

THE EFFECTS OF THE ARAB CONFLICTS ON THE MUSLIM WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

Arab as a tribe is generally known to have originated and lived in what is known as Arabian Peninsular. Its borders later extended to what was previously known as Mesopotamia, Assyria and Phoenicia. P.K. Hitti would though believe the reverse.¹ In the medieval period, the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsular as a religion and ideology, made the Arab conquerors of most of the then civilized world.

Arab occupies a territory larger than the United States, the region is strategically located and forms a link between three continents.² It contains about two-thirds of the known oil reserves of the world.

The United States of America derived an annual income that ran into millions of dollars and on the other, oil producing Arab countries also have several billions of dollar investments in the United States of America which have helped considerably to boost its economy. All these apart from the trade and banking facilities are being enjoyed by the United States and even some parts of Europe.³

Militarily, Arab nations were not push-overs. They made a significant contribution to the victory of the Allied Powers in World War 1. Military correspondent Liddell Hart reported thus:

The Turkish forces South of Damascus were distracted by the Arab forces that – it was the Arabs who almost entirely wiped out the fourth Army, the still intact force that might have barred the way to final victory.⁴

The Arab were paid for their part in the victory of the Allies with the issue of the Balfour declaration of 1917 which shall be discussed later in this paper.

The Arab nations in World War II supported the British. They built up a comprehensive military organization based in Cairo which really helped the British to accomplish their mission.⁵ As their reward, the Arab were paid with the establishment of “Jewish State” in Palestine and the expulsion and dispossession of the Muslim and Christian inhabitants.

There have, over the ages, been controversies on whether the Arab world is a single or multiracial territory. In the midst of these controversies, there is one thing sure, the Arabs

belong to the Semitic race. This is evident in the ability of the Semitic language to survive every wave of migrations.

ARAB CIVILIZATION AND THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM

Islam as a religion played a major role in shaping the lives of the Arab as a people in most areas of human endeavour, particularly in spirituality and civility. Prior to the emergence of Islam, the Arab had no dispensation, no inspired prophet and no revealed book. While it is wrong to classify them as illiterates, pre-Islamic Arab were famous of their poetical expression, the area in which they excelled. Poetry was the Bedouin's cultural asset.⁶

The arrival of Islam into the world through the Arab, gave them a new life and orientation in spiritual and mundane spheres. They now regarded human life as sacred and the neighbor as an equal and a partner in progress. The Qur'an, the symbol of Islam, contains all knowledge human being requires and therefore, serves as a way of life. Therein are knowledge about science, philosophy, astronomy, literature, theology, history, grammar, etc.⁷ As its contents were revealed in peace-meal to its bearer, Muhammad (PBUH) transmitted and practicalized it to his followers. Thus, the Muslim *Ummah* (community) had become the most refined in the world at the time.

The death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) did not in any way adversely affect the legacy he left behind. The leaders of the community immediately after him particularly Umar, the second caliph, improved on the spread of Islam and even expanded its territory farther and wider. The Islamic empire under him was said to be the largest portion of then known world.⁸

The Islamic administration after him tried to improve and indeed, made impressive progress. The Islamization of various areas conquered like Iraq, Iran and Syria by the Umayyad and Abbasid administrations at different periods and the contact with Greek and Persian works helped a great deal in their intellectual advancement. By the eighth century, the Arab world had become a renowned intellectual power. One would have thought that the Arab would no doubt sustain the feat. But this was not the case because, they retrogressed and the loss resultant from that was blamed on their passion for accumulating wealth and power.

For about half a century, the Arab remained in this state of intellectual retrogression. However, by the middle of the century, they still managed to lead the world in science. Areas of their excellence then were Mathematics (including trigonometry) and medicine. An Egyptian Muslim, Abu Hassan 'Ali' ibn al-Nafis, for example, had given a clear conception of pulmonary circulation of blood, two and half centuries before Servetus, a Spanish, was credited for its discovery. Also, since around 1260, treatise on veterinary medicine, pharmacy, etc had been developed by Arab Muslims.

REBELLION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF MUSLIMS

The arrival of Islam into the world of human existence in the sixth century of Christian era, was meant to change and transform man's life from darkness to light, from ignorance to enlightenment and from rebellion to love. The above and other lessons were practically delivered by the messenger of Islam through patience, endurance and perseverance. It is, therefore, rational to hope that the twenty-three year duration of the delivery of this message would have been enough to permanently transform and ensure an enduring refined Muslim *Ummah*.

No sooner he left the scene than the very community he laboured for began hostilities amongst themselves. More worrisome was the participation of some of the companions who formed the very first generation of the Muslim *Ummah*.

The first and indeed the major problem of the Muslim Community immediately after the death of the prophet was the question of who was to lead. It was a struggle between the Meccan emigrants (Muhajirum) and the people of Madinah (Ansar) the hosts. The problem was later resolved in favor of the former.

About twenty years later, Ali who was the prophet's cousin became the caliph after the assassination of his predecessor, Uthman. Ali's problem was his inability to bring to book, those who killed the third caliph as demanded by Mu'awiyah and others representing the Umayyad clan. Therefore, Ali's regime was threatened and the two groups (all Arab) clashed in a war that eventually broke the community into two major divisions, the Sunni and the Shi'ah.⁹

The main difference between the two, which is fundamental to the religion, is about the leadership of the first three caliphs. While the Shi'ites believe that the three were usurpers of Ali's position and have expunged the records of their activities from their own records, the sunni believe that hereditary succession has no place in Islam. Also in addition to Mecca (where Ka'bah is situated) the symbol of pilgrimage, the Shi'ah has made Mash-had Ali al-Najaf where Ali was interred, a pilgrimage centre.

The unresolved Ali-Mu'awiyah hostilities raged on after the so-called arbitration had caused more confusions. In the year 660 (A.H. 40), Mu'awiyah was made Caliph at Ilya' (Jerusalem). Thereafter, he moved the seat of government to Damascus. At this time, Ali's headquarters at Kufah remained until he was assassinated in 661. With the death of Ali, the period of orthodox caliphate came to an end while the second caliphate, a dynasty, founded by Mu'awiyah followed.

Mu'awiyah introduced hereditary succession to the position of caliph. He nominated his son Yazid to succeed him and that system was followed till the ignoble end of the dynasty. Throughout the Umayyad period the Shi'ah, still loyal to the cause of Ali, the fourth caliph, were planning against the ruling dynasty. This plan succeeded in 720 when the troop loyal to the Abbasid group overran the Umayyad.

Abdul Abbas became the first caliph in the house of Abbas and made Iraq the dynasty's capital. Many lives were lost in his bid to take over the reign. As if not satisfied, after his

enthronement, he invited about eighty members of the former dynasty to a feast and got them all killed when the feast was on.

THE PROBLEM OF ARABS

The Arab seems not to imbibe the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith handed down to them by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Unity, which was emphasized in the Qur'an, and the tradition of the prophet, as essential tools for the Muslims irrespective of their colour or race was jettisoned by the same Arab Muslims who were direct beneficiaries of these messages. However, three main problems are identified as being responsible for it. They are: Arab nationalism, national and ideological interests.

Arab Nationalism

The Arab land is blessed by God as a result of prophet Ibrahim's prayers. The land is abundant with mineral resources and wealth. It is also the seat of Islam and the Muslim world. Arabic language is the language of the Qur'an and the lingua franca of the Muslim world. Arab land hosts the greatest assemblage, in the world on annual basis (The Hajj).

The above and perhaps other reasons may have made the Arabs to think that they are a special breed of human race. They forget that it is Islam that earns them all these privileges and not their being Arab. This is so because many Arab states do not reflect Islam in their names. Some examples are: United Arab Republic of Egypt (UAR), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, etc. Only Sudan and Libya amongst the Arab nations reflect Islam in their names. Some of those who reflect Islam in their names are non-Arab nations. Countries like Iran and Pakistan are typical examples.

The Arab League

In 1945, the Arab nations, in their bid to consolidate their communities in the name of nationalism, established what is called the League of the Arab States (the Arab league).¹⁰ Its principal objectives were for security and advancement of member states. It was a surprise that the league could not help Palestine out of its problem since 1948. The league's inability to help their brothers is rooted perhaps in their fear of sanction meted out by America and Britain.

One would expect that a league of Muslim countries would have been more appropriate since that would incorporate all Muslim countries in the world including the Arab Nations. It was the premier of the then Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello, who initiated the Muslim world league in 1962. It is only this organization that unites the Muslims till the present.

Iran-Iraq War

Iran and Iraq, two Muslim countries are close neighbors because they share a common boundary. The two had the privilege of having contact with Islam at early periods and are both reputed for Islamic scholarship even though Iran is Persian and not Arab like Iraq.

In 1981, the two engaged in a war that lasted for about eight years. The Arab nations supported Iraq obviously in the spirit of Arab nationalism. But when, in 1991, Iraq overran Kuwait and its action resulted into war, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries jettisoned Arab nationalism and supported the coalition against Iraq.

The Arab Civilization

The much talked about Arab civilization is really Islamic civilization, it was the emergence of Islam, as pointed out earlier, that gave the Arabs their fame and glory.

In knowledge and scholarship, non-Arab Muslims were in the forefront in this area. Great people like Sihawayh¹² and Bukhari¹³ are renowned non-Arab Muslim scholars. In contemporary times, the Pakistanis, the Iranians and Turks have been responsible for the dissemination of Islamic values around the world. Most of their works were in English language or translations from Arabic to English, which makes easy understanding. The little contribution by the Arabs is in Arabic language which is useful only to few with Arabic background.

Had the Arab opened their minds, Islam would have captured the West long ago. This is because while the tools and equipments are with the non-Arab, the God-given wealth of the Arab would have been effectively used for the job.¹⁴

Arabic Language

Arabic as a language is spoken by all Arabs and is adopted as their official language in their respective countries. It is also the original language of the Qur'an and therefore, the lingua franca of the Muslim world. Aside from being the language with which revelation came to the prophet, it is used to commune with God while engaging in *salat*.¹⁵ Its importance can therefore, not be over-emphasized.

Considering the many benefits of the language to the Muslims in particular, the Arab should have tried to facilitate and encourage its understanding to people the world over. Standard schools ought to have been established and heavily funded and closely monitored by the Arab themselves. This method was (and is still) adopted for English and French languages which is responsible for the wide acceptability being enjoyed by the two languages all over the world.

Arabs are used to attract foreigners to come down to their land to earn or send fund to foreign lands to establish Arabic schools or to fund the existing ones with little or no supervision. Such funds are usually diverted from its primary purposes.¹⁶

Arab Media

For effective propagation of any language, religion or culture, radio and television media play very important roles. Greater percentage of the contents of Arab broadcast to the outside

world are made to promote Arab nationalism at the expense of Islam.¹⁷ This is in contrast to some non-Arab Muslim countries like Iran and Pakistan that emphasize mostly Islam on their channels.

On hajj, which is one of the pillars of Islam, majority of those who perform the annual pilgrimage are non-Arabs and do not understand Arabic language. Yet, the sermons in the Harams of Mecca and Medinah as well as at 'Arafah are rendered in Arabic language without translation for the benefit of the pilgrims.

National Interests

Another weakness of the Arabs that retards the progress of Islam and sometimes their own collective interest, is their national pride. This is peculiar to individual countries within the Arab league. Many a time when issues bordering on the state collide with the collective Arab policy, the state's policy is preferred. For example, the same loyalty and respect Muammar Ghadafi of Libya had for Jamal el-Nasir when the latter was Egyptian President was what president Sa'adat, who took over from Nasir demanded from Ghadafi. When this was not possible, it resulted in cold war and later snowballed into diplomatic conflict between the two neighbouring Muslim countries.

Almost all nations in the league do disagree with one another. There was for example, problem between Iraq and Syria over Lebanon issue. Libya and Sudan were at loggerheads while Saudi and Yemen do not agree with each other in spite of being closed neighbours and both being Arabs. These problems are against the spirit of unity preached by Islam and negates the qualification of being the best set of human creatures with which the Qur'an describes the Muslims.¹⁸

Ideological Interest

Each independent country of the world is at liberty to adopt a system of government that suits it. As hosts to hold sites of Islam, Arab nations are expected not to consider any other ideology above Islam. One cannot then understand why most Arab nations adopt system of government that are at variance with the dictates of the religion.

That Saudi Arabia, housing Islam's holiest sites – the Ka'bah in Mecca and prophetic mosque in Madinah adopts monarchy as a system of government cannot be rationally explained from perspective of Qur'an and Sunnah. Others in the same league are Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, etc. The like of other Arab nations that had adopted communism are Egypt, Libya, Iraq, South Yemen and Algeria. Monarchy is a system that allows the same family members to perpetuate themselves on others for as long as possible. This runs contrary to the directive of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his last sermon.¹⁹

Terrorism

Various definitions and meanings have been employed for terrorism by various writers and speakers in recent time. In the contemporary world, terrorism has become a household name such that any violence, whatever the magnitude or reaction to oppression by an individual or group. If terrorism as described by Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, includes, use of terror and violence to intimidate, subjugate, etc, then terrorism could be dated back to pre-historic times or the periods before Christ (B.C.) when piracy was well known. Piracy is defined among others, as the practice of violence.²⁰ In tracing the history of piracy (terrorism), Encyclopaedia Americana states that it is as old as travel by sea, often combined with trade and regarded as an honorable occupation.

In reality, terrorism today is a reaction to the happening of 1879 when Zionism was established and the subsequent Balfour declaration of 1917.²¹ That history is too recent for the world to forget so soon. It happened that an Austrian Jew, Theodor Herzl led a campaign for a place of settlement for his people. At this time, people did not attach any importance to the call. His campaign stemmed from the fear of the Jews about their safety and their repeated calls for an independent state. The Jews badly needed a home for settlement.

During the First World War, the Allied forces were trying to woo America to their side to strengthen them to win the war. On the other hand, Sherif Hussain, the spokesman of Arabs had negotiated with the British High Commissioner in Egypt to help subdue Turkey which had, for long, colonized the entire Arab land. Sherif got the promise of the British that Arab land would get independence after the war would assist in occupying the gulf of 'Aqabah'. This was done by the Arab and it quickened the conquest of Turkey by the Allied forces.

While Britain's promise to grant the Arab independence after the war stood as far as Sherif Hussain was concerned, unknown to the Arab, another tripartite agreement was going on between Britain, France and Russia to partition the same Arab land.²² After the war, instead of fulfilling the promise it made, Britain in collaboration with its Allies, got the land partitioned. Thus, Jordan, Arabia and Palestine came under the protection of Britain and Syria; Lebanon and Iraq were put under France.

The Balfour Declaration

Palestine, now a colony of Britain had accepted fate when it had to become part of the Britain's share of the European conspiracy. Britain's promise of handing over power to the landowners was again taken seriously by unsuspecting Palestinians. Instead of working positively and sincerely toward the new arrangement, Britain encouraged Jews to settle there, especially those living in their land, obviously to get rid of them in Britain.

When Britain established a new colonial administration in Palestine in 1920, more Jews were encouraged to come down for settlement. Their influx, this time, triggered suspicion from the hosts, especially when the visitors began to grab lands as they wished and with the apparent injustice, the United Nations came in to do what it referred to as justice. In it, fifty six percent of the entire land was allotted to the Jews whose population was about twelve percent, while the owners, the Palestinians, with over eighty percent population was to share forty two percent.

The remaining two percent of the land was left for Jerusalem and its environs as international zone.²³

The Palestinians were naturally surprised at the turn of event, they became confused and enraged. And as they were thinking of the next line of action, Britain came up with another straw. It left Palestine and tactically handed over the administration of Palestine to the Jews.

Having gotten the mantle of power, the Jews consolidated their hold and commenced the plan of laying total claim to the land. They feared that their failure to do just that may lead to their expulsion and their eventual return to wandering round the world. They therefore chose to unleash terror on their host who were forced to accommodate them in the first instance.

Barely one year after the United Nation's division of the land and precisely in 1948, the Jews had secretly arranged for arms and ammunitions with which to attack the Arabs and exterminate them. Unknown to the Arabs, the Jews smuggled in arms from Czechoslovakia, and in April 1948, rose in a coup like operation, massacred the Arabs in their thousands in the midnight while asleep.²⁴

Unaware of the happening, the Arabs had to flee their homes for dear lives since they were not prepared for it. Thus, they were expelled from their land and denied rights to their property including farmlands which was the mainstay of their economy. They thus, became refugees in sister Arab nations.

Their desire to retaliate was stifled by lack of weapons with which to fight a just cause. Their brother Arabs who should have helped secure weapons could not do so due to their loyalty to either America or Britain. Despite many resolutions of the United Nations, passed to allow Palestinians to live in their land independently, they could not since nobody was ready to implement these resolutions.

When all hopes to regain their lost land failed to materialize, the Palestinians resorted to violence²⁵ to vent their anger not only to the Israelis, it seems, but also on the world body that can not guarantee justice on nations it administers. Ironically it is this reaction of the poor and oppressed Palestinians that is being referred to as terrorism. Similarly, whenever Muslims in other parts of the world react to persecution meted out to them, it is globally referred to as terrorism.

Muslims throughout the world, particularly the youths are now aware of the injustice to their brothers and sisters and are resolute to revenge in whatever way they can. They are frustrated particularly at the attitudes of the Arab nations, led by Saudi Arabia, for their inability to come to the rescue of their brothers and sisters. Rather, they use their wealth to further empower the powerful nations to destroy their own (Muslim) brothers.

CONCLUSION

Arab has roles to play in the progress of Islam because of the unique position they occupy in the Islamic world. The position of Ka'bah, the emergence of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and their abundant wealth have consequently vested them in the responsibility of championing the welfare of Islam and Muslim world on them.

It seemed from the inception of Islam, that the Arabs do not appreciate the importance and the enormity of the message of the religion brought to their doorsteps. Otherwise, how can one explain the intra-hostilities that began soon after the exit of the prophet and lasted for centuries? If the message of Islam is peace among its adherents and even Muslims co-existing peacefully with non-Muslim, the Arabs would need a rethink and change their style of leadership.

The great transformation brought by Islam and which had once made the Muslims to lead the world for centuries in the past would not have eluded them if it had been well appreciated and credited to Islam and not mistaken for Arab civilization. This is very clear from the huge contributions of non-Arab Muslims to Islamic civilization that mostly surpassed those of the Arabs.

For Arabs to do what is just, it has to engage in the following: to realize its roles in Islam and stand up to the challenge; to collaborate with the Muslim-world in putting Islam and the Muslims in their right perspective; to identify the enemies of Islam and the Muslims and to practically disengage alliance with them in the interest of Islam; and to understand that the wealth bestowed on them is to be used for the benefit of all Muslims.

ENDNOTES

¹Hitti, P.K., History of the Arabs (London, Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 1984) p. 19.

²Hadasi, Sani, Better Harvest: Palestine 1914-1979 The Caravan Books New York, 1979 p.258.

³Ibid.

⁴Jeffries, Joseph M.N.; Palestine: The Reality (New York Longmans, Green & Co. 1939) pp. 237-238.

⁵See R.I.I.A., The Middle East (Second Edition) p. 36.

⁶Hitti, op. cit. p. 92.

⁷For example, the Qur'an in chapter 23, verses 12-14 discusses the science of creation.

⁸Hitti op. cit p. 176.

⁹Ibid pp. 180-182.

¹⁰Iqbal, S.M.; The Arab Glory, The Arab Grief, (Delhi Idarah-Adabiyat 1977) p. 213.

¹¹Paden, J.N., Ahmadu Bello-Sadauna of Sokoto: values and Leadership (Zaria, HudaHuda Publishing Co. 1986) p. 534.

¹²Sibawaihi was a Persian. He was discussed as most remarkable figure in Arabic Learning. His book was one of the most remarkable in Arabic Grammar.

- ¹³Bukhari is the most remarkable scholar of Hadith literature. His Hadith compilation is rated the best. He was a Persian.
- ¹⁴The technical know-how is with the West and if they had imbibed English language, the scientific and technological advancement would have positively affected the growth of Islam more than it is at present.
- ¹⁵The only language approved for the observance of Salat by the Islamic laws is Arabic language, therefore, no one, whatever tribe he belongs to, is at loss during salat anywhere in the world.
- ¹⁶Many Arabic schools that were funded by different Arab governments have nothing to show for it. It is due to lack of supervision.
- ¹⁷Most Arab nations do broadcast only in Arabic. An example is Al-Jazeera until recent time Millions of viewers who turned to it do not understand the contents. Only Saudi's second channel and perhaps Egypt have some periods for programmes in English Language.
- ¹⁸Qur'an, 3:110.
- ¹⁹Hitti *op. cit* p. 120.
- ²⁰Websters; Third New International (Massachusetts 1986) p. 1723.
- ²¹Encyclopaedia Americana p. 133.
- ²²Woodward, E.L. Butter, R., Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939 1st ser. Vol. 4 pp. 241-151.
- ²³Sani *op. cit* p. 70.
- ²⁴*Ibid* p. 86.