

The History of the Islamic Calendar in the Light of the Hijra

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The History of the Islamic Calendar in the Light

of the Hijra

The course of history is generally thought to be along a progressive path, but there are occasions when its progress seems to come to a standstill, and it becomes quiescent and inactive. The release of energy in such situations is converted into entropy, i.e. energy that cannot be used.

Such situations and occasions are those that are opposed and are antithetical to the dynamism of history, its usual characteristic. When man, forgetting his Creator and his Benefactor, takes to the worship of the outward phenomena of nature and begins to ascribe the attributes of Deity to man and prostrates himself before human beings who temporarily hold the reins of power, he becomes increasingly prone to the violation of God's laws, thereby generating conflict on earth and tending to ignore moral laws and ethics. He becomes, then, averse to light and takes to the worship of darkness.

The course of history, in such a situation, becomes static. Such inertia is not the one that is opposed to dynamics but represents that inactivity—as has its birth in conflict and confusion. History in such a situation seems to assume the state of a spectator gazing at this spectacle with amazement and disappointment, and in utter dejection casts a look at the sky to find out what it has further in store for it.

Perhaps, it is in such circumstances that the Heavenly Court decides how to do away with the obstacles that lay athwart the path of progress and to remove these impediments cluttering up the course of history. These impediments are represented and epitomized by regressive, retrograde and unnatural cultures.

God Almighty has Himself pointed to the condign punishments that visit nations violating His laws. And so we are told:

So We took each one in his sin; of them was he on whom We sent a hurricane, and of them was he who was overtaken by the (awful) cry, and of them was he whom We caused the earth to swallow, and of them was he whom We drowned. It was not for Allah to wrong them, but they wronged themselves. (129: 40).

The period of life which the Prophet (peace be unto him) passed among the hard-hearted and unrelenting people of Mecca represented an era in which the caravan of history seems to have come to a stop, becoming static. When we examine the age, it seems as if the ever moving caravan of life is awaiting some terrible fate at the hands of heaven in the shadow of the hot mountains and feverish rocks. Such a decision is at last manifested.

But the *raison d'être* for such a judgement was the person whom God Himself designated as *Rahma lil-'Alimin'* and the maximum extent to which his anger and displeasure could go was to turn his countenance away from his adversary.

His compassion, his mercy, and his tolerance are also reflected in the code of laws which were made to descend upon him. It was, therefore, decided by God Himself that the polytheists of Mecca be spared destruction used in all the other forms.

Al-Hurmuzan, then, explained to them how to use 'Umar, (however), said: "Give the people an era which they can use in business and which permits them an exact indication of the date in the mutual dealings". A Jewish convert to Islam who was present said: "we (Jews) have a similar calculation which we ascribe to Alexander".

The others, however, did not like that era, because it was too far back. Some were for the adoption of the Persian era. It was, however, objected that the Persian era had no fixed epoch year and always started entirely anew with the ascension (to the throne) of each new king. An agreement was reached to institute the era of the rule of Islam, beginning with the *Hijra* of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina.

There are no such differences of opinion with regard to the date of the *Hijra* as there are with regard to the time when the call first came to Muhammad and with regard to the day and year of his birth. And although the date of his death is fixed, it is no pleasant thought to use (such a sad event) as the beginning of the era. The *Hijra*, moreover, coincided in time with the success of the religion (*millah*) of Islam, the frequent arrival of embassies, and the Muslim ascent to Power. It is a time of blessings and a very impressive (historical) event.

The *Hijra* took place on Tuesday, Rabi 1, 8th. The first of that year –that is, al-Muharram–fell on a Thursday according to the average (calculation). After this had become generally known, it was considered (the correct date). However, according to observation (of the new moon) and astronomical calculation, the day fell on a Friday.

The author of the *Nihayat al-idrak* said that (the *Hijra*) was used, and for all future times the era was counted from it. Agreement on this matter was reached in the year 17 of the *Hijra*, the fourth year of the caliphate of 'Umar.

Until then, each year (after the *Hijra*) was called after its main event, and this was used for dating purposes. The first year of the Prophet's residence in Medina was thus called: 'The permission to travel'. The second year was called: 'The year of the command to fight'. The third year: 'The year of the test', and so on. Afterwards, the custom of naming the year after the main events was abandoned.

'Ubayd b. 'Umayr said: "Al-Muharram is the month of God. It is the beginning of the year. It is used as the beginning of the era. In al-Muharram, the Ka'bah is clothed, and money is coined. There is one day in al-Muharram on which repenting sinners are forgiven".

A tradition regarding "the first month of the year being al-Muharram," ascribed to Muhammad appears in ad-Daylamis Firdaws. Ad-Daylami's son reported the same tradition on the authority of 'Ali without the indication of a chain of transmitters."¹

At the dawn of history man tried to determine the significance of months and years in his own way. History is not in a position to tell which nation first divided the calendar into years, months, weeks and days—that is to say, how, when, and where it was that a collection of seven days was called a week, of thirty days a month, and twelve months a year.

Despite the fact that this fact lies buried in the haze of obscurity, we can still gain access to it through a process of visualization; and we can take the aid of reason to and that this River of Radiance should change its course.

Hijra does not signify merely a journey between the two cities (Mecca and Medina) of the Arabian peninsula but the movement by the caravan of history again from a static state.

When the Prophet (peace be upon him) began to depart for Medina, his steps were, on the face of things, treading on a journey, but in reality they were setting the wheels of history into motion. And history, when it witnessed this movement, again embarked upon a journey with fresh determination. Fourteen hundred years have passed since this journey was embarked upon; it is still on the move, and will be so till the end of the world.

What influence did *Hijra* exercise upon the history of man and what it gave to mankind is something that lies outside the scope of this paper. I now come to the theme of the history of the *Hijra* calendar.

When the need for toning up the administration of the Caliphate arose during the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and it became necessary to have a calendar so as to fix the dates. The Caliph, who was so well aware of the sunna of the Prophet and of his temperament, instead of fixing the standard from the birth of the Prophet, which heralded an entirely new chapter in the history of man or his death which had placed such a heavy responsibility upon the shoulders of the Caliphs or some other event, he ordered the adoption of the *Hijra* as the basic date for the Islamic calendar.

Al-Hakim narrates the tradition on the authority of Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri that when the Prophet came to Medina, he ordered the introduction of the Muslim era, but this tradition has been held to be weak in authority by the *Muhaddithun*. The authoritative tradition, according to them, says that the custom of imprinting dates upon deeds, documents and epistles was given currency to during the time of the second Caliph according to the instructions left by the Prophet himself. 2

Shams al-Din Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (d. 902) in his *al-I'lan bi'l-Tawbikh li-man dhamma ahl al-tawrikh* gives the following details about the origin of the Islamic calendar:

“A report on the authority of Ibn 'Abbas states that there existed no era in Medina when the Prophet arrived there. People came to use an era a month or two after his arrival. This continued until Muhammad's death. Then, the use of an era was discontinued, and there was none during the caliphate of Abu Bakr and the first four years of the caliphate of 'Umar. Then, the (Muslim) era was established.

'Umar is reported to have said to the assembled dignitaries among the men around Muhammad: "The income is considerable. What we have distributed has been without fixed dates. How can we remedy that?" One answer came from al-Hurmuzan. He had been king of al-Ahwaz. After his capture during the conquest of Persia, he had been brought to 'Umar and had become a Muslim.

He said: "The Persians have a (method of) calculation which they call *mahroz* and which they ascribe to their Sassanid rulers. The word *mahroz* was arabicized as *mu'arrakh*, and the infinitive *ta'rikh* was formed from it. It was also deduce that, as civilization became more complex and when it became necessary to devise ways and means of fixing periods and eras, man must have been guided by his day-to-day phenomena of repetition, based upon an ever-continuing rhythm-served as his guides.

The flux and re-flux of the moon-tides must have drawn man's attention towards it, since on specific days it is crescent-shaped, on others gibbous, followed by increase in moonlight till it reaches its maximum limit, with subsequent decrease in an ever-continuing rhythmic cycle. This phenomenon was so clear and simple that it hardly required any philosophization.

Changes in the weather must also have struck man as being related to the moon, as the twelve lunar cycles provided him with a clue to the past weather. These were such clear and simple observations that they did not demand any sophisticated argumentation.

And, therefore, despite the silence of history on this point, it can be said that the division of time into months and years on the basis of the lunar concept is the oldest insofar as history is concerned. There are other proofs for this belief, based upon semantics and sound; and history has been making use of them. Word-forms have. in the event, cultural and conceptual backgrounds.

History also provides us with alternative calendar systems for fixing historical periods, e.g. some major war or some important event. It has also happened that a calendar has had its origin in the enthronement of a king etc. All these systems are, however, arbitrary and local. On the other hand, the lunar calendar has a universal background, while the other systems are limited to geographical boundaries. Festivals and religious congregations also were specific to particular people or nations and did not carry equal significance for all.

When man took to agriculture, it was discovered that the lunar system did not fully correspond to the weather and the crops, and therefore some modification was necessary. It was felt that if within one lunar month a crop was harvested or some (particular) weather was witnessed, then after four years neither that crop nor the weather was to be seen.

According to the astronomical principle, through waxing and waning of the moon there is a difference of one month in one year every four years. For both seasons and agricultural crops, the difference of one month bears some significance. Seasons are related to the solar system, as also are agricultural crops. Therefore, the lunar and solar systems were reconciled by adding a few more days to the lunar months, and the two systems were thus reconciled.

Lawnd or Kabisa

This method whereby the lunar months are reconciled with the solar system are designated as *lawnd* or *kabisa*. We get information about this system from the ancient calendars of India, China, Egypt and Syria. The Jewish calendar was also similar.

Later on the lunar and solar calendars were separated, although for religious festivals it was the lunar system which was acknowledged as the guide, as in the case of the Christians Easter, and *Diwali* of the Hindus, and *Yom Kippur* of the Jews. The practical shape that this division took was that the lunar system was earmarked for religious occasions and the solar system for business and administrative transactions. We have thus both systems running side by side.

The Solar Calendar

There are a few things connected with the solar system requiring consideration. We have to take into account the rotation of the earth which is of two kinds:

- (1) on its own axis in such a way as to produce day and night and
- (2) in an elliptical orbit round the sun giving rise to changes in seasons.

One full rotation along this elliptical orbit is completed in 365/5/48/46 days, and the period is designated as the solar year. But it is not equally divisible into twelve months. The present-day solar calendar—the Gregorian—has been so divided that seven months consist of 31 days, four months of 30 days, and one month of 28 days.

In order to account for the fractions, every fourth year a day is added to the month of February, called the leap-year. But consideration will show that even this division does not do away with the fraction. After every four hundred years seasonal changes occur and probably because of this fact the solar calendar requires constant modification. It is just not possible to remove this discrepancy.

The League of Nations had set up a Special Committee at Geneva in 1923 charged with the formulation of a calendar that would be universally acceptable and would be reconcilable with seasonal changes. One of the recommendations of this Committee was that the year was to be divided into 13 months.

However, such a calendar would not be devised as the seasons in the hemispheres differ in their periodic occurrence. The proximity and the distance of the sun in the East and the West naturally give rise to substantial differences. Because of this inherent discrepancy, it was not possible for the solar calendar to gain universal acceptance.

The lunar calendar system, on the other hand, is free from most of these defects, and admits of broader acceptance. It is not connected with seasonal changes. The appearance and disappearance of the

moon twelve times in a year can be easily observed. It revolves round the earth, and since its orbit is elliptical and not totally circular, it comes close to the earth and becomes distant from it.

Its speed of rotation is also not the same; hence it completes its trajectory sometimes in 30 and at others in 29 days. The total period taken in its rotation round the earth is 354/48/34 days. It is not visible at any place on the thirteenth time in less than this period. This, then is the basis of the lunar system.

We have now to consider what the Qur'an has to say about the computation of months and years. It is true that, having given man a code of conduct, it has given full thought and rational freedom to man but has circumscribed these limits. Insofar as the computation of months and years is concerned, the Qur'an has provided a guideline in one of the verses which is as follows:

He it is who appointed the sun a splendour and the moon a light and measured for her stages, that ye might know the number of the years, and the reckoning. (10:5)

The following verse directs us regarding the number of months:

Lo! the number of the months with Allah is twelve months by Allah's ordinance in the day that He created the heavens and the earth... (9: 36)

The purport of these Qur'anic verses is that we must take the moon to be the source of the calendar, and any other system that would be unnatural will not succeed, being non-natural and, therefore, it is that the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar system. Its beginnings can be traced to the Prophet, but, as a regular feature, it came into its own during the time of the second Caliph 'Umar I.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal and al-Bukhari report through Maymun ibn Mihran that "an I.O.U. payable in Sha'ban was presented to 'Umar I. Thereupon 'Umar asked which Sha'ban, last Sha'ban, or this one or the coming one? Give the people something that they can understand."³

He then issued a regular directive and founded the present-day calendar in 16 A.H. from which time the practice is being followed. Al-Suyuti, in the chapter on "News and Ordinances" in his *Ta'rikh al-Khulafa'* writes with reference to al-Musayyab that the second orthodox Caliph had the *Hijra* dates inserted in all administrative directives two and a half years after his assumption of the Caliphate on the advice of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and this became the practice from 16 A.H. onwards. ⁴

Al-Tabari in his *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l Muluk* gives the following exposition:

The Prophet on the occasion of the *Hajjat al Wada'* said: "O people! Time after undergoing a full revolution has returned to its original state; the day Allah created the heavens and the earth."⁵

It will be essential to keep some historical facts about ourselves in order to understand the pre-Islamic calendar. The Arabs were seized by the fatal malady of idolatry three hundred years before the advent of the Prophet, the Hajj for them was nothing more than a big festival. Their calendar being lunar, this

feast was sometimes held in seasons when the crops had not been harvested and were not yet ready for sale. They, therefore, devised the method of *kabzsa*, according to which a year sometimes consisted of 13 months.

The period of the Hajj was also not specified. The responsibility for announcing the date of the Hajj was entrusted to a man from Banu Kinana named Qalammas, who was to announce on the occasion of the Hajj when the next pilgrimage was to be performed, and which month the thirteenth month was to follow. The first Qalammas was an individual, but then the name became specific to the announcer. We thus see a sizeable number of the Qalammasa.

The Qalammasi calendar was based upon lunar computation, and another link in the historical chain is provided by the fact that among the Arabs the months of Rajab, Dhu'l-Qa'da, Dhu'l-Hijja, and Muharram were regarded as the months of peace and sanctity. But, with this calendar, these months also began to undergo changes, and it was one of the responsibilities of the Qalammasa to announce as to what months would be the sacred months in the following year. They are called *al-nasi'* in Arabic.

The custom of kabisa was current among the Beduins but not among the townsmen. The Arabs had, therefore, two calendars: one was with the kabisa, the other without it. The Prophet in his address, to which we have referred, announced the abrogation of both—i.e. the *kabisa* and *nasi'*. Thus the time for the pilgrimage was fixed and the lunar calendar was to be enforced without the kabisa.

The lunar calendar of the Muslims began with the *Hijra* of the Prophet. The first day of the month of Muharram of the year of the *Hijra* i.e. the migration of the Prophet, was the first day of this calendar. Despite its being known as the solar calendar beginning with the 20th of September 622 C.E., according to the Gregorian calendar, before that, the year of the Elephant was used by the Arabs as the epoch of their era. This previous lunar calendar of the Arabs was totally abrogated in the 10th year of the *Hijra* on the occasion of the Prophet's address at the *Hajjat al-Wada'*. The lunar calendar thus became current without any addition or modification.

Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, says that the Muslims have borrowed the concept of the week and the festivals from the Jews. As regards festivals, yawm al-nahr derives its importance from its association with the Prophet Abraham, from whom the Prophet was directly descended.⁶ According to Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, it is one of the attributes of the Prophet that this festival should have vouchsafed to the Muslims the best of religions.

It is, therefore, out of the question that it should have been borrowed. The names of the Arabic months were retained by the Muslims with slight modifications because of their significance. The first month is al-Muharram and the last is Dhu'l-Hijja. The names of the months are consecutively as follows: Muharram al-Haram, ,Safar, Rabi' al-Awwal, Rabi' al-Thani, Jumada al-Awwal, Jumada al-Thani, Rajab, Sha'ban, Ramadan, Shawwal, Dhu'l-Qa'da and Dhu'l-Hijja.

The concept of the week in Islam derives from spiritual purgation and self-reform, while the name of the

last day, al-Jum'a, is Qur'anic. The days have been serially named as yawm al-sabt, yawm al-ahad, yawm al-ithnayn, yawm al-thalatha, yawm al-arba'a, yawm al-khamis, and yawm al-jum'a.

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