Muslim Differences: Destructive Disorder or Unifying Mercy
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The word *Fitnah* in Arabic denotes 'trial and tribulation'. It is originally derived, according to the famous philologist Al-Azhari[2] from the verb *fatana,* as in *fatantu al-dhahab wa-l-fiddah* 'I melted gold and silver' to separate the precious metal from the dross / scum.' Thus, the basic meaning of *fitnah* is a trial, which places an individual at a crossroads involving many choices, some of which are destructive, while others lead to safety and revival. Each individual is in a perpetual state of trial, faced by circumstances prompting him to behave destructively and decadently, so that he falls into a pit. When some people asked the Prophet not to test them by sending them into battle, the Holy Quran says, 'They have already been tested' (9:49). If people resist the temptation, the *Fitnah* can bring out their finest qualities.

So *Fitnah* tests human freedom of choice: either to take effective responsibility, use penetrating determination, and incisive vision, or submit to voluntary slavery that catapults the individual into the maze of ignorance, the malice of egoism and the weakness of fear.

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Hence, *Fitnah* is not inherently abhorrent, but should rather be judged based on its outcomes. We may remind ourselves in this context of the consequences of wars in the Arab East and Africa. The Holy Quran mentions that faith is a human quality that becomes evident only as a result of *Fitnah* (trial and tribulation). God Almighty says in the Quran: 'Do people imagine that they will be left (at ease) because they say, "We believe", and will not be tested with affliction?' (29:2). Thus, faith is not just an attribute that the individual adds to his identity but is rather an established psychological state and an inner force that only becomes evident through painful trial, making the individual into a different person, who attains a higher level.

What we are experiencing nowadays is a collective challenge for what was termed for the first time as 'crimes against humanity' after the Second World War, during the court trials of the war criminals. What is meant by this is 'crimes against the individual human being' as stated by Professor Hersch Lauterpacht. Professor Raphael Lemkin, for his part, wrote about genocide, which is not established unless the aim is proven. The two types of crime are connected: extermination of the individual person and genocide targeting a particular group of people. We should remember that according to Tim Macknitosh-Smith in his book "Arabs: a 3000 Year History of People, Tribes and Empire", Arabs, who constitute 5% of the world population, represent 68% of the victims of wars, and 58% of the refugees of the world.

Fitnah is used in the Qur'an in more than one meaning. I list here some *wujūh* (alternative facets of meaning) of the word as used in the Qur'an:
- 'Persecution': (2: 193) 'And fight them until persecution is no more.'
- 'Misguiding people and intermixing truth with falsehood, tempting (addressed to the hypocrites): (57:14) 'But you tempted one another, and hesitated, and doubted'.

- 'Persecution': (8:73) 'The disbelievers support one another. If you do not do the same, there will be persecution in the land and great corruption.'

The unintentional killing by Moses of the Egyptian man (see 28:15 ff.) can be seen as an example of failing the test posed by *Fitnah*.

Hypocrisy of every kind is the antithesis of truth. If we were true, how could we accept what is happening in the Palestinian areas and Gaza? *Fitnah* in this context is the challenge which the human can only confront rather than succumb to, because the firm aim of the individual is to continue leading a true and decent life, requiring all the creative capacity and human nobility of the individual.

The Quran does not confine *Fitnah* to the individual level, but rather draws a broader picture of human existence, and warns of *Fitnah,* which is the 'predestined' human condition that makes life hell, threatening the peace and stability of human relations.

An Islamic Summit was convened in 1969 to stand against aggression in the holy places of Muslims in Al-Aqsa. At the time the discussion was not about Arabs or non-Arabs but rather all the participants concurred on the necessity of defending Islamic holy places. Now, when we see missiles targeting cities such as Abha and Najran, we wonder: 'What if those missiles hit Mecca or Medina?' God forbid! Truly, the Sacred Sanctuary is protected by the Lord.

While Islam warns of *Fitnah* luring individual people to fall, it warns more strongly and intensely of collective, conflictual *Fitnah*, which burns the earth and destroys all creatures. This is what we see today in the ethnic and sectarian strife in the Arab and Islamic East, which show the enormity of what is happening to our Arab reality. We must not forget

that the Arab presence embodies custodianship of the holy places in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The Quran alerts the believers themselves to the danger of falling into this type of *Fitnah:* (8: 25): 'Beware of discord that harms not only the wrongdoers among you: know that God is severe in His punishment.'

According to the exegete Al-Tabari, this means 'Beware of a *Fitnah* which will afflict you if you do not guard yourself against it.' This is to alert people not only to avoid falling into *Fitnah*, but also to avoid coming near to it: that is to block all its avenues into public life, and to try to generate positive conditions guaranteeing the safety and reconstruction of all, psychologically, socially and materially.

This preventive vision presented by the Holy Quran has unfortunately not been demonstrated in most of Islamic history, nor in our contemporary Muslim reality, particularly in the religious discourse and nationalism, which is politicized in a random and anarchical manner from pulpits and through the media, sometimes on grounds of defending religion, and sometimes to show the straight path and disparage the paths of misguidance. Lamentably, we do not abide by the categorical and revealed texts nor by the popular adage, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.'

Regrettably, there has not emerged from the Organization of Islamic Conference/ Cooperation a taskforce that is above these differences, that includes all the concerned nations in any regional or sub-regional conflict. This has produced a vacuum enabling foreign interests to use us as proxies in conflicts against our fellow believers and our own people. We in the Middle East and North Africa have witnessed a war around every ten years since the year 1948!

Here I emphasize the importance of our history remaining alive within us, not by repeating its mistakes, but by learning from reflecting on them, developing effective systems of good conduct and unifying our causes. We should not avoid reflecting on the situation, by saying, for example, that such wars are 'Fitnahs' which God has protected our swords from, so let us guard our tongues from delving into them'. Nor should we portray events in a way that serves the aims of authority and influence, on grounds of 'defending truth and defeating evil' or as a justification for the triumph of the victorious group. This would intensify sectarian and religious conflicts which we know how to start but do not know how to end. What is actually needed is positive thinking and respect for the value of such thought.

Human history is not short of wars and conflicts, and major wars occurred even in early Islamic history, most notoriously, what was termed as the Major *Fitnah* which took place in the time of the second Caliph 'Uthman (God be pleased with him). This led to his murder. Then there was struggle between Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb and Mu`awiya Bin Abi Sufyan which culminated with the arbitration to which a sector of the camp of Ali objected. This led to the emergence of the *Fitnah* of the Khawarij.

The history of *Fitnah* allows us to learn lessons, so as to avoid it recurring and to be wise to its deceptive influence. Learning to avoid *Fitnah* provides an impetus for us to create new and challenging societal conditions that drain the wellsprings of conflict and prevent conflicts reaching uncontrollable proportions, where the discourse of demagogues and parasites is nourished by rancor and hatred and invigorated by killing and bloodshed.

Despite the aspiration of most Muslims to a united position, with the resolution of internal differences between the followers of the many

Islamic schools of thought, this aspiration is not reflected in reality: the contradictions are rather magnified, mutual recriminations intensify, and the negative positions between the various schools of thought are pervasive. The abuse of schools of thought for political and ideological purposes is ongoing and damaging. The discourse of hatred, negative assumptions and even excommunication between the followers of the various schools of thought is aggressive and pervasive. It is as though we seek exposure to the public through the media more than providing sustainable analysis to decision makers to inform them properly and soundly.

All of the foregoing should drive us to think of sound and positive frameworks for communication between the Muslims, whether between the adherents of various schools of thought, or between the various followers of a single school of law and theology. These are frameworks that do not materialize on their own and are not merely built on good intentions and mutual good will. Rather logical thought needs to be institutionalized in our policies through mutual commitment between the diverse Arab and Islamic social constituencies and the decision makers and state institutions.

It is normal for differences to exist, and this was captured by the Prophet of Islam through the words: 'The differences between my people are a mercy'. Difference in methodology serves the public interest and does not mean abandoning our unifying identities. We have instead turned our differences into a curse, because we have overemphasized the negative aspects, while ignoring the positive aspects that nourish intellectual fecundity and promote free expression and creative thought.

Altering the beliefs of any party is not what is required, but rather to modify the way we deal with each other and to revive[3] Islamic ethics of communication and dialogue. This would contribute to positive interaction and mutual respect between the components of the Muslim Umma.

The challenge before us, as Muslims, is not just to guard against *Fitnah*, but to create positive and constructive conditions in inter-Muslim relations, in the language and culture of their communications and how they deal with their differences. We do not wish to cancel differences between Muslims, for this would be against human nature, but what we need is to maintain ethical frameworks, anchored in deep belief in communication between Muslims and a mature mindset. This should produce religious discourse that strives to highlight the moral and creedal common denominators between Muslims, while respecting the right of every school of law and theology to exist and express itself in its own way.

Islam, built on the true word, is expressed through wisdom and beautiful preaching. This means that every truth that is misplaced or utilized for deviant purposes, or which leads to the despoliation of life, or generates animosities, becomes error and falsehood. The way we act should itself be a demonstration of goodness.

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[3] *The ethics of disagreement in Islam* – Taher Jaber al-Alwani, prepared from the original Arabic by Abdul Wahid Hamid, edited by A. S. al-Shaikh-Ali. Paperback 145 Pages. ISBN 9781565643598 The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).