

COMMENTARY/KOMENTAR

Being, Time and Space: Existential Consciousness that Shapes the World

Wujud, Masa dan Ruang: Kesedaran Kewujudan yang Membentuk Dunia

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1.0 Introduction

Humanity's fundamental inquiry throughout history has been the question of existence, distilled into the question, "Who am I?" This fundamental question rooted in human consciousness is grounded in three parameters: being, time, and space, whereby time and space provide the ontological context for human existence. These existential concerns have shaped the Muslim world, including Turkish society.

The first generation of the post-Ottoman Empire faced a tumultuous period marked by wars, imperialism, colonialism, and national liberation struggles, including the First World War and the Turkish War of Independence. Preoccupied with political survival, this generation had little opportunity to engage in complex philosophical or intellectual inquiries. Then, the second generation came of age in a secularized Turkey and contended primarily with economic struggles in the context of political and cultural transformation. The third generation, born in the 1950s and 1960s, posed a new line of questioning centred on why the Muslim world, despite its rich heritage and resources, remained economically underdeveloped and militarily weak compared to global powers. In the 1970s, amid the ideological polarization—characterized by competing leftist, rightist, and Islamist discourses across Turkey and beyond—I contemplated Turkey's history as a global power in contrast to its contemporary state of underdevelopment.

At the age of ten, an anti-Israel protest marked my early engagement with sociopolitical issues. Later, I went to a German high school and a private madrasah where I learned Arabic, kalam and fiqh. I embarked on the exploration of German and Western philosophical texts alongside Islamic classics, which prompted a reflective synthesis of my identity as a Turkish Muslim. Then, I went to the university to pursue a double major in political science and economics. In 1983, I travelled around the world and visited many prominent cultural and religious centres, including Jerusalem, Rome, Delhi, Kathmandu, and Beijing. This journey enabled me to explore comparative religions, study texts like the Tao and Confucian classics, and conduct comparative analyses on British and French colonial impacts on the Muslim world. I came to the conclusion that the core issue of the Muslim world is not economic underdevelopment or political defeat. Rather, it is an issue of mentality.

Historically, there were three major challenges faced by the Islamic civilization. First, the Crusades posed a military threat that, despite lasting two centuries, ended in a decisive victory for the Muslims. The second great historical challenge faced by Islamic civilization was the Mongol invasions, which brought widespread devastation, including the fall of Baghdad. Yet, in time, the Mongols assimilated with Islamic culture, and by the 16th century, Islamic civilization had ascended to a new peak of influence, with empires such as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal spanning a vast territory from Vienna to China. During this period, Islamic authority and culture were predominant across much of the world, with strong political, intellectual, and cultural centres in the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal empires. The third and ongoing challenge is the challenge of Western modernity. Colonialism, often perceived as a political issue, is rooted in mental colonization—a form of intellectual dominance that imposes Western paradigms on other societies.

2.0 Western Vs Islamic Paradigm

In 1984, I began to publish several papers exploring this mental colonization concept, analyzing the contrasts

between Western and Islamic paradigms. I examined the distinct foundations of Islamic politics compared to Western political thought, highlighting how these paradigms diverge in their philosophical underpinnings and objectives. In Islamic philosophy, three major intellectual traditions prevail: philosophy, kalam (theology), and tasawwuf. Prominent Islamic thinkers, such as Ibn Rushd, Imam Al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Al-Kindi, and Al-Farabi, represent various schools of thought within these traditions, often engaging in critical dialogue with one another. Despite their differences, these great thinkers are united within an essence of the Islamic paradigm—the ontological unity, which is tawhid. While Islamic and Western paradigms may overlap in certain methodological or intellectual pursuits, the defining characteristic of Islamic thought is its commitment to tawhid, an ontological unity that seeks to integrate all knowledge and existence under a singular divine reality. This is the ultimate essence and revolutionary core of Islamic philosophy, contrasting with the fragmented ontological foundations in Western philosophy.

2.1 *Being and philosophical depth*

Identity—commonly defined by political or national boundaries—does not fully address the question of “who am I?” as identity is mutable and contextually defined by state authority. For instance, where one might identify today as Malaysian or Turkish, those geographic or political affiliations did not exist a century ago, when communities were identified as Ottoman, Indo-Malay, or otherwise. In contrast to identity, self-perception is an intrinsic awareness that cannot be externally assigned or altered by political systems. Edmund Husserl’s foundational study in phenomenology posits that reality is not just an objective world but is intentionally shaped by human perception. Human perception and experience are formed through relationships with each other in historical, cultural, and social contexts.

Nations and civilizations define themselves through their engagement with history, geography, and international relations. For Muslims, self-perception is a transcendent and internal awareness, central to the unity of the Muslim ummah. This concept embodies a revolutionary approach within Islamic civilization, grounded in a self-perception that transcends temporal and spatial divisions, thus uniting the ummah through a continuity of consciousness rather than contingent identity constructs. Hence, “revolution” refers to a transformation far beyond mere reform or change—an upheaval that fundamentally altered civilizational constructs and perceptions. This revolutionary shift emerged in history whereby Prophet Muhammad s.a.w presented a radical challenge to all existing societal structures, particularly in the establishment of the ontological equality of human beings in Islam.

The Western paradigm, including paganism, Roman and Greek philosophies, Christianity, and modernity, are components within a continuous paradigm. It can be analyzed based on ontological proximity to describe how closely related different entities are in terms of their existence, identity, or shared conceptual frameworks. Ontological proximity affects epistemology and causes the particularization of truth between reason and Christian dogma. For instance, the Greek civilization distinguished between citizens and slaves, creating distinct ontological separations within the same society. Social hierarchies in Western civilizations have evolved over time from a rigid feudal hierarchy in Medieval Europe, then the rise of the Bourgeoisie and white supremacy during the industrialization and capitalism era to economic class, racial, and ethnic hierarchies in the contemporary Western society. Other societies, such as those in India and China, also operated within rigid hierarchical structures. For example, in the Aryan-derived caste system of India, human value was divided between high and low castes like the Brahmins and Vaishyas. Meanwhile, China’s social structure has evolved under the influence of Confucianism, dynastic rule, communism, and modern economic reforms, but China still maintains deep social divisions shaped by government control, the hukou system, and class differences.

Islam’s revolutionary assertion was the ontological equality of all human beings before God. This principle established a clear ontological hierarchy, with God (Allah) at the highest level, followed by all human beings, and then nature. Islam explicitly rejects any notion of ontological proximity, as such proximity would imply a fundamental inequality. In Christian theology, for instance, the Trinity elevates Jesus to a near-divine status, blurring the ontological boundary between Jesus and God. In contrast, Islamic teachings emphasize that Prophet Muhammad s.a.w was a human being, though chosen as God’s messenger. This distinction is

reinforced in the historical moment following the Prophet's death, when Abu Bakr r.a assumed leadership and declared, "I am an ordinary human," thereby maintaining the clear ontological separation between God and humanity. This ontological clarity is significant not only in theology but also in the epistemological structure of Islam.

On the other hand, in Western thought, particularly after St. Paul—who developed Christian theology without having met Jesus personally—the Church became an intermediary between God and humanity, with the Pope acquiring an almost divine authority. This ontological proximity influenced Western epistemology, creating a division between reason and Church dogma. Islam, by contrast, has no church, no mediating institution, and therefore no epistemological division between reason and revelation, enabling an integrated pursuit of truth. In short, Western paradigms have historically segmented truth and understanding, whereas the Islamic paradigm maintains unity in the human pursuit of knowledge.

The foundational importance of epistemological unity within Islamic thought is emphasized in my book "Alternative Paradigms". After examining the central works and classical schools of Islamic philosophy, I identify a consistent ontological hierarchy that unites Islamic philosophers across different traditions. This ontological foundation contrasts with the intellectual development in Western philosophy, where thinkers from Greek to Roman philosophers—through figures like Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas—and later pre-modern and modern philosophers, such as Erasmus, reveal a continuity that culminates in modernity. This comprehensive comparison highlights the divergence between the Islamic and Western approaches to being, knowledge, and values, which are interdependent constructs of the basis of mentality formation.

One's perception of being, use of knowledge ('aql), and construction of values contribute to a distinct worldview, affecting interconnected domains like law, politics, and economics. Mental transformation precedes and shapes material transformation, not the other way around. This shift is central to the development of alternative paradigms that challenge dominant Western models of thought. The concept of civilization is derived from this analysis. Civilization is an entity shaped by being, time, and space. The essence of civilization is being, the historical emergence of civilizations takes place within space, and the continuity of these entities unfolds in time.

2.2 *Time and historical depth*

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama proposed that the conclusion of the Cold War signified the end of history. I contested this assertion at the 1991 International Studies Association Conference in Canada. The post-Cold War era was not a historical end but a significant moment of civilizational transformation. This transformation extends beyond the mere victory of liberal democracy and capitalism; it signifies the dissolution of the modern paradigm that has historically dominated global discourse. In this landscape, the interplay of diverse civilizations—encompassing Chinese, Indian, Muslim, African, and Latin American cultures—is central to a new paradigm. Each civilization, with its unique historical trajectory and epistemological framework, contributes to a rich tapestry of global interactions that challenge the hegemony of Western narratives. This interaction is further complicated by the rapid advancements in technology, which act as an inexorable force propelling history forward, thereby making any notion of a historical ending implausible.

In 1994, Samuel Huntington articulated his thesis in "The Clash of Civilizations", suggesting that the post-Cold War era would witness inevitable conflicts among distinct cultural blocs. I challenge this premise of civilizational conflict with the notion of civilizational interaction. In other words, rather than establishing rigid boundaries between civilizations, future dynamics would be characterized by interactions, particularly as demographic shifts increase the presence of Muslims within Western societies and lead to heightened refugee flows. This leads us to the concept of historical depth. The concept of historical depth is grounded in historical consciousness arising from civilizational interaction. The first significant instance of civilizational interaction occurred during the era of Alexander the Great, marked by profound philosophical transformations. This period saw the emergence of key thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato in Greece, Zoroastrianism in Persia, Jainism and Buddhism in India, as well as Taoism and Confucianism in China. Across the vast expanse of Eurasia, a

notable historical and philosophical metamorphosis unfolded, giving rise to major traditions, including political traditions. The Greek Mediterranean transformation, influenced by Alexander, and the Zoroastrian Persian tradition are particularly significant, leading to the formation of substantial political traditions. In India, the Buddhist empire under Ashoka exemplifies this trajectory, as does the philosophical and political evolution witnessed during the Han Dynasty in China. Thus, the dynamics of civilizations have long been characterized by interactions, particularly philosophical interactions, which historically precipitated subsequent historical and political transformations.

Meanwhile, Islam emerged in an isolated environment, akin to an incubator uniquely prepared for its advent, without direct influence from other civilizations. This distinctive context facilitated the emergence of a pure tawhidic tradition. Prophet Muhammad s.a.w represents a singular figure in history, both politically and religiously, who introduced a new self-perception to his community and established a political order in Medina. This differentiates him from other prophetic figures. For instance, while Prophet Musa a.s was indeed a prophet, he did not serve as a political leader who established a governance structure, as his journey concluded in Palestine without creating a lasting political order. In contrast, prophets such as Prophet Daud a.s were political leaders who did not initiate a philosophical transformation but rather built upon the legacy of Prophet Musa a.s. Prophet Muhammad s.a.w, however, actively built his community, forming a cohesive society in Medina and instituting a political and economic order exemplified by the Medina Covenant. This foundation allowed the subsequent four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Khulafa' ar-Rashidun) to translate divine principles into human governance, particularly through the leadership of Abu Bakr r.a.

By the latter half of the first century, this newly established order spread to regions including Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Jerusalem, facilitating significant civilizational interaction following the foundational teachings of Islam. The establishment of Islamic teachings led to the formation of political and economic orders, as well as urban centers. My book, "Pivot Cities in the Rise and Fall of Civilizations", underscores their significance, noting that cities such as Jerusalem and Istanbul were transformed into Islamic cities through the application of Islamic principles and teachings by the Muslim community.

2.3 *Space and strategic depth*

When Samuel Huntington wrote "The Clash of Civilizations", he attributed the major crises occurring in the Muslim world—such as those in Bosnia and elsewhere—to the inherent conflicts between Islam and other civilizations, including the West, China, and India. He posited that Islamic civilization was primarily responsible for these crises. However, such an assumption is fundamentally flawed. The crises in Muslim lands did not arise from Islamic teachings but rather from the geopolitical positioning of these societies. There are 18 significant sea routes on Earth, with 9 of them being strategically vital; remarkably, 8 of these routes are located within Muslim territories, including the Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Suez Canal, Aden, and Malacca. If Muslims chose to block or close these routes, they could significantly disrupt global trade.

The conflicts attributed to a clash of civilizations are, in reality, geopolitical clashes. Western colonialism and global powers seek to dominate these critical sea routes and energy resources, which are strategically situated in Muslim lands. This geopolitical context underlies the political confrontations occurring in these regions. In response to the political pressure faced by Muslims, particularly following the coup d'état in Turkey in 1997 against the pro-Islamic Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, Turkey's geopolitical position needed to be redefined. This brought me to develop the concept of strategic depth, viewing Turkey and Islamic civilization as integral to the geopolitical landscape of the world. This perspective is central to understanding global geopolitics. My book "Strategic Depth" presented a novel approach to geography and spatial dynamics, positioning it as a counter to colonialism and imperialism while offering a reinterpretation of Muslim geographies, particularly Turkish geography. The concept of strategic depth should be implemented within Turkish foreign policy and Islamic geopolitics, with the overarching aim of minimizing conflicts in the Muslim world through various mediation efforts. In addition, Turkey's foreign policy should not be just about material interests but also about historical self-awareness, reclaiming its civilizational consciousness rather than adopting a Western-imposed identity.

3.0 Conclusion

A comprehensive understanding of geopolitical dynamics necessitates a nation to reflect on its philosophical, historical, and spatial consciousness of self-perception. Without an appreciation of Islamic history—tracing from the time of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w to the present and even back to the time of Prophet Adam a.s—one cannot deeply understand and effectively apply geopolitics. My intellectual endeavors have focused on forging a connection between existence and self-perception, alongside a comprehension of time as historical consciousness and space as geopolitical consciousness. I hope that future generations within Muslim societies will be able to develop and implement this paradigm not only in theory but also in practice.

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