Islam Beyond Borders: Building Ummatic Solidarity in the 21st Century

Sadek Hamid

Islam Beyond Borders:
Building Ummatic Solidarity in the 21st Century

Sadek Hamid

1. Introduction

> *Muslims are just disunited bro, we'll never be agreed as we have different*
> *aqeedas. It's too big. This is one problem we have to accept we can never fix.*
> - Most Muslims, anywhere, 2020.[1]

This quote caught my attention as I was preparing this essay. It encapsulates the sentiment of our arguably most pressing collective challenge. Our apparent disunity is one of the most common and recurring topics in our internal conversations. These discussions often begin something like, "(insert issue) is happening in the Umma—we need to take action but can't because we are not united!" For most of us, the quest for Muslim unity represents an alluring ideal, but an allusive one—one that is unlikely to be achieved as we appear to be incapable of coming together as a global faith community or too overwhelmed with more pressing issues closer to home. Nevertheless, even though the Umma is arguably at its most politically and culturally fragmented state in its history—with fractures across different nation-states, ethnic groups and sectarian orientations—it would be a mistake to underestimate the aspiration for ummatic unity alive in the hearts and minds of most believers. The colossal task of bridging wide-ranging social, economic, political and theological differences can be seen as either hopelessly unrealistic or as a collective and individual responsibility towards which we all have the capacity to positively contribute.

In this essay I make three broad arguments. I first suggest that there *is* already a widespread desire for greater cohesion between Muslims, despite the different forms of intra-faith division and conflict observable today. Secondly, I contend that ummatic solidarity is not only a desired state but already exists in vibrant shared religious, social and cultural exchanges across various globalized networks within Islamically inspired forms of social action, art, education, commerce, charity, travel and tourism, which "connect individuals and institutions, at once affirming and transforming them."[2] Here I offer a snapshot of the modern appetite for Muslim political unity, call attention to instances of ummatic consciousness after the collapse of the last caliphate, highlight responses by scholars and religious movements,

---

[1] Faisal Amjad, "A recipe to reunite the Ummah: What has Gordon Ramsay got to do with Muslim unity?" *Medium*, June 16, 2022, https://medium.com/kn-ow/how-gordon-ramsay-can-reunite-the-ummah-b977836f7d32

[2] Miriam Cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Muslim Networks: From Hajj to Hip-Hip,* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1.

and provide an overview of the transformative potential of Muslim youth. I conclude, thirdly, with the argument that to achieve great unity we must rethink our current assumptions, develop new ways of overcoming our differences and build alternative ummatic futures that transcend the imagined borders of the mind.

2. Ummatic Sensibility in Recent History

The concept of Umma holds an enduring appeal in the Muslim imaginary as it represents a moral community *par excellence*, one that is "flexible rather than static; it signifies all Islam but does so within the broadest boundaries defining Muslim collective identity."[3] The spiritual unity of Muslims has always been rooted within the foundational sources of the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition. The principle of *tawhid* provides the paradigmatic inspiration for ummatic unity exhibited in shared religious and social practices that display remarkable similarity in places as far apart as Morocco and Malaysia. Muslims across the world identify with the ideal of transnational unity and relate to the notion of umma as a referent of connection and cooperation. The idea of Muslim unity as an expression of a transnational Islamic identity materialises in the global Muslim public sphere through the practice of Umma-oriented solidarity.[4] As political scientist Ejaz Akram has noted:

> The Islamic aspirations of the Ummah have not disappeared and the ability of Muslim transnational organizations, ideologies, and communication networks to permeate national borders testifies to the existence of a more intense feeling of Muslim community than generally recognised.[5]

Historically, political unity was symbolically expressed in the institution of the caliphate, which remained embedded in Muslim consciousness even as political power was decentralised and territorial pluralism accommodated. Today this sentiment seems to be increasing as various surveys show that while Muslims hold diverse opinions regarding the international world order, they generally want a larger role for Islam in political life.[6] Ummatic sentiment is manifested in the constitutions of local places of worship, national religious organisations, and the founding charters of international Muslim institutions. The majority of the world's most influential transnational Islamic revival organisations and trends foreground Umma-centric ideals implicitly or explicitly and continue to inspire an impulse for greater Muslim co-operation. A relatively recent instance was visible in 2019, when

---

[3] Cooke and Lawrence, *Muslim Networks*, 2.

[4] For a discussion, see Peter Mandeville, "Muslim Transnational Identity and State Responses in Europe and the UK after 9/11: Political Community, Ideology and Authority," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35, no. 3 (March 2009): 491-506.

[5] Ejaz Akram, "Muslim Ummah and its Link with Transnational Muslim Politics," *Islamic Studies* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 381-415.

[6] "Most Muslims Want Democracy, Personal Freedoms, and Islam in Political Life. Few Believe U.S. Backs Democracy," *Pew Research Centre*, Global Attitudes Project, July 12, 2012, p.3.

Mahathir Mohammad, former Prime Minister of Malaysia, called for a "Muslim renaissance" to be led by Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan during a state visit for talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.[7] Though he and Imran Khan no longer lead their countries, the yearning for a renaissance remains and was rekindled with the election of the ummatically minded new President of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim.[8] All of this indicates the potential for a "Crescent of Hope" that "connects governments and peoples in the enterprise of building as an alternative to the current Islamophobic world order."[9]

Most Muslims are transnationalist in their outlook. Whether they are part of large settled diasporic communities, recent immigrants, students, refugees or business people, they are keen to maintain relations across borders with their countries of origin through regular visits and sending remittances and closely follow socio-political developments "back home." A sense of faith-based belonging is often "connected to places where Muslim vulnerabilities, even victimisation, and evocative terms such as 'Jerusalem', 'Srebrenica', or 'Rohingyas' become signifiers of an embattled ummah."[10] The well-known Prophetic saying, which states that "the Umma is like one body," is among the oft-quoted sacred imperatives which provide the connective tissue that sustains supranational religious identity. The most visible manifestations of this ummatic empathy can be seen at the grassroots through demonstrations of support for those suffering oppression in occupied Palestine, Kashmir or humanitarian assistance offered after the recent devastating floods in Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Expressions of solidarity with fellow Muslims take place in everyday interactions, conversations and prayer. This solidarity can be said to have both a 'pull' and 'push' effect.[11] The pull is the intense identification by ordinary Muslims with instances of the endangerment of other believers in places such as Myanmar. The push effect can be seen in the way states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia rhetorically call for Muslim unity through institutions, conferences, publications, and funding while pursuing their foreign policy objectives. Though realpolitik often trumps religious rhetoric in statecraft, these regimes' invocation of the umma underlines the enduring power of the ideal of Muslim unity.

The blessed land of Palestine holds a special place in the hearts of Muslims and its persecuted people have been the focus of ummatic consciousness for generations. Many Muslims from around the world have come to the aid of the Palestinians. One such instance was the heroic efforts of Bengali fighter pilot Saiful Azam, who flew with the Jordanian Air

---

[7] "Malaysia premier calls for 'Islamic renaissance' with these two countries," *The New Arab*, July 28, 2019, https://www.newarab.com/news/malaysia-premier-calls-islamic-renaissance-two-countries

[8] Anwar Ibrahim, *SCRIPT For a Better Malaysia an Empowering Vision and Policy Framework for Action* (Shah Alam: Institut Darul Ehsan and Centre for Postnormal Policy and Futures Studies, 2022).

[9] Salman Sayyid, "The Crescent of Hope," *Daily Sabah*, Sept 10, 2018, https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2018/09/10/the-crescent-of-hope.

[10] James Piscatori and Amin Saikal, *Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma and World Politics,* (Cambridge University Press, 2019)*,* viii.

[11] Piscatori and Saikal, viii.

force in the 1967 Arab-Israel war and shot down three Israeli aircraft.[12] A later galvanizing ummatic moment came in the aftermath of the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa mosque in Israel in 1969, which generated widespread anger across the Muslim world. Following this incident, the Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husaini, worked with King Faisal to call for an international conference to discuss the matter and created the momentum which led to the establishment of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). Less well known is the fact that around 8,000 Bangladeshi young people volunteered to fight for Palestinian liberation after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.[13] More recently, the Palestinian cause has been boosted by high-profile celebrities and politicians voicing their support. In 2021, former Prime Minister Imran Khan joined millions of Twitter users who promoted a campaign to express messages of support for Palestinians attacked by the Israeli government and made the #WeStandWithPalestine hashtag trend globally. The performance of these kinds of empathic statements demonstrates a sense of shared responsibility toward other Muslims who may not be within the realms of our everyday experience, underlines the continued support that the Palestinians rightfully receive, and illustrates ummatic activism in practice.

Ummatic consciousness was vividly displayed during the recent World Cup in Qatar, where some of the football teams from Muslim nations enacted symbolic acts of piety by performing sajdah on the pitch after scoring and raised "Free Palestine" flags. The successful progress of the Moroccan team into the semi-final even led to mass prayer sessions in Indonesia and was a cause for celebrations on the streets for millions of Muslims across the world.[14] As one journalist commented after their victory over Spain:

> Morocco is a Muslim country, and before the last-16 penalty shootout against Spain, the players recited Surah al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Qur'an. Then, after securing passage to the quarter-final and also after winning it, the squad ran to their fans and prostrated themselves in prayer – in the process, declaring to the planet not only their pride in being Moroccan but their pride in Islam, inspiring ecstatic celebrations throughout the Muslim world.[15]

More substantive interventions are made and often occur in the areas of humanitarian aid. Muslim international NGOs, whether in minority or majority contexts, center Islamic solidarity at the heart of their work. Among many examples include the work of International Islamic Charitable Organisation from Kuwait, International Islamic Relief based in Saudi

---

[12] Md. Kamaruzzam, "Profile - Bangladeshi fighter pilot who destroyed Israeli planes," *Anadolu Agency*, June 15, 2020, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/profile-bangladeshi-fighter-pilot-who-destroyed-israeli-planes/1877614

[13] Ehsan Abdullah, "Remembering the Past: Bangladeshi Fighters for Palestine of the 1980's, May 23 2018, https://mygoldenbengal.wordpress.com/2018/05/23/remembering-the-past-bangladeshi-fighters-for-palestine-of-the-1980s-2/

[14] In saying this, it is important to remember pre-existing tensions around identity that occurred during this global event. For a nuanced analysis of the Moroccan, African and Arab Muslim dimensions to Morocco's performance in the World Cup see Hisham Aïdi, "The (African) Arab Cup," *Africa is a Country*, December 13, 2022, https://africasacountry.com/2022/12/the-afro-arab-cup.

[15] Daniel Harris, "World Cup 2022 briefing: Morocco's pride in Islam should inspire us all," *The Guardian*. December 14, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2022/dec/14/world-cup-2022-briefing-moroccos-pride-in-islam-should-inspire-us-all.

Arabia, Ummah Welfare Trust and One Ummah Charity in Britain.[16] This powerful sense of duty to serve the Umma motivates some to go beyond giving charitable aid into directly assisting the needy and oppressed, with many Muslims travelling to conflict zones during the first Afghan war in the 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s, and more recently in Syria where hundreds of Muslims travelled to provide aid and medical assistance to those caught up in the civil war. This sense of ummatic sentiment can also be found in unexpected places as disparate as Iceland and El Salvador, where Muslims reach out to their religious brethren and identify with the causes outlined above. The unique Islamic notion of duty towards other Muslims is a staple feature of jumu'a khutbahs globally, as imams pray for the success and unity of the Umma—a message we all witness in Muslim countries and Western societies.[17]

3. Who Wants a Caliphate?

The aspiration for Muslim political unity was historically embodied in the institution of the caliphate. Unfortunately, the word 'caliphate' has become loaded with negative connotations due to the likes of ISIS and is difficult to discuss publicly, given its false association with extremism and terrorism. In fact, as Historian Hugh Kennedy points out in his book *The Caliphate: The History of an Idea,* in its essence the caliphate was about leadership and the just ordering of Muslim society according to the will of God.[18] It is worth noting that the obligation for Muslims to have a caliphate is agreed upon as a normative religious obligation according to the consensus of scholars.[19] Given the various crises that many states in the Muslim World are facing today, an independent, unified Muslim civilization has the potential to produce prosperity, security, and indigenous power and to solve most of the problems that currently hinder it.[20]

Early modern calls for ummatic solidarity can be seen in many initiatives over the last century before and after the loss of the last Ottoman caliphate in 1924. Pan-Islamic sentiment was visible across Muslim lands during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some scholars have argued that the emergence of pan-Islamic identity was purely an attempt at rallying Muslims against encroaching Western power in the beleaguered last days of the caliphate, while others have pointed out that political unity is inherent in Islam, even

---

[16] A useful survey can be found in Marie Juul Petersen, *For Humanity or for the Umma? Aid and Islam in Transnational Muslim NGOs* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).

[17] Mazen Hashem, "The Ummah in the Khutba: A Religious Sermon or a Civil Discourse?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 30, no. 1, (March 2010).

[18] Rashid Dar, "America is a Caliphate," *Popula*, Sept 11, 2018, https://popula.com/2018/09/11/america-is-a-caliphate/

[19] For an extended discussion see Ovamir Anjum, "Who wants a Caliphate?", *Yaqeen Institute*, October 31, 2019, https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/who-wants-the-caliphate.

[20] For an account of the problems facing Muslim-majority states and their inherent grounding in the modern nation-state, which continues to keep them divided and weak, see Joseph Kaminski, "Irredeemable Failure: the Modern Nation-State as a Nullifier of Ummatic Unity," Ummatics Institute, December 14, 2022, https://ummatics.org/2022/12/14/irredeemable-failure-the-modern-nation-state-as-a-nullifier-of-ummatic-unity/.

though it has not consistently been applied in practice.[21] Even so, the call for Muslim unity by Abdulhamid II, arguably the last effective Caliph, appeared genuine as his "emphasis on the ummah and the concerns of the ummah resulted in an increased feeling of a 'common spiritual solidarity' between geographically distant Muslims, even if this solidarity was never actualised in any meaningful way."[22]

Considering the hostile international context of the nineteenth century, the idea of Islamic unity was a compelling argument as Muslim political and military co-operation would give Muslims a better chance to resist European empires.[23] The dissolution of the institution of the caliphate and the symbolic unity it represented triggered strong responses from Muslim leaders and groups worldwide. Muslims in India viewed the Ottoman Caliph as the protector of all Muslims. They were highly vocal in the pan-Islamic 'Khilafat movement' which mobilized Indian Muslims to defend the institution of the caliphate as part of a broader Indian Muslim anti-colonial movement. The movement propagated the idea of forming an internationally elected council with representation from all Muslim nation-states to serve the duties of the caliphate.[24] During this period, various international conferences were held to demand the reinstatement of the office of the caliph, even as it implied installing individuals who made competing claims to the position.[25] In Egypt, Imam Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949), the founder of the al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn in the late 1920s, passionately defended ummatic identity and suggested that Muslim nations form an organization to deal with their problems. This drew on an idea earlier advocated by the great poet Muhammad Iqbal in his vision for the Umma to form a Muslim League of Nations.[26] Similarly, Maulana Sayyid Abul A'la al-Mawdudi (d. 1979), leader of the influential Jamaat-e-Islami movement established in the early 1940s, proposed a Muslim version of the commonwealth to unite the Umma beyond Pakistan. Both the Ikhwan and Jamaat had a huge impact on raising ummatic sentiment within the Middle East and Indian subcontinent and continue to exercise a large degree of influence today.

Enthusiasm for a restored caliphate waned in the interwar period and remained dormant during the post-colonial 'independence' period as nationalist sentiments dominated the newly created Muslim states. Reviving it became the core political project of the Hizb ut-

---

[21] Jacob M, Landau. *The Politics of Pan-Islamism: Ideology and Organization*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 2-4.

[22] Özcan A. *Pan-Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans & Britain* (1877-1924) (London: Brill, 1997), 62.

[23] For more see, for example, Birol Baskan and Ömer Taspinar, *The Nation or the Ummah*: *Islamism and Turkish Foreign Policy,* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021).

[24] Özcan, *Pan-Islamism*, 62.

[25] See Basheer Nafi, "The Abolition of The Caliphate in Context," in *Demystifying The Caliphate: Historical Memory and Modern Contexts,* eds. Madawi al-Rasheed et al., 31-56.

[26] Abdullah Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation: Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society* (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1994), 88. In 2011, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brother Tariq Suwaydan endorsed the idea of an 'Islamic Confederation'. See Noha Mellor, *Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood: Da'wa, Discourse, and Political Communication,* (London: Routledge, 2018).

Tahrir movement, founded in Palestine by Shaykh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani in the early 1950s.[27] Other notable modern advocates include the Egyptian jurist Dr. Abd al-Razzaq al-Sanhuri, who theorised a systematic vision for a modern caliphate that was sensitive to the rights of non-Muslims as well as neighbouring non-Muslim states.[28] The Ikhwan and Jamaat movements have also gestured towards the goal of the caliphate as a distant goal, though they appear to have postponed it due to pragmatic political considerations of the nation-states in which they operate. Other influential globalising Islamic religious trends such as Chishti, Naqshbandiyya, Tijaniyyah Sufi orders and Tablighi Jamaat movement also advocate the importance of ummatic unity and have reached millions of Muslims across the globe.

While many Muslims agree with the ideal of ummatic political unity, it is less clear how it could be achieved today. Rethinking and establishing a caliphal system in the 21st century is clearly no easy task, given the prevailing international order, and raises numerous questions about its conceptualization and revitalization. A caliphate as a confederation of governments in the core regions of Islam appears to be one logical way of connecting countries with shared histories to provide political and economic stability in way that resembles the European Union. This is comparable to a model advocated by the political philosopher Abdelwahab el-Effendi who in his book *Who Needs an Islamic State* suggests that it could take shape in the form of a "polity that is not strictly territorial…and based on peacefully co-existing communities rather than territorially-based and mutually exclusive nation states".[29]

An obvious question remains, though: do Muslims today even want a reimagined caliphate for the 21st century? Social scientist Mujtaba Ali Isani, in his recent book *Muslim Public Opinion Toward the International Order: Support for International and Regional Actors,* maintains that existing studies of Muslim public opinion on international governance have failed to investigate the actual levels of support for a caliphate system. His examination of survey data shows considerable support for a global caliphate across Muslim societies as an alternative model of international governance.[30] His contention seems to corroborate previous research conducted by Mark Tessler in the Arab world in the 1980s-1990s, compiled into a Carnegie Middle East Governance and Islam Dataset. Isani argues that emerging data appears to indicate that a "caliphate is quite popular as a political model among broad swaths of the Muslim world, rivalling if not surpassing the legitimacy of the current world order."[31]

This desire for political unity also remains consistent into the new millennium as a 2006 Gallup survey of Muslims living in Egypt, Morocco, Indonesia and Pakistan shows.

---

[27] There have been similar movements such as Tanzeem-e-Islami launched in Pakistan in the mid-1970s. For more examples see Reza Pankhurst's *The Inevitable Caliphate? A History of the Struggle for Global Islamic Union, 1924 to the Present* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2013).

[28] Anjum, *Who Wants a Caliphate?*, 47-48.

[29] For a summary of his argument, see Yoginder Sikand, "Review of Who Needs an Islamic State", *Counter Currents*, 15 July, 2009, https://www.countercurrents.org/sikand150709.htm.

[30] Mujtaba Ali Isani, *Muslim Public Opinion Toward the International Order: Support for International and Regional Actors* (Cham: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2019).

[31] Isani, *Muslim Public Opinion*, 25.

Two-thirds of respondents said they supported the goal of "unifying all Islamic countries" into a new caliphate.[32] However, in some nations, public support ranged from 38% in Indonesia to 88% in Pakistan, which demonstrates that support for alternative models of governance are shaped by national context.[33] An analysis of *The Program on International Policy Attitudes* (PIPA) suggests that support for a global Caliphate correlates with favourability toward the Sharī'ah.[34] Muslims who want to live under the Sharī'ah are more likely to support the establishment of a global Khilāfah. This sentiment perhaps also reflects a longing for accountable governance and equitable social welfare policies, which are absent in many Muslim countries. Other data collated by agencies such as the Arab Barometer, show that while democracy is quite popular, so is the idea of the global Caliphate in many Muslim-majority countries. Isani concludes that:

> Muslims would like an effective international order in which they have an impactful voice, and which fulfils their basic needs. This does not necessarily mean that the support for international organizations is only based on economic utilitarian considerations but rather for a general need for justice, stability, welfare, and development, exigencies that the populations in the Muslim world crave for.[35]

It is also important to point out that these large-scale surveys raise questions about what the respondents understood by terms such as "caliphate," "democracy" and "sharī'ah." These findings point towards the need for further research to examine the extent of this support for a caliphate, what it actually means in these nations, and what a global, politically unified Umma would look like today. Some indication is found in online groups in chat rooms and discussion boards that discuss the caliphate, but are not necessarily representative without large-scale polling.[36] For some Muslims, the idea of the caliphate has been contaminated due to the likes of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and is objected to on the grounds of its association with extremism, while others claim that is not a religious requirement or simply not feasible in the modern world.

Advocates for an authentic, modern caliphate see it as a symbol of hope. As Ovamir Anjum has pointed out in his essay on the subject: "maintaining the status quo in the Muslim world is a pipe-dream; the dream to change it is not. The current order is un-Islamic, unethical, and inimical to a decent future for Muslims and our human brethren at large. Those who wish to maintain it are a small and shrinking elite."[37] It is quite telling that autocratic Muslim regimes and powerful non-Muslim states are both hostile to the idea of the caliphate as an equitable and accountable alternative governance system that would threaten their

---

[32] "What's the appeal of a caliphate?" *BBC News*, 26 October, 2014, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-29761018.

[33] Isani, 28.

[34] Isani, 89.

[35] Isani, 3.

[36] Julia Voelker McQuaid, *The Struggle for Unity and Authority in Islam: Reviving the Caliphate*? (A joint CNA/Wilton Park Conference) 2007, Center for Strategic Studies, Virginia, p.23-24.

[37] Anjum, *Who Wants a Caliphate?*, 51.

interests. Governing elites in Muslim countries sense socio-political change, an inevitability that will come with a new generation of Islamically-oriented Muslim youth.

4. GUMEES: Global Urban Muslims, Educated and English Speaking

While there are numerous difficult issues we need to address at the macro, meso and micro levels, it is important to remember that as an Umma, our population has vastly increased in the last century. The Umma is nearly two billion strong and youthful, with more than half of its population under the age of 30.[38] We currently make up around 20 percent of humanity, possess numerous resources, and have hundreds of millions of educated people who are globally distributed and connected like never before. Globalization has helped increase ummatic sentiment through the possibilities of instant communications technology, travel and trade. It has also created complex problems that cannot be solved in isolation in an increasingly interdependent world.

Addressing these challenges requires a great collective effort that can only be possible if we enhance social, cultural, religious, economic and political interactions and collaborations. We certainly have the intellectual and material resources to make this happen and it is already occurring at certain levels, but we need to do better. Muslim societies are already interconnected with and are of "The West" and the rest of the world's civilizations. Globalized political and economic integration and interdependency can be painfully seen in the case of the Russian invasion in Ukraine, which has led to food, finance and energy shortages in Africa.[39] Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Tunisia, Iran, Jordan, and Morocco have also been impacted as they rely on imported wheat from Ukraine, and this has led to food price spikes and other difficult consequences for poorer nations. Despite living in these extremely challenging circumstances, there is sense of hope for a better future, given its greatest momentum by Muslim young people who are at the forefront of positive social change.[40] Young Muslims are shaping new media, global markets and creating cultural forms that are reshaping societies as they engage in transformative politics, social activism, and religious revival.[41]

---

[38] "Religion by Country 2023," *World Population Review*, https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/religion-by-country.

[39] Edward A. Burrier, "In Africa, Putin's War on Ukraine Drives Food, Fuel and Finance Crises," *United States Institute of Peace*, June 30, 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/africa-putins-war-ukraine-drives-food-fuel-and-finance-crises.

[40] See, for example, Juan Cole, *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation is Changing the Middle East*, (Simon & Schuster, 2014), and Tahir Abbas and Sadek Hamid (Eds) *Political Muslims: Understanding Youth Resistance in a Global Context*, (Syracuse University Press, 2019).

[41] See for example, Herrera, Linda, and Asef Bayat, eds. 2010. *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*. Oxford University Press, Ahmad, Fauzia, and Mohammed S. Seddon, eds. 2012. *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities, and Expectations*. London: Continuum, Masquelier and Soares 2016

These young people often become socially conscious through their involvement in politics and make up the core recruits of most of the different social, political and religious reform trends across the world.[42] Navid Akhtar, CEO of *Alchemiya*—the Muslim version of Netflix—has described this generation as "GUMEES."[43] They are a religiously committed global elite, who excel in a wide variety of fields that encompass arts, business, creative industries, religious scholarship, media, journalism and sports, and traverse what has been called the Muslim Atlantic.[44] Their education, social capital and the possibilities of digital technology have enabled them to shape new connections and open up new possibilities of organisation and action. As a social cohort, they are projected to grow dramatically and affect positive social change.[45] Their command of online spaces has helped create a "virtual ummah," and they are busy networking and connecting with like-minded Muslim youth on every continent through the use of English language media for communication and knowledge transmission. This has led to the creation of new conceptual categories:

> Anglophone Islam is, geographically speaking, spread across the English-speaking world, defined as those places in which English is the most commonly spoken language (Britain, North America and Australia) or spoken in some other capacity. This of course includes much of Europe, where literacy in English is high even when it is not a recognised language, but importantly, it also includes many former British colonies.[46]

This is perhaps not surprising given that the status of English as the global lingua franca, and despite its tainted colonial origins, appears to hold the possibility of literally functioning as *the* international language that could bring Muslims together in shared conversations that reflect local and international concerns. Communicating in English does not diminish the importance of other languages, but points to multi-lingual capacity of this generation and the reality of its usage among educated Muslim young people. Over the next fifteen years, the Muslim demographic is anticipated to grow at about twice the rate of the non-Muslim demographic and if current trends continue, by 2030 Muslims may make up around 26 percent of the world's total projected population of 8.3 billion.[47] According to the Pew Research Center, between 2010 and 2050 higher fertility rates combined with improved

---

[42] See, for example, Hisham D Aidi, *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon Books, 2014).

[43] This cohort has also been referred to as "Generation M" in Shelina Janmohammed, *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World* (London: I.B Tauris, 2016). The website Creative Ummah is indicative of this trend in the Anglosphere.

[44] Daniel Nilsson DeHanas and Peter Mandaville, *Mapping the Muslim Atlantic: US and UK Debates on Race, Gender and* Securitization, London: British Council, 2019.

[45] Janmohammed, Generation M. See also William Barylo, *Young Muslim Change Makers: Grass Roots Charities Rethinking Modern Societies* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[46] Abdul-Azim Ahmed, "Anglophone Islam: A New Conceptual Category." *Contemporary Islam* 16, no. 2-3 (2022): 135-154.

[47] Brian Grim and Mehtab Karim, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010-2030*, Pew Research Center Forum on Religion & Public Life, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/01/27/the-future-of-the-global-muslim-population/, p.13.

health and economic conditions in Muslim-majority states will cause Muslim populations to grow more than twice as fast as the overall world population.[48]

By the second half of this century, Muslims might surpass Christians as the world's largest religious group. Approximately 60 percent of Muslims live in the Asia-Pacific region, and about 20 percent live in the Middle East and North Africa, where youth constitute more than half of the population. The populations of Muslim minorities in Europe and America are also set to rise owing to immigration and natural growth. By 2030, the number of Muslims in Europe could increase to around 58 million and in the United States to more than 6 million. The sheer numbers of Muslim young people in majority and minority contexts will become significant as they become social actors, participate in and generate social movements. This changing demographic profile could also alter the makeup of Western societies, with their ageing populations and relatively lower reproductive rates. Global interconnectivity will continue to shape the political and social trends in younger Muslim populations, particularly as "Generation Alpha," become teenagers and "Generation Z" and Millennials age and influence their societies in different ways. This represents both a challenge and an opportunity. An optimistic perspective would suggest that this could present the possibility for Muslims to enrich their societies by actively contributing to positive social projects.[49]

Though sadly some Muslim young people are losing interest in their faith, a countervailing trend shows that others are increasingly identifying with Islam.[50] Yearning for a collective religious identity is not limited to concern for those who are suffering in a crisis, which has been demonstrated empirically. For example, a study conducted between 1997 and 2003 concluded that there was a strong sense of 'Ummah Consciousness' among Muslims in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran and Turkey.[51] When Muslims are asked about self-identification, their rapport with fellow Muslims across the world ranks high. Many polls also indicate how faith-based identity overrides national identity. For instance, a 2015 survey carried in Malaysia showed that 60 per cent of Malay Muslims identified as Muslim first, while only 27 per cent identified as Malaysian first.[52] Islam has been shown to provide a pan-ethnic identity in a comparative analysis of Latin American and Turkish second generations in Australia.[53] This greater identification with Islam for some young Muslims is motivated by theological reasons, for others is due to the experience of discrimination and identification

---

[48] Grim and Karim, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, 13.

[49] Barylo, *Young Muslim Change Makers*.

[50] See, for example, Garbi Schmidt, "Islamic Identity Formation among Young Muslims: The Case of Denmark, Sweden and the US," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2004): 31-45.

[51] Riaz Hassan, "Globalisation's Challenge to the Islamic 'Ummah'," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 34, no. 2 (2006): 311–23.

[52] Teo Cheng Wee, "More Malays Say They Are Muslim First: Malaysian Poll," *Straits Times,* August 12, 2015, www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/more-malays-say-they-are-muslim-first-malaysian-poll.

[53] Zuleyka Zevallos, "'You Have to be Anglo and Not Look Like Me': Identity and belonging among young women of Turkish and Latin American backgrounds in Melbourne Australia," *Australian Geographer* 39, no. 1 (2008): 21-43.

with the plight of their religious brethren in places like Palestine, Kashmir, and Burma. These findings are reinforced by a study of young second-generation Muslims in five cities of Belgium, Netherlands, and Sweden, which showed that discrimination led to linking personal identity with a "contested collective identity."[54]

This religiously committed generation also expresses their ummatic sentiments in popular cultural and social activism. Political scientist Hisham Aidi in his *Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* demonstrates how links between Islam, music and politics developed among different generations of Muslim youth around the world over recent decades. His findings are reinforced by Suhail Daulatzai's, *Black Star, Crescent Moon,* which points to the shared history between Black Muslims, radical activists, and the "Muslim Third World".[55] Daulatzai notes that many rappers infused their lyrics with Islamic terminologies and referenced support for global Muslims causes, such as the group A Tribe Called Quest, who openly embraced Islam in the mid-to late 1990s and later formed "The Ummah" group. Ummatic solidarity is also a staple feature in the lyrics of Anglophone artists such as the nasheed singers Zain Bhika, Sami Yusuf, and Maher Zain, though the genre arguably had its earliest iteration with Yusuf Islam's song about solidarity with Afghanistan after the Russian invasion.[56]

5. A Virtual Umma

The early use of the internet by Muslims from the late 1990s onwards saw the creation of various online platforms that enabled people to access virtual fatwa banks, search religious texts and connect with like-minded communities around the world. These trends have continued and magnified in the last two decades, resulting in a huge diversity of web portals, social media interfaces and online digital platforms. Ummatic networking has accelerated through the internet and is seen in the huge proliferation of Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram groups. The aspiration for greater intra-Muslim collaboration is never far from discussions. Online ummatic consciousness is among the most obvious ways that Muslims are globally networking and developing transnational connections that translate into collective action:

> I use FB now to network with leaders in the community – we need a channel for active minds to meet up and recruit each other to serve this ummah. We have unexploited talent and I think social networking sites can liberate these talents.[57]

---

[54] Fenella Fleischmann, Karen Phalet, and Olivier Klein, "Religious Identification and Politicization in the Face of Discrimination," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2011): 628-648, at 629.

[55] Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom beyond America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xxiix.

[56] Yusuf Islam – Afghanistan, Nasheed Lovers Blog, December 30, 2008, http://nasheedlovers.blogspot.com/2008/12/yusuf-islam-afghanistan.html.

[57] Nasya Bahfen, "The Individual and the *Ummah*: The Use of Social Media by Muslim Minority Communities in Australia and the United States," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2018): 7.

The comment above is representative of how many younger Muslims use social media to learn more about their history and Islamic identity and meet in a way that was not possible until the advent of digital telecommunication technologies. Latino Muslims, and converts who are geographically distant from large Muslim communities, use the internet to connect to a transnational Islamic identity.[58] The appetite for virtual ummatic connectivity is growing and is the most convenient way to link with other believers, despite state interference in cases such as China with its estimated 20 million Muslims.[59]

In the past, Hajj was the great annual gathering of believers that strengthened ummatic sentiment. In addition to collectively engaging in worship, it was also an opportunity to meet and exchange ideas at a scale that was not otherwise possible due to geographical distance. This face-to-face meeting with fellow Muslims was the actualization of the Qur'anic imperative to get to "know one another" (taʿāruf). Travel across borders naturally occurred as Muslim empires expanded the establishment of trade routes and various Sufi orders helped spread Islam from the Arabian Peninsula to Indonesia. Other journeys occurred through migration and movement of networks of scholars and students who went on a *rihla* to seek religious knowledge.[60] Many of these dynamics continue to take place today, though of course on an unprecedented level. Today many Muslims can afford to travel for pleasure which has grown due to the proliferation of travel operators offering "halal holiday" packages to destinations rich in Islamic history. This has in some cases served a dual function as some chose to set up businesses and pursue commercial opportunities in places they have visited such as Turkey, Morocco and Malaysia, which are among the some of the most popular places for Muslims to invest in.

Economic development and self-reliance are one of the means of Muslim empowerment and unity building. The massive potential of this international trade is being fuelled globally by young Muslim entrepreneurs, investors, professionals and consumers searching for halal-certified products.[61] According to estimates in *The State of Global Islamic Economy* report of 2016/17, Muslims spent over 1.9 trillion dollars in 2015, while in 2019 this grew to 2.02 trillion across the food, pharmaceutical, cosmetics, and fashion, travel and media/recreation sectors.[62] The ever-increasing demand for shariah-compliant finance products and availability of halal products in mainstream retail outlets points to the power of the "Muslim Pound/Dollar." Economist Masudul Alam Choudhury has argued that, "The

---

[58] Diana Carolina Zuniga Gomez and Mehmet Ozkan, "(Dis)Connecting with the Ummah in e-Spaces: How Latino Muslims Shape Their Identity Through the Internet," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2020): 302-317.

[59] Ho Wai-Yip, "Emerging Islamic-Confucian Axis in the Virtual Ummah: Connectivity and Constraint in the Contemporary China," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1-2 (2011): 137-155.

[60] Piscatori and Saikal, *Umma Beyond Borders,* 15.

[61] There are countless Muslim websites that promote faith-based, ummah centric commercial products and services on platforms such as digitalummah.co.uk, ummah.com, and netummah.com.

[62] Ifty Islam and Muzahid Khan. *Capturing the Halal Pound: A Global Business Growth Opportunity,* Janala Ventura, August 19, 2021, https://janalaventura.com/knowledge-insights/.

Ummatic transformation must arise from market-driven processes. Hence, such awakening will come from the business, entrepreneurial, trading and organizational dynamics of the global Muslim grassroots."[63]

While this halal identity economy is encouraging and represents growing economic power, its potential needs to avoid the commodification of Islam and should be grounded in an ethical Islamic framework, which values personal restraint, economic justice, discouragement of waste and respect for the environment. It also needs to take a more strategic approach with Muslim countries supporting one another. This type of economic co-operation formed part of the idea for a "Muslim common market" advanced by the Prime Minister of Turkey Necmettin Erbakan in his brief tenure in the mid-1990s.[64] He also wanted to reintroduce the gold dinar as a unified currency for the Muslim world to strengthen economic resilience and reduce dependency on dominant currencies like the US dollar. His vision materialised as the Developing-8 (D-8) organization of countries launched in Istanbul on June 15, 1997.[65] The D-8 consists of Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey and aims to maintain strategic relations and increase trade among its members. It holds significant potential for economic co-operation with current trade among its members worth $100 billion.[66]

Another form of economic Muslim solidarity that possesses political power is the idea of "ummatic boycotts." Aisha Karamat Baig uses the term to describe the strategic boycotts initiated by Muslim communities as leverage against companies or countries that produce religiously offensive goods or who are engaged in oppressing Muslim communities.[67] Economic boycotts have proved to be difficult to deal with and are extremely costly as demonstrated by the BDS movement against Israeli goods, boycott of Danish products in 2005 in the wake of the Jyllands-Posten cartoons controversy, and of McDonald's after America's invasion of Iraq, which forced the company to close 300 franchises all around the Muslim world.

6. Rethinking Ummatic Unity

Changing our current condition requires us to be able to reflect on and change how we think, particularly our underlying assumptions, frameworks and logics that we have come to accept. It also means unlearning unhelpful assumptions and thought processes that limit creativity. In

---

[63] Masudul Alam Choudhury, *The Islamic World System: A Study in Polity and Market Interaction* (London: Routledge, 2004), xxii.

[64] Cengiz Dinç, "The Welfare Party, Turkish Nationalism and Its Vision of a New World Order," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2006): 1-17.

[65] For more, see the organization's website: https://developing8.org/.

[66] Md. Kamaruzzam, "D-8 leaders vow to enhance trade among member states," *Anadolu Agency*, April 8, 2021, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/d-8-leaders-vow-to-enhance-trade-among-member-states/2202874

[67] Aysha Karamat Baig, *Ummatic Macro-Boycott Motives: A Socio-Cultural Perspective*, unpublished PhD, (Malaysia: Swinburne University of Technology, 2019).

other words, promoting a "can do," problem-solving mindset rather than one that is pessimistic or defensive. The challenge of increasing Muslim unity is one of perspective— "half full" rather than "half empty." In order to re-imagine ummatic solidarity in the future, we need to have moral vision and act as an ethical transnational community. Economist Rodney Shakespeare has observed:

> The Ummah can correct the unhappy present and build a magnificent future if it understands the deceptions which demean it, lower its energies, exploit it, humiliate it, control it and in all possible ways prevent it from developing its full potential. Those deceptions relate to economics, morality and money, and their interrelation to each other.[68]

We should lead by example and pool our expertise by facilitating the collaboration of religious and secular leaders and experts in different disciplines. It also requires the development of grassroots networks that cultivate an ethical, creative, and future-oriented leadership which is non-sectarian and able to create cooperative partnerships. This would require large-scale synergistic effort and collective intelligence in the way we think about problems. Our communities, institutions and governments cannot solve complex problems without taking a collective approach to them.

There are many instances of participatory approaches to problem-solving, such as Galaxy Zoo at Oxford University, which in the late 2000s mobilized hundreds of thousands of volunteers to classify images of the galaxy. This "Big Mind" approach involves the large-scale collating, organizing and publishing of information through conversation and negotiation.[69] It crowd-sources expertise from multiple domains such as theology, ethics, politics, law, economics, science, development studies, and futures studies, among many others. Part of co-creating solutions means having the ability to perform different types of synthesis, which involve mapping relevant factors, causation, models, relationships and putting them into shared, accessible language. This is often a circular rather than a linear process that involves critical thinking, creativity, reflection and working our way through to viable solutions.

Applying collective intelligence models to challenges faced by Muslim communities would mean that we need to have a deep analysis of these challenges, think about them in different ways, and transcend current paradigms that are clearly not working. This of course is easier said than done as it would require navigating sectarian, ideological and political differences and increasing inter-community alliances. It means the development of a proactive attitude and creation of networks that coordinate more effective collaborative responses. An initial list of priorities could include: maximising the utility of existing community institutions —particularly mosques—and making them more accessible to young people and women and including them in leadership and decision making positions; supporting NGOs, creating new infrastructures and services to deal with pressing social

---

[68] Rodney Shakespeare, Foreword in Masudul Alam Choudhury, *The Islamic World System*, xii.

[69] Geoff Mulgan, *Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence can Change our World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

challenges; establishing greater collaboration with other faiths and minority communities to increase peaceful co-existence and the addressing of challenges facing our societies as a whole. Positive inspiring instances of this include the examples of Muslims during the Covid-19 pandemic that were at the forefront of serving local communities. In the UK, Muslim businesses were particularly active in this regard with restaurants and masjids setting up food banks, and offering free food to the homeless.

The Muslim thinker and futurist Ziauddin Sardar points out, "Islam is inevitably a future-orientated world-view: it is concerned with improving both this world and the Hereafter. It is thus not surprising that the basic concepts of Islam have an intrinsic futures dimension."[70] We obviously cannot 'predict' the future but we can make empirically-based projections about it. We should be thinking about it in concrete terms in order to shape it. This means understanding current trends, how change unfolds, what challenges and opportunities may materialize in the near future, how to navigate hazards and harness opportunities. This requires a profound understanding of where we are now, and where we would like to be in ten, twenty, or thirty years from now, as positive changes in the Umma are not going to come overnight but will require truly global, multi-generational effort. We live in a period of accelerating change, what Sardar has called 'Post Normal Times'—an "in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense."[71] It is a time where new trends, technologies and crises have the potential to radically alter familiar social and political landscapes, as we have seen during the pandemic and the still unfolding Russian-Ukraine war. This is also occurring in the social sphere where established ideas around morality and identity are being challenged and changed overnight and "unconventional and uncommon notions and events can appear as though from nowhere, proliferate, and become dominant."[72]

These are dynamics that Muslims seeking to positively transform their societies need to consider. Unless dramatic changes take place, the next two decades are likely to be a painful continuation of economic and political stagnation, authoritarian consolidation, uprisings, civil wars, interrupted transitions and revolutions. However, while social facts are created by states by their implementation of policies and law, it is ordinary people who have the individual and collective agency to challenge and change them. We need to resist the tendency to exceptionalize our problems as entirely unique and insurmountable. Instead, we should see the bigger universal challenges, help shape the debates about the most pressing issues challenging us as human beings, and help solve global problems such as the environmental crisis. This is particularly pressing given that deforestation, urbanisation, pollution, ecological destabilization,

---

[70] Sardar, Ziauddin, Jordi Serra, and Scott Jordan, *Muslim Societies in Postnormal Times: Foresights for Trends, Emerging Issues and Scenarios* (United Kingdom: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Centre for Postnormal Policy & Futures Studies, 2019), 5.

[71] Ziauddin Sardar (ed.), *The Postnormal Times Reader* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, Centre for Postnormal Policy & Futures Studies, and MAHYA, 2020), 5, https://iiit.org/wp-content/uploads/BiB-The-Postnormal-Times-Reader-Combined.pdf.

[72] Sardar, *The Postnormal Times Reader*.

zoonotic diseases and flooding are more likely to impact Muslim countries in the next two decades, and will have a subsequent effect on the spread of infectious diseases and the ability of these nations to feed themselves. This has already been painfully seen in countries suffering from war such as Yemen, and the island state of the Maldives, which is at risk of disappearing by the end of the century along with a large chunk of the southern coast of Bangladesh. Climate challenges have inter-related consequences on migration and population displacement, which may escalate into political conflicts that could exacerbate the refugee flows of which Muslims comprise the world's majority.

These problems are in addition to the failure of Muslim states to develop economic policies that address poverty, social inequality and provision of basic needs such as housing, education, employment, health care and food security. In addition, most Muslim nations are a long way from being able to influence the direction of scientific and technological debates on Artificial Intelligence, digital surveillance, Transhumanism or the likely development of Next Generation Sequencing, Big Data, 3D Printing and AI combined apps. Forward-thinking governments, on the other hand, have taken innovative routes to reimagine the kinds of societies they want. For instance, Finland has established a "Committee for the Future" and later set up the Open Ministry, which allowed the public to contribute to shaping legislation.[73] Iceland also performed a similar exercise when its national parliament involved the public in an open process to rewrite the constitution, with online inputs and a representative commission.

The seemingly impossible task of unifying Muslims is not as unlikely as it seems when we consider the longer view of history. It is worth recalling that Europe was at war with itself for hundreds of years and only in the 20th century, after two world wars and millions of deaths, did the continent arrive at a peaceful settlement. The road to peaceful European democracies took many centuries and only relatively recently has it developed a functioning arrangement in the form of the EU, and even then, it is currently going through a volatile period with the mainstreaming of far-right sentiment, populism and election of authoritarian politicians. History has always had instances of dramatic reversals. The impossible can become possible. The architects of European empires never expected that the descendants of the people that they conquered would one day be populating their continent in the tens of millions and that Muslims would one day hold such a significant presence. Thirty years ago, who could have imagined that ultra-secularist Turkey would be pursuing its current Islamization policies, and that conservative Saudi Arabia would be undergoing its very public de-Islamization ("modernization")? The transformative change we seek will not happen just by talking, protesting and calling out injustice. We need to be engaged in the process of constructing just as much critiquing. As leading inter-faith activist Eboo Patel reminds us, "It is one thing to critique people in power and another thing to be the one in charge, responsible for the welfare of others. Do people's lives improve when you are the one running things…It is possible to protest bad things out of existence, but if you want to bring a good thing into

---

[73] For more, "Committee for the Future," *Parliament of Finland*, https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx

existence, you need to build that."[74] The fruits that we would like to see in the future undoubtedly begin with planting the seeds today.

The aspiration for greater Muslim unity is not only possible but achievable and starts in our own communities by reaching out to those with similar outlooks and learning to work on matters that benefit our local Muslim communities. While we have a large number of world class scientists, doctors and academics, we appear to lack original macro thinkers, public intellectuals and polymaths who can provide visionary leadership and use their knowledge to develop unique insights or creative solutions for complex, multidimensional challenges. We need to become better at transcending our differences and consider reaching out to those who might hold different perspectives but agree on the need for intra-Muslim unity and the necessity of work together to address issues of collective concern. In practice this means seeking opportunities to participate in city-wide and regional fora that bring Muslims together. We have already built infrastructures and networks that can amplify ummatic communication and cooperation.

Much of this is already taking place at regional and national levels in most Muslim communities. It could be enhanced with more effective coordination and sharing of skills and resources, and good practice needs to be highlighted and celebrated. In the UK, the Muslim Council of Britain has established itself as the leading umbrella platform with over 500 affiliated mosques and Islamic organisations. It has been able to successfully lobby for a range of issues and was the key institutional interface between government and British Muslim communities. In the US, there are several established national bodies such as CAIR, ISNA, ICNA, MANA, who provide platforms that enable the exchange of ideas, experiences and represent American Muslims to wider society. In Europe, organizations such as the Council of European Muslims, FIOE, FEMYSO and European Forum of Muslim Women are affiliated bodies that similarly help co-ordinate and advocate for European Muslims at a continental level. There are comparable groups and initiatives in every Muslim country but we need much greater strategic co-operation.

The need to enhance international platforms that have the capacity to catalyse ummatic unity is a more difficult challenge. Perhaps the OIC holds the most potential in this regard as it was originally intended to promote "close co-operation and mutual assistance in the economic, scientific, cultural and spiritual fields, inspired by the immortal teaching of Islam."[75] While it has been criticized for being ineffective due to divisions over goals and competition between its affiliate states, the OIC has had some positive impact through its Islamic Development Bank, Islamic Solidarity Fund and representation of Islamic

---

[74] Eboo Patel, "Our World Needs Social Change Agents: Here's how to be an Effective Activist," *Chicago Tribune*, July 18, 2022: https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-opinion-activism-interfaith-coalition-bridge-building-20220718-q7uyai5lejhwbe6bkk7v5fupoi-story.html.

[75] OIC General Secretariat, "Declarations of the First Islamic Summit Conference," *OIC Declarations and Resolutions of Heads of States and Ministers of Foreign Affairs Conferences 1389-1401 H. (1969-1981)*, n.d., p.18, cited in Abdullah Ahsan, *Ummah or Nation: Identity Crisis in Contemporary Muslim Society*, (Leicester, UK: Islamic Foundation, 1992), 108.

perspectives on international forums such as the UN.[76] The very fact that it still exists demonstrates the powerful need for transnational Muslim institutions. These international platforms cannot continue to do business as usual and need to respond to the concerns that have been raised about them to remain relevant.

7. Conclusion: "What Unites Us is Greater than What Divides Us"

The adage above is particularly apt when referring to Muslims. As Anwar Ibrahim has observed, "as both concept and practice, the *Ummah* in history provides a demonstration of diversity within unity."[77] The history of Islamic civilization is noted for its rich diversity of people, cultures and traditions. Sadly, today intra-Muslim division continues to contaminate efforts to bring Muslims together. As some scholars have noted, the internal borders of Islam are split on sectarian, doctrinal, or national-territorial lines. Tensions between Sunni-Shiʻa, Salafi-Sufi and rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran undermine attempts at Islamic unity.[78] While these differences are deeply entrenched, there have been many productive ongoing attempts to bring diverse Islamic traditions together. For instance, in 2005, King Abdullah of Jordan convened an international conference to produce the 'Amman Message,' a manifesto that was signed by 552 religious scholars and intellectuals from eighty-four countries, and intended to counter the rise of intolerant versions of Islam and recognize diverse theological and legal groups among Muslims. The late influential scholar Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi proposed 'Principles for Sunni-Shi'a Dialogue.'[79] Furthermore, prominent Shiite authorities, such as the Ayatollahs Ali Khamenei of Iran and Ali al-Sistani in Iraq have also issued several fatwas forbidding attacks on Sunni figures and sites.[80]

This desire for greater Sunni-Shia ecumenicalism can be seen more recently in Western Muslim communities. In the UK, the Muslim Council of Britain, Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board, Al-Khoei Foundation, Muslim Association of Britain, Council of European Jamaat, and Majlis Ulama Shia Europe issued a Joint Statement on Muslim Solidarity and Unity.[81] Another important initiative was launched in early 2022—the Global Imams and Scholars Charter—as an effort to work towards a unity of vision between

---

[76] In December 2019, the Kuala Lumpur conference in Malaysia convened with 20 Muslim countries attending to discuss issues of unity and co-operation among Muslims. For an event review see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Kuala Lumpur Summit on a Unified Currency for Muslim Countries," *IAIS Bulletin* 53 (Nov-Dec 2019), 3-4.

[77] Anwar Ibrahim, "The Ummah and Tomorrow's World," *Futures* 23, no. 3 (April 1991): 302-310, at 306.

[78] Piscatori and Saikal, *Umma Beyond Borders,* 3

[79] Sagi Polka, "Taqrib al-Madhahib — Qaradawi's Declaration of Principles Regarding Sunni-Shi'i Ecumenism," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 3 (May 2013): 414-429.

[80] Ali Mamouri, "Shiite leaders forbid insults against Sunnis," *Al-Monitor*, January 13, 2015: https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/01/iran-iraq-fatwa-sunni-shiite-insults.html.

[81] "Joint Statement on Muslim Solidarity and Unity," *MCB*, May 14, 2013, https://mcb.org.uk/mcb-updates/joint-statement-on-muslim-soldarity-and-unity/

organizations and global Western imams and scholars.[82] Its primary purpose is to strive for the spiritual, social, ethical and intellectual betterment of the Umma and currently comprises of The British Board of Scholars & Imams, European Council of Imams, North American Imams Federation, Canadian Council of Imams, Australian National Imams Council, Ulama Council of New Zealand, and United Ulama Council of South Africa. Meaningful scholarly co-operation and consensus building are hugely important in bringing different Muslim orientations together and these platforms form a basis upon which to build.

Ummatic sentiment is growing despite a simultaneous process of political and social fragmentation in the Muslim world. Muslims are converging while others are clearly diverging and magnifying existing divisions. However, unlike the 'imagined communities' of modern nation-states, the desire for ummatic unity is real.[83] To put it another way, "the umma is ummatic." For many believers, the bonds of faith are as important as those of blood. It is up to us to strengthen this connection and shape new counter-narratives that shift the conversation toward functional, sustainable, effective intra-Muslim co-operation. We need to recognize that the appetite for unity is perhaps stronger and more necessary now than ever in our history. The glimpses of diverse forms of ummatic consciousness highlighted in this essay point to starting points for further development, an especially promising point, given that most Muslims in the world are under the age of thirty. Muslim youth are not only the hope for the future but are also currently key change makers. We need to maximise the potential of the millions of entrepreneurs, business innovators, technology pioneers, educators, activists, artists, and journalists already transforming their fields and encourage them to think and act in more ummatic ways.

We also need to begin the process of bringing together the best scholars, thinkers, writers, policy analysts, academics, activists and lay Muslims from every corner of the Umma to contribute to the task of increasing unity—people who are willing to transcend intra-Muslim sectarianism and petty politics and promote the greater good. We are all aware that we are deeply divided on many issues, but one thing we should all agree on is the urgent need for greater ummatic unity. We should not underestimate the large number of Muslims all over the world who feel the same way and who are looking and working to change the status quo in positive ways. These like-minded change agents will help identify ways of addressing our collective challenges, develop consensus on key issues, and convert analysis into action. We already have the foundations and aspirations —let's build upon this. We will not become united by imposing uniformity from above, but from developing more unified efforts from below. Thus the challenge remains: if we want a more unified Umma, are we willing to work for it?

---

[82] "The Global Imams & Scholars' Charter – The Global Imams & Scholars Network", *The British Board of Scholars & Imams*, April 30, 2022, https://www.bbsi.org.uk/the-global-imams-scholars-charter-the-global-imams-scholars-network/.

[83] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<center>* * * * *</center>

Dr. Sadek Hamid is Research Associate at the Ummatics Institute. He is also a Research Fellow at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and has previously held teaching and research positions at the universities of Chester, Liverpool Hope, Cambridge Muslim College, and Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. He has been actively engaged in Muslim communities for more than 30 years and prior to transitioning to academia was a Youth & Community Development professional. He has written extensively on Muslim young people, Islamic activism, religion, politics, and public policy. His published research papers are available at: https://oxford.academia.edu/DrSadekHamid, and journalistic articles for The New Arab at: https://english.alaraby.co.uk/author/66345/sadek-hamid. He is author of *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (I. B. Tauris, 2016), co-author of B*ritish Muslims: New Directions in Islamic Thought, Creativity and Activism*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), editor of *Young British Muslims: Between Rhetoric and Realities* (Routledge, 2016), co-editor of *Youth Work and Islam: A Leap of Faith for Young People* (Sense, 2011) and *Political Muslims: Understanding Youth Resistance in a Global Context* (Syracuse University Press, 2018).

Suggested citation:

Sadek Hamid, "Islam Beyond Borders: Building Ummatic Solidarity in the 21st Century," *Ummatics*, January 25, 2023, https://ummatics.org/papers/islam-beyond-borders-building-ummatic-solidarity-in-the-21st-century.