

Changing Islamic Identities and the Effects of Geography¹

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Abstract

Islamic identity is often overlooked, but it definitely exists and is shaped by geography. It's fascinating to see how this identity takes on different forms based on where it is practiced. There are commonalities and differences between the Islamic identities of global citizens and those of local communities. It's important to recognize that no one is superior or inferior based on their identity; the variations lie in knowledge, culture, and skills. Geographical conditions play a significant role in differentiating people. Nowadays, a new and progressive Islamic identity is emerging, with Muslims embracing values like anti-bigotry and striving for positive change. They are working to transform their surroundings, promoting knowledge, morality, work, equality, and justice. In our study, we will dive into how geography influences the evolution of Islamic identities.

Keywords: Identity, Muslim, Geography, Changing Identity, Islamic world.

¹ Coğrafyanın İnsan Üzerinde Etkisiyle Değişen İslami Kimlikler (in Turkish)

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I. Historical identity problem

Ibn Khaldun was the first to address the impact of geography on human fate, supporting his claims with historical examples. Later, Montesquieu touched upon this idea with approximately a four-century gap in between. In the history of thought, this idea is represented by Buckle, who is referred to as the father of modern history. Buckle assumed that there is a close relationship between social events and geographical conditions and argued that these conditions are the fundamental factors in social development. According to him, all social events are determined by land characteristics, climate, water resources, and the state of rivers. Buckle opposed the view that social events are determined by God, and it should be noted he used his ideas and theories to defend colonialism.

Humans are constantly engaged in a struggle with their environment and its geography. History as we know it emerges from this struggle. But what is the actor in history? In some societies, it is human intelligence, in some it is religion, in some it is tradition, and in some it is an acceptance of everything as it is.

In societies where human intelligence dominates, we see modern individuals and societies. The human element is both in harmony and at war with itself, its environment, and its geography. War and peace are inevitable. As long as humans engage in a struggle with the material world using their intelligence, they either win or lose. However, it is through the use of their intelligence that a resilient and healthy society emerges.

In Marxism, historical materialism is prominent. It expresses the struggle of humans against nature and explains nature itself. Materialism is a philosophical form of monism that considers matter as the fundamental substance in nature. According to this philosophy, everything, including mental states and consciousness, is a result of material things and material

interactions. According to philosophical materialism, mind and consciousness are by-products of material processes (such as the biochemistry of the human brain and nervous system). Without these material processes, mind and consciousness cannot exist.

Throughout human history, both spiritualism and materialism have been present. In general, regardless of their geographical location, people have tended to adopt either a spiritualist approach, leading a lifestyle based on spirituality, or to manifest themselves in terms of materialism, leading a life dominated by material pursuits. In the Islamic world, it is possible to see these two philosophies, sometimes separately and sometimes together throughout history. The dominant ideology is the ideology of the dominant class. The ruling classes in the Islamic world have adopted one of these two philosophies and acted accordingly.

For example, Ibn Khaldun, despite coming from the Islamic tradition, attempted to explain human social life in terms of principles of cause and effect. Similarly, centuries before him, Yusuf Has Hacib, the author of the famous work *Kutadgu Bilig*, stated that about ten percent of people are born good and live accordingly, attributing their goodness to their nature of creation. He said that another ten percent are born bad and live accordingly, attributing their badness to their nature of creation. According to him, the remaining eighty percent of people become good or bad depending on their associations.

Spiritualism and materialism are in essence thesis and antithesis. Like any ideological currents, they complement each other. It is necessary to recognise human beings and their emergent thoughts in all their diversity. In order to think freely, it seems necessary to first acknowledge all thoughts, as this appears to be the most accurate approach; however, we should not

accept anything as true without being a hundred percent certain of its validity.

II. Islamic identity

It is not possible to explain Islamic history solely through geography. Categorizing it strictly as spiritual or material is incorrect classification. It is also difficult to explain it solely through spiritualism or materialism, since there have been periods when both were embraced together.

In today's Islamic world, there are as many different interpretations of Islam as there are Muslims. Their perspectives and forms of religious practice have changed. Contradictions now dominate their lives. They contain many different personalities within them. In other words, their behaviour varies according to where they live. They do not have a contemporary understanding of Islam. Their Islamic beliefs have suffered significant damage and have weakened. In terms of appearance, within an Islamic family, various manifestations have emerged. The situation is the same in terms of thinking, which has become more liberal.

If we look at the social, economic, and political structures in regions where Muslims are in the majority, what can we see from a sociological perspective? In other words, we need to see individuals first and then society as a whole.

Throughout my forty years of life, to the extent that circumstances have allowed, I have visited the cities and villages of Muslims, especially Arabs. In the modern era, I have read their novels and tried to follow their stories. Additionally, as a theologian, I have also integrated myself into small groups where intense religious life is practiced. I have seen very good and kind-hearted people. However, I observed that they were unable to overcome geographical conditions and, as a result, they were held back. I noticed that their main concern, in general, was simply sustaining their lives; in other words, their

focus was on economics. Their faces always reflected a sense of worry, unhappiness, and perceptions of a dark future. The greatest characteristic arising from geography was unemployment and laziness. Systematically, they faced significant challenges. They had lost the strong and determined Islamic personalities we read about in history. To put it more plainly, they had lost their identity, failed to study Islam, and were unable to present an Islamic understanding that resonated with the consciousness of the age. They were living the dreams and aspirations of others; they were soulless, oppressed by materialism, and, as some would say, representatives of the Third World. They had no means to defend themselves. Their metaphysical words, based on faith, lacked the quality to express them. They constantly expected salvation from a sheikh, a religious leader, or a political ruler. In short, they were societies that had severed their relationship with reality. The education they received also did not allow them to grasp reality as a whole.

In today's Islamic world, it is possible to categorise the worldviews and lifestyles that arise from the influence of geography under three main headings.

1. The Islamic Worldview: This view represents the perspective of mosques and ruling classes. It considers individuals and values within a hierarchy: Allah, imams, religious leaders, sheikhs, and others. According to its proponents, this system will never undergo any changes. They believe that eternal happiness in the afterlife can only be achieved through acceptance of this particular worldview.
2. The View that Places Reason Above Revelation: The representatives of this view vary from country to country and are grouped under different names. For example, in Turkey, Said Nursi represents this view religiously, while Necmettin Erbakan represents it politically. In Algeria, Malik bin Nebi is an example. According to this perspective, reason should prevail over revelation. However, among these people,

Said Nursi sought to establish a synthesis by giving importance to both reason and revelation. Generally, those who follow this understanding attend mosques, but they emphasise the importance of using reason to understand divine texts, strive to motivate society, and aim to present an activist Islamic approach. As mentioned above, this intellectual movement greatly values freedom, reason, and the individual. It also upholds universal values, believes that the flow of history will not cease, and claims to work on behalf of all of humanity.

3. The View that Criticises Islam and Its Values: Those who hold this view do not reject Islam, but subject all Islamic values to strong criticism. For them, the important thing is not religion but living a humane life and achieving a good economic life, given the state of the world. They believe that humanity should not be evaluated from a religious perspective. Christianity and Islam are seen as mere opiates. Their main foundations are concepts such as secularism, justice, and equality. However, it can be observed that they also harbour hostility towards others in their inner worlds, viewing them as inferior classes, and they are not actively engaged in developing and disseminating their ideas.

The fundamental reasons for the emergence of these three classes in Arab countries can be attributed initially to life under oppressive regimes. In the absence of democracy, oppression becomes inevitable. Where social justice is lacking, rights and laws are jeopardised. When rights and laws are jeopardised, individuals are deprived of dignity, lose their identity, and become detached from productivity. The geographical reality in the Islamic world does not allow for the establishment and implementation of advanced democracies. The textbooks that are read or taught are disconnected from reality, repeat the same content for centuries, fail to open new horizons, and are oblivious to the world.

In these societies, people are afraid to express their opinions. Consequently, under these geographical conditions, the existence of an independent individual with the ability to think critically seems almost impossible. Identities are generally expressed in relation to a lineage, a group, a religious leader, wealth, a position, or a diploma. Thus, the individual's freedom and the ability to be different from others are lost. The concept of an obedient society is prevalent, in contrast to freedom. All of this eliminates the sense of responsibility in those societies. Irresponsibility does not disappear at one point; it expands to affect other people. In other words, generations inherit an irresponsibility towards reality from the previous generation. Certain truths are concealed in the Qur'an and religious works, but they tend to ignore the realities of life and keep repeating these hidden truths in books. According to them, "[the] Qur'an encompasses all truths and presents them ready for them." However, in today's world, new realities emerge before individuals. It can be observed that religious scholars in the Islamic geography acquire their ideas outside of social life, whereas it is necessary for truths to be derived from concrete events in social life, and new truths should be added to them.

The Islamic world contents itself with repeating the truths it discovered in ancient times or with boasting about the heroism they achieved in the past. This situation stems from outdated education and educational tools. Due to the influence of their geography, people are not in pursuit of truths; everyone conceals the truths from one another. In Arab countries, various fears instilled in individuals starting from the family, such as fear of Allah, fear of the police, and fear induced by the system, discourage people from facing the concrete realities of life. In other words, the Islamic world presents itself in a fragmented form. The people do not have a thought structure that seeks to recognise and correct their mistakes. Rulers portray the current state as ideal for their people, keeping them detached from their own realities and the realities of the world.

If a society does not make short-, medium-, and long-term plans to compensate for the mistakes it made in history, it is impossible for these societies to rise again. Another common characteristic is the squandering of national wealth by a minority group, creating a situation of constantly losing people and perpetually winning, privileged minorities. If education were based on self-criticism and the value of self-reflection were recognised, the situation would change.

III. Quran and identity

Certain verses of the Qur'an have been highlighted, while others have been overlooked. The value of self-criticism can be seen in the Qur'an, but if self-reflection is not applied to concrete events, it loses its significance. It is a fact that if individuals, political parties, or religious groups do not accept criticism, the current state of the world regarding self-criticism will gradually decline and deteriorate.

Another factor that negatively affects Islamic identities today is animosity. Everyone harbours animosity towards those outside their own circle and waits for their vulnerable moment. In other words, nurturing animosity and acting upon it hinders the formation of a contemporary Islamic identity. The problem is not about whether we like or dislike someone. The real issue is whether we openly criticise ourselves and determine our place in the current world order or within our own country. If we can manage that, we can find solutions to correct our mistakes and prevent potential mistakes in the future. There are certain realities in the systems and individuals of Islamic countries which are systematically concealed and cannot be addressed. Even though these realities are hidden from the public, it is the public who ultimately bears the consequences.

The educational conditions in Arab countries do not allow for the teaching of environmental and global realities to students. Historical textbooks are filled with tales of heroism. Current religious education aims to distance itself from the world and values engagement with worship. Language instruction remains confined to grammar. A deceived and deceiving education system is followed. Everyone tightly holds onto their positions, refrains from making observations beyond tourist visits, and avoids engaging in dialogue with others, all stemming from fear. In societies from which social justice is absent, where people are treated with disrespect and humiliation, the development of diverse religious identities, the emergence of talented and hardworking individuals, and the rise of a sense of responsibility towards others are not possible.

One of the most significant characteristics of Arab countries is that these societies do not learn from their own experiences or benefit from the experiences of others. This leads us to the fact that individuals with an Islamic identity have been repeating their mistakes for centuries. For a society to learn from its mistakes and rectify them, a certain amount of time is required.

In certain Islamic societies, particularly in Iran, another reality is the presence of religious scholars (*ulema*) who exert control over the people and maintain a controlled suppression of their behaviour and thoughts. They lack defence mechanisms against external knowledge and cultures and feel no need for them. This group also enjoys significant prestige within the state. Ultimately, it is safe to say that the thoughts of individuals with an Islamic identity are not universal. Families expect their children to have a pious identity, free from evil influences, and to have a means of livelihood. However, this contradicts the adventurous spirit of exploring the world. The spirit of adventure has been lost in these societies, and obtaining it seems unlikely under these geographic conditions. The culture has become closed off to new cultures formed in this way. This can also be observed in its universities. In Islamic societies, we

encounter two types of individuals. The first type consists of religiously inclined individuals who struggle to fulfil their essential needs under difficult circumstances. The second type consists of those who possess everything and perceive themselves as different from others. Some people cannot meet their basic needs, while others possess much more than they need. If we can recognise this situation, our thoughts and behaviours will be healthier. We should also perceive the relationship between men and women in this way. There is a compulsory relationship between those who have everything and those who have nothing. In this relationship, there is mistrust and violence. This relationship exists between individuals, as well as between societies and nations. In Islamic identity, the relationship between individuals is not psychologically healthy. It is inevitable to say that they are closed off to others. It is possible to provide many examples of exploitation of individuals who attempt to establish healthy relationships. This inward-oriented relationship is cautious and controlled where others are involved. We need to see and value other people as fellow human beings. Our perspective towards other cultures should also be like this.

Europe learned about freedom from Muslims through the Crusades. The enlightened Muslims in Asia played a significant role in Europe's attainment of civilisation. We, as Muslims, expect the same from Western intellectuals. It naturally takes many years for people and civilisations to get to know each other. Every worldview emerges as a result of the interaction between various geographies and philosophies. The continuity of worldviews and civilisations can only be achieved by benefiting from other geographies and philosophies. The perspective of individuals should be universal.

People with an Islamic identity imitate Islam without truly understanding it. Muslims are blind, both in terms of Islam and the world. They imitate Islam based on outward appearances. The solution requires Muslims to fully understand their religion, Islam, and the various sects within it, and to analyse

them with their positive and negative aspects in order to construct humane and Islamic identities that are compatible with contemporary individuals in terms of biology, psychology, and sociology. Therefore, for a contemporary Islamic understanding to emerge, it is necessary to have a genuine and comprehensive knowledge of both the West and the East, rather than a superficial one. It is essential to distinguish between truth and falsehood in imposed religious teachings. Muslims who are in search of a contemporary Islamic identity need to minimise geographical influence, break out of their shells, and abandon laziness. Certainly, there are also people in the world who have a colonial approach and exploit others as raw materials.

“Wisdom is the property of the Muslim.” Neither Islam nor Western culture can reach the knowledge of truth by lacking an understanding of both. The contemporary Islamic identity is obligated to prove itself to everyone. There are two Islamic identities before you: the first is the Islamic identity of being a global citizen, and the other is the identity of being a citizen in a local Islamic country. They have common characteristics and different aspects.

Conclusion

No human is greater than or superior to another human being. The difference between them is merely a reflection of knowledge, skills, and geographical conditions. In other words, geographical conditions differentiate individuals from one another. The sole objective should be the construction of a human and Islamic identity focused on human happiness. It is true that we live in a world of both friends and enemies. Putting an end to all forms of bigotry and naïveté towards this world would be appropriate. We must prevent our geography from being a source of disaster. We need to understand the realities of the geography we live in. An Islamic identity should be progressive and listen to the voice of conscience. Islam is based on knowledge, ethics, hard work, productivity, and justice.

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