

The Vicious Cycle of Poverty and Violence in the Islamic World - Mehmet Ögütçü



As a diplomat, businessman, and traveler, I have visited 135 countries. In many of them, I have lived and worked, observing different cultures, languages, social structures, and lifestyles. I reflected on these experiences in my book: *Life is a Journey*. Wherever I went, the reality I encountered was the same: *a large portion of Muslim societies struggles with poverty, illiteracy, inequality, violence, corruption, authoritarian rule, and political instability.*

It cannot be a mere coincidence that a similar picture appears in diverse regions—from the slums of India to the bloody battlefields of the Middle East, from the impoverished villages of Africa to the refugee camps in Europe. Poverty is a burning issue that engulfs daily life in these regions, appearing as an

unchangeable fate.

Islam as a Considerable Power

As of 2024, it is estimated that approximately 25% of the world's population, or about 2 billion people, are Muslim. The majority of Muslims live in the Middle East, North Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Russia, India, and some African countries. However, the 57 Muslim-majority countries account for only about 10% of the global GDP of \$106 trillion. In contrast, the United States, with a population of 336 million, represents approximately 24% of global GDP with \$27 trillion, while China is in second place with \$18 trillion. The Turkic world, with a population of 300 million, has a GDP of \$1.7 trillion. While Muslim countries do not form a significant portion of the global economy. The income inequality, disparities in education, and social inequalities within them reflect a serious contradiction that poses grave challenges both for themselves and for the rest of the world.

Why is the Poverty Rate So High?

The problem of poverty cannot be explained solely by contemporary economic difficulties. It is rooted in the deep structural changes within the historical evolution of the Islamic world. During the Middle Ages, the Islamic world experienced its "Golden Age," which began in the mid-8th century under the Abbasids and continued until the late 15th century. Across a vast geography, from India to Andalusia, significant intellectual work was done in fields like medicine, philosophy, theology, art, mathematics, astronomy, and Islamic law. Notable scholars such as Al-Kindi, Farabi, Al-Khwarizmi, Al-Battani, Avicenna (Ibn Sina), Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham), Al-Biruni, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), and Ibn Khaldun marked this period. However, over time, the weakening of critical thinking, the rise of religious dogmatism, and the abandonment of philosophical inquiry hindered further civilizational progress. Following its golden age, the Islamic world was severely weakened by Western colonial activities, wars, and internal conflicts. Especially from the 19th century onwards, the impact of colonial powers

on education, industrial development, and social structures prevented the growth of Muslim societies. The internal wars, corruption, poor governance, and political instability that followed colonization turned poverty into a structural issue.

The Relationship Between Poverty and Religion

It is certain that poverty in Muslim societies is not just an economic issue but also a profound socio-cultural problem. However, Islam's noble teachings, such as zakat (charitable giving), sadaqa (almsgiving), and social cooperation, emphasize that society must work together to combat poverty—almost like a collective “one for all, all for one” principle. Yet, when we look at contemporary practices, it is hard to say these teachings are fully functional.

The rote-based educational system, the limited participation of women in economic and social life, inequalities created by the capitalist world order, distrust in justice, disconnection from the world, corruption, bribery, and poor governance are all contributing factors to the deepening of poverty in the Islamic world. The concentration of oil and natural gas revenues in the hands of a few elites in the Middle East and Eurasia is another reason hindering local development. These structural inequalities exacerbate poverty, and autocratic regimes, which lack accountability and transparency, complicate the issue even further.

Muslims in a Global Perspective

India, which historically bore the traces of powerful Muslim states like the Mughal Empire, today has a large Muslim population living in poverty. Around 172 million Muslims in India struggle with poor hygiene and lack of education. In areas like Dharavi, the lack of sanitation and infrastructure makes it nearly impossible for children to receive an education or for families to escape poverty. In regions with significant Muslim populations, such as Jammu and Kashmir, political instability, lack of investment, and ongoing conflict further hinder

economic and social progress. In China's Xinjiang-Uygur Autonomous Region Muslims are deprived of economic opportunities due to state policies, despite their expertise in agriculture, handicrafts, and trade. The Uygurs, who are excluded from modern economic development projects, suffer from systemic discrimination.

In Russia, there are over 20 million Muslims. However, many of them live in regions like the North Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan, where they still battle social and economic inequalities that dated back to the Russian Empire and Soviets periods. Conflicts in regions such as Chechnya, along with the presence of radical groups, impede the social integration and development of these communities. Nevertheless, Muslim populations in places like Tatarstan show potential for success, with significant progress in education and the economy. The Muslim population in the European Union has grown rapidly, now around 30 million, or about 5-6% of Europe's total population.

In the United States, the Muslim population—mainly from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia (especially Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), and Africa—numbers around 3.5 million, or less than 1% of the population. In areas such as the city of Hamtramck, Muslims are condemned to live in poverty due to systemic discrimination and social integration issues. Similarly, in the UK, cities like Bradford and Birmingham face problems of Islamophobia, poverty, and social exclusion. While education levels are rising in the West, many Muslims still face barriers to accessing basic rights.

Social Contradictions and Religious Leaders

During my travels, I observed the lavish lifestyles of certain religious leaders and Sufi order heads in many Muslim communities. These figures often live in grand mosques, luxurious mansions, and opulent conditions, while a significant portion of the population lives in poverty. This is not just an economic disparity but also reveals a societal structure where religious duties are neglected. Schools are often underfunded, dilapidated, and ill-equipped. Children from poor families

often face great difficulty accessing even basic education, let alone having equal opportunities.

In some countries, religion has become a tool to legitimize political power, paving the way for religious radicalism and intolerance. A healthy balance between modernity and religious values has not been achieved. The Muslim world has failed to fully embrace its historical successes and cultural heritage, leading to a loss of self-confidence and the development of an inferiority complex toward the West. Economic inequalities, authoritarian regimes, and foreign interventions claiming to “bring democracy” have created fertile ground for terrorism and violence. Terrorist organizations manipulate religious interpretations to manipulate masses.

Solution Will and Radical Reforms

It is very sad to see that the Muslim world, once a leader in global civilization and a pioneer in science, art, and trade, has now reached this point. There is no solidarity or unity among them; on the contrary, they are constantly fighting amongst themselves. However, changing this situation is certainly possible. But, in many Muslim countries, reforms that would reduce poverty, increase prosperity and social peace are blocked, as they touch upon vested interests since these reforms aim at social and cultural transformation. If conditions are ever created for this transformation, I would like to propose some concrete steps that could be implemented immediately:

- *Educational Reform*: Muslim societies need an education system that fosters scientific and critical thinking. A model should be adopted that moves away from rote learning and focuses on creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Additionally, education for girls should be prioritized, as it is key to social equality and economic development.

- *Empowering Women*: Women’s participation in the workforce is crucial not only

for social equality but also for economic development. Access to education and leadership opportunities for women should be ensured, and more policies should be developed to strengthen their societal roles.

- *Transparent Governance and Fighting with Corruption*: Corruption is one of the main obstacles to economic development. Accountability of leaders, proper use of public resources, and transparency are the pillars of social progress. Strengthening democratic values will create fairer and more sustainable societies.

- *Local Development and Economic Independence*: Local development projects, particularly in agriculture, technology, and crafts, should be supported with infrastructure investments, and economic independence should be achieved. Local production and industrialization should be encouraged, and economies should shift from dependency on external factors to sustainable, locally-driven growth models.

- *Cultural Renaissance*: Historical achievements should be reclaimed, self-confidence should be restored, and a cultural transformation aligned with modernity should be promoted. This process should encourage a religious understanding based on tolerance and shared human values.

- *Global Solidarity*: Muslim societies must use their internal potential more effectively and form stronger global solidarity. International collaborations in education, trade, and culture should be strengthened, and societies should move away from dependency.

The Root of Violence is Poverty

Let me emphasize once again: *poverty is not just a result of the present but has been shaped by historical forces*. Inspired by past successes and overcoming

present hopelessness, bold reforms must be implemented immediately to build a strong future. Otherwise, unfortunately, the vicious cycle of poverty and violence will persist. The light at the end of the tunnel will remain hidden from the younger generations, and Muslim countries will continue to fail securing their rightful position in the world.



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