

# [The Reasons for the Backwardness of Muslims “Asbab Takhallof al-Muslimeen”](#)

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## **The Reasons for the Backwardness of Muslims**

### **“Asbab Takhallof al-Muslimeen”**

By Jacob Thomas

Muslims today have an acute problem with their place in history. Many of them seem unable to come to terms with the way history has played out. They cannot understand why a religion believed to be God’s last revelation to mankind is not universally embraced. For them, the glory days began some 1400 years ago; when soon after Muhammad’s death his Arab successors, the Caliphs launched campaigns to subdue the whole world. Their successes were phenomenal in a very short period of time (632 to 732). Within this one hundred year time frame through the power of the sword, they conquered lands stretching from Western India all the way to the Iberian Peninsula in Europe. If it were not for the success of Charles Martel in stopping their advance in 732 at Tours, in southern France, they might have gone all the way to Paris!

The Arabic term for the Islamic conquests is the *Futuhat*. Muslims love to glory in those victories. The caliphate eventually fell out of Arab control and reverted to, the newly Islamized Turks who took over the task of enlarging “*Daru’l Islam*” (the Household of Islam.) The Turks took on the mighty Byzantine Empire and conquered its capital Constantinople in 1453. They raged on attempting to subdue all of Europe. They laid siege to Vienna in 1529 but failed to conquer it.

Muslims have always attributed their successes to the will of Allah. After all, they were engaged in “*jihad fi Sabeel Allah*” (conquests in the Path of Allah.) However, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, and the abolishment of the caliphate in 1924, it seemed that history was taking a different term that did not seem to be in their favor.

It is today true that after end of WWII, Muslim countries that were under foreign rule, gained their independence. Yet today the lot of the majority of their citizens did not improve. Poverty and violence today mar their landscapes. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that many of them continue to ask; “What went wrong?”

When glancing over Arabic-language websites, one can sometimes find Arab intellectuals discussing this subject. Early in August, 2008, this headline on the **kwtanweer** website caught my attention: “*The Reasons for the Backwardness of Muslims: Asbab Takhallof al-Muslimeen*” I would like to quote from the article, and then follow up with my analysis and comments.

The author began by stating,

“Nowadays, no one would deny that Muslims nations come last in the list of nations that suffer from backwardness, ignorance, poverty, and illiteracy. What are the reasons for this backwardness? There are too many reasons to mention in one article; so here are some of them.

### **First Reason**

“When Islam appeared, the Christians of *Syria, el-Koofa, and Yemen*, were conversant with reading, writing, and translation; while most of the people of *Qureish* (1) were illiterate, with the exception of a few of its merchants, some Christians and *Hanifs* (2) like *Waraqah bin Nawfal*.

“Due to the prevalence of illiteracy, the majority of Muslims could not transcribe the Qur’an, so they contented themselves with memorizing it. Even those who were literate found it difficult to read the Qur’an as it was written without the use of the *dots* (3) making its recitation almost impossible without the help of teachers. This gave rise to a class of readers, who had memorized the text. They were called, *al-Qurra’* (the reciters,) and assumed a special status in the Islamic society.

“Since members of the Qureish tribe belonged to the merchant class, many of them were at home as brokers, or middlemen. In a similar way, the *Qurra’* acted as middlemen between Allah and Muslims. In order to keep the ordinary people from learning the Qur’an, they invented certain rules for the proper recitation, or intonation of the sacred text, and its exposition.

“With the passage of time, the *“reciters”* began to dictate both to ordinary Muslims and to the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs, what they must do, and what they must refrain from doing, in order to please Allah.

*“Hadith* collectors joined the *“readers”* to form a special class that was highly favored by the Caliphs who now claimed that they were Allah’s representatives on earth. And in order to increase their power over the masses, the *‘Ulema* (Muslim religious teachers,) invented more *Hadiths* that kept people from enjoying life. They declared that it was unlawful to enjoy music, singing, and dancing.

### **Second Reason**

“Another reason for the backwardness of Muslims was the fear of becoming divided into many sects as it had happened among Jews and Christians, according to the reasoning of their *fugaha*. (4) They over-emphasized the necessity for the Muslim community to be of one mind. Whatever a caliph accepted was regarded as the actual choice of the entire *umma*. They taught that obedience to the ruler was tantamount to obeying Allah and His Messenger.

### Third Reason

“The Muslims’ aversion to schisms led to their fear that somehow the text of the Qur’an may get corrupted. This caused the transcription of the Qur’an to take place only in big centers such as Damascus, Cairo, and Istanbul. A proverb came into being stating that **“the Qur’an descended in Mecca, was chanted in Cairo, and was transcribed in Istanbul!”** Sultan Muhammad the Conqueror refused the offer of Gutenberg to send him a printing press!

“The Qur’an and other religious books, continued to be hand-written until 1627; which explains the dearth of books within Ottoman lands. The first printing press was built in Egypt during the rule of **Muhammad Ali** in 1822. Thus, Muslim religious leaders were responsible for delaying the printing of books for more than 300 years. Even after the printing press was allowed, all books required the prior approval of the authorities before they were published.

### Fourth Reason

“The conjunction of time with the call of the **Muezzin** (6) caused the Arabs to have little concern for the passage of time, except for the rising and setting of the sun. When Islam introduced the five daily prayers, the **Muezzin** became the “talking” clock for Muslims.

“Once, the Ottoman Sultan **Murad III** had a clock built in 1561 that announced the times of the **Azan**; rather than receiving the praise of the religious leaders, he was denounced for introducing a machine that was invented by Infidels! He was forced to destroy the clock; and Muslims continued to rely on the **Azan** as their method of reckoning time.

### Fifth Reason

“Muslim theologians encouraged people to develop a concept of reliance upon Allah that nullified the role of personal responsibility in one’s plans and actions. Muslim theologians never stopped repeating this verse from the Qur’an: **“Say: ‘Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allâh has ordained for us. He is our Maulâ (Lord, Helper and Protector)’ “And in Allâh let the believers put their trust.”**

**(Surat al-Tawba: 51)**

“According to Muslim teachers, the acts of men are ultimately to be considered as the direct acts of Allah as in **Surat al-Anfal: 17**: **“You killed them not, but Allâh killed them. And you (Muhammad SAW) threw not when you did throw but Allâh threw, that He might test the believers by a fair trial from Him. Verily, Allâh is All-Hearer, All-Knower.”** Thus, Muslims developed no concern for the future, because of their type of reliance on Allah. After all, everything in life is pre-determined!

### Sixth Reason

“Islam forbids interest in loans and in savings accounts, regarding any type of interest rate as usury. This is how the chapter of the Cow puts it in Ayat 275:

*Those who devour usury shall not rise again except as he rises, whom Satan of the touch prostrates; that is because they say, 'Trafficking (trade) is like usury.' God has permitted trafficking, and forbidden usury. Whosoever receives an admonition from his Lord and gives over, he shall have his past gains, and his affair is committed to God; but whosoever reverts -- those are the inhabitants of the Fire, therein dwelling forever. God blots out usury, but freewill offerings He augments with interest. God loves not any guilty ingrate.* Arberry's Translation

### **Seventh Reason**

“The Qur'an addressed the wives of the Prophet requiring them to remain in their homes and not to adorn themselves like the women of the Jahilyya (pre-Islamic era.) The legal authorities interpreted this specific command as normative for all Muslim women. This led to the weakening of Islamic societies, adding to their backwardness and poverty.

### **Eighth Reason**

“Belief in fables and myths has become part and parcel of Muslim societies. Every evil that takes place in the world becomes the work of Satan. In order to protect young children from Satan's harm, Muslim children wear blue beads; while adult women wear the *hijab*.”

Thus far my quotations from the article.

### **Analysis**

The columnist listed eight reasons for the sad state of affairs in the Islamic world today, by pointing to certain developments in the early history of Islam that caused Muslims to make wrong decisions. Thus they sowed the seeds for regression in Islam, and it resulted in Muslims being unable to cope with the challenges of modernity.

### **Comments**

The author of the article spent a good deal of time dealing with the first three reasons for the “Backwardness of Muslims.” In fact, he advanced some little known history about the role of the “Reciters” of the Qur'an, who, according to him, became the official commentators of the sacred text. This eventually brought about a rigid outlook on life, and kept Muslims from coping with the changing times.

The remaining reasons for Islam's propensity to stagnate are enumerated and quite easy to grasp. In the early history of Islam, the consequences of such stagnation were not easily detected, because the Empire, or the Caliphate, was benefiting from the labors and taxes imposed on the dhimmi population. But as the burden of Dhimmitude increased,

many non-Muslims chose to Islamize. Thus, the revenue that had come from their labor as Dhimmis stopped. It took some time for the negative traits of the Islamic worldview to manifest their full destructive nature. The writer enumerated some glaring examples such as the phobia brought about by new inventions (the clock); regarding women as inferior to men; fatalism that immobilizes human beings, making them extremely passive; belief in myths and fables, causing people to disregard the benefits of scientific discoveries, etc.

Obviously, the article “Asbab Takhalluf al-Muslimeen” was addressed to an Arab audience and not to those of us who are native to the West. Yet, Westerners too can benefit from the writer’s insights. We need to develop genuine empathy for many of those Arab intellectuals who are seriously thinking about their past and current milieu as they seek answers to why their culture exhibits such “backwardness.” and what can be done about it.

I believe the answer will not be forthcoming from within Islam. As long as Muslims of all types, cling tenaciously to the basic tenets of their faith, and regard it as God’s final and complete message for mankind, they are doomed to find no way out of their “Closed Circle.”<sup>(7)</sup> Their understanding of history and their place in it will become more enlightened as they learn to be tolerant of all the “others” that inhabit our world ..

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1. ***Qureish***, the leading tribe in Mecca; Muhammad was a member of this tribe, and of the clan of ***Hashim***

2. ***Hanifs***, Arab monotheists who were neither Jewish, nor Christian; very little is known about them.

3. ***Dots***, The Arabic alphabet resembles shorthand (stenography); its letters are distinguished by the number and place of the dots that are placed over or under a letter. They are referred to in Arabic as “***Niqat***” plural of “***Niqta***.” They are to be distinguished from the vowel signs known as “***Harakat***,” that indicate how a consonant should sound.

4. ***Fuqaha***, plural of ***faqih***, an expert in the exegesis of the Shari’a, a Muslim theologian.

5. ***Firman***, a decree issued by an Ottoman Sultan promulgating a new rule to be followed throughout the Empire.

6. ***Muezzin***, a Muslim charged with chanting the call to prayer 5 times a day, he climbs to the top of the minaret to call the faithful to fulfill their duty. Nowadays, the call to prayer goes over loudspeakers in many parts of the Muslim world. The time for the call to prayer is known as the ***Azan***.

<sup>(7)</sup> Reference here is to the title of David-Pryce Jones’ “**The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs.**”

<http://www.kwtanweer.com/articles/readarticle.php?articleID=568#>