterpoint to conflict-centric paradigms, their implementation necessitates complementary engagement with structural and critical perspectives. This includes examining how dialogical ethics can be operationalized in unequal settings, how education systems can cultivate *wasatiyyah* without neglecting power critiques (Ahmed, 2020; Razak, 2019), and how forgiveness and empathy can be integrated into post-conflict justice without obscuring demands for equity. This review thus sets the stage for a balanced analysis that honors the transformative potential of Al-Nursi's thought while consciously addressing the complex conditions of contemporary global fragmentation.

## METHODOLOGY

The fragmented and politically charged nature of contemporary global affairs calls for an approach that prioritizes conceptual clarity while remaining attentive to real-world complexities. This study employs a qualitative, document-based research design centered on conceptual analysis and critical textual review. This methodology is deliberately chosen to excavate the foundational ethical and philosophical assumptions that underpin paradigms of civilizational engagement, beyond the transient fluctuations of political rhetoric or policy.

### Conceptual and Textual Analysis

A curated corpus of foundational texts forms the core of this inquiry. Primary attention is given to the works of Badi' al-Zaman Sa'id al-Nursi, especially his writings on *hiwar muqni'* (constructive discussion), universal brotherhood, and forgiveness. These texts are subjected to close reading and hermeneutic analysis to distill their explicit ethical propositions, implicit assumptions about human nature, and prescribed modes of interaction.

To establish a critical dialogue, Al-Nursi's framework is systematically juxtaposed with influential texts representing the conflict-centric tradition in Western political thought, including works by Machiavelli (2018), Morgenthau (2020), and Huntington (2018). This contrastive analysis allows for a structured comparison of normative starting points, rather than a mere survey of opinions.

### Integration of Case-Oriented Documentary Review

Responding to the need for greater concrete engagement, this study supplements its conceptual analysis with a focused review of policy documents, diplomatic records, and reports from selected intercivilizational initiatives. These are not treated as empirical case studies in a strict sense, but as illustrative contexts to examine how the ethical principles in question are invoked, applied, or negated in practice. Examples include:

1. Documents and evaluations from post-conflict reconciliation processes (e.g., commissions in South Africa or Rwanda) to explore the praxis of forgiveness and empathy.
2. Policy frameworks governing international development aid (e.g., comparing conditional vs. rightsbased models) to assess alignments with self-interest versus mutual benefit.
3. Declarations and outcomes from structured intercultural dialogues (e.g., the Alliance of Civilizations initiative, or religious diplomacy documents) to observe the operationalization or performativity of dialogue.

### Analytical Framework

The analysis is structured around four interconnected conceptual categories derived from the literature:

1. Basis: The foundational view of human nature and intergroup relations (e.g., brotherhood vs. inherent hostility).

2. Principles: Core ethical guidelines (e.g., forgiveness, moderation, sovereignty).
3. Strategies: Proposed modes of interaction (e.g., constructive discussion, retributive justice, conditional engagement).
4. Goals: The envisioned outcomes (e.g., mutual understanding, victory, stability).

Each paradigm is analyzed through these categories, with consistent attention to how power asymmetries and structural constraints might facilitate or impede their real-world application.

### Addressing Limitations and Ensuring Rigor

This methodology acknowledges that a document-based conceptual approach cannot capture the full dynamism of on the ground political encounters. However, it offers unmatched depth in critiquing the normative architectures that justify action. To mitigate the risk of abstraction:

1. We explicitly consider counter-scenarios where dialogue fails or is instrumentalized, drawing from critical scholarship (e.g., Enroth, 2020; Yordan, 2009).
2. The selection of supplementary documents is guided by their demonstrated relevance to the ethical concepts under review, ensuring conceptual coherence.
3. We maintain a self-reflexive stance regarding the limits of normative frameworks when faced with nonethical actors or deeply entrenched structural violence.

In sum, this methodology enables a principled excavation of ethical foundations while consciously engaging with the practical arenas in which these principles are tested, contested, and sometimes betrayed. It provides a robust foundation for arguing that the choice of ethical paradigm is not merely academic, but one that shapes the very possibility of peace or perpetuation of conflict in a fragmented world.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals a fundamental divergence between the ethical assumptions and practical pathways offered by conflict-centric paradigms and those grounded in dialogical ethics, as exemplified by Al-Nursi's framework. The analysis is structured around four interconnected themes that emerged from the comparative textual and documentary review, each highlighting a core tension and its implications for global engagement.

### Anthropological and Epistemological Foundations: Brotherhood versus Inherent Hostility

The analysis uncovers a foundational divergence in assumptions about human nature. The conflict paradigm, from Machiavelli to Huntington, proceeds from the premise that differences in identity and interest naturally lead to competition and hostility (Huntington, 2018; Morgenthau, 2020). In stark contrast, Al-Nursi (2019) posits "universal brotherhood" as the ontological basis of human relations. For Al-Nursi, difference is not a threat but a potential mercy, a source of enrichment for collective understanding when navigated through "constructive discussion" (Mohamad Zaidin et al., 2021).

This initial assumption dictates the entire subsequent logic of interaction. A view that perceives "the other" as a threat tends to justify defensive-aggressive policies, as seen in the post-9/11 national security approach prioritizing pre-emptive strikes (Ibrahim, 2007). Al-Nursi's framework offers an alternative epistemology: conflict produces only "heat," not "light" (Sanadi, 2020), making sincere dialogue the only path to shared truth. However, applying the assumption of universal brotherhood faces real-world challenges in contexts where nonstate or state actors openly adhere to exclusive and hostile ideologies. Extreme case studies, such as the rise of transnational militant groups, demonstrate the limits of a dialogical approach when meeting actors who ideologically reject the very foundation of dialogue.

### The Purpose and Practice of Interaction: Pursuing Common Good versus Seeking Victory

The purpose of interaction serves as a clear dividing line. Within Al-Nursi's framework, the goal of "constructive discussion" is the common good, operationalized through principles of active listening, open-mindedness, and the pursuit of joint solutions (Al-Nursi, 2019). Conversely, within the conflict paradigm, interaction is a



continuation of politics by other means, aimed at victory, domination, or unilateral gain, as reflected in Machiavellian thought (2018) and the practice of *realpolitik* (Morgenthau, 2020).

This divergence in purpose explains why many intercultural dialogue forums fail to yield substantive progress. They often devolve into stages for "performative diplomacy," where parties deliver fixed monologues without a genuine willingness to listen or adapt (Enroth, 2020). In contrast, initiatives like the National Reconciliation Process in post-Arab Spring Tunisia, which involved inclusive dialogue between secular and Islamist groups illustrate an attempt (however imperfect) to prioritize national survival over partisan victory. This example also shows that successful dialogue often requires neutral mediation and structures that protect the process from domination by the more powerful party.

### Transcending Historical Baggage: Empathy and Forgiveness versus Stigma and Retribution

The review documents the powerful grip of "historical stigma" in shaping contemporary perceptions and policies, both in the West and the Islamic world (Bjelic, 2020; Ibrahim, 2007). The U.S. response to 9/11, dominated by retribution and military intervention, stands as a prime example of how historical wounds can trigger cycles of vengeance (Yordan, 2009). Al-Nursi offers the concepts of *ihsan* (compassionate benevolence and deep empathy) and forgiveness as radical ethical acts to break these cycles. He even discusses the possibility of forgiveness (*sulh*) within Islamic legal frameworks, albeit with compensation (*diat*), as a pathway to broader social peace (Al-Nursi, 2019; Sanadi, 2020).

This principle of forgiveness is profoundly relevant yet immensely challenging in contexts of transitional justice. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is often cited as an instance where acknowledgment and forgiveness were opened as a path, though this process has also been criticized for sacrificing procedural justice. In international relations, the application of forgiveness is scarce. Foreign policy remains dominated by a logic of retribution and accountability, as seen in economic sanctions that are often collective and prolong civilian suffering. Al-Nursi's framework poses a difficult question: can a nation practice *ihsan* toward another that has harmed it, not as a sign of weakness, but as a shrewd strategy for longterm peace? Its application requires visionary leadership and a paradigm shift in statecraft.

### Transformative Strategies: Education and Principled Openness versus Power-Based Instrumentalization

The proposed strategies of each paradigm are also diametrically opposed. The conflict paradigm relies on instruments of power: sanctions, interventions, and conditional foreign aid designed to maintain influence (Marten, 2004). Al-Nursi, conversely, emphasizes long-term transformative strategies, particularly education that instills universal humanistic values and principled openness (*wasatiyyah*) a balance between standing firm on principles and remaining open to engagement (Ahmed, 2020; Heyneman, 2020).

This contrast is evident in development aid practices. Aid laden with strict political conditionalities often fosters perceptions of "patronage" and undermines genuine partnership (Yordan, 2009). Conversely, successful educational programs, such as student exchanges designed to build empathy or curricula teaching multiperspective history, can serve as long-term investments in peace. However, significant challenges persist: transformative education can be resisted by ruling regimes that rely on narrow nationalist narratives. Furthermore, the concept of *wasatiyyah* (principled openness) offers a valuable middle ground between isolationism and assimilation, allowing societies to engage critically with other civilizations without losing their identity. This principle could serve as a vital guide for Muslim minority communities in the West or for nations navigating the pressures of globalization.

These findings collectively indicate that global fragmentation is not an inevitability but a consequence of persistent ethical and strategic choices. Al-Nursi's ethical framework provides a coherent roadmap for constructive engagement, yet its implementation faces tangible systemic constraints. Genuine dialogue cannot occur in a vacuum; it requires supportive structures and institutions, a fairer international justice system, reformed global economic governance, and a commitment to educating future generations in the spirit of *wasatiyyah* and empathy. Without parallel efforts to address power asymmetries and legacies of injustice, the discourse on dialogue risks remaining abstract and ineffective. The choice before the global community is between deepening familiar cycles of conflict or mustering the courage to embark on the more demanding yet more promising path of ethical engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative examination of the ethical foundations underlying civilizational engagement and conflict culminates in a clear, urgent verdict. The pervasive “clash of civilizations” paradigm, rooted in a zero-sum logic of power and historical grievance, is not a neutral diagnosis but a self-fulfilling prophecy that perpetuates global fragmentation. In contrast, the dialogical ethics championed by Badi‘ al-Zaman Sa‘id al-Nursi centered on universal brotherhood, constructive discussion, forgiveness, and principled openness (*wasatiyyah*) offers a coherent and sustainable counter-framework for international relations. It reframes dialogue from a reactive diplomatic tactic into a proactive ethical imperative essential for collective survival.

However, this study also underscores that the realization of such an ethical framework faces formidable, realworld constraints. The analysis acknowledges that power asymmetries, structural injustices, and the presence of actors operating in bad faith can co-opt, distort, or outright obstruct genuine dialogue, as seen in instances of performative diplomacy and conditional aid. Therefore, Al-Nursi’s vision must not be adopted uncritically as an abstract ideal. Its principles demand translation into robust institutional mechanisms, educational reforms, and foreign policy practices that consciously address these imbalances. The transformative potential of empathy and forgiveness, for instance, must be coupled with parallel commitments to equitable justice and the dismantling of structural violence.

Ultimately, the choice confronting the global community is stark. To remain wedded to conflict-centric models is to choose a path of perpetual instability, where security is pursued through domination and historical animosities dictate future hostilities. The alternative, a committed, consistent, and ethically grounded practice of dialogue presents a far more arduous but necessary route to lasting peace. This paper argues that frameworks like Al-Nursi’s provide the essential moral and practical compass for this journey.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is part of research under the Special Research Grant Scheme (SRGS-FKI) 1.0, UniSZA/2023/SRGSFKI1.0/02, supported by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA).

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