**The Contemporary Challenges of the Muslim Ummah**

Before scrutinizing those challenges, let us have a quick look to the definition of challenges and ummah, the key words throughout this study. ‘Challenge’ is a simple everyday word. If one browses through several dictionaries he will find out that the definition given by those dictionaries is more or less the same, which is ‘a demanding or stimulating situation’. Specifically, it refers to “(the situation of being faced with) something needing great mental and physical effort in order to be done successfully and which therefore tests a person’s ability.”

Major challenges Muslim Ummah is facing now a days are Illiteracy, poverty, terrorism, autocracy, lack of productivity, far behind in technology, war ridden economies, no veto powers, concentration of wealth, redefining role of women, nationalism, regionalism, materialism, internal conflicts, division, national and international conflicts, conspiracies, Islam-o phobia, leaving Jihad and spirituality,

No doubt that our ummah faces many challenges, both internal and external. While external challenges come from our surrounding – most of them created by the West to control and destroy us, internal challenges are challenges that occurred within us, which sometimes difficult for us to identify (and admit) and much more dangerous compared to external challenges, if we fail to manage and overcome them. This study will focus first in discussing the internal challenges and will touch about the external challenges later.

**Internal Challenges**

**Disunited Ummah: The No. 1 within Enemy**

The first and foremost internal challenge that Muslims need to overcome urgently is their disunited ummah. As we know, the mission of the prophet Muhammad was to bring peace and unity to the feuding tribes of the pre-Islamic days. However, after the prophet passed away, the Arabs returned to their feuding wars. Blindly tribal loyalties returned. Disputes over which tribe had the right to succeed the leadership of the Muslims ummah after the death of the prophet eventually led to the most serious and dangerous schism among Muslims.

Certainly, the quarrel between Muslim sects and nations are obviously contrary to the teachings of Islam. Let us admit that Islam and the Muslim world today are divided and disarray. They are unable to cope with the changes that are happening in this world and are reversing further and further backwards. Therefore, we should resolve our own quarrels to present a united ummah. Most importantly, we should never be our own enemy. Disappointingly, personal quarrels and ambitions for power seem allowed in Muslim world, which eventually disrupt government administration, leaving it incapable of addressing the needs of the people. As a result, Muslim nations remain largely underdeveloped, poor, unskilled, uneducated and incapable of contributing positively towards the wellbeing of the Muslims, their faiths and nations.

Though many of us are blessed with rich resources, we are unable to put such resources to the optimal use, to serve and defend Islam and Muslims against those who loudly confess their hatred against us and bravely proclaim their intention to frustrate us. The bad situation becomes worse when the best, skillful and knowledgeable people of us emigrate and contribute to the wealth and prosperity of other nations, to some extent, to the nations which are hostile to us. This frustrated situation happened because we are unable to offer these talented people with facilities, plus the conditions of our nations are unsuitable for the application of the considerable attributes that they possess, simply because we are too busy with our petty quarrels.

Thus, we need the ‘right people’ to rule the nations, and to get this, the one and only situation is to revert to the teaching of Islam, the really true teachings, not the teachings which are interpreted to justify the bad things we are doing as good. If we are not sure what is really meant by the true teachings, we need to ask only few questions. Does Islam advocate wars and violence amongst Muslims? Does Islam advocate oppression of the people by the government, or destabilize the government by the irresponsible acts of the people? Can we really say that it is our religious duty to be poor, without knowledge and skills, incapable of defending ourselves against our enemies?

Behavioral Issues

The first major issue confronting the Muslim Ummah is behavior. Across various dimensions—whether in daily interactions, worship, or communal activities—Muslims have largely strayed from Islamic principles. A telling example is how disorganized individuals can be in places of worship, such as leaving shoes scattered instead of placing them neatly on racks. This small act reflects larger issues of laziness, disorganization, and a lack of seriousness in religious practice. The speaker emphasized the importance of paying attention to these seemingly minor details, as they signify a deeper commitment to Islam and its values.

We clearly know the answers to all these questions, and yet, we do not care to follow the Islamic answers to these questions. Instead, we quibble about small issues, fight over minor differences. We divide Muslims and cause them to fight because differences created in our practices in Islam.

**Fundamentalists: The True Muslims or Extremists?**

Another internal challenge faces by Muslim in this contemporary world is fundamentalist Muslims. Realizing or not, fundamentalism is one of the most abused word. Most of the time, it is associated with extremism. Yet, if the teachings of Islam are revised, it would be obvious that the past best Muslims were fundamentalists. On the contrary, nowadays, the people who are usually described as fundamentalists are far away from following of the Islamic teachings. Most of them have seemingly reverted to the pre-Islamic jahilliyyah ways of extreme loyalty to their groups, to fanaticism or ta’asub .

The answer lies in correcting or abandoning the incorrect interpretations of Islam by some of the so called ‘ulama’. These interpreters, no matter how learned they may be in teachings of the religion, or how large may be their followers, or how established their teachings, are not prophets. Prophets cannot be wrong, but these interpreters of Islam can be.

If Islam appears rigid and doctrinaire, it is because the learned interpreters make it so. They tended to be harsh and intolerant when interpreting during the golden day of the Muslim empires. And so, long after the Muslims have lost their predominant era, and the world has changed, the Muslim were exhorted to adhere to interpretation which are no longer adequate or relevant.

What Muslims must do is to go back to the teaching of Holy Qur’an and genuine Hadiths, study and interpret them in the context of the present day. It is Allah’s will that the world has changed. It is not for man to reverse what has been willed by Him. Islam is not only meant for seventh century Arabs. The faithful must look for guidance from the teachings of Qur’an and Hadiths in the present context. If we Muslims understand this, then there will be fewer misunderstandings among us, and the world will be a better place if all misunderstandings are removed.

External Challenges

Globalization: The Modern Form of Colonization

Globalization as defined by the West is “the generalized expansion of international economic activity which includes increased international trade, growth of international investment (foreign investment) and international migration, and increased creation of technology among countries. Globalization is the increasing world-wide integration of markets for goods, services, labor, and capital.” [8] Some Muslim ‘scholars’ are exalted and believed that globalization will benefit and give positive impacts on Muslims, while others (including this study) take a more skeptical and critical view of this process.

Realizing or not, globalization in its current manifestation is benefiting the West as their idea of a borderless would simply means the unbridled flow of capital across borders. The huge amount of wealth some of us have accumulated through the extraction of our national resources has not been invested in our own countries. We have instead taking advantage of the free flow of capital to invest in the developed countries. Effectively we have enriched them .

Unfortunately, they have used our money that we have invested, to invest back in our countries, destabilize and impoverish us by pulling out their investment suddenly. Then, they take advantage of our poverty to gain control over us. Much of our money is hold hostage abroad and is actually used against us. In fact, we are not even able to use our natural resources to enrich ourselves. We find ourselves quite helpless and unable to adjust and take advantage of these new ideas and concepts. Our own resources are the cause of our present impoverishment and weakness. But, we do not really care because we always believe that they can provide us with powerful means to assert our influence in the whole world, to strengthen and protect us from oppression. All we need is simple, the will to regulate the supply. Yet, we cannot even do this.

Nowadays, colonial control of land by military strength or physical colonialism can no longer be accepted by society worldwide, even no longer necessary. Control to currency trading that globalization has introduced holds similar effects. This form of ‘colonialism’ could be achieved without sacrificing the life of soldiers. When a country becomes poor, it will be politically unstable and a power struggle will ensue. As a result, there will be successive change in leadership until a candidate who is willing to submit to the world power is found. In other words, before getting to that moment, colonization has occurred. Still, there are some of us who do not believe that what is happening now can throw us back to the early days of colonialism.

When we agreed to globalization, we thought that we would be able to share the wealth and technology of the rich countries. But, the rich countries are actually thinking about how globalization would enable them to exploit the untapped resources of the poor countries by using their huge capital and sophisticated technology. Even though exploiting the poor to enrich themselves causes more poverty and misery, so long as it is done in the name of globalization, it is still considered as fair and proper. The attack on the currencies of South East Asian countries in 1997 is the good example on how they exploit globalization.

Islam stresses a balance between materialism and spiritualism, between life in this world and hereafter. The loss of the spiritual values in the West has resulted in unbridled materialism. Money is considered as the most important thing in life. As a result, money is literally worshipped as an end in itself, not as a mean to an end. Nothing must get in the way in the acquisition of more money. And in the process of doing so, economic has to be devastated, people killed, children starved. All these are perfectly all rights as long as the objective is to make more money.

Therefore, all Muslims should work together to defend the sovereignty of our nations. What we are doing is actually defending our own independence. No less than that. Do remember, those who created the economic, political and social problems that we are facing now are just like the colonists who once colonized us. Do not ever think that their behaviors have changed. As the Malay proverb says, “Tigers will always have their stripes.”

Globalization – a world without border is a terminology introduced by the West, not by us, by Muslims. Surely, the West did not come out with this new thought to lose out. It is invented for their own interest. Let us not accept it without scrutiny, without suspicion. Let us not accept all this simply because we want them to regard us as sophisticated. Let us not be proud of being praised by them when we show how up-to-date our thinking is. Globalization might bring many benefits to us, but this new thinking will destroy us more. The attack of our currencies is part of globalization and we only end up losing.

Information Technology – Another ‘Cold War’

Nowadays, it is obvious that information, rather the mastery over it, will determine the course of future struggles between nations. Recent breakthroughs in the field of communication and computer technologies have made it the most valuable currency of the age. If natural resources were what represented wealth and power in the past, information now claims an equal place, and is poised to become, in the near future, the most basic source of strength.

Muslim countries have struggled so hard to catch up with advanced nations. This new technology may affect this struggle in two opposite ways. Firstly, it is possible that it may take the battle still harder. The technology might make the gap between Muslims and industrial world more difficult to bridge, increase the westernization of our culture, and further tighten the grip of those already in control of the world. However, if we take it positively, the same technology may provide wider opportunities to Muslims nations to free themselves from cultural and economic influence of the West, loosen their control over the means of knowledge, and reduce its influence over oppressed nations. Of course, these opportunities will come for us only if we know how to exploit this technology to gain our objectives. It would need vision, strategy, cooperation and solidarity. That is the only way the challenges of the next century can be met.

A quick survey at the state of information in Muslim countries will show how difficult it is to speak of a ‘joint Islamic information’ in the absence of strong cooperation among them. The lack of comprehensive researches and field studies reflect the true state of information in Muslim societies. Therefore, any evaluation of the state of information in the Muslim world would be no more than a general opinion based purely on personal experience and observation.

Backwardness

The second problem is that the Muslim Ummah is backward in many critical fields. Being backward, as defined by the speaker, means lagging behind in competition. Whether in education, healthcare, or economic development, Muslims are often not ranked among the top countries or individuals globally. This lack of progress in key areas prevents the Ummah from achieving the level of civilization and development that it once enjoyed.

Educational Lag

One stark example of this backwardness is in education. Despite available resources, many Muslim countries are not among the top-ranked in education globally. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of proper planning and execution at both the individual and institutional levels.

Lack of Productivity

The third issue is low productivity. Both individuals and institutions within Muslim countries are not producing enough, whether in terms of economic output, intellectual contributions, or social advancements. The speaker noted that government employees in some Muslim-majority countries work productively for only a few minutes per day. This level of inefficiency is a major barrier to progress and development.

Government Productivity

A study in Gulf countries found that the average productivity of a government employee was only 15 minutes per day. This figure was even lower in other countries like Egypt (5 minutes) and Sudan (3 minutes). Such low productivity levels make it impossible to build a strong civilization or compete globally.

Misunderstanding of Religion (Fiqh)

The fourth, and one of the more fundamental issues, is the misunderstanding of religion. Fiqh, or the deep understanding of Islamic teachings, plays a crucial role in shaping how Muslims interact with the world. Without a clear and proper understanding of religion, individuals and communities cannot effectively navigate modern challenges. This misunderstanding leads to poor decision-making in all areas of life, from politics to economics to personal behavior.

View of the World

The speaker stressed the importance of having a balanced and informed view of life, competition, and religious obligations. Without this, the Ummah will continue to struggle with progress and development.

Leadership Deficiencies

The final and most critical issue is leadership. Leadership, or the lack thereof, is a problem not only in politics but across all sectors—education, healthcare, military, and more. Leaders are responsible for guiding and directing resources, and when they fail to do so effectively, entire systems break down. The speaker argued that even when resources are available, they are often misused due to poor leadership.

Example of Education

Japan, for instance, spends less on education per capita than many Muslim countries, yet it consistently ranks among the top nations in education. This discrepancy is largely due to the quality of leadership and management in these countries. In contrast, many Muslim countries fail to utilize their resources effectively, resulting in poor outcomes.

The five major problems facing the Muslim Ummah—behavioral issues, backwardness, lack of productivity, misunderstanding of religion, and leadership deficiencies—are interconnected. To move forward, the Ummah must address these challenges holistically, focusing not only on practical solutions but also on reviving a sense of seriousness and discipline in both personal and communal life. Only then can the Muslim world hope to achieve the advancement and success it seeks.

To cure a disease, of course we need to be clear about what really cause it. Generally speaking, information in Muslim countries continue to suffer because of several reasons – continuous dependency on foreign media, low level of cooperation and exchanges of information among Muslim nations, centralization and state control of information, and emphasize more on technical and material aspects while manpower development gets low priority. It would be unrealistic, and almost impossible to believe that individual Muslim country would be able to confront these challenges separately. Cooperation must always be the principle guidance. Instead of complaining about foreign cultural and media invasion of our societies, we must take the initiative to stop the invasion.

Appeal to Islamic government to cooperate with the private sector for the establishment of joint information, advertising projects, and supporting and encouraging information industries can be one of the valuable suggestion. To ensure the successful implementation of such projects, there must be unified policies and plans to facilitate and attract investments plus a joint Islamic fund to provide loans to finance these projects. Moreover, the infrastructure of Muslim countries should be linked together, commercial information and advertising representation unified, communication mechanism consolidated and an Islamic information bloc set up.

All these promises brought about by the information revolution should make us view them with optimism and make the right investment in a way that would ensure the advancement of our societies and enable us to face the challenges facing us. They should also inspire us to plan carefully and lay down a solid ground for a coordinated effort that would free us from Western information domination. The cure lies in our ills and we know the cure. What is needed is a joint initiative to start the treatment.

Conclusion

Perhaps, it is too much to expect that our Muslim amah would awake and fight all the challenges discussed above. But, still, we need to fight because it is a duty towards our religion. If we learn from the Islamic Civilization of the past, it will tell us that how a great faithful ummah can lead to greatness and establishment of one of the greatest, if not the greatest ever, civilization on earth. What has been done once by Muslims can be done again, and perhaps the second one will be everlasting. It is for us, Muslims, to decide. God willing, we will awake and we will decide, we will fight, and insha Allah, we will win.