

WHITHER THE UMMA?
HOPE IN TIMES OF EXISTENTIAL CRISES
Muzaffar Iqbal

The ‘Whither the Umma’ question has, of course, been asked before and under circumstances no less threatening than those which confront the Muslim Umma today; and with a similar sense of urgency, if not more: In 1924, when even the nominal Caliphate was abolished; in February 1258, when after thirteen days of bloodbath, plunder, rape, and burning of the City of Peace (*Madinat al-Salām*), al-Musta‘ṣim bi’llāh—who would be listed in the annals of history as the last of the 37 Abbasid Caliphs—was rolled up in a carpet and trampled under the feet of the Mongol horses. And this is not all.¹

There are other times, higher on the historical arc of the life of the Umma, when questions about its survival loomed large: The first Fitna (35-41/656-661), which witnessed—among other tribulations—the “Battle of the Camel,” when those who had been bonded together through Divinely instilled love in the very presence of the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, found themselves facing each other with drawn swords on the battleground in Basra on a cold day, just 36 years after the Hijrah—a day which resoundingly manifested the obscuring of a very special Divine blessing of which the Prophet himself was reminded while in Madinah: *And He put love in their hearts. If you had spent all that is on the earth, you could not have brought their hearts together; but Allah brought them together. Indeed, He is Exalted in Might and Wise.*² Basra, let us recall, was founded as a garrison city by the Companions, some of whom would be killed by others in the Battle of the Camel that left 10,000 dead.³ The Companions had founded the city when they were sent there by ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23/634-644), Allah be pleased with him and all the Companions, and it became the headquarter of the Muslim army that would defeat the Sassanian empire and open Persia and Transoxiana—*bilād mā warā’ al-nahr* (lit. “the lands beyond the river”, now called Central Asia)—a region that produced the best scholars of Islam for centuries.

Likewise, one still shudders to think about the “Whither the Umma” question at the time of the second fitna (60-73/680-692), during which the Prophet’s grandson, Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (4-60/626-680) was martyred at Karbala in 60/680 and ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (1-73/623-692), the son of al-Zubayr b. al-‘Awwām b. Khuwaylid al-Qurashī al-Asadī (28BH-36/594-656), one of the ten Companions promised Paradise by the Prophet, met the same fate in 73/692, Allah be well-pleased with them all.

Still higher on the arc, in the very midst of the making of the Umma, is the time when the entire Umma was surrounded by the largest army Madinah had ever seen—the army that *came upon you from above you and from below you, and when eyes swerved and hearts reached the throats and you thought many things regarding Allah. It was there that the believers were tried and shaken in a manner most severe.*⁴

And yet, it was on that very day that Allah Most High showed His Messenger palaces of the two super powers of the time—super powers which were to vanish from the face of the earth within the lifetime

¹ For an earlier iteration of this theme, see “Challenges to Islam and Muslims: What is to be done?” *Islamic Studies* 42:4 (2003), available at <https://jis.cis-ca.org/challenges-to-islam-and-muslims-what-is-to-be-done.html>, accessed March 2, 2022.

² Q 8:63.

³ Tabari, *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa-l-Mulūk*. Beirut: Dār al-Turāth, 1387, 11 Vols., 4:539.

⁴ Q 33:10-11.

of his Companions who, on that day in Madinah, were faced with an existential threat unlike any they had witnessed before. The Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him peace, himself was in the trench, a huge boulder had blocked further digging and time was running out before the arrival of the ten thousand strong confederate army. It was under these circumstances that the Prophet was given the keys of Syro-Palestine (al-Shām) and he saw its red palaces when he struck the boulder obstructing the digging of the trench. And he was given the keys to Persia and shown the white palace of Madā'in when he struck a second time. And he was given the keys to Yemen and he saw the Gates of Ṣan'ā' when he struck the final blow.⁵

But we are not in the times of the Prophet or his Companions, not even in the thirteenth century, when the Battle of 'Ayn Jālūt (Ramadan 658/September 1260) halted the Mongol advances and the Caliphate was reinstated in Egypt by the Mamluks, who supported the emergence of a rigorous scholarly tradition and under whom Cairo and Damascus emerged as the new intellectual centers of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Now, the Umma faces an existential threat that is neither peripheral nor regional; it encompasses the entire Umma and affects the very core of its foundational beliefs and praxis in a way never witnessed before.

II

Thawbān, Allah be pleased with him, said, that the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said:

“The nations will invite one another to devour you, like diners are invited to a dish.”

Someone asked, “Will it be because our numbers will be small on that day?”

He said, “No, rather you will be plentiful on that day, but you will be like scum that is carried down by a torrent and Allah will take away your fear from the breasts of your enemy; and Allah will instill *wahn* in your hearts.”

He was asked: What is *wahn*, O Messenger of Allah?

He said: “Love of this world and dislike of death.”⁶

Most Muslims know that this prophecy is now being fulfilled; some are more aware than others because *they know it experientially*; their lives have been devoured by the nations. They are the direct victims of internal conflicts and external occupations raging across the traditional lands of Islam where the Umma of the last Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, once lived without having to deal with the intrusion of an alien civilization and its myriad aggressions. Muslims now live in nation states, most of which are ruled by non-representative potentates, self-appointed kings, and presidents who come to power with 95% votes. These states remain unmoved by the heart-wrenching suffering of believers in Palestine, Kashmir, East Turkestan, Afghanistan, Burma, Iraq, Syria and so many other places on earth. Their suffering only draws occasional chatter among the ruling clique, statements are issued and forgotten; the suffering continues.

It would not be an overstatement to say that now the Umma is politically and economically crippled despite the false sense of political independence and wealth of some nation states. Its educational

⁵ Aḥmad (14249, 18716) and Nasā'i (3176, 8807); deemed *ḥasan* by Ibn Ḥajar in *Fatḥ al-Bāri* (7/458).

⁶ Abu Dāwūd, K. al-Malāḥim; Aḥmad, Tatimma Musnad al-Anṣār, wa min Hadīth Thawbān; al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Imān* 13:16 §9887.

and state institutions, modes of economic activity, forms of artistic expression, literature, even everyday practices and ways of living are being rapidly reconfigured to fit the mold of an imported secular modernity. This transformation is more rapid in some Muslim-majority nation states than others, but the entire Umma is moving in this direction. In the six richest Muslim states, Western control has reached such a level that for all practical purposes, they have become extensions of the Western societies.⁷ From education to economy, from agriculture to market places, everything is being transformed. Many American universities have opened their campuses in all six GCC countries. A network of Western-style schools was already in existence. Such control on education means that the next generation of these states would think, act, and live like Americans.

On the other hand, there are Muslim-majority nation states where the mere daily existence is a struggle for millions of believers. This disparity is so stark that it becomes hard to believe that Muslims of Somalia and UAE belong to the same Umma. Or Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, listed by the World Health Organization in the top ten countries worldwide in term of obesity,⁸ share the same planet with their brethren in faith living in Somalia and Afghanistan where malnutrition is prevalent in more than 35% of population.⁹ How did the Umma arrive at this state?

III

A quick glance at history is enough to deduce that most of the contemporary Muslim nation states emerged through a grand restructuring of the world after World War II, euphemistically called decolonization instead of re-colonization. In retrospect, it is clear that the old-world colonizers had realized that it was no longer possible to hold on to their colonies in the manner they had held them since their initial arrival in those lands. The changed circumstances needed a new mechanism, which was invented and put into practice with breath-taking speed. As a result, nation state after nation state was “born” along with a “father of the 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 the 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 the 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. The 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 1971.¹⁰

⁷ The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May 1981. GCC consists of the United Arab Emirates, the State of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, the State of Qatar, and the State of Kuwait.

⁸ Al-Nohair, Sultan, “Obesity in gulf countries,” *International Journal of Health Sciences*, Vol. 8, 1 (2014): 79-83. doi:10.12816/0006074; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4039587/>, accessed February 27, 2022.

⁹ <https://www.fao.org/3/X8200E/x8200e03.htm>, accessed February 27, 2022.

¹⁰ By 1949, the mainland was in the hands of the Communist Party of China and it was renamed People’s Republic of China (PRC). The ROC retreated to the island of Taiwan. But the 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, the People’s Republic of China is part of the veto group in the Security Council.

The emergence of nation states was encouraged because they were smaller entities and 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”).

Muslim rulers did their part to establish a trans-national organization, but miserably failed to achieve anything through the caricature of the UN they established following the arson of al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem in 1970. This pseudo supra-state social club, called the 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.

These institutional developments were, in fact, a part of the great remaking of the world. The pace of global change has accelerated manifold since 9/11 through a well-executed “War of Terror”—often misnomered as the “War on Terror”—which has subjugated most of the Muslim Umma to the tyranny of genetically modified kings, princes, military general, icons of entertainment industry, including sports heroes turned politicians, and IMF and World Bank experts who are catapulted to the helpless polities when their economies are about to crumble.

The spread of secular modernity impacts all religions but it is specifically antithetical to Islam, primarily because they both make claims to universality. This dimension of the present crisis means that we can no more frame this discourse in “Islam and the West” terms; geographical boundaries have been broken through technological outreach. Now, it is a global contest between two worldviews. Yet, worldviews are products of beliefs held by real human beings, who now live in nation states. Their earthly affairs are being controlled by governments to an extent that was not even imaginable two decades ago. The nature and extent of the controlling power of the modern nation state is unprecedented in human history. Its impact on the Umma is devastating because of the wholesale surrender of ruling elites to secular modernity. In most Muslim countries, governing institutional structures, systems of education, economic and social arteries of change, indeed, the very air has become infected with modernity. These conclusions can no longer be discarded by pointing to isolated—ultimately inconsequential—initiatives, which spring up here and there in the Muslim world. It is the question of the change of *qibla*, the direction toward which Muslim societies are heading.

This change of *qibla* is part of the success of the work of nineteenth century reformers who desired to catch up with the West in science and technology, often not distinguishing between science and technology. Their late-twentieth century successors started to distinguish between the two and would often ask for technology transfer. The current crop, however, has no time for such transfers; 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—races to buy lethal weapons worth billions of dollars to instantaneously establish armies equipped to fight other Muslims, mushrooming of campuses of American universities in countries where one could hardly find high-school graduates in the previous generation, and the list goes on. What the reformers planted in the previous two centuries has started to yield abundant fruit. It may be that those early harbingers of modernity were unaware of the results of what they were advocating, but that does not change the result.

IV

What Happened? How? When?

To map out the present with some historic depth, we need to briefly look at the destruction of the three apparently powerful empires in the geographical region where Islam has been firmly established for centuries: the Ottoman (689–1343/1290–1924), the Şafavid (907–1135/1501–1722), and the Indian Tīmūrī (933–1274/1526–1857). These three empires achieved their specific forms through a grand remaking of the Muslim world during the one and a half centuries between the sacking of Baghdad in 1258 and the dawn of the fifteenth century—a period during which the traditional Muslim lands recovered from the large-scale destruction that followed in the wake of the Mongol conquest. True, Baghdad never recovered its past glory or its status as the intellectual capital of the Muslim world, but in its stead new locations attracted scholars and scientists. These included the lands of the later Tīmūrī rulers such as Tīmūr (772–808/1370–1405), Shāh Rukh (808–851/1405–47), and Ulugh Beg (796–853/1394–1449).¹¹ Cairo became the heart of Islamic scholarship and retained its supremacy during the Mamlūk Sultanate (1250–1517). The Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), the counterpart of the Mamlūks in the Indian subcontinent, also attracted many Muslim scholars fleeing Mongol invasion and remained a center of scholarship for 320 years, during which it continuously expanded under a series of brilliant rulers, such as ‘Alā al-Dīn Khiljī (r. 696–716/1296–1316) and Muḥammad Tughlaq (727–753/1325–51). Through this great realignment, which produced the three aforementioned empires, the Muslim world recovered, even enhanced, its power and vigor.

These empires had tremendous wealth and resources, yet they were unable to foresee and prepare for the emergence of what Marshall Hodgson has called “European hegemony”, an outcome of the great transformation of its economic, political, scientific, and industrial institutions. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, this transformation produced such important changes in Europe’s economic, political, and military power that by 1800, not only “all peoples had to adjust their governments to a modern European international political order; but also to adjust their economies—a harder task—to the competition of technically industrialized Europe; and finally to adjust their mental outlook to the challenge of modern science as studied in Europe.”¹² 1800 is, however, already too late, because by the time Napoleon arrived in Alexandria on July 1, 1798, the European hegemony was well-established and unstoppable. Napoleon’s surprise arrival in Alexandria, nevertheless, remains a point of articulation of that hegemony which would manifest with great brutality in the following centuries.

Why did the three Muslim empires collapse? When did the balance of global power shift in favor of Europe? How? Why did no one in the Umma see the coming calamity in time to prevent it?

These are weighty questions with which scores of scholars have wrestled *since* the establishment of the European hegemony. The Reformers’ discourse framed the preceding centuries, especially the seventeenth, as an era “marked by unthinking scholarly ‘imitation’ (*taqlīd*), crude Sufi pantheism, and ‘syncretic’ and idolatrous popular religious practices.”¹³ Recent scholarship has seriously questioned

¹¹ Historians of science have plausibly argued that the “Golden Age of Islamic Astronomy” lies between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries, and not in the ninth-tenth centuries as was previously assumed. See, for instance, George Saliba, *A History of Arabic Astronomy* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 15 and passim.

¹² Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3: 177.

¹³ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 2.

this narrative in reference to the Ottoman empire. New studies contend that it is no more possible to construe the seventeenth century as a bleak century during which “on one side of the Mediterranean...one encounters Galileo, Kepler, Bacon, Newton, Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Locke, and Leibniz, whereas on the other side one encounters popular chroniclers, Sufi diarists, popularizers of medical or occult knowledge, and the like.”¹⁴ These studies also attempt to deconstruct the “triumph of fanaticism” narrative, propounded by—among others—Halil Inalcik, Marshal Hodgson, and Francis Robinson.¹⁵ There were no fanatics or sword wielding Mullas fighting against scientific rationality. “The evidence behind a ‘triumph of fanaticism’ in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century is, to sum up, far from compelling. The Kāḏizādelīs were by all accounts a minority within the scholarly class, and in any case, there is surprisingly little evidence that they were hostile to all the rational sciences.”¹⁶

Similarly, we now recognize that the Istanbul Observatory, built in 1577 and demolished in 1580, was not demolished because religious scholars opposed astronomy, but because of its use for astrology, especially, for an incorrect prediction about Ottoman victory against the Safavids.¹⁷ Likewise, the “so-called ‘Ottoman decline thesis’ has also been called into question:

...that is, the notion that towards the end of the sixteenth century, following the reign of Sultan Suleyman I (1520-66), the empire entered a lengthy decline from which it never truly recovered, despite heroic attempts at westernizing reforms in the nineteenth century. Over the last twenty years or so... historians of the Ottoman Empire have rejected the narrative of decline in favour of one of crisis and adaptation: after weathering a wrenching economic and demographic crisis in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire adjusted its character from that of a military conquest state to that of a territorially more stable, bureaucratic state whose chief concern was no longer conquering new territories but extracting revenue from the territories it already controlled while shoring up its image as the bastion of Sunni Islam.¹⁸

While these studies shed new light on Ottoman scholarly concerns of the seventeenth century, deepen our appreciation and understanding of the work of scholars like Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Kūrānī (1615-1690), al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī (1631-1691), Aḥmed Müneccimbāšī (ca. 1631-1702) and ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī (1641-1731), they do not provide answers to the crucial questions about the shift in the global balance of power. They provide convincing evidence that these outstanding scholars were not exceptions in an otherwise bleak century—because the same century had numerous others (Aḥmad al-Maqqarī, Yaḥyā al-Shāwī, Muḥammad al-Rūdānī in the Maghreb; Ibrāhīm Kūrānī’s student Muḥammad Barzinjī in Medina; ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Baghdādī in Cairo; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ramlī in Palestine; Qāsim al-Khānī in Aleppo...),¹⁹ but they do not answer the crucial questions; rather they increase their gravity: why such outstanding scholars did not realize that the very existence of the bastion of Islam was coming under a foreign threat? Why did their deep study of rational sciences not sharpen their own faculties to allow them a clear understanding of the impending danger? Even if scholars were unable to take any practical measures, their wise counselling could have provided intellectual leadership and suggested paths to correct the course before it was too late—something

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 3.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁶ El-Rouayheb, op. cit. p. 26, passim.

¹⁷ D. A. King, “Takī al-Dīn b. Muḥammad b. Ma’rūf,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden, Brill, 1960-2002), Vol. 10, 132-133.

¹⁸ Jane Hathaway, with contributions by Karl K. Barbir, *The Arab Lands Under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800*, end edition (New York, Routledge, 2013), pp. 7-8.

¹⁹ Cf. El-Rouayheb’s description, p. 5.

like what Shāh Walīullah Dehlawī (1703–1762) did in the Mughal empire in the next century, though it was already too late.

Answers to these questions may never be fully established, because, ultimately, these 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 3:141).*

V

Where is Hope?

Away from the nation-state apathy, millions of individual Muslims pray to their Lord in the dead of the night for the relief of suffering of their brothers and sisters. Muslim charitable organizations spring to action when major disasters take place. Hearts ache with pain of the mother of the four-year-old baby who is lost in the forest in freezing temperatures. Muslims all over the world feel the pain of the would-be refugees stranded in the no man's land between Poland and Belarus as guards hurl them between fences marking the two borders. There is an ever-present sense of solidarity with the suffering believers, even though this response does not appear in any survey, graph, or statistics. This, however, does not diminish its importance. It also reflects what the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said: "The parable of the believers in their affection, mercy, and compassion for each other is that of a body. When any limb aches, the whole body reacts with sleeplessness and fever."²⁰

This heartbeat of the Umma, marked as it is in our times by pain and suffering, needs to be transformed into an effective and sustained mechanism of change so that Muslims can once again live with dignity and in peace. This is not easy, yet there is no other choice for the believers: the little *fasīla* (shoot of a plant) in hand has to be planted, even if the Hour is in sight.²¹

Hope may be in short supply, but it can never disappear for the believer. Yet, as al-Ghazālī has counselled, one needs to be critically aware of the difference between genuine hope (*rajāʿ*) and deluded thinking (*tamanī*). He elucidates the difference between the two through the example of the one

who seeks good ground and casts into it seed of first quality which is neither moldy nor worm-eaten, who thereafter looks after it and does whatever is necessary—such as its watering at appropriate times—who then clears the ground of thorns and weeds and everything that obstructs the growth of the seed or makes it rot; who then sits down and expects from the bounty of God the warding off of thunderbolts and blights until his crop is mature and he has achieved his goal—his expectation is called hope.

On the other hand, the one who

scatters his seed in ground which is baked hard or swampy, which is so elevated that water does not reach it, who does not labor one whit in the preparation of the seed—if he then expects a harvest from it, his expectation is called stupidity and self-deceit, not hope. And, if he scatters seed in ground which is good but without water, and proceeds to wait for the

²⁰ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, K. al-Adab, Raḥmatu-l-nās wa-l-bahā'im (6011); *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, K. al-Birr wa-l-ṣila wa-l-adāb, Tarāḥum al-mu'minīn wa ta'āṭufihim wa ta'āḍudihim (2586).

²¹ Anas ibn Malik said, the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said, "If the Final Hour comes and one of you has a shoot of a plant in hand and he is able to plant, he should do so." Aḥmad, *Musnad* 2:296 §12981; Abu Dāwūd al-Ṭayālīsī, 3:545 §2181; Bukhārī, *Adab al-Mufrad*, Bāb Iṣṭinā' al-māl, 168: §479.

waters of the rain in place where [rains] do not prevail, his expectation is called wishful thinking and not hope.

In reality, the noun hope (*rajāʿ*) is legitimate only in relation to the expectation of a thing desired for which those means that fall within the realm of the creature have been facilitated, and only what does not fall within his realm remains, such as the blessing of Allah in repelling birds and blights.²²

Hope now lies within the stark realities of our times. It is the collective obligation of the scholars of the Umma to (i) map out these realities as clearly as possible; (ii) to objectively look at the mechanism of the superfast genetic modification of Muslim societies now in full swing; (iii) to do the hard work of preparing the soil; and (iv) to plant seeds for an internal change to reorient the *qibla*, leaving the results of our efforts to Divine providence. Indeed, this is a tall order, but there is no escape from this responsibility even as one needs to remain cognizant of limits and abilities, individually and collectively.

There are some obvious concrete points of hope worthy mentioning: The median age of Muslims is 24 years, seven years below the median age of non-Muslims.²³ While this factor supports the rapid negative change now in full swing, it also provides hope because Muslims in this age-group are showing great thirst for authentic knowledge of Islam. Even in countries like Turkey, where public space for Islam had diminished, new openings have appeared. Resources have also multiplied. Classical works of Islamic scholarship are already in second stage of recovery, meaning that after their commercial editions, now they are being issued in critical editions. The sheer volume of this effort generates hope.

There are other points of hope. Outside the traditional lands of Islam, there are considerable number of Muslims in Europe, UK, and North America. The emergence of this diaspora is a historical anomaly in the sense of how Muslims have arrived in these lands. Most of them arrived as immigrants, factory or farm workers, and refugees. It is an anomaly, because until this happened, Muslims had always gone to non-Muslim lands as conquerors or traders. This unusual opening of new lands for Islam and Muslims is an unparalleled event in the history of the Umma; no one could have predicted in 1950 that by the end of that transforming century, believers would be calling the name of their Creator in the land of the midnight sun.²⁴

This opening for Islam and Muslims is due to none other than the Sender of the Message. It has brought unprecedented opportunities to the Umma at a time when the historical heartland of Islam is in the tight grip of an intellectually enslaved ruling elite that has lost hold of the paradigmatic necessity of Umma; they are despotic rulers of their own little kingdoms, with marked apathy for the suffering of their brethren in faith.

This is not to suggest that the Muslim diaspora in the West is not facing problems of its own, but to simply highlight an unforeseeable opportunity. The second—and in some cases—the third generation of Muslims in the West is now operationally finding its way in the new lands. It has still to find firm operating ground in the Western system of governance and there are many traps, but there

²² *Fear and Hope*, Book 33 of *Ihyāʿ*, translation and annotation by William Mc Kane, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965, pp. 3-4; translation slightly modified.

²³ According to a 2015 Pew Center survey, Muslims are the youngest (median age of 24 years) of all major religious groups, seven years younger than the median age of non-Muslims. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>, accessed February 14, 2022.

²⁴ Reference here is to the Norwegian city of Tromsø.

is hope that there will be a global impact of their work in terms of understanding of the current state of the Umma and what is needed to correct the direction.

It is not difficult to identify the most effective agent for the superfast genetic modification of the Muslim societies: it is technology. The Muslim world is not alone in this predicament; all non-Western societies are facing an unprecedented impact of modern technology. There are whole regions which have bypassed two phases of technology-driven change. Technologies change the way we live: “[O]ne has to remember that every tool carries with it the spirit by which it has been created,” wrote Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976)—whose 1927 uncertainty (or indeterminacy) principle turned the laws of physics into statements about relative, not absolute, certainties.²⁵ Heisenberg had recognized this in 1958; the nature of technology has changed manifold since then and so has the magnitude of its impact. Yet, once again, there is hope in harnessing technology for positive, rather than disruptive change.

Preparation of ground for sowing the seeds of positive change is not something that can be accomplished easily. It may require a whole generation of Muslims scholars; but a thousand-mile journey begins with the first step, as the ancient proverb tells us, and our reliance is on Allah alone.

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²⁵ Heisenberg, Werner (1958, 1999), *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science*, Prometheus Books, New York, pp. 27-28.