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The Amman Message and intra-Muslim peace — Syed Farid Alatas

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FEBRUARY 1 — Hostility between Sunnis and Shiites has become a dominant feature of intra-Muslim relations today. Indeed, the first decades of the 21st century will be known as a period of protracted conflict between these two major denominations of Islam.

Twelver Shiites, who form up to 29 per cent of the global Muslim population, are in the majority in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran and Iraq. They also constitute important minorities in countries such as Lebanon, Kuwait, Turkey, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia.

The history of Islam is characterised by numerous instances of violence and hostility between Sunnis and Shiites. The confrontations were often initiated by Sunni rulers and, sometimes, by the religious elite who were co-opted by the state.

For example, Alevi Shiites suffered from persecution in the form of expulsion, imprisonment, force labour and execution under Ottoman rule. In 1802 a Saudi-Wahhabi (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wahhabi>) alliance attacked, sacked and looted the Shiite shrine at Karbala (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karbala>), Iraq. It was reported that about 2,000 people were killed during the raid, including the elderly, women and children.

For the last two decades, Malaysian Shiites had come under increasing scrutiny by the religious authorities and live under constant fear as a result of some members of the community being persecuted by the authorities.

The situation is worse in other countries where Shiites had been subjected to physical violence, such as in Bahrain, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Egypt. On the other hand, Sunnis in Iraq had been the targets of Shiite militias. In the so-called Islamic State, both Sunnis and Shiites have been victims of violence where barbaric acts of violence were also perpetrated against Christians and other religious minorities.



Despite such a shameful history, it would be wrong to suggest that Sunnis and Shiites have been in a perpetual state of conflict throughout the ages. While there had been relations of conflict between the two groups, for most of Islamic history Sunnis and Shiites lived under conditions of mutual tolerance and harmony rather than animosity and hostility.

This is not to say that there are no theological and ideological differences between Sunnis and Shiites. However, it would be wrong to suggest that the sectarian conflicts that we witness now across the Muslim world spring from these doctrinal differences.

In fact, the conflicts have less to do with religion and more to do with the manipulation of sentiments by various groups for the sake of political interests.

The Amman Message, therefore, was a brilliant initiative that, if taken seriously by those who endorsed it, can play a crucial role in mobilising Muslims leaders and communities against the growing bigotry in certain Muslim circles today.

The Amman Message calls for tolerance and unity among the Muslims of the world. First issued on November 9, 2004 (27th of Ramadan (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramadan_%28calendar_month%29) 1425 AH (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_calendar#Numbering_the_years)) by King Abdullah Al-Hussein (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdullah_II_of_Jordan) of Jordan (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan), the Amman Message deals with three fundamental issues.

These had come to be known as the “Three Points of the Amman Message.” In its early stages the Amman Message took the form of a statement by King Abdullah that declared what Islam is and is not, and what actions represent Islam and did not.

To give the statement religious authority, King Abdullah asked three questions from 24 senior ulama from around the world, who represented the main schools and branches of Islam. The questions were: (1) Who is a Muslim? (2) Is it permissible to declare someone an apostate (*takfir*)? (3) Who has the right to undertake issuing fatwas (legal rulings)?

These authorities included the Shaykh Al-Azhar, Shaykh Qaradawi and the prominent Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Sistani. The fatwas provided by the scholars formed the basis for an international conference of 200 leading scholars of the Muslim world, convened in July 2005 by King Abdullah in Amman. There the scholars unanimously issued a ruling on the three fundamental issues, known as the “Three Points of the Amman Message.”

The first fundamental issue concerns the validity of all eight *madhhabs* or legal schools of Sunni, Shiite and Ibadhi Islam; of the Ash’arite school of theology; of Sufism, and of true Salafi thought. In this way, a precise definition of who a Muslim is was arrived at.

The second fundamental issue concerns the prohibition of *takfir* or the declaration of apostasy between Muslims.

The third fundamental issue concerns the preconditions for the issuing of fatwas. The objective here was to expose ignorant and illegitimate opinions and rulings in the name of Islam.

The Three Points were subsequently presented to the political leadership of the Muslim world and unanimously adopted by them at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit in Mecca in December 2005.

Also, over a period of a year from July 2005 to July 2006, the Three Points were unanimously adopted by another six international Muslim scholarly assemblies. This culminated in the International Islamic Fiqh Academy of Jeddah in July 2006. In total, more than 500 leading Muslim scholars from 84 countries endorsed the Amman Message. It states:

Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four *Sunni* schools (*Mathahib*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi’i* and *Hanbali*), the two *Shi’i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Ja’fari* and *Zaydi*), the *Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Thahiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible. Verily his (or her) blood, honour, and property are inviolable. Moreover, in accordance with the Shaykh Al-Azhar’s *fatwa*, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to the *Ash’ari* creed or whoever practices real *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) an apostate. Likewise, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare whosoever subscribes to true *Salafi* thought an apostate.

Equally, it is neither possible nor permissible to declare as apostates any other group of Muslims who believes in God, Glorified and Exalted be He, and His Messenger (may peace and blessings be upon him), the pillars of faith (*Iman*), and the five pillars of Islam, and does not deny any necessarily self-evident tenet of religion.

In his foreword to the Amman Message, King Abdullah of Jordan had stressed that the consensus that created it “does not represent the opinion of one man, one ethnic group, one country, or even a group of countries. It does not represent one school of Islamic Jurisprudence or one school of thought in Islam. It represents a unanimous agreement by *all Muslims everywhere* as represented by their acknowledged most senior religious authorities and political leaders.”

The question then arises as to why sectarianism among Muslims, particularly that concerning Sunni-Shiite relations, had deteriorated during the last few years.

Indeed, the Amman Message had not been taken seriously by many of the countries that endorsed it. Among the signatories were the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz Al Saud, the late Saudi King.

The geopolitical context of today calls for a great deal of political will to put into practice the values that inform the Amman Message. A shining example to follow is that of the Sultanate of Oman. Oman is a country which implemented the ideals contained in the Amman Message long before it was drafted.

Although the Ibadhis of Oman, neither Sunnis nor Shi'ites, make up about 75 per cent of the population, Oman is probably the one country that allows for the greatest harmony between Sunnis and Shiites that make up the rest of the population.

The Omani basic law prohibits discrimination based on religion and protects the rights of different religious communities to practice their religions on the condition that there is no disruption of the public order.

Many Muslim countries miserably failed to live up to the ideals expressed in the Amman Message. Indeed, some blatantly violated its spirit by encouraging the demonisation of Shiism and the persecution of Shiites. In the case of Iraq, violence against Sunnis was encouraged.

The Amman Message is an expression of the spirit of religious pluralism that defines the understanding and practice of Islam that is now in danger of erosion due to the narrow-mindedness of the religious establishment and the willingness of politicians to sacrifice religion for material interests.

Governments need to be more responsible and strive to lessen bigotry and avoid sectarian politics. Failing to do so only puts the Muslim societies and the rest of the world in danger.

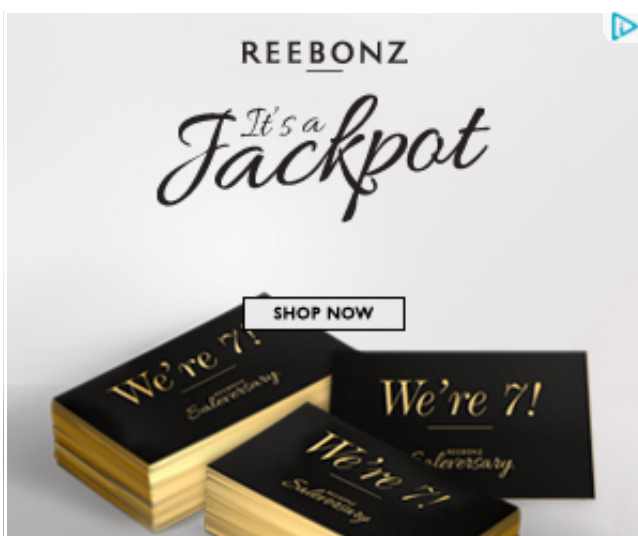
The Amman Message, issued more than 10 years ago, is an historic statement expressing and reflecting the desire of Muslims around the world to be united and to live lives free of sectarian conflict and strife.

It is a formal statement by Muslims of a pluralistic mutual recognition and respect. The question is whether Muslim leaders have the morality and courage to live up to the promise they made when they endorsed it more than a decade ago.

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