

Reflecting on the Lessons of Hajj

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Rached Ghannouchi studied at the universities of Zaytouna (Tunis), Cairo, Damascus and Paris. An activist for Islamic democracy, he was in exile in the United Kingdom for 21 years before returning following the Tunisian Revolution in 2011. He is the co-founder and ‘intellectual leader’ of the Ennahdha Party, which grew to become a powerful social and political party in Tunisia calling for democracy,

social justice and pluralism. He was co-awarded the Chatham House Prize in 2012, the Ibn Rush Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2014, the International Crisis Group Peace Makers Prize in 2015 and the Jannalal Bajaj Award in 2016 for promoting Gandhian values internationally. He was also named as one of Time’s 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2012.

The Islamic calendar year is filled with important, spiritually significant days that invite reflection for every believer. As we approach the most important date of the year, the great Hajj pilgrimage, these reflective moments are at their most profound. On the individual level, contemplating the various spiritual aspects of the Hajj is intended to refocus faith, re-establish one’s connection with Allah, ﷻ and re-commit to the pursuit of peace and justice on earth. On the societal level, the pilgrimage as a united and uniting communitarian force is striking, prompting reflection on the myriad ways in which to build and sustain social cohesion and harmony. From the organising staff to the pilgrims themselves, witnessing the seamless movement of millions between various stations and across many kilometres is a truly amazing feat and is full of important lessons for our modern age.

In my view, the Hajj is a profoundly diverse and pluralistic space, one where humankind goes back to its primordial state and sheds its differences, where everyone participates in one action, recites in one language, dons a single uniform, with hearts and minds acting in total synchronicity. Hajj epitomises Islam’s marriage between faith and action. It is faith that pulls them together but without real-world plans and practical mechanisms, these lofty ideals could not be realised. The Qur’an many times insists that faith requires action, from prayer and charitable giving to standing firmly on the side of justice and goodness, and teaches us that we must constantly strive for excellence. These are the same values all pluralistic systems seek to achieve.

Hajj is also a unique shared space that generates new interactions, ideas, friendships and commitments. Individuals in everyday life must share public space and are responsible for managing their interactions so as to enable peaceful co-existence. This challenge is heightened in Hajj, given the huge numbers of people coming from every corner of the world, speaking different languages and carrying different cultures and customs. Yet, despite all these differences, they all rub alongside each other with minimal problems, all seeking the same thing – to be closer to God. This unique space also gives Muslim scholars the opportunity to convene annually and discuss the big issues facing the Ummah. This also renews friendships across national and cultural boundaries, and generates a sense of unity in diversity.

Spirituality is a great equaliser. On Hajj, all are equal before God, regardless of their nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, or social status. The practice of wearing the same simple clothing in Hajj serves to remind us that we are all equal, and that we all came from and will return to God, teaching us humility and respect for others.

Makkah throughout its history is a microcosm for how the entire Ummah ought to look. As Muslims, many of our greatest role models after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ are his companions who lived in Makkah and contributed in a variety of ways to the beauty and prosperity of mankind’s greatest community. We learn goodness and truthfulness from Abu Bakr Al Siddiq, steadfastness in the pursuit of justice from Omar ibn ul-Khattab, discipline and grace from Ali ibn Abi Talib, and compassion and loyalty from Aisha, the Mother of the Believers. After the passing of the beloved Prophet, each of these individuals played a pivotal role in shaping the spirit and direction of the Ummah for the future and are each unique manifestations of the rich essence of Islam.

Just like the early generations of Muslims, our Ummah must uphold justice and provide services for its people, protect its minorities, and choose peace and reconciliation over conflict and war whenever possible. In Tunisia, we are in the middle of a social transformation and transition to democracy. Our society has always been a crossroads of cultural and religious exchange, a unique and beautiful characteristic of which we are very proud, and the example of the first generations of Muslims in Makkah is one that is ever-present in the minds of many Tunisians. Now six years after the revolution, our leaders and citizens have demonstrated time and time again that Islam and democracy are both compatible and possible. It is in this spirit that I remain hopeful for the future of my country and of the Ummah more globally. **E**