

# Returning to Islam's Roots

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The following is an edited excerpt from a speech by the prime minister of Malaysia, delivered at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London on September 22



Can we honestly say that the situation of the Muslim today is good? It certainly is not. And if it is not, is it because of Islam, because of its teachings? Or is it because changes have been made to Islam so that it is no longer in accordance with the original teachings of Islam?

After the collapse of the Turkish Ottomans, Muslims everywhere became divided and much weaker. In fact, for a time there was hardly a Muslim country which was not colonized or dominated by Europeans. Some Muslim reformers then began to question the orthodox views of Muslim scholars. They wanted to "modernize," to emulate the Europeans. Some went so far as to believe that only by discarding Islam and becoming secular could Muslims regain their pre-eminence. They achieved very little success in the face of strong opposition by the influential orthodox scholars. The problem was that some of the reformers were too influenced by the European concept of the separation of state and church. This may be possible in the Christian context. It is not in the Muslim world.

Islam is a way of life, and a way of life cannot be compartmentalized into spiritual and material areas. The system of government of a country and its development is a part of the way of life. It is entirely possible to be Islamic even if a modern administration or system, including democracy, is adopted. It is possible if we go back to the fundamentals of Islam. The problem is that Muslims tend to emphasize and venerate the form rather than the substance in the practice of everything.

*“We have to go back to the one Islam brought by the Prophet”*

Thus, clothing to cover the body is translated as the wearing of the Arab dress. That other forms of dress can also cover the body is regarded as being of no merit, un-Islamic. Reading to acquire knowledge is interpreted as reading to acquire Islamic religious knowledge only. Defence of the *ummah* [or Muslim community] is interpreted as veneration of the ancient weapons of war. But what is one to make of the neglect of learning and defence in the Muslim world? Must Muslims forever buy their weapons from others? Surely they must have indigenous capacities to invent and produce for their defence needs. To do this, they must learn science, mathematics, technology and the rest. Far from regarding the pursuit of these subjects to be not

as good as the study of Islamic theology, it should be regarded as an *ibadah*, which should gain merit for the individual and the community.

But to focus on the defence of the *ummah* will need political stability and economic wealth. And so Muslims must learn to restrain themselves and to make whatever system of government they adopt, work. Democracy is compatible with Islam. The Prophet left it to his followers to choose a leader from among themselves. One can say that a system where the leader is chosen by an electorate is much more Islamic than otherwise. And having been elected, a leader must care for his people. This means ensuring they have food, clothing, shelter and security.

Islam means peace. We wish peace upon each other. This is also fundamental to Islam. We only fight against those who attack us. When the enemy sues for peace, Muslims must respond positively. But we are doing none of these fundamental things. Today, Muslims are labelled terrorists. We don't think it is justified. But the fact is that we are killing people because of our anger, regardless of who we kill or the consequences. Admittedly, we are desperate and outgunned and there is very little else we can do to defend ourselves against injustice. But should we just lash out indiscriminately, killing innocent people, including those who sympathize with us? Shouldn't we stop to think, plan and strategize with ultimate victory as our goal? What have we got after almost 100 years of fighting? Nothing. Even our anger is not assuaged. We are, in fact, getting more angry.

Our present predicament is not pre-ordained by Allah. It is entirely due to our own doing. We have neglected and misinterpreted the teachings of Islam. We rely merely on praying to Allah for help when Allah has said in the Koran that we have to help ourselves first before He will help us.

We do not have a need to reinvent Islam. Islam is perfect and is for all times. Islam is relevant if we stick to the fundamentals, if we interpret them correctly. The problem is with the interpretation. It has not only divided the *ummah* but has made the *ummah* practically illiterate, incapable of dealing with even the simple problems of governing.

Islam is still the perfect religion. It is Muslims who are not perfect, who have allowed themselves to misinterpret Islam. Muslims must correct themselves. It is they who must change. The Prophet brought to us only one religion of Islam. Today, there are hundreds of Islams. We have to go back to the one Islam brought by the Prophet. ■