

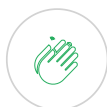
LIFE & SOCIETY

Three Problems Affecting Global Muslims

By: **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** August 24, 2026



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Muslims around the world live in pitiable conditions and are at the receiving end of external aggression and exploitation. For centuries, they have been crumbling from internal weaknesses.

The decline of the Muslim world started arguably in the late 16th century, and 19th-century European colonialism marked the rock-bottom in its plight. Even since formal decolonization began around the mid-20th century, the condition of global Muslim communities has not improved.

Some Muslim nations have improved their economic condition

natural resources, not from the optimization of human capital.

Conversely, non-Muslim-majority countries like Singapore - not known as resource-dense lands - have achieved prosperity unreachable for Muslim-majority countries.

Other countries like China and India have amassed extraordinary power and influence yet to be achieved by any Muslim country. Even though some Muslim-majority countries have high per capita incomes, they are not known for quality human resource management practices in education, technology, or other areas that determine a nation's competitive edge in today's world.

In many Western and Muslim-minority countries, Muslims are disproportionately profiled and marginalized. Globally, they face systemic discrimination, invasion, occupation, and the constant fear of human rights violations. Under such circumstances, it is important to ascertain what makes Muslims vulnerable to discrimination and oppression.

Islam and the Problem of Inefficiency

Despite organizing rallies, denouncing injustices, and condemning oppressors, Muslims have not been able to protect themselves from aggression. They are not strong enough to prevent harm. The main reason for Muslims' centuries-old suffering is that, as a global community, they are weak and inefficient. While some individual Muslims soar high, most Muslim nations are conspicuous by their un-competitiveness and inefficiency.

There is a marked resurgence in religious consciousness among Muslims. However, their apparent growth in religiosity has not necessarily resulted in their intellectual advancement, material prosperity, or safe and honorable position in the world. Therefore, the question of Islam cannot be dissociated from the investigation of why Muslims have fared so badly for centuries.

the cause of the Muslim predicament?

The primary sources of Islam contest the hypothesis that the religion contributes to the weakness and humiliation of its followers. Islam is rather a recipe for progress, success, and dignity. It is true that believers are tested and tried through various challenges, but their adherence to Islam should elevate their standing in the world, not diminish or degrade it (Quran, 29:2).

A more specific answer to the question above poses three problems that stand out in Muslims' perception and practice of their religion. Collectively, in my opinion, these three issues have held them back for centuries despite Islam being the world's second largest, and the most rapidly expanding, religion.

1. Imprecise understanding of *Ibadah* and *Amal Salih*

The root word of the term *ibadah* (worship) is '*abd*', submission to God. And the Quranic term *amal salih* translates to good or virtuous deeds. Both terms refer to lawful activities that are done in accordance with obedience to God. These include all virtuous and beneficial activities done for mundane or transcendent purposes. Any good work that is done to please God comes under the purview of *ibadah* and *amal salih*.

However, most Muslims have confined *ibadah* and *amal salih* to certain rituals such as mandatory or optional prayers, obligatory and voluntary fasting, *du'a* (supplication), Qur'anic recitation, praising and glorifying God, *dhikr* (remembrance), performing Hajj or Umrah, doing charitable work, and other practices of mostly spiritual nature.

While these practices are important for the development of the

the world. If moral high ground or excellence in ritual practices were enough for victory in this world, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his Companions would have won all wars against their opponents. Victory in the Battle of Badr and defeat in the Battle of Uhud, for example, were determined by the degree of the Muslims' worldly and spiritual skills.

In Islamic preaching and religious exhortation, diligence, hard work, and perseverance in fields other than ritual observance are not adequately emphasized. If religious motivation were added to superior performance in science and technology, as well as other much needed fields, Muslims would successfully compete with other communities and avert many highly sophisticated, technology-enabled attacks to which they have remained vulnerable.

2. Losing Sight of the Primacy of Education

In 1927, during a series of lectures in India titled "Cultural Side of Islam," the English writer Marmaduke Pickthall said, "Neither the Holy Quran nor the Holy Prophet ever contemplated the existence of an ignorant Muslim. Indeed, 'ignorant Muslim' is a contradiction in terms. In the great days of Islam, an ignorant Muslim, like an indigent Muslim, could hardly have been found."

Despite Islam's overwhelming emphasis on intellectual endeavor, scholarly pursuit, and cerebral excellence, today's Muslims are not universally regarded as the best in all academic fields. Few of the best scholars, publishers, journals, media outlets, and universities are in Muslim-majority nations.

In Muslim societies, mistakenly, knowledge is bifurcated into two categories - religious and secular. Since, in most religious discussions, only the former is presented as religiously sanctioned,

knowledge, they bifurcate and often limit it to what they call "Islamic knowledge." It is forgotten that Islam cries out for competence in all fields of (beneficial) knowledge.

In this sense, the second problem is related to the first one. As *ibadah* and *amal salih* are misperceived only as ritualistic work, *ilm* (knowledge) is misconstrued as the understanding of the Qur'an, Sunnah, and similar branches alone. It is forgotten that Islam gives pre-eminence to all fields of (beneficial) knowledge. Muslims' competitive edge in all branches of knowledge would contribute to their freedom from harm in an era characterized by technology-driven warfare.

3. Homogenizing the Responsibilities of all Muslims

This world is transitory and the life hereafter is eternal. Therefore, success in the other world in the form of entry into Paradise is the goal for all Muslims. While such a worldview is not necessarily wrong, most Muslims are at fault in outlining their responsibilities exclusively for the achievement of a blissful afterlife. Devout Muslims of all backgrounds usually follow a uniform checklist of work to achieve salvation in the afterlife and enter Paradise.

While all Muslims are obligated to carry out certain basic rituals and other practices, the privileged among them are mandated to shoulder greater responsibilities. The Qur'an states that God gives some humans higher statuses to see how they use them (6:165). Accordingly, rich and knowledgeable Muslims have greater responsibilities than those who are poor or less resourced.

Some Muslims - of all abilities and statuses - seem to be singularly focused on a set of ritual practices, hoping that these alone will lead them to Jannah (Heaven) in the afterlife. However, while the lesser-resourced may please God by carrying out certain rituals,

this, the community will lose both skill and ability. This ultimately leads to the sub-optimization of the potential of Muslims worldwide. Thus, homogenizing the responsibilities of Muslims of all backgrounds and abilities constitutes a waste of talent that has been hindering their progress for centuries.

Rehabilitating the Ummah

These three problems are not country or culture specific. They have been affecting Muslims around the globe for centuries. They point to inaccurate understanding by Muslims of their religion and of their duties here on earth.

Islam holds the transformative potential to reshape Muslims' standing in the world and to restore their lost honor and dignity. The problem, therefore, lies with Muslims themselves. They must identify the reasons that have made them weak and easy targets for oppression, reprioritize their lives and activities, and focus on things that truly matter for their success in both worlds.

In this regard, greater responsibilities rest on the shoulders of imams, civic and social leaders, and above all, well-educated Muslims. The former should provide a comprehensive understanding of *ibadah* and *amal salih*, while the latter should realize that their obligations as educated Muslims are much greater than performing certain rituals.

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