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Learn lessons of history to progress

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TO plan for the future, we must first of all look backwards so that we know where we came from. If we do not do that, then we may actually be moving backwards even though we may feel we are moving forward.

The same thing applies when we face the 21st Century - an era where information made available through sophisticated technology will change people's lifestyles and where borders between nations can no longer prevent the inflow of information and other activities. Accompanying the inflow would be challenges in such fields as economy and finance besides social and cultural activities. This means we need to seek guidance and draw lessons from world history, Islamic history and history of the Muslims.

This does not necessarily mean that we can find all the right answers through Islamic history. But we may be able to learn the strategies and approaches by Muslims who were so successful in the early years but these strategies were no longer suitable in the later years and instead brought negative results. At least we can identify what were the ineffective ways used to counter problems at that time, challenges and problems which may be similar with the ones we will face in the future.

Even if we do not go deeply into Islamic history, it was obvious that ignorant Arabs who were living in the desert, whose culture was so backward that they were willing to kill their own children and were obsessed with their ways, later accepted Islam and its teachings and succeeded in creating a vast empire and developed a civilisation far superior than others during their time. From Spain to China, the once-ignorant Arab helped spread Islam to the point that half of mankind accepted the religion and changed their lifestyles, language and written scripts. Against the fact that Prophet Muhammad SAW himself was illiterate, the achievements of the Arabs who became Muslims were indeed outstanding. Within just 100 years after hijrah, the ignorant desert Arabs, by just accepting and practicing Islam, had built a big and strong empire. The spread of Islam after this was not as wide even though efforts to this end continued successfully.

We also know from history that after the Muslims were ousted from Spain in 1492, the Turkish Islamic Empire emerged in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Subsequently, the Turkish empire also fell to the point that Turkey no longer became the centre of an Islamic Empire, and instead it rejected Islam in its administration and declared itself as a secular state which had no involvement in the Islamic world.

The rise and fall of Islam and its followers in history have close connections with the religion they practised. But why was it that when the ignorant Arabs adopted Islam they became such a dynamic group of followers? But in the later years, a lot of teachings deviating from Islam's true path were spread and more Muslims became involved in a power struggle while declaring that they were doing so in the name of Islam.

That is why three out of four Caliphs died through killings. Only the first Caliph, Saidina Abu Bakar, was not killed. Saidina Abu Bakar was known to be humble. When he was appointed Caliph, he told everyone that they could criticise him because he said he was a mere mortal and not a prophet. The killing of Saidina Omar and Osman was surely because there were followers of Islam who did not agree with their leadership.

But when Saidina Ali was appointed Caliph, the opposition to him was

very strong. War ensued between Saidina Ali and the Muawiyah which eventually ended with the murder of Saidina Ali, resulting in a split among the Muslims - the Sunni and Shiite. The difference between the Sunnis and Shiites were great but both argued that their religion was Islam. How is it that the one religion brought by Prophet Muhammad SAW could become two with wide differences? Surely one of them is not Islamic, or probably each of them have different interpretations of the religion which are both correct and incorrect. What was clear was the fact that the different interpretations and teachings was a result of a political struggle, that is to become a Caliph by certain leaders.

But different interpretations on Islam continued to be made. Whether these were the results of problems brought by changing eras or the political leaderships in these two sides, scholars continued to make rulings (fatwas) all the time. At the same time, some scholars introduced their own ruling and formed groups or tariqat and others. To support them, many of them created hadiths which had no real basis.

Two hundred years after hijra, Bukhari collected a total of 600,000 hadiths. Out of these, he only verified 7,000 and rejected about 593,000 which he believed were false and not genuine.

Other hadith scholars such as Muslim and Tarmizi accepted even less than the 7,000. There were hadiths accepted by Bukhari but rejected by other scholars who also studied them, and vice versa.

This happened only 200 years after hijra. After this, a lot of hadiths were created by other people. There were many opinions, interpretations and fatwas made and supported by various means. Some of them were rejected by scholars who came much later but this did not deter anyone to continue to make fatwas without proper procedures approved by Islam. Hence, the different interpretations.

The truth is that in Islam's 1,400 years, they were exposed to a variety of teachings each claiming to be Islamic but were opposites of each other. There were 1,001 beliefs ranging from narrow interpretations which rejected the present world outright and a desire to bring Islam back 1,400 years before, to one that alienates Islam and accepts secularism. As a result, the followers became very confused. Some lost their minds and lost their way in the process.

Can such Muslims face the challenges of the 21st Century when the world is just a village with sophisticated information technology, rockets, laser, spacecraft and nuclear bombs? In a world dominated by the big powers where none is Islamic, where such injustice exists that Muslims without weapons are left slaughtered by their enemies, where an Islamic country can be isolated and its people made to die of starvation; and where Muslims are fighting each other as enemies, and who are confused by their own teachings; are backward, poor and weak; can they enjoy any benefit from the 21st Century?

The answer is that they will not enjoy any benefit. Instead, they will become weaker and will be suppressed and colonised, directly and indirectly.

But this fate should not befall Muslims. Going by history, we can see that the progress and achievements of the Islamic Empire in its early days were due to the fact that there were not many differing interpretations of Islam, not many false hadiths, and not many shallow fatwas which could have confused the followers. That was why they were not hindered from furthering their studies on the world which were pioneered by others. They even translated the studies by others and made extensive and deep research on their own which surpassed those of other civilisations during their time. They invented studies on astronomy, algebra, logarithm, medicine, navigation and various other branches of mathematics. They were so skilled

in the use of metal that Damascus was known to have the best steel for weapons.

It was possible to study all this knowledge because there was no prohibitions against them. There was also no instructions that only Islamic studies could be pursued. They knew that the Koran wanted Muslims to look at everything created by God - the hills and mountains, the earth and the sky, rain, flora and fauna, animals which can be turned into food, vehicles, clothings, the moon and the stars, the days and nights, the weather and the climate and many other God-created things. In the eyes of the Islamic personalities at that time, looking was interpreted as not just looking in the physical sense but also studying them in detail so that they can bring benefits to mankind.

A hadith says: "Seek knowledge even as far as China." It was pointed out by detractors that this was just a saying of the Prophet and it was not a command from God. When they disagreed with a particular hadith, they were quick to discredit it and refused to acknowledge it as a source of Islamic teaching. But if they subscribed to it, then they would not cease to highlight it repeatedly, even if it's authenticity is doubted. Surely seeking knowledge in China does not mean Islamic knowledge. During the Prophet's period, China was also known to have deep knowledge in such fields as medicine, literature and paper, explosives and many others.

Since Muslims then followed the teachings of the hadith, they were clever and efficient, able to comprehend all of God's gifts for the benefit of themselves and Islam. That was why they could build a credible and big empire and filled it with institutions of knowledge, industries, business and commerce, modernise agriculture through new engineering techniques and many others.

Unfortunately, some personalities who disputed and questioned the Islam practised in the progressive years emerged. They began rejecting all the knowledge which they said were against Islam and Muslims were prohibited from studying them. Those with especially strong leanings on the fiqh began inventing and spreading their teachings so that Muslims were discouraged from studying those which the former claimed to be un-Islamic. Institutions of higher learning were no longer supplied with books on science and philosophy which did not specialise on Islam. Big libraries ceased to be built and those in existence were no longer equipped with books on areas of studies pioneered by other communities and those pioneered by Islamic philosophers in these fields. Many of these books were destroyed by this anti-knowledge group, especially those considered un-Islamic.

Instead, a heated debate took place in trying to define what constitutes Islamic and what were the Islamic laws and regulations pertaining to crimes in the eyes of Islam. Muslims froze and were unable to move forward when confronted with rules and regulations based on narrow interpretations.

In certain parts of North Africa and several other locations individuals claiming to be Imam Mahadi surfaced promising to cleanse Islam before Doomsday. They battled every Muslim who failed to acknowledge them. In Spain, they succeeded in bringing down the administration and forced their narrow teachings to be accepted. Hence, Muslims became even more backward and they were ousted from Spain and could not even save themselves in North Africa.

The history of the Turkish Empire is also similar. The hold over the Turkish Sultanate by scholars with vested interests made it impossible for Turkey to adjust accordingly with the times. The Turkish army became weak and often opposed the Government over problems of uniforms and weaponry said to be un-Islamic. In the end, Turkey was overcome by the western

powers. The intellectuals and military leadership of Turkey were so disillusioned with Turkey that they began to believe that the country they liberated was secular.

The Turkish and Arab empires fell because Muslims rejected knowledge which they considered to be un-Islamic, and therefore unnecessary and prohibitive to Muslims. Muslims had failed to face and counter the problems brought about by a rapidly changing world.

The 21st Century is already regarded as a very challenging one. Modern technology including information technology will radically change people's lifestyles. No one can isolate themselves from the world and sophisticated technology. People can travel anywhere in the world in less than one day. They can also converse with one another anywhere across the globe on real time basis as if they are in the same room. Dispatching letters by hand has been replaced by instant despatch through the Internet. Those in possession of information and know how to use them will influence world politics and economy. By the same argument, wars will be won by those in possession of the latest information and know how to use them.

Many inventions close to magic can be created by those in possession of deep knowledge in certain fields. As such those in possession of such technology can do anything they like, including oppressing Muslims and Islamic countries.

In Bosnia, they allowed mass slaughter of Muslims in broad daylight. Worst than that, they confiscated weapons owned by Muslims so that this would facilitate the killings by the enemies of Islam. It is the same in Chechnya, Pakistan and South Asia.

But Muslims were hapless when this injustice took place. They dared not even voice out their objections. Such is the fate of Muslims today. For as long as they reject the teachings of Islam which allows them the ability to defend themselves and seek knowledge for this purpose, and as long as they fail to seek happiness in the present world and the hereafter, the fate of Muslims will remain the same.

Obviously, religious knowledge has to be pursued, but there is no reason for Muslims to merely specialise in this discipline. Should Muslim scholars become experts in religious fields alone and not seek knowledge in other disciplines which can help bring progress and save Muslims? Doesn't the knowledge in other fields which are important to save the Muslims form part of mandatory lessons in the interest of the ummah? Isn't the Muslim community guilty of a sin because among them there are no experts in fields which can help save Muslims? Aren't the Muslims at fault because today there is not even a single major Islamic power? Aren't the Muslims wrong if because of their own weaknesses and disappointments, they Muslim community generally at fault, if, due to their disappointment with the weaknesses of Muslims as a result of their neglect in the pursuit of other knowledge, other Muslims reject Islam and turn their country into a secular nation.

We accept that knowledge alone does not guarantee that Islam and Muslims will be saved. For this, many other important Islamic teachings will have to be practised. Islam asks Muslims to remain in brotherhood. But in contrast, they fight with each other because there are those who claim that only they are Muslims while the others were less Muslims, in fact apostates. This is happening in most Muslim countries, in fact even in Malaysia there are those who easily decide for themselves that only they are Muslims while the rest are apostates.

The Quran tells us to be patient. Efforts to rehabilitate the strength of Muslims and Muslim nations will take a long time. It requires political stability, efficient administration, knowledge proficiency, wealth, ownership of sophisticated industries and the development of defences

which are capable of saving the nation and the Muslims.

But many Muslims, especially the extremists, are impatient, like to take harsh unplanned actions, rebel and run riot without reason, especially against other Muslims. Due to such unprepared actions, they waste the little strength that Muslims have without achieving any progress or development. On the contrary, they create a state of chaos in the Islamic states and weaken the Muslims. In fact, they indirectly or unconsciously, conspire with enemies of Islam, including the Zionists.

Because of these people, there is almost no Muslim nation which is well-administered or developed. There is no Muslim nation which is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century. While other races and followers of other religions become mightier and progressive, and while world powers become arrogant and oppress Muslims, Muslims and Muslim nations continue to remain backward, weak, disunited and easily used by enemies of Islam to weaken them. They frequently blame the enemies of Islam for disuniting them, but this situation does not encourage them to stop their own actions which do not benefit Muslims.

In view of this situation, what is the reformation needed by Muslims everywhere which can help prepare them and ensure their success in the 21st century? The much-needed reformation is one which can make Muslims return to the true teachings of Islam, which do not contain mixtures of the various deviant interpretations, teachings and fatwas made throughout the 1,400 years after hijrah.

This reformation must be able to ensure that Muslims return to the teachings of the Quran and the sunnah of the Prophet which everyone knows had happened during the days of the Prophet.

This includes how the problems posed by the group of Jahiliah Quraish were handled by the prophet and other early Muslim followers. This also includes the situation in Medina, as well as the philosophy behind the diplomatic and military struggle to take over Mecca.

What we know from the teachings of the Quran and hadith is that brotherhood among Muslims is given paramount importance. They do not wage wars against each other because of differences in opinion on the facets of Islam. During the time of the Prophet, Islamic brotherhood was the main factor.

It is true that all religious problems could be referred to the Prophet to be solved. However, Islamic teachings have provided for Muslims to solve their problems through musyawarah. All parties have the right to voice their opinions, but decisions made through musyawarah have to be obeyed. No one, including Caliphs, can make their own unquestionable decisions and force them upon Muslims.

For sure, no small groups stooped to their own teachings and interpretations and acted violently to force society at large to accept their opinion. All parties were tolerant. The Prophet himself did not force his family members who did not accept Islam, to embrace it.

Muslims during the days of the Prophet were patient, courageous, disciplined and loyal to the Prophet's leadership. They were not prohibited from working, even on Fridays, in pursuit of worldly wisdom and halal wealth.

They were given the responsibility to defend Muslims. Security and defence were important, not the manner in which it was done or the equipment used. Therefore, if defence required different equipment, these equipment must be invented and used. If for this purpose, certain knowledge has to be acquired, it will be wrong to ignore its pursuit.

To save the Muslims, a strong and stable Government is also needed. Islamic leadership must be elected through musyawarah, a democratic method and not by cheating or instilling fear in Muslims through untrue

teachings.

Differences in opinion and teachings remain in the Muslim community. While, the deviationists must be returned to the true path, it must be done through musyawarah and not pressure, oppression and injustice. If an agreement cannot be reached, tolerance and brotherhood must be practised. Attempts through the use of force which will only bring about disunity and never-ending riots, must be avoided.

In short, to face the 21st century which is full of challenges of the Information Age, the reformation needed is one which emphasises the values of Muslims and based on true Islamic teachings which are free from confusing beliefs and interpretations which are not based on the Quran and hadiths.

The actual situation of this new Age must be acknowledged. Cheating one's own self on the real situation will bring about failures in facing the challenges of the 21st century. The main reformation is the reformation of thoughts for those who are trapped within the teachings which are not truly Islamic and which confuse the Muslims.