

The Significant Role of the Intellect in Confronting Contemporary Global Challenges: The Taught of the Holy Quran

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Abstract

Nowadays, the Islamic world is confronting constant challenges in terms of physical and spiritual, as a whole. Living in such challenging atmosphere persuades Muslims to develop proper strategies for handling ongoing crises in a way arguably compatible with the Islamic codes and practices, as well as the fast growing universal demands. This paper, based on the taught of the Holy Quran, aimed to finding out a modest approach to handling the contemporary challenges. The Islamic approach towards the historical challenges, such as the way in dealing with unbelievers and intellectuals of other religions, was of special interest in this paper.

Deep analysis of selected verses of the Holy Quran reveals that paying full attention to the special requirements for every time and place and having precise understanding of different nations' characteristics; their values and way of thinking are among the most important factors of tackling challenges in every time. The Holy Quran teaches us that having rational and intellectual exchanges even with unbelievers are among the most important tools for the Muslims to overcome their challenges. In conclusion, Islam appreciates the role of the intellect and chooses a reasonable and convincing manner in confronting important challenges all over the time.

Keywords : Holy Quran; Islamic thought; Islamic world; Global challenges; The Intellect

Introduction

Today, the entire world in general and the Islamic nations in particular are confronting constant challenges which are different in their nature, size and severity (Brown, 2011; Hafeznia, 2012). Contemporary challenges, either physical or spiritual, inevitably influence all aspects of human life in terms of social, cultural, political and economic. Every year, both manmade and natural challenges cause enormous socioeconomic deficit and claim thousands of lives in all around the world (Nagamatsu et al., 2011). In preceding years, manmade challenges such as violence, political turbulence and wars are getting widespread all over the world. On the other hand, the destructive consequences of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, famines and heat waves became even harsher, partly due to the effect of climate change and global warming (Zangh and Liu, 2012).

Furthermore, the public wellbeing and welfare is constantly threatened by traditional diseases and new emerging infections such as Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) which has been a major cause of death and public health concern since early 1980's. Based on the existence evidences, the most deprived places of Africa are the core of ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic and the largest numbers of the

world's HIV/AIDS patients have already lived in undeveloped areas. In 2009, the number of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa reached 22.5 million, 68% of the global total, and the estimated 1.3 million people who died of HIV/AIDS related illnesses in sub-Saharan Africa comprised 72% of the global total of 1.8 million deaths attributable to the epidemic (Global report, 2010). The high burdens of other non-infectious and chronic illnesses such as psychiatric disorders also impose huge socioeconomic costs on both developed world and developing settings every year (Bele et al., 2012).

A Closer Look at the Concurrent Challenges in the Islamic World

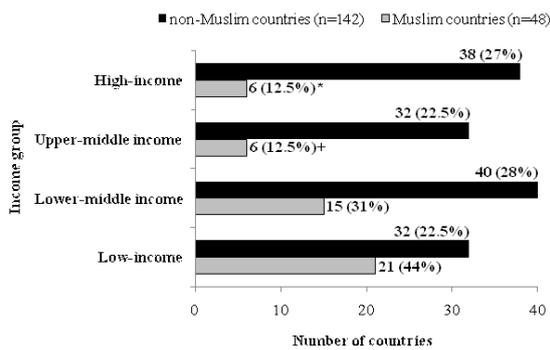
Nowadays, the Islamic world is confronting constant physical and spiritual challenges. A comparison between 48 Muslim-majority countries (MMC) and 142 non-MMC revealed that Muslim nations are generally at a significant disadvantage in terms of social, financial, educational and health indicators (Razzak et al., 2011). As shown in the Figure 1, the majority of the MMC (75%) were low-income or lower-middle income countries, whereas almost half (49%) of the non-MMC were upper-middle income or high-income countries. Furthermore, the number of maternal deaths and the number of deaths of young children were twice as high in MMC as non-MMC. The mean values of maternal deaths was 455 versus 266 per 100,000 births, the number of deaths of babies under one year of age was 56 versus 34 per 1000 live births, and the number of children who died by the age of five was 80 versus 52 per 1000 live births for the MMC compared with the non-MMC, respectively. Large differences were also found in the socioeconomic and education indicators, as shown in the Table 1. Adult literacy rate was significantly higher for non-MMC, as it was 85% for the non-MMC compared with 69% for the MMC. In addition, there were fewer resources for health in MMC than in non-MMC. Annual per capita expenditure on health in MMC (US\$ 156) was one-fifth

of that in non-MMC (US\$ 627). Similarly, facilities such as hospital beds (22 versus 36 per 10000 population) were better by a large margin in non-MMC. Other predictable factors that explained the differences between the two groups of countries were poor availability of clean water and the level of corruption.

Table 1: Comparison of the selected socioeconomic indicators between the Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries

Variable (n = 48)	Muslim majority	Non-Muslim majority (n = 142)
Human Development Index (HDI)*; mean (SD)	0.6 (0.2)	7.9 (5.8)
Gender Equity Index (GEI)+; mean (SD)	50.3 (8.5)	64.9 (11.1)
Total life expectancy in years; mean (SD)	64.2 (11.0)	66.7 (13.1)
Total adult literacy rate (%)	68.6 (25.8)	85.0 (16.8)
Male adult literacy rate (%)	78.6 (20.6)	89.5 (12.7)
Female adult literacy rate (%)	65.2 (28.3)	84.5 (19.6)
Improved water access (% of population)	77.5 (19.5)	85.7 (16.6)
Hospital beds per 10000 population; mean (SD)	21.7 (18.9)	36.3 (31.2)
Government expenditure on health per capita (US\$)	156 (165)	627 (896)
General government expenditure on health (% of total government expenditure)	7.6 (3.5)	13.3 (8.8)

(Data were retrieved from Razzak, 2011; SD = standard deviation; GDP = gross domestic product * The HDI is a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, and standards of living. The HDI formula result is a number from 0 to 1 (1 is the best outcome possible). + The GEI includes three dimensions of economic activity, empowerment and education. The index's range of values is from 0 to 100, with lower values indicating greater inequity and higher values greater equity.)



(Data were extracted from Razzak, 2011; High-income Muslim countries: Bahrain, Brunei Darussalam, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates; Upper-middle-income Muslim countries: Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Malaysia, Oman and Turkey)

Figure 1: Comparison between Muslim majority and non-Muslim majority countries by their income category

On the other hand, the fast growing sense of racism, religious conflicts and wars are the other examples of contemporary challenges involving the Islamic world. Religious extremism and sectarian violence are the major elements of hatred, expanding from the Arabian Peninsula to the Indian subcontinent (Waseem, 2010). Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, severe political turbulence in North Africa and the Middle East, and massacre of Muslim minority in Myanmar are the fresh examples of contemporary challenges in the Islamic world. The relations between Sunni and Shi'a have also been the subject of major disputes in the Islamic world over the years. Although the two major denominations of Islam consider the Quran to be divine, there are differences in their religious jurisprudence, practices, traditions and customs that occasionally led them to blood-shedding conflicts. Other major factors which create divergence among the Muslim nations included: border and land conflicts, large difference in their socioeconomic development, poor structures of their economy in both production and consumption sectors and their deep dependency to the world powers in terms of economic, technological, political and martial (Hafeznia, 2012).

On the “Right Track” in Tackling the Challenges

These challenges are mostly dependent to each other and improvement or deterioration in one may affect others in a positive or negative sense. In most occasions, the undesirable effects of such challenges are fuelled by a widening gap between rich and poor and a range of socioeconomic inequalities, exacerbated by discrimination of highly vulnerable groups and persistent gender inequity. Hence, the instability and insecurity imposed by the physical and spiritual challenges are still the major hurdles against sustain socioeconomic development of every single nation in the world. Certainly, there is no silver bullet to immediately solve such complex problems, and despite efforts to reduce the negative impact of the challenges, many of these factors have not been adequately addressed so far. Most of the challenges due to their international nature cannot be addressed by any government or institution alone and collaborative action among governments, international organizations, academics and religious leaders are required. In order to facilitate long-term sustainable global development, top strategy and creative policy such as being more sensitive to long-term global perspectives, incorporating ethical considerations more routinely into global decisions, and establishing new security strategies to reduce ethnic conflicts and terrorism are desperately needed.

Living in such challenging atmosphere persuades Muslims to develop proper strategies for handling ongoing crises in a way arguably compatible with the Islamic codes and practices, as well as the fast growing universal demands. Therefore, this paper based on the taught of the Holy Quran, aimed at finding out a modest approach of handling the contemporary challenges. The Islamic approach towards the historical spiritual challenges, such as the way in dealing with unbelievers and intellectuals of other religions, was of special interest in this paper.

The Significant Role of the Intellect in the Holy Quran

One of the best ways to manage and control the contemporary global challenges is the optimal use of knowledge and the intellect which is arguably the most valuable asset of all humankind. However, the concept of the intellect, its meaning and people's attitude and perceptions towards it may vary considerably in different individuals, nations and religions at different places and time. That means from the Islamic perspective the meaning and application of the intellect may completely differ from those of unbelievers, due to their different attitudes towards the reality of existence, its past, present and future. From the Islamic point of view, there is a particularly close relationship between monotheism, the intellect and people's way of life. There are some holy verses in which the God holds special reverence for the wisdom and highly appreciates the role of the intellect. For instance, according to the Islamic taught having faith to the Divine religions is a definite sign of having the intellect and vice versa. It is mentioned clearly in the Holy Quran that people who gave up from the Abrahamic religion are unwise and reckless (And who turns away from the religion of Abraham but such as debase their souls with folly? ... Al-Quran 2:130). In another occasion at the early age of Islam, when the Prophet (pbuh)- who is the embodiment of perfect wisdom- was accused of being mad and insane by the infidels, the God instead described the infidels by strong words as idiot people who are the same as animals or even worse (... Or thinkest thou that most of them listen or understand? They are only like cattle; - nay, they are farther astray from the way. Al-Quran 25:44). In fact, such ongoing conflicts between monotheists and infidels are one of the decisive evidences in favor of The Judgment Day, the time to judge who is intellectual and who is not. In another occasion, the Holy Quran gives the Intellect even more power of questioning the God for his doing. (He cannot be questioned for His acts, but they will be questioned) for theirs(Al-Quran 21:23). Surely, the only

thing is potentially in title to question the God for his doing is the intellect of human being. However, God had said in advance that he did nothing wrong to be questioned by others. Such significant position for the intellect is not limited only to this holy verse; and in another occasion the Holy Quran says the reason for sending Prophets from Noah to Mohammad (pbuh) was to prevent people's appeal against the God (We have sent thee inspiration, as We sent it to Noah and the Messengers after him: we sent inspiration to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms; Of some messengers We have already told thee the story; of others We have not, and to Moses Allah spoke direct; Messengers who gave good news as well as warning, that mankind, after (the coming) of the messengers, should have no plea against Allah. For Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. Al-Quran 4:163-165). One important point worth mentioning here is that the wisdom of human is only in title to question the Divine action but there is no way for the intellect to question the Divine essence or Divine attributes (Javadi-Amoli, 2008). What is clear is that these holy verses completely blessed human intellect and has established its credibility and authority.

The rational way in which the Holy Quran challenges with infidels is also remarkable and important to notice. In two separate occasions, when it comes to dispute with infidels, the Holy Quran asks them to bring reason for worshipping other than the God. (Or have they taken for worship (other)gods besides Him? Say," Bring your convincing proof -of their godhead-Al-Quran 21:24; ... Is there any Allah beside Allah? Say: Bring your proof, if you are truthful! Al-Quran 27:64). It comes later in another holy verse that their proof have to be based on either narration of the earlier Holy Scriptures or the intellect and knowledge (Say (unto them, O Muhammad): tell me about what you invoke besides Allah. Show me what part of the earth have they created. Do they have any share in the heavens? Bring me a scripture revealed before this, or some vestige

of knowledge, should you be truthful.” Al-Quran 46:4). The rational atmosphere was designed by the God has even gone beyond this point by encouraging the infidels to behave wisely even when they are arguing concerning the God (Yet there is among mankind such a one who dispute concerning Allah without knowledge or guidance or a scripture giving light. Al-Quran 22:8). According to these evidences, the significant role of the intellect is overwhelmingly appreciated in Islam, alongside the narrative reasons.

The Quranic narration of the dialogue between Prophet Abraham (pbum) and people who worship a star, the moon or the sun is most likely one of the best examples of a way to use the intellect properly. Based on the knowledge was gifted to Abraham (pbuh) by the God, he succeeded to express his intellectual argument against the unbelievers in a convenience language, simply understandable for them. His soft approach and flexibility also were highly significant in this story. (So also did We show Abraham the kingdom and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude; When the night covered him over, He saw a star: He said:” This is my Lord.” But when it set, He said:” I love not those that set”; When he saw the moon rising in splendor, he said:” This is my Lord.” But when the moon set, He said:” Unless my Lord guides me, I shall surely be among those who go astray”; When he saw the sun rising in splendor, he said:” This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all).” But when the sun set, he said:” O my people! I am indeed free from your guilt of giving partners to Allah; “For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Allah”; His people disputed with him. He said:” (Come) ye to dispute with me, about Allah, when He (Himself) hath guided me? I fear not) the beings (ye associate with Allah. Unless my Lord willeth,(nothing can happen). My Lord comprehendeth in His knowledge all things. Will ye not yourselves be admonished? “; How should I fear (the beings) ye associate

with Allah, when ye fear not to give partners to Allah without any warrant having been given to you? Which of (us) two parties hath more right to security? (tell me) if ye know. Al-Quran 6:75-81).

The Islamic Approach in Confronting Contemporary Challenges

The current situation of the Islamic world, whether positive or negative, is actually a reflection of what they have done so far, as it mentioned clearly in verses of the Holy Quran (And that; man can have nothing but what he strives for; And the fruit of his striving will soon come in sight. Al-Quran 53:39-40; The Day when man shall remember all that he strove for. Al-Quran 79:35). Hence, people must pay the price of their wrongdoing; no matter what their wishes and their religion are (It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor the desires of the People of the Scripture. He who doeth wrong will have the recompense thereof, and will not find against Allah any protecting friend or helper. Al-Quran 4:123).

The discrimination between the Islamic nations and others is mostly rooted in Muslims commitment to act intellectually and knowledge-based, which is arguably the most neglected part of the Islamic beliefs. For having the upper hand in confronting the contemporary global challenges, most of the Islamic nations need to reconsider their strategies and policies in accordance to the pure Islamic codes and practices. Islam is a comprehensive religion brings together faith in the God, intellectuality and good deed; and the combinations of these principles guarantee the happiness and eternal felicity of Muslims (Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith, verily, to him will We give a glorified life, a life that is good and pure and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions. Al-Quran 16:97).

Conclusion

Deep analysis of selected verses of the Holy Quran reveals that paying full attention to the special requirements for every time and place and having precise understanding of different nations' characteristics; their values and way of thinking are among the most important factors of treating challenges in every time. The Holy Quran teaches us that having rational and intellectual exchanges even with unbelievers are among the most important tools for the Muslims to overcome their challenges. In conclusion, Islam appreciates the role of the intellect and chooses a reasonable and convincing manner in confronting important challenges all over the time.

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