

The Plight of the Diasporic Muslim Refugees Living in the West¹

Research Team

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Introduction

The origin of the word diaspora goes back to the Greek language. It explains the condition of people who have been displaced, dispersed and scattered from their homeland. Western literature and media highlight the word diaspora exclusively referring to the suffering of the Jewish community in the bygone history of the world. In truth, this word is not only applicable to the Jews but to others as well, including the Muslims.

Generally, a diasporic nation or community is forced to leave their homeland due to unfavourable or hostile conditions they have to face. Hostility faced by the diasporic community can be due to internal factors like sectarian violence, an oppressive regime, racism, genocide, etc. within their homeland. Sometimes, a diasporic situation is also triggered by external factors like the intrusion of a foreign army, the imminence of war, the annexation of a country by its neighbour, etc.

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With this chapter of the book, we would like to explore the plight of the diasporic Muslim community in the West. Among others, this chapter will cover subheadings like; what are the conditions that force the Muslims to flee their homeland, what are the problems endured by Muslim refugees in Western countries, what guiding principles should the diasporic Muslim community follow to coexist with others, Ethics that should be observed by Muslim refugees, and finally what the West has to do to avoid the influx of refugees from the Muslim world. As a qualitative research, the researchers will employ textual and contextual analysis methods to analyze the relevant data that will be retrieved from print and internet sources.

The Golden Era of the Muslims

Countless historians say that the golden era of the Muslims happened during the peak of their civilization (750-1258). Others say it lasted for a much longer period. Regardless of the disagreement of the actual time frame of the Golden Era, it was an era in the Muslim world that witnessed the appearance of many polymath scholars. The epicentres of knowledge, scientific research, and philosophical and religious debates were taking place in Baghdad (Iraq), Cordova (Spain), Damascus (Syria) and Cairo (Egypt). Compared to the last two, the epicentre of the intellectual activities was taking place in Baghdad and Cordova. Research works in the areas of human and natural sciences conducted in these centres, particularly in Bayt al-Hikmah (Iraq) attracted many Western scholars to these centres to study through the media of Arabic. As such, during that time, Arabic became the lingua franca for science and philosophy.⁴ Benefitting from the research works done by eminent Muslim scholars, Renaissance scholars took back the ideas to Europe. Great books written by Ibn Sina (980-1037), Al-Farabi (897-950), Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Al-Biruni (973-1050), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and others were translated into many European languages. Except for a few, many Europeans failed to acknowledge the fact that the ideas provided by the Muslim scholars acted as an impetus for the European Renaissance movement. In other words, ideas from the Muslim scholars acted as a 'spark' that set the Western scholars ablaze in their quest for more knowledge and enlightenment. The Europeans did not stop after getting knowledge from the Muslims, but they did further research and development applying their knowledge to other areas of research.⁵

Interesting to note that during the heydays of the Islamic civilization, a fair deal of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian experts were employed as teachers and translators of ancient manuscripts at the Islamic centers of intellectual activities. Notably, the most famous centre for research, learning and translation work was happening at Bayt al-Hikmah in Baghdad. It was a normal scene at Bayt al-Hikmah to witness people communicating in Arabic, Farsi, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, Greek and Latin. The mindset of the Muslims at that time was, that religion is something that comes from God and there should be no compromise on its fundamental teachings, while civilization is a human product. As such, it is very natural for one civilization to learn from the other. Truly, the civilization that comes later will learn all that is positive from the bygone

⁴ Osman Bakar, 1991, *The history and philosophy of the Islamic science*, Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society.

⁵ Osman Bakar, 2008, *Tawhid and Science*, Shah Alam: Arah Pendidikan.

civilizations. An avid reader of history without doubt will agree that the Islamic civilization as a dynamic force had learned and borrowed ideas from earlier civilizations; like the Greek, Persian and Indian. This fact of borrowing ideas from different civilizations has also been highlighted by Iqbal (1877-1938), the great Muslim poet-philosopher. Like others, he too highlighted that there was a time in history when European thought received inspiration from the world of Islam. Many centuries later, after freeing themselves from the clutches of colonialism, the Muslim world in return started to imitate some of the dynamism in the areas of science and technology found in the West. To Iqbal, this act of borrowing ideas from the West by the Muslims was more or less an act of taking back the lost heritage of the Muslims of the past.⁶

Present Condition of the Muslim World

Muslims who created great empires and a dynamic civilization in the bygone centuries are now faced with an enormous amount of problems from within and outside their countries. The Muslim World which was once seen as a civilizational force that produced intelligentsia in many disciplines of knowledge, exactly after European colonization and during the post-colonial period, lost its prestigious position as the custodian of knowledge. Colonization had somehow dented the Muslims of their ego and created a sort of inferiority complex. As a result of this psychological state of mind, the Muslims started to lag behind others in terms of science, technology, and nation-building.⁷

In many ways, colonization had divided the Muslims causing disunity among them. As a divided Ummah, Muslim countries lost the strength to speak as a single nation (Ummah). This situation has allowed foreign powers to set them against one another. Different political aspirations have led them into war and sectarian violence which is still prevalent in many Muslim countries. Countries like Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen have experienced war. Some of these countries are still waging war within the country and at the frontiers with neighbouring countries. Besides that, the occupation and confiscation of Palestinian lands by Israel have caused a great deal of pain and suffering. Over the many decades of Israeli rule over Palestine, many have been brutally tortured and killed, including innocent children and women. An estimated six million Palestinians are forced to live in exile as asylum seekers/refugees in Europe and the Americas. To a certain extent, external forces should also be blamed for taking advantage of the situation and using their mass media to create war in Muslim countries. The motive for creating political instability in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world is none other than to usurp the wealth that comes through their natural resources like oil and gas. The absence of clarity of mind and the failure to understand the deceitful strategy of the external forces caused the Muslim nations to go against one another. Many wars were fought and are still going on in Muslim lands causing death to scores of civilians, damage to their infrastructure and triggering environmental degradation on land, sea and air.⁸

⁶ Muhammad Iqbal, 1996, *The reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture.

⁷ Amer Al-Roubaie, 2002, *Globalization and the Muslim world*, Shah Alam: Malita Jaya.

⁸ Abdul Rahim Abdul Karim, 1991, *War-dance of the superpowers: the US-led war on Iraq*, Penang: Thaj Publishing Division.

The war in the Middle East, Africa and other regions of the Muslim world has caused many to lose faith in their governments and move on to a more secure region of the world. As a result of the chaotic situation in Muslim lands, pockets of migrant population who had braved the mountains, deserts and rough seas without bothering the heat and the cold to crossover to foreign lands. Their survival instinct made them perform the impossible to sustain their lives and the lives of their dear ones. In recent years, there has been an influx of refugees from the Middle East to Europe and the Americas. It has been reported that over the years, some 25 million Muslims who are refugees, migrants or asylum seekers from different parts of the Muslim World have taken residence in Europe. Their presence there is not always a welcomed one by all, a fraction of the local citizens complain that the arrival of the Muslims has increased the burden for their government to facilitate these foreign visitors who come with an alien culture that is different to the one in Europe. These Muslims have to leave their homes and possessions behind in search of a safe haven to start a new life in an environment where peace and security prevail. Despite their expectation, in some parts of Europe, these Muslims have to face discrimination, racism, marginalization and at times anti-Islamic sentiments, now popularly known as Islamophobia from the people of the land. Though this scenario is pathetic to watch and hear, the fact will remain the same as the blame should go back to the government and political leaders of their country of origin in the Middle East.⁹

Leadership crisis is another issue that has been plaguing for very long in most Muslim countries. The greed for power and control of the wealth of the nation has caused rivalry among political leaders. Obsession with power has created an unhealthy political atmosphere in many Muslim countries. As if it is a new norm that leaders in Muslim countries have been discrediting and attacking one another's national policies. This sort of political climate is not good as it allows others to take advantage to tarnish the image of Islam and Muslims. Political leaders have gone beyond all ethical principles in grabbing power.¹⁰ Smear campaign, character assassination, conspiracy, lies; unfulfilled manifestos, etc. have become the new norms in the political arena even though they are Muslims. Worse, in some countries, we often hear terror attacks, suicide bombings, assassination attempts, etc. All this is done just to win an election or grab power by a coup d'état. When too much politicking is going on in a Muslim country, the possibility of neglecting the welfare of the people will be very high. Due to too much politicking, the economy, foreign investment, education, health, poverty eradication, etc. will be issues left unattended. At times, many of these problems can push the nation into backwardness and the particular nation will never be able to catch up with the rest of the world.¹¹

When there is a war happening between two Muslim countries, much of the national budget will be spent for military needs; particularly for the purchase of armaments to strengthen the country's military prowess. So, it would be a wise thing for Muslim nations in conflicts to negotiate peace talks rather than to go to war with one another. Leaders in such countries should be wise enough to think of the safety of the people and channel the money spent on buying weapons and missiles to the nation's educational and health care needs. In fear of war and political instability,

⁹ Bichara Khader, 2015, *"Muslims in Europe: The Construction of a "Problem"*, In the search for Europe, Contrasting Approaches. Madrid: BBVA.

¹⁰ Imran N. Hosein, 2011, *Jerusalem in the Qur'an*, San Fernando: Masjid Jami'ah, City of San Fernando.

¹¹ Dilip Hiro, 1989, *Paladin movements and ideas: Islamic fundamentalism*, London: Paladin Grafton Books.

professionals and experts in some Muslim countries migrate to Europe and other parts of the world in search of better prospects for their families; better living standards, good education for their children, better income for themselves, the availability of research centres with up to date laboratories and facilities. The loss of professionals from such Muslim countries in the form of a brain drain will most likely make the country stay backward and will never be able to compete with the rest of the world.¹²

The researchers feel that all the above-stated problems in the Muslim world are related to how the leaders and masses think. If they happened to think from a broader perspective by integrating spirituality, science, and philosophy, they would be able to function more dynamically. Moreover, with this mode of thinking they can come out from their backwardness and turn their nation into a progressive and prosperous one, eradicating poverty, illiteracy, political chaos, war, etc.

Meaning of Diaspora

Etymologically diaspora comes from a Greek word which means scattered and dispersed. Generally, a diasporic community explains people who have to leave their homeland for another part, region or country of the world. In most instances, the act of leaving one's motherland is involuntary. Many diasporic communities around the globe are forced to leave due to unfavourable conditions in their place of origin or driven away by an invading army or regime. For a very long time, Western media has used the word diaspora exclusively to describe the Jewish diaspora alone, but in fact, many others can be classified as diasporic communities.¹³ A few examples to state here will be the Hijrah made by the Prophet of Islam and his followers, three million Muslims who were expelled from Spain between the years 1492-1610, Africans who were taken away to the Americas under the slave trade (1776-1865), the Palestinians who have to leave their country due to the Israeli occupation and mayhems, Rohingyas due to the genocidal attacks carried out by the regime in Myanmar, and very recently, the exodus and migration of 6.8 million Syrian refugees have to flee for their safety and security. It is said that about one million Syrians crossed over to Europe as refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁴

Muslims in Europe and America

The conquest of Persia, carried out by the Rashidun Caliphate in the years between 633 and 653 AD, opened the passageway for the first batch of migrant Muslims to enter Europe through the Caucasus region. Later, Muslims entered Southern Europe with the Umayyad conquest of Hispania, the region comprising the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th-10th centuries. During the Middle Ages, Islam spread from Spain to neighbouring Portugal, Sicily and Malta. On the whole, the Muslims who went to Europe in the early days were very much diverse in their origin and historical background. Most Muslims of that time settled in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, as well as in some Russian Republics). While in the Americas, the earliest Muslims who came there in the 14th century came from the Senegambian region of Africa. This group of

¹² Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak, 2015

¹³ Merriam Webster online dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diaspora>, Retrieved: 1st March 2024.

¹⁴ Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak & Salah Machouche, 2022, *The Plight of the Diasporic Muslim Community in the West*, Islam on Web.

Muslims were the Moors expelled from Spain who later went to the Caribbean, and from there, they went to the Gulf of Mexico.

In the twentieth century, as a result of Algerian Independence, a large number of Muslims migrated to France. In the year 1961, West Germany and Switzerland opened their doors to migrant workers from Turkey. Likewise, Muslims who went to Britain were from its former colonies, like Pakistan and Bangladesh. According to reports from Pew Research Centre say that the EU is now home to 2.7% of the world's Muslim population. In 2017, Pew also predicted that the Muslim population of Europe would increase between 7-14 % by 2050. In terms of the largest Muslim concentration in Europe, France tops the list with 3.35 million. Next comes Germany, which has recently taken in 1 million Muslim refugees from Syria. In contrast to France and Germany, Slovakia is the least friendly of all countries in the EU toward Muslims.

The Influx of Muslims into Europe

At the moment, roughly 44 million Muslims have been residing in Europe, which includes expatriates, students, migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. The factors behind the large influx of Muslims in Europe are related to the political turmoil in the Middle East, the outbreak of war, sectarian violence and terror attacks on the civilian population, brain drain, Western preemptive war on Muslim lands, etc. Below here is a further elaboration on factors that cause Muslims to migrate:

Political Turmoil: Was the discovery of oil in the Middle East a blessing or a curse is a thing only known to God alone. Ever since the discovery of oil, countries in the Middle East have become destabilized. The newfound prosperity through the sale of oil and gas became a temptation for political leaders to scramble to power. The rivalry in politics has led to a topsy-turvy situation in the management of the countries. In the past, the Arab world had seen a few coup d'états. When the government of the day was overthrown and a power vacuum came into effect, anarchism and the idea that 'might is right' became the order of the day. In witnessing the chaos and lawlessness, the masses tend to move to more secure regions of the world, like Europe and the Americas.

War and Sectarian Violence: When two rival groups of different ideologies or denominations go to war against one another, with rampant bomb blasts heard here and there in the cities, civilians in those countries are left with no choice other than to move away from their homeland leaving behind their land and property. Impoverished because of the war situation, they go to the extent of accepting the status of refugees and asylum seekers in other parts of the world.

Terror Attacks: The lives of the Muslim masses are not only terrorized by the radical groups in their own countries but also by the invading armies. The occupiers of the Muslim lands, who entered with the pretext of restoring democracy, peace and freedom, in reality, came with their clandestine plan of stealing oil and usurping the wealth of the Muslim world. To that end, in achieving their planned mission, they recklessly kill those who resist them. With the latest war machines and drones, they hunt their enemies at the cause of killing thousands of those who are innocents. They normally justify the killing of hundreds or even thousands of civilians as collateral damage. They often suspiciously and mistakenly kill a man and later put a 'terrorist' label on him. Since the world media is under their control, they control the narrative by saying they are the champions of democracy and world peace, while the Muslims want war and bloodshed.

The Challenges Faced by the Diasporic Muslims in the West

Witnessing the chaos, political instability, mismanagement, terror attacks, and war in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Muslim world made the masses brave themselves to cross mountains, vast desert land and oceans to make an exodus to the West. In the course of migrating, they have to face many challenges. There is always a possibility while crossing the border of one country to another, they can be killed in the crossfire, a bomb dropped from the air, step on a landmine, die of exhaustion or drown in the high sea. There are many reported cases of the drowning of children and women while making an escape using small and unreliable boats. According to the 2021 UN report, over 3,000 refugees drowned or went missing at sea while making attempts to enter Europe. For those who succeed in making it into Europe, their sufferings are far from over. Over in Europe, they have to face some new challenges. Below here, we have listed a few of those challenges:

Different Culture and Values System: Being present in Europe makes the newly arrived Muslims feel that they are exposed to a new culture and value system that is very different from their Islamic one. Normally, it takes some time for them to get used to the new lifestyle in a foreign land. Though they live in a safe environment, it is very difficult to rid their hearts and minds of thinking about their homes and others they have left behind. Some refugees will take the opportunity in Western countries and try to adapt themselves quickly, while others take a longer time to adjust themselves. Yet a few others will never want to adapt themselves at all. The last-mentioned group of Muslims will never want to take the middle group in accepting some of the Western lifestyles that do not contradict their Islamic faith and culture. For them, everything that is Western is bad and there should be no consideration or compromise in assimilating any of those Western lifestyles.

Islamophobia: Despite the Western governments' willingness to accept refugees and asylum seekers into their countries, there are voices heard in those countries to drive away the newcomers (who are classified as their unwanted guests) back to their countries of origin. This group of protesters use the internet and social media as their platforms to garner support for their movement. Through their propaganda message, they use derogatory names like terrorists, fundamentalists, extremists, jihadis, etc., against Muslims. Not only that, but they also attack the personality of Prophet Muhammad SAW. Besides Muslim men, women who observe the Islamic dress code are harassed and embarrassed in public places and on social media. The very extreme Islamophobes organize Qur'an burning campaigns, terrorize the mosque community and sometimes even kill Muslims. Over the decade, many shooting incidents happened in Western countries targeting the Muslim community. The ones that happened in Norway and New Zealand seem to be the biggest in terms of the number of people killed.

Things the Diasporic Muslims Should Avoid in the West

Muslims who, for one reason or the other, ended up in the West must abide by certain moral principles. Since they are on foreign soil and have to survive, Muslims should be careful in dealing with matters related to the local authorities there. The following will be some of the things they should avoid doing:

1. They should respect the law of the countries of their domicile. As such, they should behave as good law-abiding citizens of the country.
2. At no time during their stay in the West, they should not threaten the local authorities by saying that they would change the country into an Islamic one and implement the Syariah law amid the European society.
3. Throughout their stay in the West, they should use all democratic means to voice their complaints, and grievances to the authorities and not give in to violent means to show their resentment. They should bear in mind that their presence in the West is somehow like ambassadors of Islam. For this reason, they have to be on their best behaviour.
4. Muslims should not isolate themselves completely from Western society. In matters that do not violate the *Syariah* and *Aqidah* principles, they should join in with others, especially on issues related to the public interest.
5. Since the Islamic value system disapproves LGBT lifestyle, Muslims have a valid reason for not joining rallies organized by the LGBT and other anti-Islamic organizations. It should be okay for them to explain to people in the West why they are not present in just gathering.
6. Overzealous Muslim scholars and evangelical organizations should avoid touching the sensitivities of other religious groups living in the West. They should avoid belittling what they believe and worship. By doing so, they will be keeping their behaviour closer to the emphasis mentioned in the following verses on the Qur'an:

“And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge. Thus, We have made pleasing to every community their deeds. Then to their Lord is their return, and He will inform them about what they used to do.”¹⁵

“For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.”¹⁶

Recommended Mannerism for the Diasporic Muslims in the West:

1. Muslims should learn to coexist with people of other civilizations. Coexistence and cooperation with people of other faiths is the way shown by the Prophet of Islam SAW and other great leaders of the Ummah.
2. Muslims should look into the commonalities between them and the Europeans and avoid all religious and racial conflicts.
3. If there are any differences of opinion, they should apply the principle of “Agree to Disagree”.
4. Take the opportunity to learn all that is positive and allowed in Islam and simultaneously share their concept of spirituality when there is an opportunity available to do so. Learning useful knowledge and skills from others can enrich the Ummah.
5. Highly encouraged to participate in interfaith dialogues. During such meetings, do not disparage other people's faith and concept of God.
6. For scholars who want to propagate Islam to people of other faiths, in their communication, they should apply a lot of diplomacy and persuasion. Besides that, their behaviour should reflect the ethical values emphasized in the Qur'an and Sunnah.
7. Muslims in the West, should bind a good relationship with their immediate neighbours in the locality in which they live. Doing so, most likely, they will be able to remove the rancour from the hearts of the non-Muslims.

¹⁵ (Al-Qur'an, 6:108).

¹⁶ (Al-Qur'an, 109:6).

8. Muslims who take citizenship in Western countries should demonstrate their loyalty, and respect the laws of those countries.

What the Muslim World needs to do:

1. To stop the mass exodus of Muslims to the West, by all means, countries in the Middle East should avoid conflicts and wars.
2. Dialogues and negotiations should be the first preference in resolving the differences between two countries.
3. To avoid all political tension in the Muslim World, power transitions should happen democratically.
4. Leaders should put public interest above their personal interest.
5. Leaders should think of providing good health care services, education, job opportunities, and other necessities of life to their people.
6. In running their countries, leaders should open the democratic channel for public opinions to be heard, no violation of human rights, and no racism and religious prejudice toward minority populations in their countries. All citizens, Muslims and others should be given their fundamental rights and dealt with principles of “fairness and justice”.
7. To bring the much-needed peace and prosperity in the Muslim World, leaders should be at the forefront of propagating the philosophy of “Less Politicking, and More Thinking is Needed” among their subjects.
8. When a refugee crisis happens due to war in the Middle East, neighbouring countries that are affluent and have vast land reserves should temporarily take in the refugees until peace is restored in the country of the refugees.

What Countries in the West Should do:

1. To avoid the mass migration of Muslim refugees into Europe and America, countries in the West should stop their interference in the politics of the Middle East. Their greed for controlling oil and gas in the Muslim World should not cause them to destabilize Muslim countries.
2. The West has to understand that when it disturbs the region of the Middle East, people from that troubled region of the world are most likely to come to Europe and ask for help. Like what people say, “What goes around, comes around”. As a consequence of the Western atrocities in the Middle East, Europe has to face the burden of the influx of Muslim refugees.
3. The West should abandon the idea of bombing countries in the Middle East. By now, the West should have realized that by bombing, you cannot stop terrorism. True to the saying, ‘terror breeds terror’, by terrorizing the people in the Middle East, the West is going to produce more terrorists, and the vicious circle is never going to stop. Instead of bombing, the West should try other diplomatic means of solving conflicts in the Middle East.
4. The West should leave all matters related to the Muslim World to be dealt with by the OIC member countries.
5. All preemptive wars waged in the Muslim World should come to a stop. The West should realize that such wars have killed a great multitude of civilians in countries like Iraq, Syria and Libya.
6. As an alternative to war and confrontations in the Middle East, the West should learn to get along with Muslim countries and just focus on areas of trade, science and technology.

Conclusion

In realizing the pain, agony, embarrassment, and religious and racial prejudices experienced by the diasporic Muslim community in the West, all leaders in the Muslim World should put a stop to war and resolve all differences through peaceful means. By stopping war and sectarian violence in the Muslim World, we could easily avoid a refugee crisis that spills over to the West. Muslim leaders in the Middle East should feel embarrassed when their citizens wander into European countries, asking to be accepted as refugees or asylum seekers. It is about time; the Muslim World should reflect on the ideal and lofty teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah and mend their ways of managing their own affairs.