

# ILS DIGEST

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وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

*“But all honour and power belongs to Allah, His Messenger, and the believers”*





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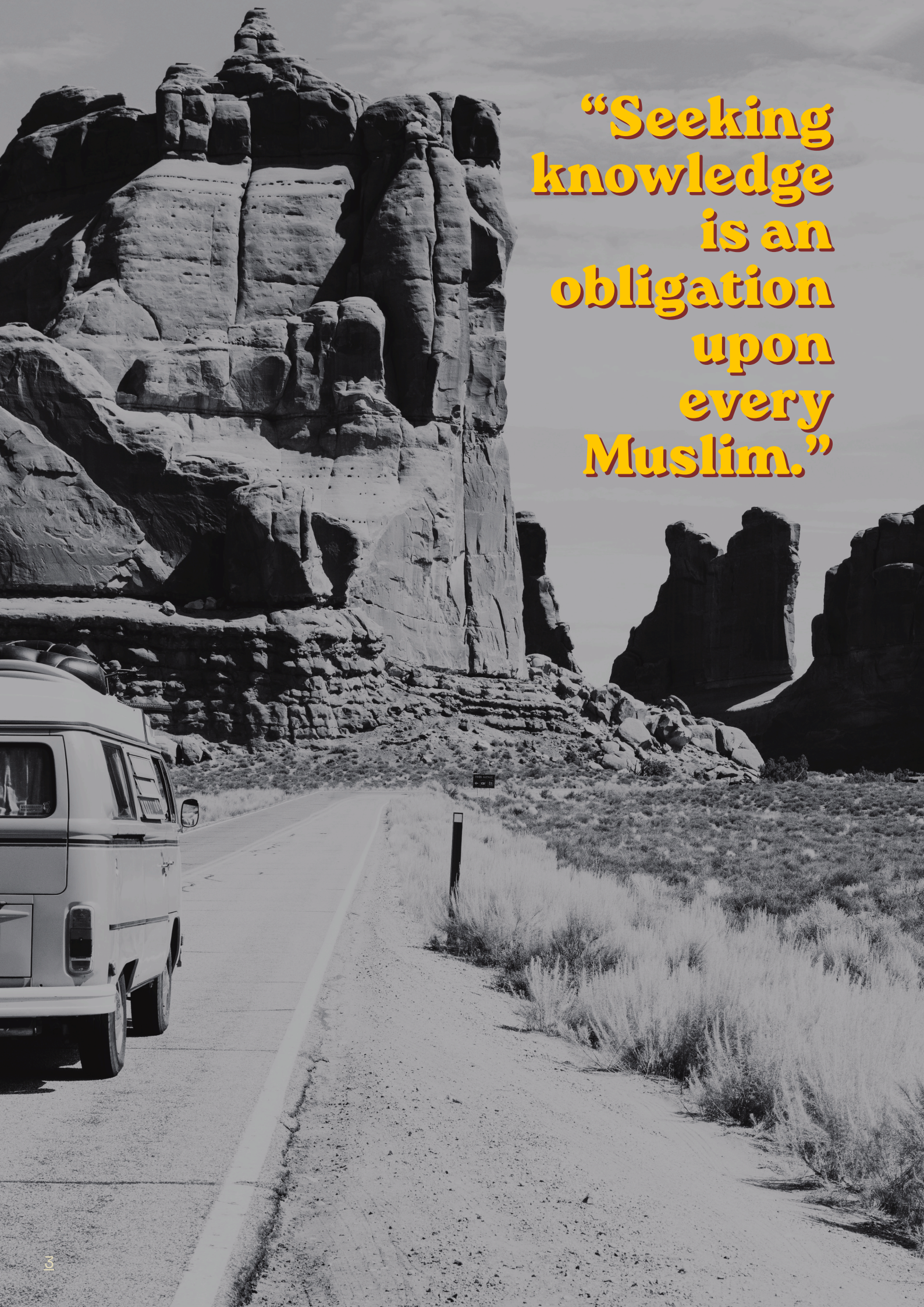
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**“Seeking  
knowledge  
is an  
obligation  
upon  
every  
Muslim.”**



# *The Lost Medieval International University of Sonargaon, Bangladesh*

By Khalid Al-Sylheti



In the fertile plains of Bengal, where rivers braid themselves into a tapestry of life, there once stood a city that summoned scholars and seekers from across continents. Sonargaon—the Golden Hamlet—was far more than an administrative capital; it was where knowledge and aspiration converged in a luminous dance that spanned centuries. Nestled in the Narayanganj District, approximately two and a half kilometers north of the Mograpara Crossing on the Dhaka–Chittagong highway, this ancient city rose like a jewel of history amid verdant forests and remarkable architectural wonders, its landscape suffused with natural beauty and the quiet dignity of remembrance.

From the first millennium onward, Sonargaon's fertile soil drew weavers and artisans who spun the world-renowned muslins that clothed distant courts. Yet its true weave was intellectual as much as economic. Here, in this confluence of cultures, ideas flowed as freely as the rivers that nourished the land. It was celebrated not only as a centre of trade but also as a hub of spiritual and scholarly life, where the pursuit of knowledge was as cherished as the pursuit of truth. By the early 13th century, the city had gained renown across the Indian subcontinent.

Drawn by its prosperity and promise, men and women from far-flung lands including Bukhara, Samarkand, Arabia, and Yemen journeyed to Sonargaon not simply to trade in goods but to trade in the currency of ideas.

One of the earliest witnesses to Sonargaon's intellectual vibrancy was the celebrated traveller Ibn Battuta, whose writings brim with admiration for cities that bridged cultures. In his travelogue, Ibn Battuta recounts that, after meeting Shah Jalal Al-Suhrawardi in Sylhet, he set out toward Sonargaon. At that time, Bengal was under the rule of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah. Battuta described Sonargaon as a well-fortified and formidable city, renowned not only for its security but also for its vibrant intellectual life. During his stay, he visited the celebrated seat of learning established by Sharafuddin Abu Tawama. From this centre of scholarship, the great traveller continued his voyage, setting sail toward Sumatra.

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## *The Beacon of Learning*

At the heart of Sonargaon's intellectual life was a centre of learning that shone like a beacon across the subcontinent and beyond. Its reputation was said to rival the most illustrious institutions of the Muslim world Al-Azhar in Egypt, the madrasas of Fez in Morocco, Timbuktu in Mali, and the storied schools of Seville, Córdoba, and Granada in Spain. In its halls, knowledge and wisdom flourished, drawing students and scholars alike from near and far.

During the reign of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah, the flourishing university faced a tragic turning point. Raja Ganesha, a Hindu king of the time, is said to have ordered its destruction due to communal hatred.

Yet the soul of this institution was not merely its renown; it was the man who nurtured it. The great hadith scholar, Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama al-Bukhari al-Hanafi.

Born in the intellectually rich city of Bukhara in Central Asia in the early years of the 13th century, Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama was destined for a life steeped in learning. From his earliest years, he immersed himself in study, mastering both religious and worldly sciences. His thirst for knowledge led him from his homeland to the seminaries of Yemen and then across the Indian subcontinent.

According to historical records, during the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban of Delhi, Abu Tawama's reputation as a learned and charismatic teacher spread swiftly. Some accounts note that the Sultan, unsettled by his growing influence, suggested he journey to Bengal. In the late 1270s, Sharafuddin Abu Tawama set out for Bengal, accompanied by his family and disciples, among them his brother, Hafiz Moinuddin.



GHIYASUDDIN AZAM SHAH  
SULTAN OF BENGAL

Before reaching Bengal, he spent time in Maner Sharif, then part of present-day Bihar, under the guidance of the Sufi and Muslim scholar Abu Yahya Maneri, who entrusted his young son, Yahya, to Abu Tawama as a disciple. From there, it was likely in the early part of 1285 CE that he arrived in Sonargaon, the prosperous city of Bengal, bringing his family and disciples with him.

The expenses for Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama's journey from Delhi to Sonargaon were borne by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban himself. Moreover, the Sultan arranged for him to freely impart education and promote morality and monotheism in Sonargaon. At that time, the governor of Bengal under Delhi's rule was Sultan Balban's son, Nasiruddin Bughra Khan, who later declared himself an independent sultan. Some accounts note that Sultan Balban wrote to his son, instructing him to assist Abu Tawama, and in accordance with the Sultan's command, Bughra Khan provided him with full support.

Sultan Nasiruddin Bughra Khan granted Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama nearly 300 acres of cultivated land as *la-kharaj*, or tax-exempt property. With this endowment, he established a separate *khanqah* for his devotees, as well as a distinct university and library for his students.



## *Sonargaon*

### *A City Transformed*

At this academy, instruction was not confined to works in Arabic and Persian; the writings of local scholars were also taught. Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama was accomplished not only in Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence but also in disciplines such as herbal medicine, mathematics, geography, chemistry, and military science. In addition to traditional religious sciences like Tafsir, Hadith, and Fiqh, education encompassed tasawwuf, logic (mantiq), history, astronomy, herbal science, philosophy, and other essential subjects of the contemporary world, providing a holistic education unmatched in many parts of the subcontinent.

In the cosmopolitan city of Sonargaon, it was commonplace for students to come from far-flung lands: Bukhara, Kandahar, Khorasan, Syria, Yemen, Bihar, and the Deccan. Although precise records have been lost, research indicates that this academy flourished for decades, attracting scholars from across regions who came to study, debate, and share knowledge.

This thriving institution produced illustrious scholars and helped spread learning throughout Bengal and beyond. Among its notable students was Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri, who went on to become a celebrated teacher and Sufi master in his own right, continuing the intellectual lineage fostered in Sonargaon.

### *Words Written, Words Lost*

Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama's intellectual pursuits were not confined to the classroom. A Persian work attributed to him, *Nam-i-Haq*, containing 180 verses on Islamic jurisprudence, reflects the scholarly spirit of his academy and was later published in South Asia. Under his guidance, Bengali students were encouraged to compose works in their native language, including a Sufi philosophical treatise called *Manjile Maqamat*, though no complete copies of such texts survive today. Nonetheless, his legacy is echoed in the manuscripts and references that persist in archives and oral tradition.

Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama passed away in 1300 CE and was buried in Mograpara, a medieval settlement in Sonargaon that served as an early Muslim learning centre and contains remnants of historic mosques and tombs.

## *Modern Memories and Revival*

In 1984, the renowned scholar Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi visited Sonargaon. Upon seeing the ruins and the neglected condition of the educational institution founded by Shaykh Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawama, he was moved to tears. To honour Abu Tawama's memory, he proposed the establishment of a new school close to the original university site and endowed it, suggesting the name *Madrasatush-Sharaf*. This institution has since been overseen by its founding director, Maulana Obaidul Qader Nadwi.

Although *Madrasatush-Sharaf* functions as a traditional Deobandi madrasa today, the institution founded by Sharafuddin Abu Tawama was a flourishing university that once stood at the heart of Sonargaon's intellectual life.

In 2022, Dr Akram Nadwi, a former researcher at Oxford University, visited Bangladesh and performed *ziyarat* at Abu Tawama's grave in Sonargaon, urging the restoration of the ancient university.

Researchers and scholars familiar with the histories of Bangladesh, India, and the Arab world regard the re-establishment of this university as a revival of Bangladesh's historical heritage and pride, and many have voiced strong support for this cause.

### *Heritage and Preservation*

In recent years, historians and local activists have called attention to the need to preserve Sonargaon's remaining historical structures and the ancient library remains believed to be connected to the medieval academy, underscoring its importance.



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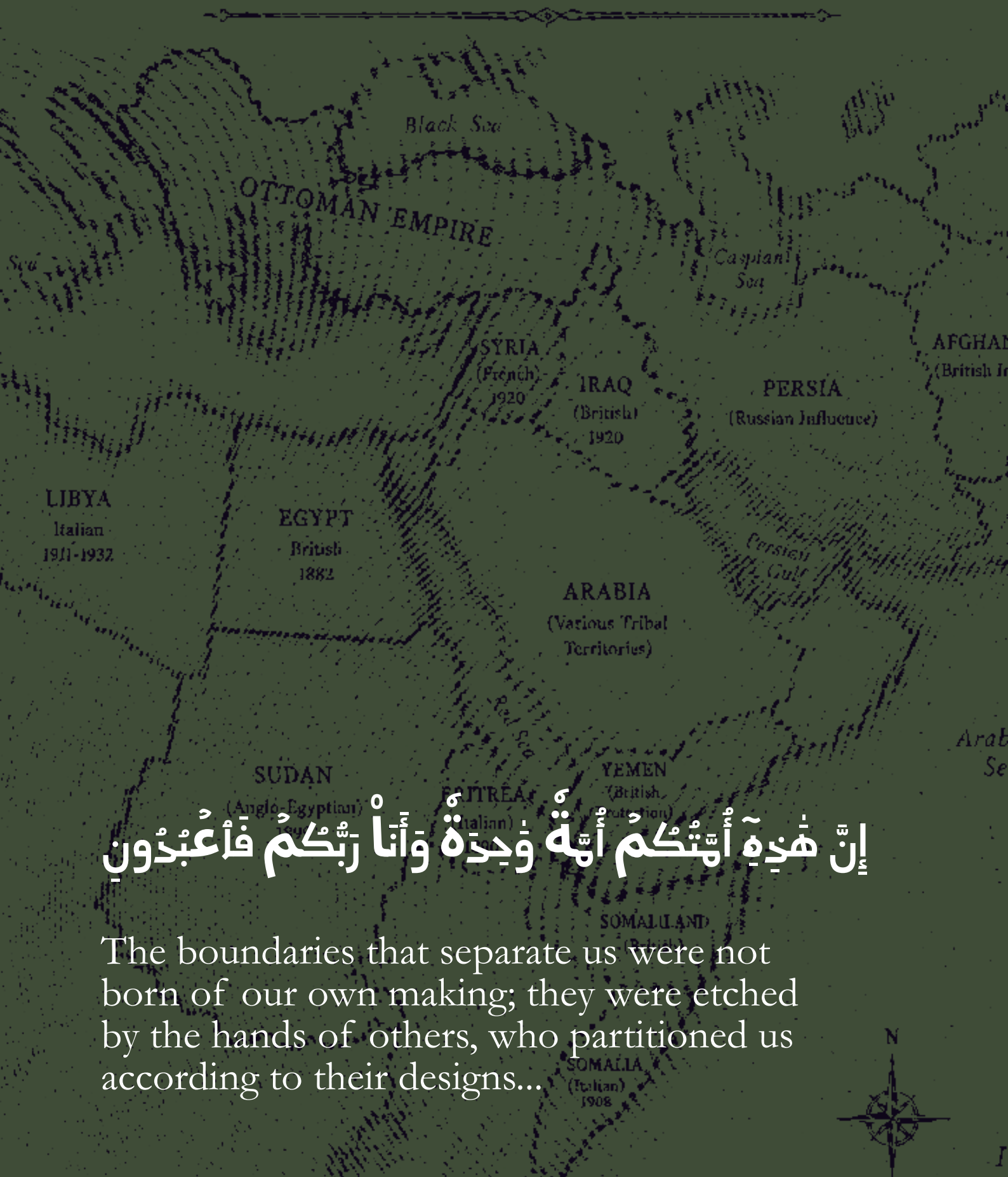
On the authority of Sufyan bin Abdullah (may Allah be pleased with him) who said:

*“I said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, tell me something about Islam which I can ask of no one but you.’ He (peace be upon him) said, ‘Say “I believe in Allah”—and then be steadfast.”*”





# THE DIVISION OF THE MUSLIM WORLD BY EUROPEAN POWERS (19TH - EARLY 20TH CENTURY)



إِن هَذِهِ أَمْثَلُكُمْ أَيْهَ وَجِدَّةٌ وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَأَعْبُدُونِ

The boundaries that separate us were not born of our own making; they were etched by the hands of others, who partitioned us according to their designs...



# Silence of Hagia Sophia

*Visit to Istanbul and the  
Echoes of an Empire*

by  
*Abdul Hai*

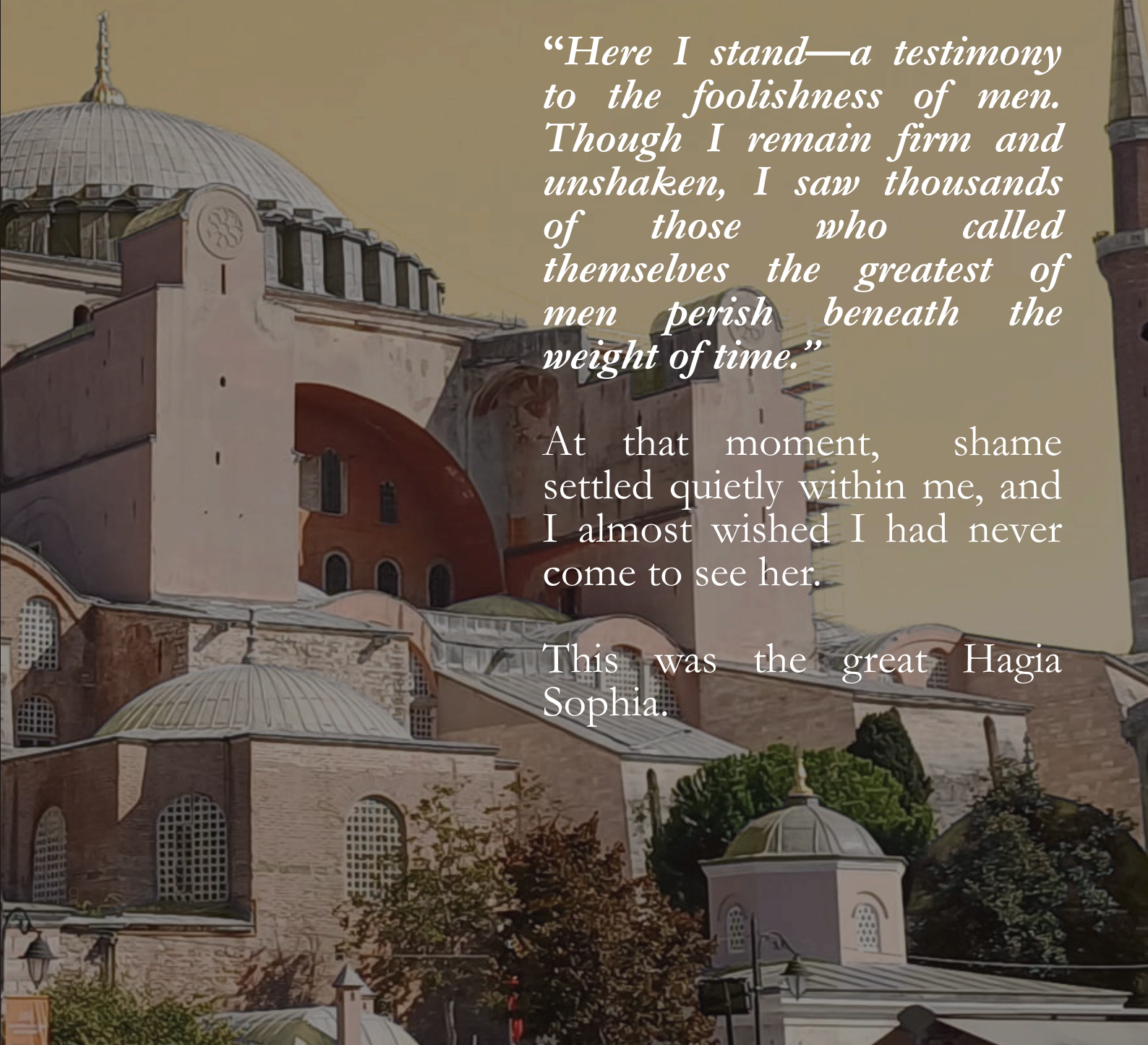
As I stood before her, my eyes fixed upon her ancient beauty, she spoke with a voice that carried both joy and sorrow. Hundreds of people moved around her, yet somehow her voice travelled only to me.

Then, with a sudden burst of anger, she declared:

*“Here I stand—a testimony to the foolishness of men. Though I remain firm and unshaken, I saw thousands of those who called themselves the greatest of men perish beneath the weight of time.”*

At that moment, shame settled quietly within me, and I almost wished I had never come to see her.

This was the great Hagia Sophia.





*“The imagination of humankind can only dream of a city as beautiful as Istanbul.”*

My encounter with her and with the magnificent mosques and timeless architecture of Istanbul began during my journey there in 2024. What I expected to be a simple visit became something far deeper: a conversation with history itself.

The thought of travelling to Istanbul, once the mighty capital of the Ottoman empire, whose thunderous power once made Europe tremble, filled me with both excitement and an unexpected sadness because I knew her downfall and her pain.

We arrived while the city was still deep in sleep. The night concealed her beauty, hiding minarets, domes, and ancient soul beneath darkness. But as soon as the sun awakened and my eyes finally rested upon her beauty, I found myself without words. No expression seemed worthy enough to describe what stood before me. Then, as though carried by the very air of the city itself, the words of Sir Henry Layard came rushing into my mind: *“The imagination of humankind can only dream of a city as beautiful as Istanbul.”*

At that moment, I realised there was nothing more I could possibly add to his description. It is said that Sultan Muhammad al-Qunawi, the ruler of an empire that once stretched across continents is reported to have declared to European envoys:

*“Tell your emperor this: wherever my power has reached, even his dreams cannot follow. We are not afraid of owls; we are the hawks.”*

Whatever I may see or feel from this day forward, I know where my roots lie and where my pride belongs: it is in the enduring words of the Khalifa who once carried the spirit of a civilisation upon his shoulders. With that sense of belonging, I walked through Istanbul, searching not only for history but for pieces of myself within it.

It was midday. The sun burned against my face as I wandered through the city, eager to witness what fragments of stories the Ottoman emperors left behind and echoes of greatness that I hoped one day to pass on to my children.



I entered Grand Bazaar, alive with noise, bargaining, and the scent of age. There, among forgotten relics, I saw the sword of Osman Gazi. It seemed almost to weep, longing to be lifted once more by the strong hands of the Turks, who had once built an empire with it. Yet now it rested abandoned upon the floor, while distant travellers bargained over its price so it might hang as decoration upon the polished walls of some secular home. And I wondered then: what shame must Osman the Great feel, knowing that the sword which once carved an empire now lies beneath the feet of passing strangers?

From every corner of Istanbul, the call to Allah echoed through the air. As I wandered along the ancient streets, I found myself trying to fit into a history that I felt had once belonged to me. Yet I soon realised that many of Osman's children no longer responded to the call of Allah, and some even went so far as to say that the call itself should fall silent. A heaviness settled within my heart, but I knew I still had to answer it. I stopped before the grand gates of Sultan Ahmed Mosque commissioned by the great Sultan Ahmed in 1609 and known to the world today as the Blue Mosque. As I entered its vast prayer hall, I saw countless visitors who had come not to worship but merely to marvel at its architecture and beauty. Meanwhile, the few worshippers who stood there for prayer remained silent in contemplation before their Lord. At that moment, I was overcome with questions of identity.

How could I claim belonging to these places, its history, the people, and its civilisation while my aspirations, my thinking, and even the very fabric of my life had been shaped by a world so distant from them? With that heaviness still resting upon me, I stood shoulder to shoulder beside people of every colour and background. Together, we formed a single line to prostrate before our Lord. And there, in prayer, the burden within my mind began to lift. For a moment, identity was no longer tied to race, nation, language, or history but to something greater that transcended them all. After the prayer, I walked slowly through the mosque, absorbing its beauty and grandeur. And with every step I took beneath its domes and chandeliers, I felt as though a path within me was finally beginning to clear.



*“The cool  
covered bazaar,  
Mahmutpasha,  
the courtyards  
filled with  
warbling,  
pigeons...”*

Orhan Veli Kanık





Stepping out once again into the endless hustle and bustle of Istanbul, I watched the lost children of the Turks descendants of a once awe-inspiring civilisation now sitting by the roadside selling fragments of their history in small framed photographs. Images of greatness, of empire, of memory, reduced to decorations for passing strangers. People of every colour moved through the streets, admiring what still remained of a civilisation that had once shaken the world. Yet beneath the beauty and admiration, I could not escape a quiet feeling of sorrow for what this great legacy had become.

Still, everywhere I turned, the city overwhelmed me. Its domes, minarets, courtyards, and ancient architecture stood like surviving witnesses of another age. Every street seemed to carry the echoes of forgotten glory. Eventually, exhaustion overtook me, and I found a small Turkish restaurant hidden away from the noise of modern life and the over commercialised cafés that surrounded the city. I entered not only to satisfy the hunger in my stomach but also to reflect upon the condition in which this nation, a nation I somehow felt connected to now found itself. And as I sat there in silence, surrounded by the scent of food and the distant sounds of the city, I realised that my journey through Istanbul was becoming more than travel. It has always been my custom, whenever I journey to another corner of Allah's earth, to sit among the people of that land and listen to their stories.

So, I took a deep breath and approached a group of Turks whose faces reminded me of the great soldiers who once stood firm before the walls of Constantinople beneath the mighty banner of Muhammad Al-Fath, who marched not merely with swords and ambition but with the blessed words of the Holy Prophet ﷺ carried within their hearts:

*"Verily, you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful leader her leader will be, and what a wonderful army that army will be."*





It seemed that, like me, they too longed for the past for a time when the voice of the Ummah echoed across every corner of the world. I could almost feel the pain hidden within their words, yet I could offer them no comfort, for I myself carried the very same sorrow. I wanted to see Istanbul through the eyes of the sky, as though from the wings of the birds that once flew above its domes and minarets centuries ago.

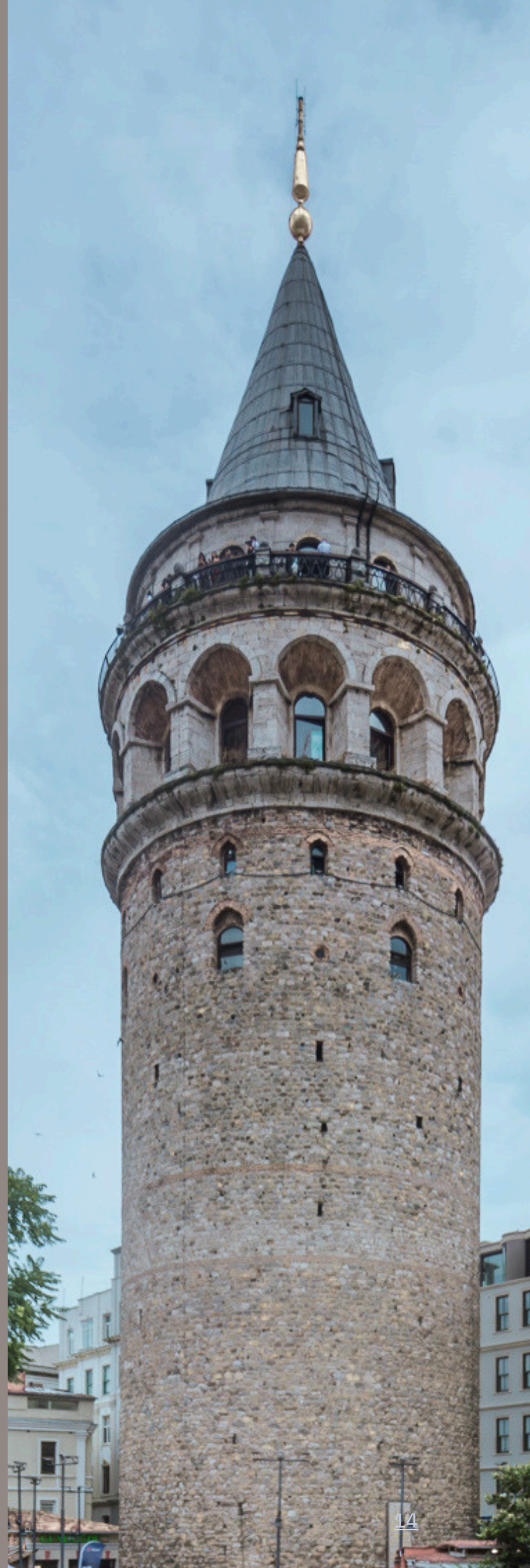
So, beneath dark clouds that hung over the city in what felt like endless moaning, I made my way with patience and exhaustion toward Galata Tower, standing proudly within the district of Beyoğlu. As I approached the tower, crowds from every part of the world gathered at its gates, all eager to witness Istanbul from above. Yet I knew my journey there was not merely for sightseeing. I had come searching for something deeper for peace, belonging, and a connection to a history that once viewed the world through these very heights.

For this tower, I reminded myself, had once stood as one of the watchful eyes of a Muslim empire. It is said that from this very tower, in the year 1632, Hezârfen Ahmed Çelebi achieved the impossible and flew across the skies of Istanbul using wings crafted from wood. As I climbed the ancient staircase of the tower, an unusual silence overtook me. My steps slowed. I paused for a long moment and drew a deep breath. Then, as though the tower itself wished to warn me, it began to speak:

*"I am the staircase a path of silent ascent, illuminated by the light of dawn and shadowed by the burden of time. I rise toward the heavens, where the sky bears witness to the deeds of men: their cruelty and their mercy, their weakness and their strength. From my height, I gaze upon the minarets of Istanbul standing proudly in devotion to Allah, and I whisper to them:*

*'You call the faithful. You stand as beacons of light. But do they truly hear you? Do they love you as they should?' I have watched over them, just as you have, yet their hearts remain distant, their footsteps wavering between reverence and rebellion.*

*Know this: I am not silent. I shall not fade into the stillness of forgotten stone. I have carried men upon my steps, men searching for power, refuge, meaning, and glory. Yet I have also witnessed their betrayal, their neglect, and their arrogance. And on the Day when all things shall be judged, when every veil is lifted and truth stands uncovered, I too shall speak. I will bear witness against those who walked upon me without remembrance of the One who sees all things. I am the staircase to the tower, and on that Day, no height shall protect them, and no ascent shall save them."*





I stood there listening, as though those were the tower's final words to mankind. A deep sorrow overcame me, and with a heavy heart, I began my descent back toward the earth once more, toward a world where perhaps there still remained time to set things right. As Istanbul slowly drifted into sleep after a long day of wakefulness, I found myself wandering once again through its ancient streets. The city had grown quieter now, its noise softened beneath the evening sky, yet the words of the tower continued to echo within me.

I needed to sit somewhere in silence, somewhere I could absorb the weight of what I had heard. Eventually, I came upon a small coffee shop hidden beside an old garden. Though modest in appearance, the place seemed overflowing with wisdom and forgotten stories, as though every stone and every tree carried memories from another age. So I sat down and ordered a cup of pure, unadulterated Turkish coffee, served by weathered hands that appeared to belong as much to Istanbul itself as to the person who carried it.

As I sipped the hot, bitter Turkish tea, I looked around and wondered how many people before me had once sat in that very same spot, drank the same coffee, and perhaps carried the very same worries within their hearts. Then I quietly said to myself:

*"Just like those before you, you too will one day be forgotten—that you once walked these streets, sat in this café, and drank this Turkish tea."*

That very thought filled me with a sudden heaviness and rushed me back toward my hotel, longing to close my eyes so that the horror of such a reality would not continue to haunt me. In 1932, the secular leader Mustafa Kemal banned the Adhan in Arabic. So, when the call to prayer was once again recited in Arabic, it felt as though every stone of Turkey responded to it. After the dawn prayer, and a simple breakfast of fresh juice, two slices of toast covered with Turkish butter, I continued my journey. I set out toward a place where one of the most honoured companions of the Prophet Muhammad (may Allah's peace and blessing be upon him) is said to rest.

A journey of no great distance, carried by the Istanbul Metro for nearly forty minutes, brought me to the district known to the Turks as Eyüp Sultan Mosque named after the great and noble companion Abu Ayyub al-Ansari (may Allah be pleased with him). Located on the European side of Istanbul, overlooking the northern edge of the Golden Horn, the area appeared exactly as it was meant to be: filled with light, honour, and a quiet sense of dignity that seemed to move through the air itself.

People of every age filled the streets, and once again I witnessed the visible symbols of Islamic identity flourishing openly something that would no doubt have displeased Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who once attempted to silence much of that legacy.



Yet standing there, it seemed to me that the sun was beginning to rise once more upon the faces of the Turks, and that Islam still lived strongly within the hearts of a new generation just like Allah (He be exalted) said :

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا مَنْ يَرْتَدَّ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَسَوْفَ يَأْتِي اللَّهَ  
بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ أَذِلَّةٌ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٌ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ  
يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ ذَلِكَ فَضْلُ  
اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

*"O believers! Whoever among you abandons their faith, Allah will replace them with others who love Him and are loved by Him. They will be humble with the believers but firm towards the disbelievers, struggling in the Way of Allah, fearing no blame from anyone. This is the favour of Allah. He grants it to whoever He wills. And Allah is All-Bountiful, All-Knowing"*

For a brief moment, I felt as though Istanbul had returned to being the glorious Islamic capital it once was. But my journey was far too short for me to fully lose myself within that dream. And so, after wandering through the district, taking in its beauty, and enjoying some heavenly Turkish ice cream beneath the shadow of the mosque, I slowly made my way back toward those familiar streets that had now become the very trademark of my journey through Istanbul.



The call to prayer, once echoing in every direction, had fallen silent. I entered a mosque within the same district to pray, where I found people of all ages already gathered, waiting eagerly to prostrate before their Lord and respond to His call. In that moment, I confronted the sense of helplessness that lingered within me. I said to myself:

*"This is the return of the glory days."*

With a feeling of quiet joy and gratitude, I joined the congregation and prayed alongside the Turks around me. After the prayer, I left the mosque and began my walk back towards the hotel. Yet there remained one more place I felt drawn to visit. I turned back once more towards the great Hagia Sophia perhaps to see her one last time.

She stood there as before, as though she had been waiting for my return. I stood before her, looking into what felt like her tired eyes. Before she could speak, I took a deep, heavy breath and said:

*"Perhaps you are right. Men are often foolish, arrogant, self-centred. And perhaps what your eyes have witnessed most painfully is their godlessness. Yes, you have seen many who call themselves great, walking the earth in pride. Your eyes have seen more than mine ever will, and I cannot compare my experience to yours; the dust that covers your weathered body is wiser than I am. But what my mortal eyes have seen gives me greater hope than despair. So hold on just a little longer, and you will witness a moment that will feel like the day Sultan Mehmed II freed you from the shackles of polytheism and a day is coming once again when you will be freed from the shackles of secularism."*



### About the Author

Abdul Hai is a book lover, bookbinder, book restorer, and leisure writer. His other interests include book collecting, woodwork, gardening, and fishing. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Social Science and a Certificate of Higher Education, both from Birkbeck, University of London. He also holds a Master's degree from the University of Wolverhampton. He is very passionate about sharing his reading experiences, especially on topics related to Islam.





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# Reflecting on History Through Travel and Architecture

by  
*Dr. Yakoob Ahmed*

The ayats in the Quran, which Allah Ta'ala, in terms of the theme, mentions quite a few times, is intriguing for me because it not only asks one to reflect but also encourages a form of curiosity and a historical curiosity, which is sometimes missing in many people's imagination, especially when they're traveling. There is an expectation or a recognition by Allah Ta'ala, at least, that when one travels and is moving around from one place to another, one pays attention to their surroundings and their environments. One ought to be reflective of the fact that in the very place that one is passing through, there were people before them.

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ بَدَأَ الْخَلْقَ ثُمَّ اللَّهُ يُنشِئُ  
الْنَّشْأَةَ الْآخِرَةَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

“Say, [O Muhammad], ‘Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation. Indeed Allah, over all things, is competent.’”

قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ سُنَنٌ فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ  
عِقَابُ الْمُكَذِّبِينَ

“Many ways of life have passed away before you, so travel throughout the earth and observe how was the end of those who denied [the truth].”

قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلُ  
كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُشْرِكِينَ

“Say, [O Muhammad], ‘Travel through the land and observe how was the end of those before [you]. Most of them were polytheists.’”

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رِجَالًا نُوْحِي إِلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَى  
أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عِقَابُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ  
قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

“And We did not send before you except men from [among] the people of the cities, to whom We revealed. Have they not travelled through the earth and observed how was the end of those before them? And the home of the Hereafter is best for those who fear Allah. Will you then use reason?”





I remember more recently listening to a player who had signed for Liverpool Football Club, and when he sat down in the dressing room, he said, "I was sitting here, and on my right was Mohamed Salah, and on my left was Virgil van Dijk as players." But then he said something interesting. He said, "But when I was sitting on the seat, I then remembered the players that had come in the past, the ones who had come before us." And he started to remember the likes of Steven Gerrard, Robbie Fowler, Kenny Dalglish, Barnes, and so forth. It was intriguing that he was taking his memory back and reflecting on the fact that the room he was sitting in was part of history, that people had come through that building, that dressing room. And he started to understand the magnitude of his presence in the club and the historic nature of the club that he had now signed up for. This is a very interesting form of introspection that people are encouraged to do, which is to not become disassociated with places, spaces, and so forth but to have a curiosity to recognise that there are places around the world we visit that have deep historical undercurrents. And buildings, at times, are just simply perceived as being buildings. I was reminded once by an intellectual historian that he had no real interest in sightseeing or seeing buildings when he came to a city because he was interested in ideas. And I had to remind this colleague of mine that in actuality, there is so much intellectual history in the buildings themselves if one only pays attention. And it's not just simply buildings that are upright and still in function and are still being used. It's also buildings that have become destroyed. I would like to mention a couple of places in these last few months that I've travelled to that I took a real interest in. When I first came to Istanbul a couple of weeks ago, I was living in the Edirnekapi quarters, and we were right next to the Topkapı walls. As I left the apartment every morning, I would look at the Topkapı walls. There were a few interesting things that I noticed. The first thing I noticed was that there were parts of the walls that looked older than other parts of the walls. To me, it was evident that there were parts of restoration that had taken place, not just restoration in terms of the current government, which shored up parts of the walls, but even historically, that the walls continuously needed restoration. The weather, the terrain, and the elements would do their job on these walls, and they would constantly need re-fixing.



Another aspect that I noticed of the walls was clearly the parts that were destroyed. I was imagining, when Fatih Sultan Mehmet had conquered Constantinople, of the cannons that would have been used to destroy the walls, so that the Ottomans could enter the city. That was something that went through my imagination. Then there were other sections of the wall, there's, for example, an entrance of the wall in the Topkapı walls, where, if one pays attention, there are still inscriptions of the Byzantine period, crosses etched into the wall and so forth, which people don't pay attention to. The fact that these walls were part of the Byzantine and Eastern Roman Empire.

It was during that time in Istanbul, for example, I'd also gone to the Hagia Sophia. People forget. Memories don't really go that far back. But I remember that during COVID, when Istanbul was like a ghost town, I had visited the Hagia Sophia when they just opened it up during the COVID period. There was a relaxation of movement in the city, and I and my friend Amrullah were the only two people in Hagia Sophia at the time. There were no tourists. There was nobody there. The structure was empty because of COVID, and I got to see it in its full form as a museum. I really paid attention to the details, recognizing how the structure prior was a church, that had then become a mosque, that had then become a museum. Ironically, only a few weeks later, the structure was then returned back to it becoming a mosque, and how quickly things changed.



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I remember having to juxtapose my memory regarding those two events, because only two weeks later, or a few weeks later, I was now in a building that had become a mosque. And how human beings were drawing from different parts of the collective memory to engage with the structure. Recently, I was in the Hagia Sophia to pray Salat al-Fajr. It's a wonderful time to go there because there are not many people. I got to see some interesting things. One of them was that the structure was being restored again, and the structure is always being restored because of how old it is, and there are certain aspects missing in the structure in relation to when it was built and how that structure inspired the Ottoman mosques, how the structure's weaknesses inspired and helped the Ottoman architects understand how to build mosques in order to not have those same problems. There is something quite regal and imperial about the Hagia Sophia that can't be denied.

I would be sitting there contemplating over the years of which this building has gone through, from its Eastern Roman roots, to the Byzantine world, to the Ottoman conquest, to moments in Ottoman history where the building was having some structural challenges and wasn't taken seriously by the Muslim population, to the reinvention of the building in the 19th century, to it becoming a museum, to it becoming a mosque again. The building itself has gone through a whole lifespan and journey that many people do not appreciate.



Then a week later, I was in Canada, and while I was in Canada, I was moving around, and I met a Muslim convert who was from the indigenous peoples of Canada, and he was explaining to me some of his challenges. But then he was explaining to me about some of the architectural spaces that I had engaged with regarding the indigenous community and what I thought about that. It's interesting because I'd engaged with those architectural spaces, but I didn't reflect on it much until I had my conversation with him. That made me realize that there was a group of people here whose presence or visibility has been marginalized. One of the key things about the marginalization of a people is the eradication of their architecture in terms of its visibility. We see something similar to this in terms of what's happening in Gaza at the moment, in fact, where it's not just the killing of people but a removal of architecture and architectural spaces so that no memory of a particular civilization, people, or presence is felt. Anyone who would have got the opportunity to go to Tel Aviv would notice that's exactly what's happened there. It's totally been eradicated now in comparison to Jerusalem. Those memories are still held together but for different reasons, for sure. So I really started reflecting upon that.





More recently, I went to see a friend of mine in Scarborough, and we got to go to a few abbeys that have now become ruins, and it was very interesting to see them once again. When I entered one of the abbeys, one of the notes had said that Christianity is a lot more practiced in the north than it is in the south. It was a very interesting statement that was written about Christianity's presence in England centuries ago, not recently. Then there were interesting moments about how different Christian denominations and different Christian peoples had built these structures, built these churches, and over time, how different kings had engaged and contested over with the church in order to attain their estate.

Once again, I was sitting there with a friend of mine and saying, "Once this was a church of a monastery in which there would've been hundreds of people practicing a particular faith, and now it's just a ruin site where people are just walking around taking photos." There was one section in the Abbey Museum where they had chess pieces from the 11th century, and one of them—the pattern—was inspired by Muslims, making the case that there was an engagement between Islam and Britain long before the colonial period. These sorts of imaginations are important to imagine how the world was in the past.

I think we require that collective imagination. We require that collective consciousness. We require that collective historical consciousness. I think this is one of the key things about Ibn Khaldun's work when he was making the case that the reason why history writing becomes important is because of this need for collective memory and collective consciousness.

For me, the ayah in the Quran, once again, becomes important in the sense of trying to encourage Muslims, and Allah 'Ta'ala is making this case here that each person, society, nation, and civilization has a beginning and an end. There have been multiple cycles of births and deaths, and we have remnants of that, that we can see, and to some degree, have this form of collective humility that we are not the most exceptional people in the world in comparison to people that had come in the past, that there is an inevitability of things coming to an end, just like there is an inevitability of this world one day coming to an end. So, I really do hope that when people travel, that they do travel to these places to see the architecture and the history and to understand that these are spaces in which people had been before.

I remember to this day, when I was in Damascus, and I met a Western traveller, not a Muslim, but a Western traveller, and he had said to me, "Can you believe that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) had walked through these streets?"

He had highlighted that to me, and I had paused for a second. Damascus was full of history when I lived there. I started thinking about Masjid al-Ummawi from the time it became a part of the Muslim world during the Umayyads, to how it became a part of the Muslim world during Nur ad-Din Zangi and Salah ad-Din, to how it became a part of our ecosystem during the Ottomans, and the streets named after the Ottoman Sultan, Abdulhamid II and so forth. You see layers and layers and layers upon history.

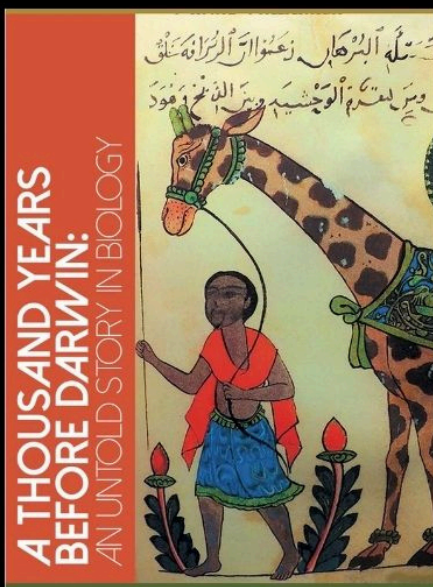
I think what I'm asking, perhaps, is what traveling does and what is interesting about it, whether it's local or global: the idea that people do not lose their curiosity about the fact that human beings were there before and that we are part of a larger journey of human presence on this planet, and that is something worth reflecting on.



### About the Author

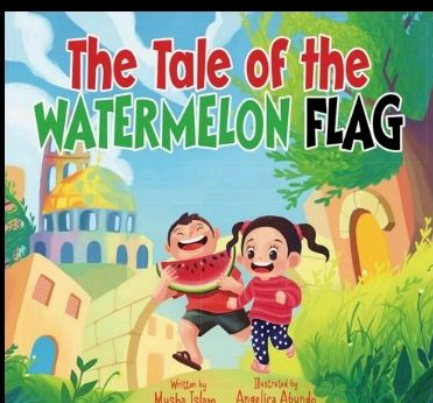
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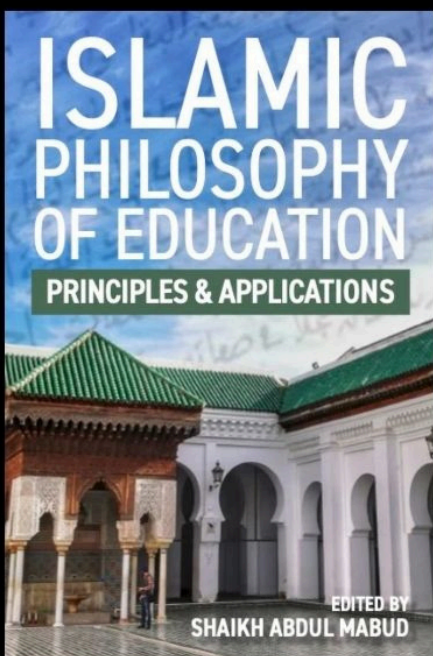
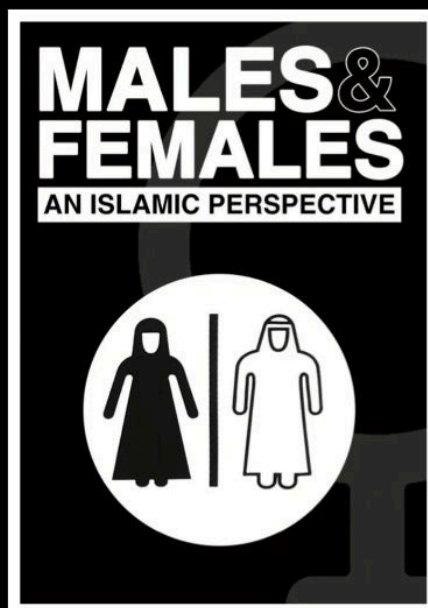
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Reflections on Ahmet T.  
Kuru's *Islam,  
Authoritarianism, and  
Underdevelopment: A Global  
and Historical Comparison*

by

*Umar Mukhtar Ali Khan Bhatti*

Few questions have generated as much scholarly debate as the apparent relationship between governance, economic development, and the contemporary condition of many Muslim-majority societies. Why do numerous Muslim countries continue to struggle with authoritarian political systems and developmental challenges despite possessing rich intellectual, religious, and cultural traditions? Explanations have ranged from claims about the nature of Islam itself to arguments emphasizing the legacy of European colonialism. Yet both approaches often seem to simplify what is, in reality, a far more complex historical and social landscape.

A closer examination of Islamic history suggests that Muslim societies have not always been associated with political authoritarianism or economic stagnation. Between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the Muslim world stood among the most advanced regions on earth. Cities such as Baghdad, Córdoba, and Cairo functioned as centres of learning, commerce, scientific discovery, and philosophical inquiry. Scholars, merchants, scientists, and intellectuals contributed to a civilisation that, for a time, led the world in numerous fields, from medicine and mathematics to architecture and trade.

This historical experience raises important questions about the assumption that Islam is inherently incompatible with intellectual progress, economic growth, or political pluralism. If Muslim societies once flourished as centres of innovation and learning, then contemporary difficulties may not be adequately explained through religious doctrine alone. This, in turn, invites a broader question: not whether Islam promotes or hinders development, but how shifting social, political, and institutional arrangements may have shaped different historical trajectories over time.

AHMET T. KURU

# Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment

A GLOBAL AND

## HISTORICAL COMPARISON



One significant dimension of this transformation appears in the relationship between political authority and religious institutions. Across different periods of Islamic history, the interaction between rulers and religious scholars seems to have played a central role in shaping social and political life. As political power became increasingly concentrated in military-based states, alliances often emerged between ruling elites and segments of the religious establishment. While such arrangements may have offered stability and legitimacy, they may also have contributed to a narrowing of intellectual autonomy and a weakening of alternative centres of authority.

From this perspective, the marginalisation of independent scholars, philosophers, and commercial classes becomes particularly significant. Intellectual innovation has often emerged in contexts where scholars enjoy a degree of independence from political control. Likewise, economic dynamism tends to rely on the presence of autonomous merchants, entrepreneurs, and commercial networks capable of generating wealth and sustaining new ideas. When such groups lose influence, it is worth considering whether societies may gradually experience a reduction in creativity, critical inquiry, and institutional adaptability.



A comparative perspective further deepens this line of reflection. In Europe, the gradual emergence of autonomous universities, expanding commercial classes, scientific institutions, and constitutional limitations on political power contributed to long-term transformations in governance and economic development. Although Europe's path was neither linear nor free from conflict, these institutional developments arguably helped create conditions that encouraged innovation, accountability, and social mobility.

Such a comparison is not meant to imply that one civilisation possessed inherently superior cultural values. Rather, it invites reflection on how differing institutional arrangements may produce different historical outcomes. Prosperity and development, in this sense, may depend less on religious identity than on the evolving relationships between political authority, intellectual freedom, and economic independence.

This distinction becomes especially relevant in contemporary discussions about Islam and development. Too often, such debates appear to oscillate between cultural explanations that reduce outcomes to religion and political narratives that attribute them entirely to external forces. Yet both perspectives risk overlooking the more complex role of institutions and long-term historical processes. A more careful approach requires attention to how power, knowledge, and economic resources are organised and how these arrangements change over time.

At the same time, any attempt to interpret the Muslim world through a single explanatory lens risks oversimplification. Colonial histories, global economic inequalities, regional conflicts, foreign intervention, and domestic political dynamics have all shaped contemporary realities in profound ways. Moreover, Muslim societies themselves are not monolithic; they are diverse, and their historical and contemporary experiences vary widely across regions and contexts.

Still, the interplay between political power, religious authority, intellectual freedom, and economic autonomy remains a crucial area for reflection. History appears to suggest that societies tend to flourish when scholars, entrepreneurs, and civil institutions retain sufficient independence to participate meaningfully in public life. Conversely, when authority becomes overly concentrated and alternative centres of influence weaken, the conditions that support innovation and development may also diminish.



Seen in this light, the broader question extends beyond the Muslim world itself and touches on civilisation more generally. Sustainable progress seems to depend on institutions that nurture learning, safeguard intellectual inquiry, encourage economic initiative, and restrain the excessive concentration of power. Revisiting these questions, therefore, may offer insights not only into historical trajectories but also into possible futures.

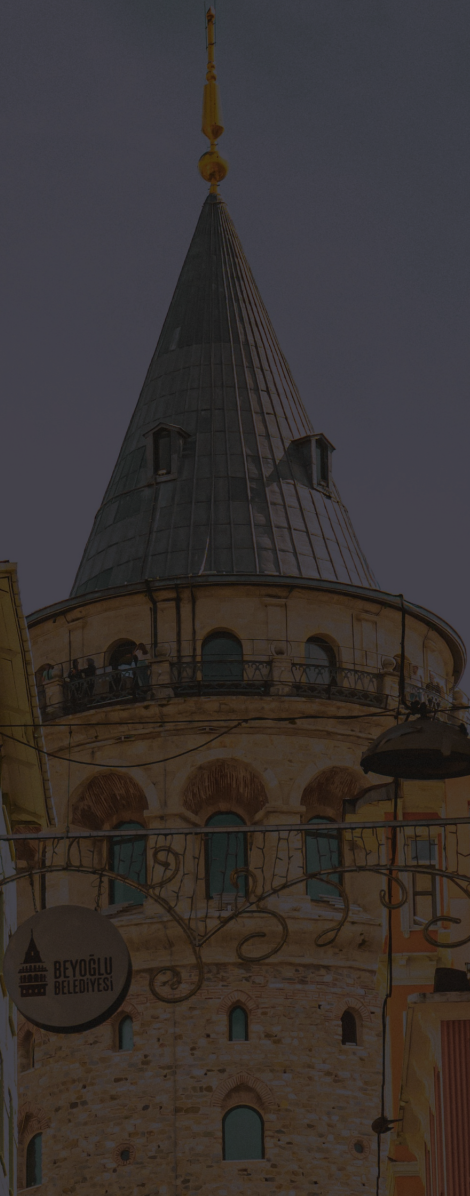
As debates about governance and development continue, there may be value in shifting attention away from cultural stereotypes and toward historical institutions and social structures. By reflecting on how political, religious, intellectual, and economic forces interact over time, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of both the achievements and the challenges that have shaped Muslim societies across history.



### About the Author

Umar Mukhtar Ali Khan Bhatti is a Political Science student at the University of the Punjab, Lahore. He is a contributor to The Express Tribune, Minute Mirror, and Political Pulse Magazine, where he writes opinion pieces and articles.





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