Globalization and Islam: Challenges and Opportunities.

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Abstract: Globalization is a complex process which has affected all aspects of life. No country, no civilization can remain an island to neutralize the effects of globalization. Muslim world too is encountering globalization in its own way. It has challenged the very core values of Islamic civilization and Muslim scholars are finding it difficult to counter the powerful influence of Western Anglo Sexan globalization. The paper aims to highlight both challenges as well opportunities the globalization has for Islam. The paper holds the view that in many ways globalization and Islam are allies but in many other ways they contradict. Furthermore the paper presents, though very small, sketch of Islamic globalization.

Introduction: The term globalization was presumably coined in 1944 by Reiser and Davies and has become a catchword for various researchers across a wide academic disciplines after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the last decade of the 20th century. The collapse of communism gave powerful impetus to economic globalization, in that it paved the way for the absorption into the global capitalist system of the last significant bloc of states that had remained outside it.

Globalization is the emergence of a complex web of interconnectedness that means that our lives are increasingly shaped by events that occur at a great distance from us. The central feature of globalization is, therefore, that geographical distance is declining relevance, and that territorial boundaries are becoming less significant. The problem with globalization is that it is not a single process but a complex web of processes, sometimes overlapping and interlocking processes but also, at times, contradictory and oppositional ones. For the economist, globalization is essentially the emergence of a global market. For the historian, it is an epoch dominated by global capitalism. Sociologists see globalization as the celebration of diversity and the convergence of social preferences in matters of lifestyle and social values. To the political scientist, it represents the gradual erosion of State sovereignty. But discipline specific studies explain only a part of the phenomenon. From a multidisciplinary angle, globalization may be treated as a phenomenon, a philosophy and a process which affect human beings as profoundly as any previous event.

Ahmad Ibrahim Abushouk has categorized the definitions of globalization into five broad categories but none of them wholly encompasses the meaning of globalization. Analyzing these definitions he finds that in the end, all the definitions suggest that the upshot of today’s Anglo-Saxon globalization will lead to a form of comprehensive globalization which will include all the forces that are guiding the world towards a global village, compressing distance, homogenizing cultures, diluting national
society is deleterious and reducing the relevance of political
borders.

Leslie Sklair has identified four major approaches to the globalization – (i) The world systems approach, the offshoot of Dependency Approach, is based on the distinction between core, semi-peripheral and periphery in terms of their changing roles in international division of labour dominated by the capitalist world system (ii) The Global Cultural Approach, this approach focuses on the problem that a homogenizing mass-media-based culture poses threat for national identities. This approach highlights the communication revolution and the emergence of what Marshall McLuhan famously called “the Global village” with linkage to both global to local and local to global. (iii) Global Society Model, historically global society theorists argue that the concept of world or global society has become a believable idea only in modern age and, in particular science, technology, industry and universal values are increasingly creating a twentieth century world that is different from any past age and (iv) Global Capitalism Model, this model locates the dominant global forces in the structure of ever-more globalizing capitalism each interpreting globalization in its own way.xx

The United States of America is the principal architect and the most powerful champion of the capitalist path to prosperity and progress. The most vital and overarching objective of the US is to incorporate the major national markets (like that of China, India etc.) into the so-called global free market under its stewardship xvii. Globalization thus has thus a pronounced neo-liberal or free-market ideological character. Capitalism, in short, remains the issue. Supporters of globalization, sometimes called globalists, usually argue that capitalism tends towards general prosperity and widening opportunities, in which case global capitalism will allow these benefits to be enjoyed by more people in more countries. Opponents of globalization, on the other hand, tend to associate capitalism with inequality and exploitation, in which case globalization will simply generate new forms of misery and injustice xviii. What is new in the present day globalization is, it is conducted in the post-socialist framework, that no longer recognizes that there are viable alternatives to market structure and capitalist organizations xix. The choice is between neo-liberal globalization and regulated globalization, rather than between global capitalism and any qualitatively different alternative xix.

Globalization has produced both winners as well as losers. The winners are invariably identified as multinational corporations and industrially advanced states, the losers, in contrast, are in the developing world. These transnational corporations now account for between 25 and 33 per cent of world output, 70 percent of the world trade, and 80 percent of international investment, while oversea production by these firms exceeds considerably the level of world exports, making them key players in the global economy controlling the location and distribution of economic and technological resources xv.

Globalization has not only created losers and winners, but has also contributed towards a social setup, more integrated but highly uncertain. This high uncertainty is summed up in Ulrick Beck’s idea of a ‘risk society’ xixi. Globalization has globalized the risks, the risk of a global war, AIDS, environmental deterioration, terrorism, drug trafficking etc. To sum we may simply assume that the globalization process was engined by the development paradigm mantra, which to its utter dismay resulted in hyper-urbanization, landlessness, which reveal short comings of the development paradigm’s underlying belief in inexorable technological progress xixii.

Globalization harps on the master concept of ‘development’ which surely has undermined social protections. The recent global financial meltdown has silenced all pro-capitalist scholars and statesmen. The rising unemployment, from 190 million in 2008 to 240 million in 2009 along with food crisis, low economic growth and vulnerability of more than 46 million people in the developing world, who will be driven into poverty in 2009 according to a World Bank estimate xixiii. Although the crisis erupted in the US because of banking system collapse, its consequences are seen all over the globe. The severity of the crisis were vehemently felt after the fall of Lehmen Brothers xixiv. Looking upon the contemporary situation there comes one single voice from all corners of the globe that unregulated global capitalism can and have brought havoc to the people’s lives all over globe.

**Globalism in Islam:** The doctrine of Islamic globalism is rooted within the basic principle of Islam that is *Tawheed*, belief in one Allah. This doctrine is the corner stone of the whole Islamic message. It is mentioned in the Quran:

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Belief in One God demands that humanity be considered as a composite whole and all humans be treated alike. In Islam ‘Oneness of Rab’ is followed by the principle of ‘oneness of Aab’ (doctrine of common parenthood). The Quran mentions in Chapter 4, Verse 1 that; O mankind! Reverence your guardian Lord, Who created you from a single person; Who created the first person’s mate of like nature; Who created from them twain all men and women on earth. The message is repeated in various chapters of the wholly Quran. In Chapter 49, Verse 13, it is mentioned:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know and cooperate with one another.

Same message is repeated in Prophet Mohammad’s last sermon which was delivered on 9th day of Dhul Hijjah AH in the Uranah Valley of Mount Arafat.

O people! Verily all mankind is from Adam and Eve, and Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother of every Muslim and that Muslims constitute one brotherhood.

Islam rejects the idea of ‘chosen people’ that are favoured by God over others because of their race, color or origin. Thus a direct relationship is established with God, open to all alike without any discrimination or intercession. The Quran refutes the argument of Jews and Christians as the chosen people. Allah mentions in Chapter 2, Verse 111:

And they say: None entereth paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their own desires. Say, bring your proof (of what you state) if you are truthful. The Quran mentions in the same Chapter Verse 112 that

Nay, but whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good, his reward is with His Lord; and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve.

Islam is a global Din with a global message for the good of human kind. Its methods of worship clearly reflect the globalism of its mission. For example prayer is offered five times a day and while offering prayers Muslims stand in a single row, bow together, prostrate together by
Globalization a challenge to Islamic Identity: There is a group of Muslim scholars who believe that globalization has brought an invasion of American culture to Muslim societies that will hallow Muslims from inside and domesticate their identity. They consider globalization as an old process that has been in process since the dawn of history, and is currently in its most rapid phase of development. Some Muslim scholars take the history of globalization back to Greek civilization, where Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BC) tried to expand his political territories over the neighboring countries, and impose the values of Hellenistic civilization on the indigenous people of the Mediterranean region. The Greeks gradually left the scene for the Romans, who based their civilization on the Greek legacy and Christian heritage. These developments enabled Constantinople to establish itself as the capital of the Roman (or Byzantine) phase of globalization, from where the Romans tried to impose their cultural and political values on the nations of the Mediterranean Sea, the Near East and North Africa. The spread of Roman values in the old world put the Romans and their clients in conflict with the Persians, and the tension between the two superpowers (the Byzantine and Persian empires) of that time dominated the political landscape until the Muslims appeared as a new political force in the 7th century. Contemporary Muslim writers see globalization as sabotaging the Islamic personality and inflicting the people, causing a planned exchange with the Muslims through the introduction of materialist culture. The question which has now arisen is whether what printing and the first Industrial Revolution did to Christianity, the Internet and Cyberspace and the third industrial revolution (of information technology) will do to Islam. (The second revolution was in global exploration and imperial trade). Can Islamic world compete with the West?

Globalization is all about shrinking of space and distances, thus creating more competition for space among different actors at the world stage. Shrinking of resources in a shrinking world will lead to what Huntington calls a ‘clash of civilizations’ especially West vs Islam. Huntington says the underlying problem of the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the US Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflict between Islam and the West.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC, the advocates of the clash of civilizations doctrine have dominated the American political and media scene. Before any evidence was revealed about the identity of the attackers, and within a few minutes, Islam and Muslims were placed in the dock by leading American newspapers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post. In the Western media, Islam was also painted as a violent religion, and ordinary people were made to believe that Islam and terrorism go hand-in-hand. The war on terrorism became consciously or subconsciously associated with the war on Islam. In this atmosphere, George W. Bush Jr. divided the world between “believers and non-believers”; the former are those who accept the values of Anglo-American capitalism and the latter are those who do not.

The West shows hostility towards Islam both on theological grounds and on grounds of power, simply because Muslims are the last group to stand against Western domination of the world. What the West calls “Islamic Fundamentalism” is nothing more or less than the combination of Islam and power. Islam alone cannot be said to ‘threaten the West’ since the West happily accepts what they call a non-political Islam as practiced in Saudi Arabia, often called as ‘American Islam’. Nor does power alone upset the West. But when power is combined with Islam, the West automatically perceives the enemy and it makes every effort to crush it e.g. Taliban of Afghanistan, Morsi’s government in Egypt, Khomeini’s Iran etc.

Globalization brings opportunities: Let us consider some common features of Islam and Globalization:

1. Islam demands death of distances so do globalization. Islam believes in universalism rather than nationalism and globalization has a capacity to tear down the borders erected and maintained by the nation-states. Thus the
Islamic concept of *Ummah* can be realized through the mechanism and opportunity the globalization provides. Modern technology in transport and communication has promoted an unprecedented degree of interaction between Muslims across the world, especially those belonging to the middle and upper classes, forging new links in scholarship, trade, commerce and welfare programs. This network of relationships has naturally given fresh impetus to the trans-national nationalism of the Muslim *Ummah*, with a leadership drawn mainly from the ranks of the middle class. Its energies are targeted against western cultural imperialism. Globalization, thus, has resulted in fueling Islamization of identity as well as ideologized Islam across Muslim world.

In an attempt to turn the world into a global village the technology, especially the communication and information technology of the World Wide Web and the Internet, have had two inter-related effects:

i. Shrinking of national sovereignty, and

ii. Shrinking of distance.

In both these regards, Islam and globalization are fundamental allies.xxix

2. Islam provides huge importance to movement so do globalization. Islam is a religion which has always wanted to celebrate both movement and direction. The Islamic era or calendar does not begin when the Prophet Muhammad was born in 570 CE. It does not begin when he became a prophet forty years later. It does not begin when the prophet died in June 632 CE. The Islamic era or calendar begins when the Prophet Muhammad moved in 622 CE. The *Hijra* is, in a sense, a celebration of purposeful movement. The Prophet not only changed and synthesized religious paradigms, from pre-Islamic to Islamic. The Prophet also physically changed cities from Mecca to Medina. Islamic time began with physical movement.xxx

3. Islam ascertains the death of distances through three holiest cities, Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, each of which signifies different levels of the death of distance. Prophet Mohammad was born in Mecca but migrated from intolerant Mecca to receptive Medina. Mecca signified other aspects of the primordial death of distance. Five times each day millions of Muslims turn to Mecca, communicating with Allah through a city thousands of miles away. Mecca is a constant point of religious convergence for those in communication with the ultimate. Distance is threatened by faith. And, in the earlier centuries, Islam enlisted scientific and technological know-how in this very quest to overcome the barriers of distance. But Mecca is also the city of the annual pilgrimage, receiving millions every year from diverse corners of the world. They came by jet and camel, on foot and by boat. No barrier was challenging enough to stop the Muslim faithful from conquering the distance to Mecca.xxxi

The third most sacred city for Islam is, of course, Jerusalem over which Israelis and Palestinians are today in a stalemate. Jerusalem hosts the Masjid-i- Aqsa, the first Qibla of Muslims. Muslims believe that on the night of *Mi’raj*, distance was truly shrunk at three different levels: The prophet moved from Mecca to Jerusalem in a single night in the age of the camel; and he moved from earth to Heavens during the same night, ascending from Jerusalem; and while in Heavens the present age communicated with the ages of the past, for the Prophet was able to talk to Jesus, Moses and all the way back to Adam during the same night. The Prophet was back in Mecca before morning – breaking at least three sound barriers of cosmic experience: the distance between Mecca and Jerusalem; the distance between the earth and the Heavens; and the distance between the past and the present, very akin to the theory of relativity. And it is in this sense that Islam prepared believers for the age of the end of distance and the age of globalized digital simultaneity.xxxii

**Conclusion:** Globalization is an unstoppable phenomenon, presenting opportunities to those who are prepared and threats to those who are not. Globalization may seem to have challenged Muslim values and culture but at the same time Islam has found in it a mechanism akin for the realization of its goal.

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Ibid.


Heywood Andrew, *Politics*, p. 139.

Ibid.

Baylis and Smith, *Globalization of World Politics*, p.21

A risk society is one that is characterized by rising individualism and an associated weakening of tradition, community and established institutions (Baylis & Smith; 2007: 231 & Roberts and Hite; 2007: 357).


V. Sridhar, "The spectra of protectionism; The Hindu, March 23, 2009


Al Quran, Chapter 2, Verse 107.

Al Quran, Chapter 3, Verse 18.

Al Quran, Chapter 112, Verses 1-4.


See Also *Islam and the World and Western Civilization Islam and Muslims* by Mulana Syed Abu ul Hassan Ali Hasni Nadvi, See Also, Dr. Fazal ul Rehman Feridi, *Capitalist System: A Challenge*.


Al Amin Mazrui, *Globalization and the Muslim World: Sub-Saharan Africa in a Comparative Context* 

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.