

FROM MUSLIM TO ISLAMIC SCHOOLS

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Islamic education system did not collapse; it choked to death, initially, slowly and imperceptibly, but later in broad daylight, in front of the helpless onlookers, over the course of the 11th/17th century. This demise may also be irreversible.

Despite certain recent attempts to cast away the gloom of that bleak century, there is no denying the fact that it was a century during which on one side of the Mediterranean Galileo, Kepler, Bacon, Newton, Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Locke, and Leibniz were overturning the entire order of the cosmos as it was understood on the other side of the Mediterranean.

Ali al-Qari (d. 1605)	Mediterranean	Galileo
Mir Zahid Harawi (d. 1689)		Kepler
Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī (1615-1690)		Bacon
Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624)		Newton
'Abd al-Haqq al-Dehlawi (d. 1642)		Descartes
Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramli (d. 1671)		Malebranche
al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (1631-1691)		Spinoza
Aḥmed Mūneccimbāšī (ca. 1631-1702)		Locke
'Abd al-Ghānī al-Nābulusī (1641-1731)		Leibniz

Despite its spiritual merits—even necessity,¹ this solution was suicidal, because the shift in global balance of power, which was just around the corner, would leave no place of refuge for the *'uzla* seekers, all of whom seemed to have been totally oblivious of the soon-to-strike calamity that would not only destroy the system of education that had given birth to some of the most penetrating minds any civilization has ever produced, but also shackle the Umma of the last Prophet in intellectual, political, and economic servitude for centuries to come.

In retrospect, the heavy air that filled that fateful century seems to be full of a hitherto unknown slumber that would spread not only in the Ottoman empire, but far and wide, throughout the lands where Muslims had lived for centuries with their internal feuds and external threats, but never at the outer edge of existential obliteration.

It was an exceptional century. A thousand years after the Hijra, the leading scholars of the Umma were all going for the siesta, all at once, it seems, such that none had to the *baṣīra* to see what was coming: In addition to the above named, it was a century of Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, Yaḥyā al-Shāwī, and Muḥammad al-Rūdānī in the Maghreb; Ibrāhīm Kūrānī's student Muḥammad Barzinjī in Medina; 'Abd al-Qādir al-Baghdādī in Cairo; Kahyral-Dīn al-Ramli in Palestine; and Qāsim al-Khānī in Aleppo. No one saw the coming catastrophic implosion. Why?

We may never know why such outstanding scholars did not realize that the very existence of the bastion of Islam—the education system—was coming under a foreign threat? Why did their deep study of the transmitted and the acquired sciences not sharpen their own faculties to allow them a clear understanding of the impending danger? True, scholars were not rulers, but they are the heir of the Prophets and as such they had responsibility to warn those who were busy making blunder after blunder at home and on the frontiers of their empires. They did not even counsel, as Shāh Waliullah Dehlawi (1703–1762) would do a century later, when it was already too late.

¹ See, for instance, Gibril F. Haddad, "Quietism and End-time Reclusion in the Qur'ān and Hadith: Al-Nābulusī and his book takmil al-nu'ūt within the *'uzla* genre," in *Islamic Sciences*, Vol. 15 (Winter 2017) No. 2, pp. 91-124; https://cis-ca.org/media/pdf/2017/2/A_qaeritqahaahbtawtg.pdf, accessed April 22, 2023.

One reason why answer to these questions may never be fully known may be because, in the final analysis, such large-scale, global changes are beyond human comprehension. *If a wound has touched you, a similar wound has touched [other] people; such days We rotate among the people, so that Allah may know those who believe and take some from you as martyrs and Allah does not love the unjust* (Q 3:140).

II

When we woke up...

While we cannot know, in full detail, what actually happened to the Islamic education system, we do know that what happened during the course of the seventeenth century in Europe not only led to the overthrow of Greco-Islamic conception of how the inherent forces in the cosmos work at the terrestrial level, it also gave birth to a reservoir of energy that generated tremendous military and economic power, which was then used to subjugate almost everyone living on this planet, directly or indirectly. Marshal Hodgson was right when he called it “The Impact of the Great Western Transmutation: The Generation of 1789”, although his timing is off by almost two centuries:

This broad transformation had far-reaching effects not only among Europeans but-almost as soon-in the world at large. Its long-run implications for us all have not yet become entirely manifest. Some of them will be taken up later. From the point of view of the world at large, however, and particularly of the Muslim peoples, there was a more immediate consequence which will concern us here. This was that by about 1800 the Occidental peoples (together with the Russians) found themselves in a position to dominate overwhelmingly most of the rest of the world-and, in particular, to dominate the lands of Islamdom. The same generation that saw the Industrial and French Revolutions saw a third and almost equally unprecedented event: the establishment of European world hegemony.²

This European over-reach was—and remains—invincible, even as it is unethical and immoral, but ethics and morality are a different story. The ground realities are such that the process of colonization and exploitation of resources belonging to other people, obliteration of other cultures, destruction of other lands and lives, and annihilation of other worldviews has never stopped since the turning of scales in the seventeenth century.

Game plans have changed, but the game has not.

Muslim nation states that have emerged through a grand restructuring of the world through euphemistically called decolonization instead of re-colonization have either surrendered or outsourced their educational systems to the colonizers of yore, doing, exactly what Ibn Khaldūn (732-808/1332-1406) had said they will do. Writing six centuries before the contemporary manifestation of his prediction, in the twenty-third section (*faṣl*) of the second chapter of his insightful *Muqaddima*, tellingly entitled, “The conquered always want to imitate the conqueror in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and in all his other conditions and customs,”³ he said,

² He adds, in a footnote: “I choose the term “hegemony” as less strong than “paramountcy”, and as suggesting the leading role of Europeans: they did not immediately dominate all lands in the world, but they immediately dominated all interstate relations-political or commercial or even intellectual: thus the Europeans were the leading foreign merchants in the ports of all the world, however resistant for a time these areas were to European interference; and the European consular representatives were everywhere the leading foreign political figures to be reckoned with. In this sense, the Europeans exercised full world hegemony even before they had imposed their conditions effectively within all regions.” *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Volume 3, 1974, p. 176-177.

³ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *Diwān al-mubtadā’ wal-khabr fī tārīkh al-‘Arab wal-Berber wa man ‘āshirahum man dhawī-l-shā’n-l-akbar*. Ed. by Khalīl Shaḥāda. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1408/1988.

The reason for this is that the conquered is [already] convinced of the superiority of the one who has conquered him and to whom he is [now] subservient, either because he considers him perfect or erroneously assumes that his subservience is not the outcome of his material and physical defeat, but due to the perfection of the conqueror. Once this erroneous assumption fixes itself in the soul, it becomes a firm belief. Such a person is then drawn to the conqueror, adopts his manners and assimilates in him...The conquered can always be seen to assimilate themselves in the conquerors in the use and style of dress, mounts, and weapons—indeed, in everything...

This goes to such an extent that a nation dominated by another neighboring nation will exhibit a great deal of imitative behavior...they even draw pictures on the walls [like those of the conquerors] and put them in their buildings and houses [just as the conquerors do]... An intelligent observer concludes from this that [this imitation] is a sign of dominance of the others.⁴

The intellectual and psychological mindset that informs the decisions of rulers of the contemporary Muslim world is made up of this malady, and it has yielded an educational landscape dotted with schools and campuses of the Western educational systems in all oil-rich countries and their cheaper, local dim and faded copies in poorer countries, all in high demand, without exception.

This educational landscape has not emerged overnight. It has been in the making for almost two centuries. It emerged from the Reformers' discourse who were so thoroughly defeated in their entire being that they said, "without flattering the English, I can truly say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners, and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man."⁵

This is not an isolated example; it is a typical representation of what is all over the map—from Cairo to Timbuktu and from Dubai to Kuala Lumpur, along with Karachi, Tehran, and Rabat.

No matter how complex the reasons are for the inferiority complex that played—and continues to play—a decisive role in the making of the contemporary educational landscape in the Muslim world, the role of the nineteenth-century "re-formers" cannot be under-estimated in the emergence of the present system which has already produced a generation of genetically modified ruling elite, mostly men who appear in public in traditional garbs but in fully Western clothing when out of public view. The social and intellectual makeup of these rulers varies to some extent but their mental makeup is the same across all the Muslim lands. Whether they are drabbed in military fatigues or civilian clothing, whether they are called his or her highness, king, prince, princess so and so or prime minister or president, they are, ultimately, the decision makers who decide what is to be taught to the next generation. And invariably, they want the next generation to learn what they have learned. Thus, they are self-replicating their own "high-end" genetically modified variety, but only in cheaper and cheaper versions.

⁴ Ibid, p. 184.

⁵ For instance, Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–99), one of the most influential figure of the nineteenth century Indian Subcontinent, wrote—shortly after receiving the Order of the Star of India at a ceremony held in London on August 6, 1869: "Without flattering the English, I can truly say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners, and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man." *Maqalāt-e Sir Sayyid* (Lahore: Majlis Taraqi-e Adab, 14 vols., 1965), vol. 14, 8.

III

In Retrospect

In retrospect, it is clear that certain fundamental changes have taken place in the global system since that fateful day of September 11, 2001 when two planes were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a third hit the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C., and the fourth crashed in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Almost 3,000 people were killed. The event triggered a process of change unlike any witnessed in history: from one end of the earth to the other, a ruthless and unrelenting war was waged to “protect” America.

The change required a complete remaking of the global world order that had emerged after the second World War, and it has been accomplished with a breath-taking speed, which is similar to what happened shortly after World War II, when nation-state after nation-state was “born” along with a “father of nation,” who was often a military officer in the colonial army. These new nation-states were inducted in the rapidly evolving world order. They would normally start their journey at the bottom of the ladder, with an application for membership in the United Nations, formally established on 24 October 1945 with an undemocratic hierarchy which had Security Council at the top of decision-making process, with “veto power” granted to the so-called “five permanent members” (USA, UK, France, Russia, and China). It is important to note that in the new distribution of power, the three old colonizers—UK, France, and Russia—recognized the share of USA because of its military and economic power amply displayed in the World War. China was an “accidental permanent member” of the Security Council, because its inclusion in the veto-power group was originally for the Republic of China (ROC), which was part of the victorious Allies of the Second World War. ROC was, however, reduced to the Island of Taiwan within four years and thereafter a long struggle started for this seat in the Security Council which was not resolved until 1971.⁶

The emergence of nation states was encouraged because smaller entities are more manageable. There were 51 “Founding Members” of the United Nations in 1945; today, it has 193 members. In addition, economic control of the world was ensured through the establishment of organizations such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1944 at the UN Monetary and Financial Conference (“the Bretton Woods Conference”).⁷

These institutional developments were, in fact, a part of the great remaking of the world, but after 9/11, these mechanisms of control were deemed to be insufficient; the world had to be remade once again.

The spread of secular modernity was suddenly pushed into a much higher gear. It was realized that Islam as a religion is out of reach for any human remaking, but Muslims are not. What could be done so that the Qur’ānic worldview does not shape and define lives of one-fourth of humanity? “Educate them so that they speak your language, even though you cannot change how they look.” The 19th-century British answer came handy.

⁶ By 1949, the mainland was in the hands of the Communist Party of China and it was renamed People’s Republic of China (PRC). ROC retreated to the island of Taiwan. But PRC was not recognized by the Western powers; this gave rise to two Chinas and one seat in the Security Council. The United States and its allies opposed the replacement of the ROC at the United Nations until 1971, when they finally recognized it due to its economic and military development. Since then People’s Republic of China is part of the veto group in the Security Council.

⁷ Muslim rulers did their part to establish a trans-national organization, but miserably failed to achieve anything through the caricature of UN they established following the arson of al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem in 1970. This pseudo supra-state social club, called Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), serves as a façade behind which the potentates hide and through which they incessantly issue resolutions after their meetings—resolutions which have not liberated an inch of Palestinian land or prevented any massacre of believers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir and so many other lands.

IV

Education is the vehicle of change—perhaps the most powerful tool we have, because it changes the lens with which one looks at life and cosmos—our worldview. Worldviews are important because, on the human plane, worldviews are *acquired*. The process of acquisition is akin to osmosis: the child is born upon *fitra*, but as soon as a baby starts to breathe the air of his or her earthly abode, enormous transformations begin the process of change that would eventually lead to a full-grown human being with convictions, ideas, and ways of being. The early stages of human development through schooling are foundational. Schooling is now controlled by governments. Governments of modern nation state has a power that is new in human history. In most Muslim countries, governing institutional structures, systems of education, economic and social arteries of change, indeed, the very air, has been recolonized to such an extent that it is akin to a change of *qibla*.

In a way, this change is based on the success of the work of the nineteenth century re-formers, who desired to catch up with the West, not only just in science and technology, which they did not understand, but also in education and ways of being. Even dress code, for instance, the “Hat Law,” adopted by the Turkish Parliament on November 25, 1925, which is just an outward manifestation of this mentality.⁸ That was a century ago. The current crop of rulers, however, has no time for such formalities; they want turn-key systems which can spring into action yesterday and transform their countries to their desired ideals in the blinking of an eye: Mega-city projects in deserts which have remained in their pristine natural state for centuries, mutual rivalry in erecting tall buildings—so poignantly foretold by the best of creation—instantaneously bring into existence Harvards and Princetons in Dubai. The mushrooming of campuses of American universities in countries where one could hardly find high-school graduates in the previous generation is, in fact, proof of the success of re-formers agenda.

What is really amazing, however, is not the success of this multi-generational, multi-billion dollar effort, but the fact that resistance to this remaking of the Muslim mind has not only survived, it has gained more strength and clarity—from the clarion calls of “Islamization of knowledge”, to the robust articulation of worldview of Islam by a few scholars, from the resilience of madrasa system as a whole, which held ground against draconian efforts to obliterate it, to the individual scholars who have correctly diagnosed the roots of the cancerous growth of modern-secularity, there has been a constant struggle to re-orient the educational efforts, even though results are not visible yet and, even though a robust theoretical framework of Islamic education exists, its practical manifestation in the twentieth century remains vague, individualistic, and ineffective.

V

The question haunting those who are sincerely interested in the state of the Muslim education today is how to practically establish schools which will help to ground and anchor young Muslim minds in the Qur’anic worldview—an anchoring so vividly left behind by the one upon whose blessed heart the last Divine revelation was sent—a life preserved in perpetuity that guides us to find practical solutions for everything.

This practical need of the Umma requires practical solutions, not theoretical formulations. Here is a sincere Muslim teacher ready to start the day with a classroom of young Muslims eager to learn a lesson: “Experiencing Diverse Texts”. This is a unit in their language arts class, with precise outcomes determined by the local jurisdiction.

The teacher is faced with the practical issue of teaching a particular unit in a particular subject from the Qur’anic worldview? What resources are there? Where are they? What can be done this morning to make it possible to

⁸ “Law No. 671 on Hats” was adopted by the Turkish Parliament on November 25, 1925. It required that the members and officials of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey were obliged to wear hats as headgear, and the general populace was prohibited from wearing the Fez (*tarbush*, derived from the Persian *sarpush*, meaning headdress). continuing a habit contrary to this. The law entered into force after being published in the government-run Official Gazette, dated 28 November 1925. According to Article 174 of the 1982 constitution, the Hat Law is among the “revolutionary laws” of the Turkish nation (laws that cannot be repealed even if it is found to be unconstitutional).[3]

teach these young minds something they will remember for the rest of their lives? Something that will contribute to their worldview?

This may sound dramatic, but it is the actual reality of the day for thousands of teachers who are teaching in Muslim schools aspiring to be more than just Muslim schools. Similar scenarios can be constructed for other units in science, social studies, history, in fact, in all subjects and all grade levels.

What actually happens, varies from one classroom to another—even within the same school—but most teachers have access to some kind of resource: a text book, a website, a previously taught unit, something to use as a base for the delivery of their lesson that morning.

We only have to apply the Ten Foundational Principles to some of the available resources to ascertain their contra-Qur’ānic nature. Such resources have come into existence over the course of time in the public school system. In North America, provincial and state Departments of Education have poured millions, if not billions, of dollars to provide such resources to teachers. These resources are not only the backbone of what is actually taught, but also the most helpful starting points for teachers, even when they are energetic and inspired to deliver these units in their own way. Muslim schools, generally speaking, do not have such resources in the manner they are available in the public system. Yet, they expect teachers to not only teach these lessons, but expectation is that they will be taught in a manner that is different from the public school system.

Faced with time constraints, obligations of family lives, and other existential realities, most teachers take these resources and sprinkle verses of the Qur’ān on this material. This impresses, even satisfies, most administrators and parents, but it is like sprinkling *ḥalāl* spices on the meat that was not slaughtered according to the Qur’ānic teachings. (For a presentation on this subject, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZmYpSL_n6w)

VI

APPLYING TEN FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES (AL-MABĀDĪ AL-‘ASHARA) TO DEVELOP CLASS-ROOM READY UNITS

Starting September 2023, MEF plans to have a series of international workshops for interested teachers. These workshops will, insha Allah, begin with “Education (*al-tarbiyya wa-l-ta‘līm*) in the light of the Qur’ānic and Prophetic teachings. This will be followed by workshops to construct the framework to teach each of the four core subjects from the Qur’ānic worldview.

- i. Languages and other expressions of the *self*
- ii. History and Social Studies
- iii. Mathematics
- iv. Science

TEN FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

Using the Ten Foundational Principles—first developed by the “Imām and foremost specialist of kalām and uṣūl, specialist of Arabic language, grammar and poetry, Qur’ān commentator, orator, jurist, and Ḥadīth scholar,” Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Fūrak al-Asbahānī al-Shāfi‘ī (330–406/ 941–1015), these workshops will establish a broad framework for teaching these core subjects.⁹

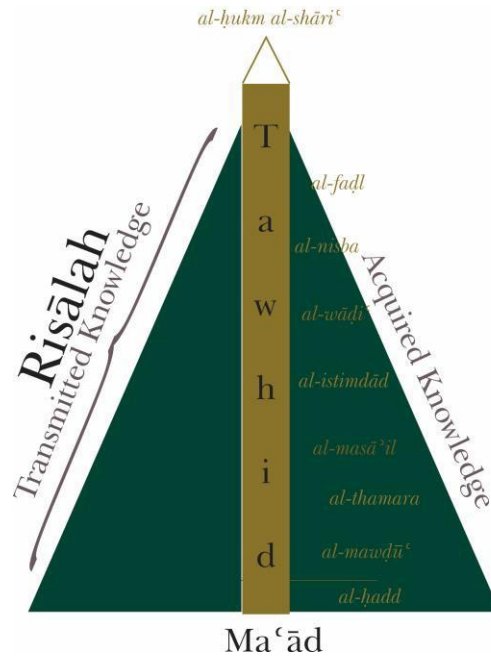
Ibn Fūrak’s work was further refined by successive generations, most notably by Imām al-Ghazālī (d. 505/111), but his principles have remained intact for centuries. He had synthesized these principles as a framework to

⁹ For a biographical note on Ibn Fūrak, see:

https://web.archive.org/web/20200210013939/http://www.sunnah.org/history/Scholars/ibn_furak.htm#_ftn1
; accessed May 10, 2023.

teach and study every branch of knowledge. It was done in that fascinating 4th/10th century which witnessed the great flowering of intellectual fervor in the wake of the Greek-to-Arabic translation movement which brought almost the entire corpus of knowledge from Greek—and to a lesser extent—Pahlavi, Sanskrit, and Syriac into Arabic.

The arrival of the Greek and Hellenistic texts in Islamic civilization is a fascinating process of inter-civilizational currents which has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies,¹⁰ but what has not been studied in any depth in modern times is the impact of this arrival which created an enormous fissure the Islamic intellectual tradition and more importantly, the efforts to “process” this new knowledge—something that is extremely relevant to moving from Muslim to Islamic Schools.



1. *al-hadd*, the definition of a given subject
2. *al-ism*, the name
3. *al-mawḍū'*, the subject matter
4. *al-thamara*, the benefit of learning it
5. *al-masā'il*, the issues with which it deals
6. *al-istimdād*, the sources
7. *al-wādi'*, the founder
8. *al-nisba*, its relation to other subjects
9. *al-faḍl*, its rank among other subjects
10. *al-hukm al-shāri'*, Law-Giver's Ruling about it

¹⁰ Dimitri Gutas (2012). *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th 5th-10th centuries)*. Routledge; and various other studies.