

The Decline of Muslim Empires: Sectarian Division and Cultural Wastefulness

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Abstract: *The decline of the Muslim world within the modern global village requires a critical and unbiased examination. This deterioration cannot be attributed merely to external forces, nor to any lack of religious devotion among the masses. Rather, the central cause lies within the very leadership of the Muslim community, its clergy, who, instead of embodying the Nabawi Sirah in its holistic sense, failed to adopt a scientific outlook and a pious Islamic lifestyle in their daily conduct. It is a matter of deep concern that many clerics have consistently separated science and secular Talim from religion, labeling it as “worldly knowledge” with no intrinsic connection to Islam. Such an interpretation, driven by intellectual stagnation and narrow interests, has ultimately become a decisive factor in the decline of Muslim societies. The burden of responsibility, therefore, rests heavily on the shoulders of the Ulama’ al-Su, the corrupt and self-serving clerics, whose misguidance continues to cast long shadows on the community. Historically, Islam as a faith and civilisation radiated with spiritual illumination, intellectual achievements, and profound cultural contributions. Yet, the history of Muslim societies has been marred by repeated cycles of disunity, sectarianism, and decline. From the divisive struggles of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, to the catastrophic fall of Baghdad in 1258, from the devastation of Bukhara at the hands of Genghis Khan, to the eventual collapse of Andalusian rule, the lesson is consistent: Muslims have suffered more from internal discord than from the might of external enemies. Sectarian bigotry, the vested interests of the Ulama al-Su’, the indulgence of elites in luxury, and the neglect of Qur’an guidance collectively weakened the Ummah, rendering it vulnerable to domination and humiliation. Today, despite possessing the Qur’an and the Sunnah of Rasulullah (S), contemporary Muslims remain entrapped in disputes over trivialities while their lands are ravaged, their dignity diminished, and their unity fragmented. The present condition, political subjugation, economic exploitation, and spiritual distraction, echoes the recurrent crises of the past. This study argues that the true path of revival does not lie in scholastic polemics or sectarian rigidity, but rather in a sincere return to the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the unifying ethos of Islam. Such a revival, grounded in justice, tolerance, humility, and scientific consciousness, alone can restore the vitality of the Ummah in the global arena.*

Keywords: *Islamic history; sectarianism; Abbasids; Mongols; Muslim decline; Ulama al-Su; Qur’an; Sunnah; unity of the Ummah; contemporary Muslim world*

Introduction

Sectarianism has been one of the most persistent afflictions in the history of Muslims. Despite the universality of Islam's message, the venom of religious hatred has persisted since the earliest monarchies. Minority groups within the Ummah were often persecuted-arrested, tortured, and massacred-under the pretext of defending Islam, but in reality to preserve corrupt political authority. The chronicles of the Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayubid, and Ottoman dynasties testify to the repeated weaponisation of religion for political ends. Paid clerics (Ulama al-Su) frequently inflamed hostilities, inciting their followers to declare rival schools of thought as heretical. In doing so, they weakened the fabric of Muslim unity, ensuring the Ummah was ripe for exploitation by external enemies. This pattern of internal division and betrayal runs through the great crises of Islamic history. When Genghis Khan's armies advanced into Central Asia, Muslim factions betrayed one another and even aided the invader in hope of personal advantage, only to be destroyed afterwards. The Abbasid caliphate, once the pinnacle of intellectual and spiritual civilisation, collapsed in 1258 when Baghdad was reduced to ashes by the Mongols. Andalusia, the jewel of Muslim Spain, fell not simply because of Christian power, but because Muslim rulers sought Christian allies against one another. Such patterns are not confined to history. Today, the Muslim world stands fragmented and humiliated, embroiled in sectarian disputes while its lands are occupied, its resources plundered, and its people displaced in the millions. The Qur'an warns:

"And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not be divided" (3:103). Yet division has remained the hallmark of the Ummah's decline.

The Late Fatimi Empire in Ismaili Historical Writing:

The long reign of the Fatimi Ismaili Imam and Khalifah al-Mustansir bi'llah (r. 1036–1094) is often seen, in Ismaili-oriented writings, as both a high point and a turning point. Under him, the Fatimi Khilafah reached great prestige in learning, culture, and religious life. At the same time, by the middle of the 11th century, the state had already started to weaken in political terms. These writings stress that the early signs of decline were not due to any flaw in Ismaili Aqidah. Instead, they highlight concrete political, military, and economic problems that developed over time. First, Ismaili accounts point to growing military factionalism in Misr. Different army groups - Berber, Turkish, and Sudanese regiments - competed for influence and sometimes held real power over the palace. This struggle within the army made the state unstable and weakened the central authority of the Imam and Khalifah. Second, the Fatimi Empire suffered a severe economic crisis and famine in the 1060s, often called the "Years of Misery." These years badly damaged agriculture, trade, and tax revenues. As a result, the state had less money to pay its soldiers and officials, and it became harder to secure the loyalty of key groups. Third, the Fatimiyyn gradually lost several important provinces and routes. Territories in North Africa, parts of the eastern Mediterranean, and control over some Red Sea trade routes slipped away. This reduced the empire's geostrategic advantage and further limited its reach. Taken together, these factors - army rivalries, economic crisis, and loss of territory - are presented as the main reasons for the early decline. The argument is that these were historical and political pressures, not a religious failure of Ismaili Daw'ah of Islam.

Ismaili-oriented writings also place decline of Fatimi Empire within a wider Sunni revival in the 11th century, marked by the rise of the Abbasid-supported Seljuq Sultanate. As the Seljuqs expanded their power, they created a more hostile environment for a Shia Ismaili Khilafah. Seljuq rule in Sham (the Levant) and the Jazirah reduced Fatimi influence in these regions. Later, the First Crusade brought new Latin Christian powers into the same area where Fatimi–Seljuq rivalry already existed. This added another constraint on the ability of Al Muizziyah al-Qahirah to project power and pursue its policies. From this angle, decline of the Fatimi Empire appears as part of a larger shift in the balance of power in the central Muslim lands. It is not simply a story of religious or moral collapse, but of a changing regional order in which the Fatimi Empire found itself increasingly encircled.

Ismaili historians accept that internal succession disputes also weakened the Empire, but they understand these disputes as political and institutional crises, not as a collapse of the idea of the Imamate itself. When Al Imam al-Mustansir died in 1094, a serious dispute arose over who should succeed him. One group recognised Al Imam al-Musta'li as Khalifah and Imam in al-Qahirah, while another group followed Nizār in Iran and Sham. This led to the Nizārī-Musta'li schism. This split certainly damaged the unity of the Fatimi Dawah mission and the large Empire. However, from an Ismaili viewpoint, it also marked the start of new and lasting Ismaili communities and polities the Nizārī State, centered on Alamut in Iran, and developed its own strong network of fortresses, scholars, and Du'at. While in Yemen, the Sulayhi Queen Al Sayyidah al-Hurrah Arwa bint Ahmad supported the Musta'li line and helped make Yemen an important Markaz of Ismaili Musta'li Dawah.

After the Shahadah of Al Imam al-Āmir in 1130 by Nizārī Fida'een - a new crisis emerged. Some hostile to the Ismaili Aqidah, in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah accepted the rule of the usurper and regent al-Hāfiz, while others held that the true Imam was the infant Al Imam al-Ṭayyib, who had entered Satr. Those who followed Al Imam Abul Qasim al-Ṭayyib formed the Ṭayyibī branch, with its own organised Dawah. Over time, the center of the Ṭayyibī community moved from Yemen to Gujarat and the wider Indian Ocean world, where Ismaili communities developed strong religious and social institutions. From this perspective, the late Fatimi period is not only a story of decline. It is also the matrix from which the later Nizārī and Ṭayyibī Ismaili communities arise, and through which Ismaili Islam continues in new forms and regions.

Ismaili writings broadly accept the historical sequence by which Salāḥuddīn (Saladin), originally Vazir to the last ruler al-Āḍid, slowly transferred real authority to the Sunni Abbasi Khalifah. When al-Āḍid died in 1171, the Shi'i Ismaili signs in Al Qahirah, Misr were forcefully removed, and the Fatimi dynasty came to an end. However, Ismaili accounts differ from many Sunni narratives in how they interpret this change. They stress Salahuddin's need to unify and Sham under his control, and his search for Sunni religious legitimacy to face the Crusaders. Therefore, the fall of the Fatimi Empire is not treated as "Proof" that Ismaili Aqaid were false. Rather, it is seen as one more phase in a longer Shi'i and Ismaili history of concealment - Satr, persecution, and renewed emergence.

A major theme in Ismaili-oriented literature is that, even as the Fatimi Empire shrank and finally fell, the Ismaili Daw'ah outside Misr became more stable and deeply rooted. Nizārī strongholds across Iran and Sham built a durable network, combining defense, learning, and missionary work. Ismaili communities in Yemen and along the western Indian Ocean and Sindh (current Pakistan) developed strong structures led by a hierarchy of Du'āt. Ismaili Islam did not end with the fall of the Fatimi dynasty, instead, it shifted from a centralised empire to dispersed but enduring communities, which preserved and developed Ismaili thought, law, and religious practice. The relative stability of these communities outside former Fatimi territory helped ensure the continuation of the Ismaili Daw'ah after 1171.

Ismaili and sympathetic historians are often explicit that many medieval Sunni chroniclers wrote from polemical positions. In those works, Fatimid decline is frequently explained as the result of "Heresy" and doctrinal error

Alleged moral laxity or corruption at court

Popular resentment of Shia rule

Ismaili writers do not deny that there were cases of intrigue, personal weakness, or corruption at the Fatimi court, but they argue that such explanations, taken alone, are morally charged and analytically shallow. They prefer a more complex explanation that combines:

Structural pressures - economic crises, military problems, and demographic change

Regional power shifts - especially the rise of the Seljuqs and the impact of the Crusades

Internal institutional fractures - especially army politics and disputed successions

At the same time, they insist on recognising the intellectual and institutional achievements of the Fatimiyyin in law, Talim, urban development, especially in Al Muizziyyah al-Qahirah, and the promotion of scholarship right up to the end of the dynasty. From an Ismaili point of view, the "decline of the Fatimi Empire" means the gradual political weakening and final overthrow of an Ismaili Imam-Khalifah under intense internal and external pressures. It does not mean the collapse of Ismaili Daw'ah itself. On the contrary, Ismaili Aqaid, institutions, and communities survived and evolved through the Nizārī and Ṭayyibī branches and through new centers in Iran, Yemen, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean world, long after 1171.

The Abbasids: Intellectual Glory and Internal Decay

The Abbasids (750–1258 CE) stands as a warning in the history of Muslims. At its height, Baghdad was the unrivalled center of the world, the axis of trade, scholarship, and spirituality. Its libraries overflowed with translations of Greek, Persian, and Indian sciences, and its scholars pioneered advances in medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. Hugh Kennedy reminds us that for centuries Baghdad symbolised the pinnacle of human achievement. Yet beneath this glittering exterior, cracks spread through the body of the Ummah. Rivalry between sects and schools deepened; caliphs indulged in luxury and political intrigue; and paid clerics - Ulama al-Su legitimised authoritarian rulers in return for patronage. The Abbasid court often oscillated between excessive rationalism and rigid dogmatism, producing schisms that alienated large parts of the population. When the Mongols arrived at the gates of Baghdad in 1258, these divisions ensured that no united resistance could be mounted. The capital of the Muslim world

was sacked, its scholars slain, and its libraries burned, marking a turning point in Islamic civilisation.

The Mongol Catastrophe

Few events in Islamic history were as devastating as the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The conquest of Khwarezm, Bukhara, and Samarkand was accompanied by unimaginable bloodshed. Chroniclers record that rivers ran red with blood, and cities once renowned for their learning and piety were reduced to ashes. Yet the Mongols could not have inflicted such devastation without internal Muslim betrayal. As David Morgan observes, factions within Central Asia often collaborated with the invaders, hoping to preserve their own fragile power. The fall of Baghdad epitomised this pattern: while Hulagu Khan's forces besieged the city, rival Muslim factions failed to unite, and some even advised submission. The devastation was not merely material but spiritual: the world's greatest library of Arabic manuscripts, the Bayt al-Hikmah, was cast into the Tigris, its ink staining the waters. The Mongol invasions were a punishment of history, exposing how sectarianism, corruption, and arrogance had hollowed out the Ummah from within.

Andalus: The Tragedy of Muslim Spain

If Baghdad symbolises intellectual glory undone by arrogance, Andalus symbolises unity destroyed by envy. For centuries, Muslim Spain dazzled the world with its architecture, philosophy, and interfaith tolerance. Cordoba and Granada were centers of light in a darkened Europe, where Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted in relative harmony. Yet political disunity proved fatal. Muslim rulers of rival small kingdoms allied with Christian kings against their fellow Muslims, sacrificing unity for fleeting power. Richard Fletcher documents how the disunity of the Taifa period allowed Christian forces to advance steadily southward. By the late fifteenth century, Granada alone remained, until it too fell in 1492. The loss of Andalus was not simply a political collapse, but a civilisational tragedy. María Rosa Menocal emphasises that Andalus had embodied a spirit of tolerance and intellectual openness rarely seen in medieval Europe; its destruction was thus a loss for humanity as a whole. The betrayal of Andalus echoes across the ages: Muslims lost not because their enemies were stronger, but because they were too divided to resist together.

The Mughals: Splendour, Stagnation, and Decline

The Mughal Empire, founded in the sixteenth century, stands as one of the most magnificent dynasties in Islamic history. Under emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, India witnessed an unparalleled flourishing of architecture, literature, and statecraft. The Taj Mahal, the Red Fort, and the gardens of Delhi and Agra remain enduring monuments to the empire's splendour. John Richards observes that the Mughal state represented one of the most sophisticated pre-modern bureaucracies in the world, with far-reaching control over land revenue and administration. Yet the very grandeur of the Mughals masked a creeping decline. By the seventeenth century, extravagance at court, endless wars of succession, and the alienation of regional elites undermined imperial cohesion. Aurangzeb's attempts to enforce stricter religious orthodoxy divided his subjects further, alienating Hindus and non-Sunni communities, and fuelling rebellions. Abraham Eraly notes that while the Mughals remained

materially opulent, their intellectual and spiritual vitality had diminished. By the eighteenth century, the empire fractured into competing successor states, leaving the subcontinent vulnerable to European colonisation. The British, armed with superior naval power and a ruthless East India Company, exploited this disunity to establish domination. The Mughal story reveals the same pattern: wealth without humility, power without justice, and knowledge without unity invite humiliation.

The Ottomans: Longevity through Tolerance

In contrast to the rapid decline of the Mughals, the Ottoman Empire endured for over six centuries, from the late thirteenth to the early twentieth century. Its longevity was rooted not merely in military might, but in its capacity for tolerance and pragmatic governance. Halil İnalcık demonstrates how the Ottomans incorporated diverse populations-Muslims, Christians, and Jews-into a system that allowed autonomy under the millet framework. This pluralism ensured stability across vast territories, from the Balkans to Arabia. At its height under Sulayman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566), the Ottoman state symbolised justice, discipline, and learning. Caroline Finkel observes that the Ottomans balanced Islamic legitimacy with political flexibility, enabling them to integrate peoples of multiple languages, cultures, and faiths. Unlike many dynasties before them, the Ottomans recognised that preserving diversity was key to preserving empire.

Yet, even the Ottomans could not escape decline. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the empire was labelled “the sick man of Europe.” Internal corruption, military stagnation, and the growing power of European colonial empires eroded Ottoman strength. Carter Findley notes that the Ottomans attempted reforms, such as the Tanzimat, but by then, the balance of power had shifted irrevocably towards Europe. Still, compared with other Muslim dynasties, the Ottomans endured because they practised a measure of tolerance, justice, and humility, delaying collapse for centuries.

Understanding Decline in Muslim History: A Thematic Inquiry into the Role of the ‘Ulamā’ al-Sū’ and Intellectual Stagnation

Sectarianism has remained the sharpest wound in the body of the Ummah. Time and again, Muslims have turned their weapons against one another rather than their external enemies. When Baghdad fell in 1258, or when Andalus collapsed in 1492, it was not merely because Mongols or Christians were strong, it was because Muslims themselves were fatally divided. As Chase Robinson observes, sectarian rivalries have long distorted the political unity of Muslim societies. The Qur’an commands:

“And do not be divided, lest you lose courage and your strength depart” (8:46),

Yet this warning has been ignored repeatedly. The result has been humiliation, occupation, and loss.

No less destructive than sectarianism has been the role of the Ulama al-Su, scholars who sold their integrity for wealth, patronage, and influence. From the Abbasid court to Mughal palaces, such figures often endorsed tyrants and inflamed sectarian hatred. Wael Hallaq argues that in the post-classical period, legal scholars became increasingly entangled in state structures,

reducing their capacity for independent moral leadership. Instead of serving as guardians of justice, many legitimised authoritarianism and perpetuated divisions.

Another recurrent theme in Muslim decline has been intellectual stagnation. While earlier centuries saw dazzling scientific and philosophical contributions, later centuries witnessed rigidity, polemics, and scholasticism divorced from reality. George Makdisi has shown how the great institutions of learning, such as the madrasa, originally nurtured intellectual dynamism, but eventually ossified into centers of rote memorisation. By the Ottoman and Mughal periods, knowledge often served to reinforce authority rather than to question or renew it. When knowledge loses its vitality, it becomes an ornament of decline rather than an engine of renewal.

Wealth, Luxury, and Moral Corruption: Contemporary Parallels in the Muslim World Today

Finally, materialism and luxury repeatedly hollowed out the Ummah's strength. Dynasties rose to power on the basis of discipline, frugality, and justice, but declined into decadence, indulgence, and oppression. Ibn Khaldun, in his theory of 'Asabiyyah, argued that dynasties inevitably weaken when luxury corrodes their moral fiber. Modern historians echo this, noting how the splendour of Mughal and Abbasid courts masked deepening social inequalities and political fragility. When rulers abandoned justice for excess, Allah's promise was fulfilled: "And when We intend to destroy a town, We command its affluent but they defiantly disobey therein; so the word comes into effect upon it, and We destroy it with [complete] destruction" (Qur'an 17:16).

The tragedies of history echo in the present. The same patterns of disunity, sectarianism, betrayal, and intellectual stagnation that brought down Baghdad, Andalus, and Delhi are visible across the Muslim world today. Despite possessing the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Rasulullah (S), Muslims remain fragmented, quarrelling over trivial issues while their lands are occupied, their resources exploited, and their dignity eroded.

Sectarian Conflict and Political Fragmentation in Light of Colonial Legacies and Ongoing Domination

Modern Muslim states are fractured along sectarian and ideological lines. Sunni against Shia, Salafi against Sufi, Islamist against secularist, each group claims monopoly over truth, while the Ummah bleeds. Vali Nasr has shown how sectarian conflict, particularly between Sunnis and Shiah, has become one of the most destructive forces in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. Meanwhile, authoritarian rulers use sectarianism to consolidate their power, repeating the sins of earlier dynasties.

The fall of the Mughal and Ottoman empires opened the way for European colonial domination, which reshaped Muslim societies politically, economically, and intellectually. The artificial borders carved by colonial powers continue to fuel conflict, as seen in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Mahmood Mamdani reminds us that colonialism did not merely exploit resources but restructured identities, creating “tribes” and “sects” in ways that continue to fracture Muslim societies. The postcolonial state in much of the Muslim world has too often reproduced the authoritarianism of both colonial administrators and corrupt sultans.

Intellectual Decline under Western Dependency

Muslims today suffer from an intellectual crisis akin to that of the later Abbasid and Mughal periods. The once-dynamic tradition of ijtiḥād has often been replaced by rigid Taqlid or politicised polemics. Wael Hallaq argues that the adoption of the Western nation-state has created profound contradictions within Islamic societies, since the very structures of modern governance are often at odds with Islamic moral frameworks. Rather than leading the world in thought, science, and ethics, Muslim societies frequently depend on Western paradigms and technologies, while struggling to assert an authentic intellectual independence.

Despite vast natural resources, oil, gas, minerals, many Muslim-majority nations remain economically dependent, their wealth siphoned by global powers and their own elites. The warning of Qurʾān is clear: luxury and arrogance precede downfall. When palaces rise while the poor starve, when rulers indulge in extravagance while refugees drown in the seas, when clerics argue over the length of beards while entire nations collapse, then history’s verdict is near. The Muslim world today stands where the Abbasids once stood before the Mongols, or Andalus before Ferdinand and Isabella: fractured, distracted, and vulnerable. Unless the Ummah returns to the rope of Allah, unites upon justice and humility, and reclaims the Qurʾān and Sunnah as its living constitution, it will remain subject to humiliation. Rasūlullāh (S) warned:

“You will be numerous, but you will be like the foam of the sea.”

This is our reality, abundant in numbers, but powerless in the world.

Talim to the Ummah and Tajdid

History is not a dead museum but a mirror, and the Ummah must look into it with honesty. From the Abbasids to the Mughals, from Andalus to the Ottomans, the pattern repeats: unity brings strength, but division invites destruction; humility nourishes civilisation, but arrogance brings ruin; justice builds empires, but tyranny topples them. The Mongols, the Reconquista, the British Empire, none of these powers could have triumphed if Muslims had remained united, disciplined, and faithful to the Qurʾān and Sunnah. Our defeats were not decreed by fate alone; they were earned by our own betrayals, by scholars who served tyrants, by rulers who oppressed the weak, and by communities that abandoned the Nabawi path of justice, mercy, and humility. Today, the Muslim world stands at another crossroads. It is fractured by sectarianism, burdened by colonial legacies, weakened by intellectual stagnation, and corrupted by materialism. Yet decline is not destiny. If the Ummah can recover the spirit of the early believers—who combined knowledge with humility, faith with justice, unity with courage—then renewal remains possible. The Qurʾān promises:

“Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” (13:11).

The question is not whether Islam can rise again, but whether Muslims will summon the courage to change themselves.

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