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Arab time capsule: Once we were the leaders of Islamic civilization

By Dr. Mahboob A. Khawaja

January 28, 2010 (Pal Telegraph) - "It is highly probable that but for the Arabs, modern European civilization would never have arisen at all; it is absolutely certain that but for them, it would not have assumed the character that has enabled it to transcend all previous phases of evolution. For although there is not a single aspect of European growth in which the decisive influence of Islamic culture is not traceable, nowhere is it so clear as in the natural sciences." Robert Briffault (*The Making of Humanity*).

This week (Jan. 25, 2010), the London Museum of Science is hosting an exhibit on the historical achievements of the Muslim world. But the time period is not the 21st century; rather, it celebrates the golden age of Islamic civilization in Al-Andulus (Spain) from the 8th century to 16th century. Many Western scholars describe the Arabs of the time as the "people of the Quranic age." While the Europeans lived in the dark ages of barbarism, Muslims were the most advanced civilization in Southern Europe. A BBC newscast made me think deeply and reflect on what I wrote two decades earlier in two articles titled "Why Muslims are a Divided People?" and "Towards Muslim Unity" -- widely published in English and Arabic (the *Muslim World League Journal*, *Makkah al Mukarramah*, *Al-Muslimeen*, *Al-Mujahtamah* [Kuwait] and a weekly from New Delhi).

Once upon a time, the Arabs were the leaders in knowledge and human progress, and Islamic civilization was the pioneering influence across Europe, causing the continent to become a role model for centuries to come. For 800 years, the Arabs developed the most advanced societies - the longest period during which any civilization is known to have flourished in human history. The London Museum of Science is celebrating this past, not the present or the likely future. Why? Simply put, Muslims have not been part of the progressive movement for change and development in the 21st century. They are acting more like Arabs without Islam. The achievements over the centuries were the outcome of Islam as a system of thinking and living, and nothing else. After the eviction of the Muslims from Al-Andulasia, they misconceived future challenges and preferred to live in a time capsule of borrowed time and money. They continued to be dispersed, arguing about the past and not thinking about the present or the future. They remained "scattered like seeds," as Dr. Shaw Dallal ably describes in his book.

Two decades ago, the Muslim masses were primarily concerned with the peaceful creation of an independent Palestinian state. But now their worries have expanded to include Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arabian peninsula. The Western strategy is to create new problems, so that the core issue is sidelined. Nobody seems to care how much Muslims have lost on all of the major frontiers of human survival. For example, consider how many Muslims are now homeless and refugees in their own countries. The UN estimates that 90 percent of the world refugee population is of Muslim origin. No one questions WHY.

Ruled by ex-colonial masters, Muslims are more divided now than at the time of formal imperialism. Egotistical and self-made Muslim rulers are selling Muslims and their interests to foreign powers for money and political favors by manufacturing a myth of "Islamic extremism" and "terrorism." Many rulers dependent on petro dollars call themselves "moderate" Muslims - an innovative way to give meaning and purpose to wickedness and treachery. The masses are boxed in, helpless captives unable to think about anything except survival, not knowing how to replace their stupid, cruel leaders who stay in power with the aid of their colonial masters.

Compare contemporary Muslims to those who lived during the time of Al-Andalusia, and you will be disgusted. The London Science Museum does not and cannot capture this reality. The exhibition portrays past material, scientific and intellectual progress, but does not explain the reason for the recent decline.

The Arabs created a pioneering culture of tolerance, encompassing various ethnicities, faiths and languages -- thus inspiring the development of everything from mathematics to astronomy to library science. However, it seems that at the beginning of the 21st century, the world went terribly out of focus. So-called "moderate" Muslim political leaders prefer ambiguity and silence to avoid standing for Islam in public and losing their official status and financial-aid packages from their colonial puppetmasters.

True leaders create leaders. When Muslims were the leaders in faith and human values, they articulated a unique civilization tolerant of diversity and varied cultural ethnicities and built upon the unity of Islamic faith to nurture peace and human development. If you list the discoveries and contributions of Muslim scholars, they are countless. Do you know any other scientists or scholars whose contributions were used in text books for six centuries in European medical schools? Consider Mohammad Hussein Bu Ali Sina's *Cannon of Medicine*. The Europeans changed his name to Avicenna so that nobody would recognize that he was a Muslim scholar. It is said that Ibna Sina alone discovered and authenticated 36 pharmaceutical formulas that are used to this day. Marai Rosa Menocal (*A Golden Reign of Tolerance: The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*), explains: "The lessons of history, like the lessons of religion, sometime neglect examples of tolerance. A thousand years ago on the Iberian Peninsula, an enlightened vision of Islam had created the most advanced culture in Europe....In Cordoba, the library housed some 400,000 volumes at a time when the largest library in Latin Christendom probably held no more than 400."

Contemporary Western ruling elites have many problems: For instance, they do not know what peace means. If they had found peace and consciously recognized it, why would they be striving to attain it throughout recorded history? Do you struggle for goals you have yet to achieve, or the ones you have already reached? Arab proponents of true peace *do* speak out, but are unable to reach the majority of media-controlled humanity. Arab religious scholars see the light just in mosques, whereas people live in darkness.

What went wrong with the succeeding generations of Muslims? Foremost, they ignored Islam and tried to copy the age of ignorance ("Jahilliya"). Is it a crime or mismanagement of human affairs?

Arab civilization has a long, credible history. In contrast, Americans are relatively new to civilization and rush to hasty conclusions, only thinking after acting and then feeling guilty for waging bogus wars on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. Islam disciplined the Arabs to THINK in advance, acting not just to protect our own community but for the good of humanity as a whole. The Al-Qura'an identifies them as "the best people chosen to invite humanity towards goodness and forbid evil." When Arabs forgot the universal mission of "goodness", they were defeated and continued to be so to this day. Can they regain global leadership through Islam? AbdulHamid Abu Suleyman (*Crisis in the Muslim Mind*), believes so: "The basis of Muslim strength and ability as well as creativity stems from faith....the early generations of Muslims understood this, and the result was that they were successful. Allah is ever forgiving and merciful."

Muslims have a mission: a God-given duty to invite humanity towards goodness and true success -- a consciousness they have ignored to obtain a superficial, oil-fed prosperity. This naïve, Western concept of prosperity has drained away Arab cultural values, intellectual creativity and commitment to one ummah, one people. Now, they appear more attracted to air-conditioned edifices; big, polluting automobiles; foreign, exploited house-maids; and satellite dishes. This oil-based, consumable "prosperity" has destroyed their inborn capacity to THINK and act like Muslims and to work towards a sustainable global mission for the good of humanity.

Despite our numbers and countless resources, what have contemporary Muslim leaders done for the interests of the Muslim ummah? Opportunism is the hallmark of the 21st century, "moderate" Muslims who are capable of consuming bread and butter without much effort. However, building palaces on moving sand does not facilitate human progress. Western strategists created an innovative time capsule to entrap oil-producing Arab leaders into an oil-linked fantasy. Was the discovery of oil a conspiracy ("fitna") to change the Arab way of thinking, to reduce their belief in Islam as a successful system to govern human life?

What went wrong with the Arab pioneers of Islamic civilization across the European continent? Bernard Lewis (*What Went Wrong*) talks about the currents of history, missing leadership and the impact of political and technological advances in Europe -- which all worked to curtail the growth of Muslim influence. However, among many reasons, few suffice to explain the primary concerns:

- 1- Neglect of Islam as a system for life, and the absence of proactive, transformational leadership.
- 2- A change in the originality of thinking, causing an absence of proactive vision for the good of humanity and a role model that promotes righteousness ("Ummah of Khair," a nation of goodness).
- 3- Systematic decadence in intellectual, moral and political leadership.
- 4- Dismantling of the Islamic institutions of thinking and political governance needed for the development of one ummah, and defiance of the role of reasoning and accountability.
- 5- Adaptation to colonial thinking, behavior and social norms that drain Islamic unity, creativity and movement.
- 6- Fluid and transient prosperity - the aftermath a society dependent on oil-export revenues.
- 7- Illusions of the neo-colonialist elite that oil revenues will last forever and their exclusive property.
- 8- Overwhelming materialism and consumerism.

Generation after generation, Muslims have been defeated and submerged into other societies by their Western masters. Humanity in the West shrunk from intelligence to stupidity; whereas Charles Darwin (*Origin of the Species*) was uplifted and honored, man ("insaan") was degraded.

In contrast, Islam focuses on the man ("insaan") as the primary object of change and progressive development. Alexis Carrel (*Man the Unknown*), appears to affirm the Islamic perspective on human development: "Certain forms of modern life lead directly to degeneration....In the poor as well the rich, leisure engenders degeneration. Cinemas, concerts, radios, automobiles and athletics are no substitute for intelligent work. We are far from having solved this momentous problem of idleness created by prosperity, modern machinery or unemployment. By imposing leisure upon man, scientific civilization has brought him great misfortune. We are incapable of fighting the consequences of indolence and irresponsibility as cancer and mental diseases.....After all, the purpose of civilization is not the progress of science and machines, but the progress of man."

Arabs and other Muslims, the pioneers of scientifically progressive civilization, became prisoners of foreign ideas. They moved from freedom to human exploitation, transformed into digits and numbers to become an abstract reference in a tourist guide.

How can contemporary Muslims revive their cultural presence and leadership role in the global political arena? The political imperatives call for the new generation of proactive, educated and intelligent people to lead the way in reforming the old, obsolete, inherited infrastructure of political governance -- shaping a

new, sustainable system of institutional development and nation-building. The hard facts of life speak for themselves. There is not a single Muslim country to present a credible, intelligent leader to the international community. Muslims are operating from a position of moral and intellectual weakness and deprivation, not of strength. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular must develop public institutions with participation by the citizenry, since Islam emphasizes the concept of "shura" (consultation is an important principle for societal decision making, law, justice and accountability).

As one ummah, Muslims could have a common currency and an international organization -- an "Ummah Council" responsible for developing policies and dealing with issues of security, peace and conflict resolution. The powerful nations of the world have intelligent and powerful leaders to represent their national interests. Muslims are handicapped and misinformed, and have failed to develop leaders like those of the past (such as Syed Qutb, Jamaluddin Afghani, Abu al Alla Moudoodi, Mohammad bin AbdulWahab, Sultan Salahuddin Ayoubi, King Abdulaziz, Dr. Soekarno of Indonesia, Dr. Allama Mohammad Iqbal, Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Ayub Khan of Pakistan). Muslim societies cannot escape responsibility for its collective failure to produce intelligent leaders. Living under authoritarian rulers and political turmoil is degenerating Muslim's' energies, positive thoughts and creative abilities.

Leaders striving to be effective and successful must hold a vision of the future and be open to listening and learning. They cannot be rigid and hidden in remote palaces away from the people. Most often, they are in touch with the strengths and weaknesses of the people around them and have a proactive vision for the future, based on concrete ideas and ideals that conform to the laws of God. The 21st century is marked by planned conflicts and wars of greed and political domination. Look at the Islamic world; there is not a single institution or university in any Muslim country to deal with the important issues of international security, peace and conflict management. If you propose to the rich, oil-exporting Arab leaders the imperatives of building such learning institutions to enhance the bonds of Islamic civilization, they will get offended and refuse to respond to your suggestions. Simply, they are not open to listening to the voices of reason. Consider the Shah of Iran, General Musharaf, Saddam Hussein and so many others who came to a sorry end. The so-called leaders - military dictators, authoritarian kings and presidents and political thugs -- gained billions from the planned devastation of the Muslim masses in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, enriching their lifestyles in the Western-sponsored theatre of absurdity until they died in disgrace.

Carly Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett Packard ("technology, business and our way of life: what's next") stirred my thoughts and soul with her thoughts years ago: "There was once a civilization that was the greatest in the world...."

This civilization was driven, more than anything, by invention. Its architects designed buildings that defied gravity. Its mathematicians created the algebra and algorithms that enabled the building of computers, and the creation of encryption. Its doctors examined the human body, and found new cures for disease. Its astronomers looked into the heavens, named the stars, and paved the way for space travel and exploration.

Its writers created thousands of stories: stories of courage, romance and magic. Its poets wrote of love, when others before them were too steeped in fear to think of such things. When other nations were afraid of ideas, this civilization thrived on them and kept them alive. When censors threatened to wipe out knowledge, this civilization kept the knowledge alive and passed it on to others.

While modern Western civilization shares many of these traits, the civilization I'm talking about is the Islamic world from the year 800 to 1600, which included the Ottoman Empire and the courts of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, and enlightened rulers like Suleiman the Magnificent. Although we are often unaware of our indebtedness to this other civilization, its gifts are very much a part of our heritage. The technology industry would not exist without the contributions of Arab mathematicians. Sufi poet-philosophers like Rumi challenged our notions of self and truth. Leaders like Suleiman contributed to our notions of tolerance and civic leadership. This kind of enlightened leadership - leadership that nurtured culture, sustainable diversity and courage - led to 800 years of invention and prosperity.

Are there any Muslim leaders open to listening and learning for their own good and capable of articulating a navigational change to serve the interests of the Muslim ummah? As Al-Qura'an says, "intelligent people always readily accept advice."

Dr. Mahboob A. Khawaja specializes in international affairs-global security, peace and conflict resolution and international affairs with keen interests in Islamic-Western comparative cultures and civilizations, and author of several publications including the latest: *One Humanity and the Remaking of Global Peace, Security and Conflict Resolution*, 2019.