

## GEOGRAPHY AND ISLAM'S PLACE ON THE WORLD MAP

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Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century numerous treatises have been published on a wide range of historical, geographical, anthropological and religious topics. Although their assumptions and ideas have often been racist and discriminatory, the fact that their approach is global has had the positive effect of showing that the phenomena they explored were both universal and human in nature. This led to a closer examination of specific cultures and civilizations and provided some Orientalists and geographers with the material they needed for their theories about the history of Islam from a geographical perspective.

The best known of these theories was put forward by the French geographer Xavier de Planhol in his proposition that Islam's nomadic desert and semi-desert character was inspired by the regions of the world in which Islam had become widespread, as well as their demographic and cultural features. In fact, though, his thesis is more an impression than a theory derived from historical reality.



Islam emerged out of the desert environment of the Arabian Peninsula and most of the peoples who embraced it belonged to the Turkic races from the desert and semi-desert lands of Central Asia. According to de Planhol, Ibn Khaldun – who wrote in depth about the nature of states and governance in Islam – maintained that the culture of Muslim societies had been shaped by nomadic tribalism when it moved out of the desert and into the cities. However, Andre Miquel and Marshall Hodgson have asserted that, although this view might be attractive, it makes no sense – neither geographically nor from a human point of view – since the Muslim regions with the highest populations lay along the coasts and the banks of the major rivers, including the littoral zones of the Indian Ocean, East Asia and the Mediterranean, and the Nile, Euphrates, Sayhun and Jayhun rivers. They noted that coastal, river-based and agrarian societies can only thrive in large, medium-sized and small settled communities and in a stable environment – factors which are incompatible with a nomadic existence.

There are indeed deserts and nomadic peoples in the Islamic world and these have played an important role throughout history; however, it is not they who have determined the shape or destiny of Islamic societies; this has been the role of the major settled communities. Hence it is erroneous to peddle the stereotypical image of Islam's Bedouin or nomadic character (supposedly shaped by demography or geographical factors).

In order to comprehend the Islamic world of today we need to go back to Islam's creedal roots; at the same time we also need to look closely at the development of the state and the growth of the towns, cities and populations. Only then will we be able to understand how changing situations have affected Islamic societies today.

According to the Qur'anic view of the world, mankind was originally a single nation, since they sprung from a single origin. Then differences arose and they became separate nations. However, from the time this separation occurred they always felt a yearning to return to their roots and overcome those differences. Later, ruling authorities arose in those nations and Allah sent prophets and messengers calling upon the people to follow a single faith. Every prophet was sent specifically to his own people; then Allah sent Muhammad (PBUH) to the whole of mankind, starting with his own people and clan.



When the Prophet (PBUH) emigrated to Madinah in the year 622 CE he wrote a contract between its inhabitants and those who had emigrated with him in which he considered them to be “one *Ummah* (Nation) to the exclusion of all other people”. The Qur’an decreed that emigration to that community and its *dar* (territory) was an obligation in order to reinforce the new *Dar al Iman* (“Territory of the Faith”). This continued to be the case until the Conquest of Makkah, when the concept of the all-inclusive *Ummah* triumphed and it was no longer obligatory for Muslims to migrate to Madinah. On the contrary, people were then required to go out, spread the Message and endeavour to ensure that the *Ummat al Da’wah* (Nation being called to Islam, literally, the “Inviting Nation”) became identical to the *Ummat al Ijabah* (the Muslim Nation, literally, the “Responding Nation”). In this context, “becoming identical” does not mean “becoming united in a single state” since, according to the Qur’an, mankind will continue to consist of separate nations and differences will remain. What people are required to do, however, is to continue to work for reconciliation and peace between the different nations (i.e. peoples and tribes) through the medium of “*ta’aruf*” (getting to know one’s fellow man) – that is, every side should recognize the other at both the individual and collective levels. According to the Qur’an, Muslims are required to deal with each other, at home and abroad, as follows: “Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for [your] faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them; for Allah loveth those who are just.” (*Al Mumtahanah* 8).

The Caliphate, Islamic State and Conquests played a hugely important role in the historical and human development of *Dar al Islam* (the “Territory of Islam”). The State that was established in the Arabian Peninsula changed the strategic balance in the region, which had previously been dominated by the Byzantine and Persian empires, and the ensuing period of conflict – known in early Islamic history as “*Asr al Futuhat*” (“the Age of the Conquests”) – led to the fall of the Persian Empire and the contraction of the Byzantine Empire. There was another Age of Conquests during the Ottoman period between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, and this expansion of the state (or empire) was one of the reasons behind the spread of Islam. However, the main reason was the civilization and culture which the



Muslims brought to the outside world through spreading the Message of Islam, and the justice and goodwill which characterised the way they dealt with the peoples of Asia and Africa, and later Europe and America, in the Middle Ages as well as in more recent times.

Like the tides, the conquests had their highs and lows and in several cases their fortunes were reversed; this happened in Andalusia, which had contributed so spectacularly to human civilization. However, where the Faith has remained firm today – i.e. the regions in which the Islamic faith and culture are still predominant – this is due to the spirit of the civilization and *ta'aruf* spread by the Islamic *Ummah*. The geo-strategic sea-change that occurred when the *Ummah* and the Caliphate appeared on the scene only became an established feature because there had also been radical geo-religious and geo-cultural changes. The Crusaders invaded the Levant, wreaked havoc and death and built their castles, then they disappeared from the scene some two hundred years later. The Mongols and the Tartars swept across the world, but they too only remained a power to be reckoned with for two hundred years or so, while those of them who remained in the areas they had conquered were able to do so because they had embraced Islam along with its attitudes, manners and values.

Religious and cultural geography cannot be fully understood unless it is seen in the context of human geography. The late Russian Orientalist Ignati Krachkovsky wrote about the Muslim geographers and the way they saw the Islamic world, its neighbours and the more far-flung regions. The writings of the French scholar Andre Miquel – who wrote about the human geography of *Dar al Islam* (the “Territory of Islam”) – are not only precise and descriptive; they also provide a comprehensive picture of the nature of human society in the Islamic world. He approaches his subject from two different angles: firstly, he looks at the peoples within the borders of *Dar al Islam* and their lives in the Middle Ages within the context of their own cultures and the culture of Islam; then he examines the human and cultural relations between Muslims and the human relations between the Muslims and the outside world over a longer period of time. In his view, between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AH the world of Islam represented a major world culture and achieved a level of civilization and prosperity that the Asian



continent had never seen before in its history. One of its offshoots was “North African Islam” which provided Mediaeval Europe with the basis for its scientific and cultural progress.

Marshall Hodgson preferred to divide the geography and culture of the mediaeval Islamic world into six sub-categories which he regarded as forming a single cultural entity. At the same time, he did not discount specific geographical and human factors.

*Dar al Islam* was by no means a stagnant or static region. However, the modern era has seen fundamental changes in its populations, systems of government and cultures. Both linguistically and culturally it has undergone significant deterioration and – to add to its woes – it has suffered from the twin evils of political turbulence and subjection to foreign domination. Muslims are not the only peoples to have been affected by these developments, which have also caused pain and suffering in most of Asia and Africa. There has also been a population explosion in the Muslim world that was unimaginable before the modern era. Moreover, there are now tens of millions of Muslims in Europe and America, half of them Arabs, and in recent decades they have been the focus of tensions caused by the strains in the relationship between Muslims and the West.

However, despite these tensions and despite talk of a clash of civilizations and wars on terrorism, new horizons are opening up for Islam. Today, the changing state – or status – of the world of Islam’s geography is no less important than the recent shift of focus back to the *Ummah*, its “geographical disconnection” following the decline of *Dar al Islam* and the growing turbulence created by the belief that the Islamic Faith is inextricably linked to geography or the Caliphate.

As the focus now shifts back to the *Ummah* and its cultural identity, its human and cultural geography has shrunk in some respects, while it has expanded in others. The major cultures and nations are not in decline, but they are changing, while the notion of the *Ummah* is still very much alive in many Muslim societies across the world.

It could thus be true to say that the world map of today’s Islamosphere is the map of an *Ummah* that is in the process of renewing itself.