

GLOBALIZATION: SOME GROUND REALITIES AND AN ISLAMIC RESPONSE

MUSLIMS AND THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

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Essays on
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Globalization: Some Ground Realities and an Islamic Response

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Introduction

Every age has its own fads and clichés. In contemporary times, ‘globalization’ seems to have become one; at least a sizeable section of the intellectual and political community of the world surmises so. Reservations aside, the developments of the past two decades suggest that globalization no longer seems to be a mere fad or cliché; it is assuming the position of a *framework for a re-ordering of the world*. As such, it is incumbent on the Muslim *ummah* in particular and the people of the third world in general to have a deeper understanding of what is going on. They must be able to sift the grain from the chaff; to identify those aspects of globalization that are useful, and as such desirable and acceptable, and those that are injurious and need to be resisted, modified or adapted to suit their conditions, needs and aspirations. The claim of *inevitability* and *universality* has to be taken with a pinch of salt. However, the response should be positive as well as creative, since isolation and autarky are not the best options.

Globalization is not new. As far as the Muslim *ummah* is concerned, its existence is based on certain universal values, articles of faith, and principles, which provide the intellectual and conceptual foundations for globalization. The Muslims believe in Allah, the

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Lord of the worlds and the Creator of the heavens and the earth. They believe in all the Prophets of Allah and the Qur'an testifies that these Prophets and their followers belong to one *ummah*.¹

The Qur'an makes it very clear that though human beings have been made into tribes and nations – something natural and inevitable – this has been done for mutual identification only. All human beings, races and ethnic groups are equal and the only basis for superiority, greatness and leadership is moral excellence. The Qur'an says: "O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware" (49:13).

So the conceptual framework of Islam and the Muslim *ummah*, even by definition, has a global dimension. In fact, it may rightly be claimed that Islam provides, *par excellence*, the intellectual and moral foundations for an appropriate and sustainable conceptual framework for globalization.

Historically, the Muslim *ummah* is the best example of a universal community. From the flood in the age of Prophet Nuh (Noah) to our own times, the spread of this *ummah* is and has been global. Today, there are some 57 independent Muslim states inhabited by over 900 million people, and over 400 million more Muslims are spread throughout the rest of the world. Consequently,

¹ "And lo! This your religion is one religion and I am your Lord, so keep your duty unto Me;" (23:52) "Lo! This, your religion, is one religion, and I am your Lord, so worship Me;" (21:92) "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty toward Allah in Whom ye claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bare you). Lo! Allah hath been a watcher over you." (4:1) (All translations of Qur'anic verses quoted in this section are from Pickthall's *Meaning of the Glorious Quran*.) The Prophet Muhammad (blessings be upon him) said: "The origin of man is from one couple and the entire humanity is one family."

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in every part of the world, there is Muslim presence – in most cases, quite a significant one.

Globalization as a political, economic, cultural and technological process is not very new. Throughout history, there have been waves of globalization, the critical vehicles for this process being *migration*, *trade* and *conquest*. What is indeed new in our times, however, is the spread, the scope, the speed, and finally, the structure that is going to imbue the current trend towards global integration with liberalization, deregulation, privatization and the hegemonistic contours of capitalism and American power. These factors combined make the globalization of today, to a great extent, a unique phenomenon. It is in this context that limitations of time and space are being annihilated and the entire world is, willy-nilly, becoming one global city.

The most significant aspects of the contemporary phase relate to revolutions in technologies concerning transport and communication, particularly the processes of instant transfer of information. Swift global interactions and decision-making via new information systems are having far-reaching effects on the whole matrix of worldwide relations, including the movement of goods, services and financial flows. These represent developments with profound consequences, moral, ideological, economic, cultural and political.

In view of the dominant paradigm of power and civilization, America and Europe remain major players in the making of this new world order. American military power and its outreach, political influence, economic strength, command over technology and almost total control over media, bordering on virtual *thought-control*, have given globalization a distinct Euro-American identity. In the name of promotion of liberalization, privatization, market economy and modernization, the domination of Western norms, value-systems of life, socioeconomic institutions, and finally, political and economic interest is being established over the length and breadth of the world. Along with the state players, three other powerful actors are in the field, which are:

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- a) The multinational corporations,
- b) The international NGOs and
- c) The media.

Together, they are playing a decisive role in bringing about what can be described as the emergence of a hyper-imperialism, giving it a benign name: 'globalization.'

There is nothing wrong with globalization *per se*; however, when the crucial ground realities that comprise the context of globalization are ignored, serious problems arise. A judicious and honest approach by the Muslim leadership towards addressing these realities is a must for affording some relief to the world that is at the suffering end.

Globalization: Some Ground Realities

The first and the foremost reality of the modern world to be recognized is the fact that there exist gross asymmetries of political power, military strength and levels of technological and economic development in different parts and countries of the world. Foreign rule is nothing new in history. However, European colonial rule, which held sway over a large part of the world for more than four centuries, has something unique about it. For the first time ever in human history, during this period, a large-scale physical transfer of resources took place from the colonies to the colonial overlords – the so-called mother countries. Consequently, the erstwhile global balance was destroyed and a new global arrangement appeared which established the authority of the Western hemisphere and marginalized all other regions, cultures and people. During the twentieth century, although the colonization process apparently reversed, Western powers gained further grounds because of selective and lopsided development strategies. As a result, today, one finds a strong center-periphery relationship that has been embedded into the global system's political, economic and technological spheres, and which is primarily responsible for producing serious deformities and inequities.

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Let us glance over certain anomalies. Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the per capita income of Europe, America, the Muslim World and the rest of the Third World was within a differential of 1: 2; in certain parts of the world, it was in favor of the Muslim World. From the nineteenth century onwards, the trend changed until, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, 87 percent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) is produced in 22 rich countries, while the rest of the world, consisting of some 170 countries and over four-fifths of mankind, tries to survive on the remaining 13 percent.² In 1800, Europe's share in the world's manufacturing output was hardly 28.1 percent; America's, less than one percent; while that of the rest of the world – the so-called Third World of today – was almost 67.7 percent. Notably, the share of the Muslim World was roughly around 40 percent of the world GDP.³ This sea change has totally distorted the balance of power in the world and created a situation where liberalization and globalization only accentuate these disparities.

The distribution of wealth is grossly skewed, not only globally, but also within the regions and between persons. There are gross inequalities of wealth and income within the developed and underdeveloped world. Forty billionaires alone, according to a CNN survey in September 2003, owned US\$955 billions, which is more than the total wealth of almost 30 percent of the Third World countries, the abode of over 1.2 billion people. While over a billion persons in the world live on less than one dollar a day, the European Union gives its citizens a subsidy of US\$2 per cow per day and this subsidy, in Japan, is US\$7.5 per cow per day. Even in the richest country of the world, the USA, with a GDP that is 26 percent of the world GDP, over 12 percent of people live below the poverty line.⁴

² Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 190. See also Bairoch, "International Industrialization Levels"; Alam, *Poverty from the Wealth of Nations*; and Milanovic, "True World Income Distribution," 51–92, 112.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hertz, *Silent Takeover*; Gray, *False Dawn*; Greinder, *One World, Ready or Not*; and Ellwood, *No-Nonsense Guide to Globalization*.

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Asymmetric economic wealth is both accompanied and accentuated by asymmetrical political power and military strength. The expenditure of the US alone on its war machinery is equal to the combined defense expenditure of all the other countries of the world.⁵ US forces are stationed in some 40 countries of the world with an outreach to every corner of the globe. Technology has reached a state where a target anywhere in the world can be struck from the US Military Command stationed in Florida. Most of the countries of the world are dependent on the US arms systems and supplies for their defense; indeed, the US accounts for 48 percent of the world's exports of arms and defence systems.⁶

In a world like this, competition and liberalization shall mainly contribute to the disadvantage of the poor and the underprivileged. Moreover, those who stand for trade liberalization insist on liberation of the capital markets and flow of goods and services only: they do not believe in free movement of labor. This is why liberalization has become an instrument for neo-colonialism and a method for the virtual establishment over the weak of the dominion of the powerful – particularly the country that today boasts of being a hyper-power.

This being the state of affairs, unless there are safeguards for the weak, globalization can safely be termed as a race between the unequals. It will aggravate a process through which, whatever economic and political wherewithal remains in the hands of the poorer countries of the world, will be further reduced, if not decimated. This is the concern of the people in the Third World as well as of those who care for justice and fair play elsewhere in the world. It is symbolized by protests against WTO, and also the Group of 8, in the two bodies' recent ministerial meetings and summits.

The second ground reality to be aware of is that today's globalization is taking place in the absence of any just and agreed juridico-political and economic infrastructure at the global level. The legal, political, economic and financial architecture of the world is out of tune with the demands of a healthy, sustainable and equitable globalization process. Good governance is not merely a national

⁵ Roddick, 2001 and Hertz, op. cit.

⁶ Ibid

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virtue, it is equally important for the global community. The United Nations Organization (UNO) and its organs and the Bretton Woods infrastructures built after World War II reflect and perpetuate the equation of power that existed at the time of their creation. The demise of the Soviet Union has further tilted the balance of power in favor of the only remaining superpower. New institutions, which could ensure security and justice for all the countries and the people of the world, are conspicuous only by their absence. America's refusal to accept the authority of the International Criminal Court ratified by over 80 countries of the world, its unilateral withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, and its recent veto in the Security Council on the issue of a resolution condemning Israel's threat to kill or expel the elected President of the Palestinian Authority, is an index of the incongruity of power and the poverty and deficiencies of the global infrastructure. The result is obvious: the lone superpower is now calling the shots and regards itself above the law. In fact, America is acting in a manner that is contemptuous towards international norms of behavior and is arrogating to itself the right to disregard even its own constitution. It can violate any international treaty, walk out of any international institution, invade any part of the world in the name of "preemptive strike" and in pursuit of its alleged "right" of "regime change" and self-defence. Globalization of terrorism is one ugly consequence of this unilateralism and brinkmanship.

In such a setting, the globalization process can be successful and become a blessing only if there is a global infrastructure ensuring good governance, equitable opportunities of participation to all, and commitment by everyone to respect recognized processes for dispensation of justice among the nations and the people of the world. While there is talk of democratization as part of the globalization agenda, there is no mention of making the global players – the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the NPT, etc. – more democratic and accountable to the people. Similarly, if the people of a country, out of their own free will, choose an alternative culture, political strategy or economic order and are not prepared to tow the liberal US-European model, their choice is disregarded with impunity. Democracy no longer means the will of the people of every country; it only means surrender to the wishes and preferences of the dominant powers. This

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makes the whole process of democratization a sham. Moreover, democracy cannot be imposed from outside; it can only evolve from within. So is the problem with *forced* liberalization and *imposed* openness. They are contradictory in themselves.

The third reality is that globalization needs a particular mindset and an approach based on commitment to and respect for universal values and principles. Globalization with a parochial or nationalistic mindset and in pursuit of hegemonistic ambitions of a nation, system or civilization cannot but be a threat to mankind. It can succeed and become a blessing for mankind only if it is rooted in *shared* universal values and commitment to the processes and traditions of respect for *plurality* and acceptance of *variety* and *differences* as *authentic*. This calls for a very different psychological and moral approach. It demands an approach based on values and geared to achieving the common ideals of justice and fairplay for all. This is not possible in a climate of obsession with national interests, regional concerns, unilateralism, cultural arrogance and imperialistic ambitions. *Free* trade is a virtue only if it is also *fair* trade. So is the case with every other aspect of international contact and cooperation.

What one witnesses today, instead, is a globalization without the change required in the psychology and mindset of the leadership, and in the dynamics for the use of power at the global level. The dominant paradigm is fundamentally flawed. *Change within this paradigm* cannot deliver. What is needed is the *change of the paradigm itself*. Without a new moral and ideological dispensation, the dream of a just global order will remain unfulfilled.

This brings the discussion to the fourth important dimension. The new paradigm that can ensure healthy and fair globalization, and universal and shared prosperity, must be based on the values of (a) freedom with responsibility, (b) individualism tempered with social concern and solidarity, (c) competition with cooperation and compassion, (d) efficiency and profit motive with justice and fair play, and (e) power with rule of law and accountability. The incorporation of these prerequisites warrants a major paradigm shift to a just order from the dominant civilizational paradigm of the West, which remains one-sided, despite the fact that this one-

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sidedness is rooted in partial reality. The West's one-sidedness stems from its emphasis on freedom, individualism, profit motive, competition, liberalization, efficiency and power, without incorporating within the model the other coordinates of responsibility, solidarity, cooperation, compassion, justice and accountability.

Lastly, the central issue: whether the globalization shall take place in the context of the supremacy of one power – now actually a hyper-power – and one economic system, capitalism, or it shall take place in the framework of a pluralistic world where different cultures, religions and socioeconomic systems could flourish without the over lordship of one or a few powerful players? Free movement, dialogue, competition and interaction at the global level can lead to freedom, well-being and opportunity for all, only if this takes place in a landscape of genuine diversity, plurality, respect for the rule of law and supremacy of shared values. This is not possible if only a few dominate while others are forced to follow and succumb.

Globalization: Blessing or Blarney?

The Western creeds of liberalism, colonialism, secularism, nationalism and capitalism have proved to be parochial and regional as well as racial, class-based and culture-oriented. They have failed to prove their capacity to provide fair and equitable opportunities to all human beings. Justice and compassion for all remain elusive and unattainable.

While certain positive and innovative dimensions of these concepts and ideologies cannot be denied, their limitations and negative contributions outnumber their positive contributions and potentials. The result is undeniable: globalization within the framework of these concepts is creating, and is bound to create, ominous problems, and escalating serious conflict situations for humanity in every part of the world. The twentieth century has been the bloodiest century in history. It witnessed some two hundred wars including two World Wars, resulting in the death of over 100 million people and the destruction of vast lands all over the world. More of the same cannot be anything but more fatal.

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New attitudes and new approaches are needed that are genuinely universal, and capable of providing freedom and opportunity to all and ensuring fair-play for all the people and the countries of the world, irrespective of their faiths, cultures, politico-economic systems, and positions on world affairs.

Democracy is a great virtue and an invaluable blessing for humanity, but it can only flourish globally if there is genuine scope for plurality, respect for the rights of all, effective accountability of those who are insensitive to the demands of law and established norms, and equality of opportunity for the weak and the strong alike. Otherwise, democracy remains a form without substance and may degenerate into a sham and a farce.

The media and free flow of information are major building blocks for a free society: however, because of monopolistic overtones and maneuverings, they can become vicious instruments of thought-control, mind-manipulation and intellectual colonization.

Technology, likewise, is a blessing: but it can also turn into a monster, a vehicle for subjugation and decimation of other peoples, morally, militarily, and culturally.

Globalization is a great opportunity, but the weaker players can become genuine players and seize the opportunities it offers only if there is a new mindset and a fresh approach that is universal and pluralistic, and is operationalized in the context of a global framework that establishes supremacy of law and ensures equality of opportunity to all.

Muslims' Preparedness for Globalization

The Muslims, by and large, are not behaving as true representatives of Islam, individually or collectively. Economically, the Muslim World is poor and dependent on the West. Politically, it is divided like nine pins. Culturally, it seems to be in a melting pot. In the field of education, research and technological development, it is far behind the rest of the world. According to a recent study, the total number of books published and translated in the Arab world is barely equal to

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the number printed in one, rather less developed, country of Europe, Spain.

The combined GDP of all the 57 Muslim countries of the world is less than five percent of the world GDP, or to put it differently, less than the GDP of one European country, Italy – which itself ranks as seventh economy in the world. The bulk of Muslim financial resources are in the hands of and under the management of American and European banks and investment and management houses. Muslim countries have developed a consumer economy without a sustainable production base. Despite all of their wealth and resources, almost all the Muslim countries are languishing under foreign and domestic debt, in a few cases, with menacing consequences.

Militarily, the Muslims are not only dependent on the West; they are helplessly caught in its grip. Despite all the expenditure on defense, they have not been able to even face the threat that has been hammering at the doors of the Arab and Muslim World for over 60 years in the form of the “tiny,” yet armed-to-the-teeth entity of Israel.

The state of political freedoms, the level of participation of the people in the economy and the polity, and the equitable sharing of wealth and power within Muslim societies is in very bad shape. And unless they set their houses in order, it is unrealistic to expect that Islam and the Muslim *ummah* can play their rightful role in the current phase of globalization.

The above being the weaknesses of the *ummah* today, it should be stated that all is not bad news. There are certain positive developments and there is definitely light beyond the tunnel for the Muslim World.

Globalization: the Role for Muslims

It is critical, in this backdrop; to examine the role Islam and the Muslim *Ummah* can play in influencing and shaping the future course of globalization.

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Globalization provides a very unique opportunity to Islam and the Muslim *Ummah*. Islam with its fundamental values of *Tawhid*, Oneness of God, and consequently of Oneness of mankind; of supremacy of the moral over the material; of integration of spiritual and mundane; its overriding commitment to justice, beneficence and compassion (*al-adl wa al-ehsan*) for all; and its insistence of *shura* - consultation – as the process for decision-making at all levels, can provide a framework for genuine globalization that could be a blessing for mankind.

But this can become a possibility only if the Muslim *Ummah* is prepared to take stock of its present position and pursue a path that is truly representative of the Islamic ethos. The present state of the Muslim *Ummah* is rather disenchanting.

The Muslims can seize these opportunities only if, on the one hand, they seriously strive to overcome their weaknesses and drawbacks, and on the other, they open up a meaningful civilizational dialogue with the rest of the world, particularly with the West, as an *ummah* with a mission. As the Qur'an says:

“Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you...” (2:143)

If the Muslims pursue this mission diligently and with perseverance, then the promise of Allah (SWT) is very clear:

“Faint not, nor grieve, for ye will overcome them if ye are (indeed) believers.” (3:139)

The promise of success comes with a clear condition and that is *in kuntum momineen* – if you actually behave as true believers. And to be a *momin* does not merely mean offering prayers five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan and frequent visits for *Umrah* and *Hajj*. They are obligations and constitute mighty pillars of a Muslim's strength, but prayers (*salah*) must prompt the people to fight evil and become rightful representatives of Islam. Fasting (*sawm*) should inculcate in those observing the fast, the true and dynamic spirit of *taqwa*, which is God-consciousness, heedfulness

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towards Allah, self-discipline and commitment to a life dedicated to the fulfillment of Islamic ideals. Obligatory charity (*zakah*) is a great '*ibadah*', but it is associated with a vision of a sharing society where wealth ensures well-being of all and mobilization of the resources of the *ummah* for the welfare of humanity. Pilgrimage to Ka'aba (*hajj*) is a symbol of the Muslims' unity. Today, millions of Muslims come for *hajj* from every part of the world, but where is the unity that may harness their energies in the direction of *amr bil ma'roof wa nahee 'anil munkar* - bidding what is right and forbidding what is wrong – and of conducting the affairs of human society with justice? Globalization can be a historic opportunity, provided Muslims can fulfill the Qur'anic condition: *in kuntum mo'mineen*.

If the Muslims sincerely, seriously and courageously strive in the path of Allah (SWT), His help and guidance is assured:

“As for those who strive in Us, We surely guide them to Our paths, and lo! Allah is with the good.” (29:69)

The Way Ahead for Muslims

Islam calls Muslims to a mission, an approach and an effort rooted in a moral socio-political framework and geared to the ideals outlined above. If Muslims are prepared to put their shoulders to this harness, the present is struggle, and future is Islam. But this calls for clear commitment and serious efforts in the right direction. A strategy to face this challenge would consist of, at least, the following elements:

Firstly: A clear vision of the objectives, the moral and civilizational identity, and the mission as *ummah*.

Secondly: Serious efforts towards reforming and reconstructing individual lives and societies in accordance with the values and principles of Islam. This must be done with complete loyalty to Allah (SWT) and His Prophet (peace be upon him), sincere adherence to the Divine revelation as contained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, ensuring freedom and opportunity to all members of the society, as Islam wants Muslims to run their affairs through mutual consultation (*shura*), supremacy of law, pursuit of justice, and respect

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for the rights of Allah (SWT) and of the people (*Huququllah* and *Huququl Ibad*).

Thirdly: Muslims must realize that systematic preparation to face the challenge is as much a part of an Islamic strategy as unwavering confidence in our mission and responsibility. Knowledge, character, moral sublimity, economic strength, political power, military capability, technological prowess, and social cohesion are key elements of this preparation. Without setting own house in order and mobilizing all the resources at hand to prepare to play the rightful role in the world, nothing can be achieved.

Fourthly: The Muslim *ummah* have no option but to move towards greater cooperation, unity and collective self-reliance. Regional groupings, trade and financial arrangements, educational and technological alliances, and political co-ordinations are stepping stones to a global order that is more balanced and just, and that represents a fair state of equilibrium between different nations, socio-political systems and civilizations. Muslim unity could be an effective guarantee against decimation of Muslim countries and the eclipse of their civilizational identity in the face of the onslaught of unmanaged globalization.

Muslims should not be merely at the receiving end; they must plan and prepare themselves to play a positive role both to protect their identity and interests, and to make the world a better place for all.

Finally: Muslims must realize that emotional outbursts and thoughtless confrontation are no answers to the multidimensional challenges the *ummah* faces today. In fact, as an *ummah* with a mission, the right course of action for the Muslims is dialogue, contact, participation, and cooperation at the global level. This must be an essential component of their strategy. Their response to the global challenges must be proactive and positive; that is the only way, not only to survive, but also to make their own mark on history. (First published in IPS journal, *Policy Perspectives*, Vol. 3. No. 1, Jan-Jun 2006)