

Rabita 50th anniversary Conference

The next 50 years: Strategic Planning & Islamic Futures

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Rabita: The future and a paradigm shift

Many Muslims of my generation hoped that their dreams of a unified Umma and common prosperity for Muslims were at hand when Rabita (the Muslim World League) was first created. As I grew up, the persistent fragmentation of the Muslim world led me to feel a lot of despair and at times hopelessness. Now, after fifty years, while I am no longer the young man with those unrealistic youthful dreams, I have hopefully some wisdom and a chance to present, from experience, my ideas to rejuvenate this very important organization in order to enable it to understand the hopes and aspiration of Muslims around the world and to empower Muslims to realize some of their dreams. This can only be done if Rabita is able to reinvent itself and become a lean and dynamic powerhouse.

In order for this new Rabita to exist I am proposing a paradigm shift in its thinking and the way it functions. Traditionally, Rabita paid various employees to perform jobs. I am basing most of what is proposed here on voluntarism. It is high time for Muslims to sweat for what they want rather than wait for someone to give it to them. The Rabita that I am envisioning should be able, through its offices around the world, to recruit volunteers motivated by their true care for the Umma's future; volunteers for think tanks and study groups, that will organize to produce studies and to respond to present and future challenges. The Umma is about one billion and a half. We should be able to identify a couple of thousand volunteers that care enough and have the needed experience to do the work. This will help bring into Rabita the enthusiasm of volunteers and help rejuvenate its corporate culture. Volunteerism is a corner stone of our Salaf's understanding of Islam but it is largely missing from our every day's practice despite the teachings of our beloved Prophet: "Whomever help his brother with a hardship of this world, Allah will eliminate one of his hardships on the Last Day and

Allah will continue to help His servant as long as he is helping his brother¹”.

A clear Vision for an unpredictable future

But this will have mainly to do with what Rabita identifying who it is and it wants to be, meaning that Rabita need to decide on a clear vision. In fact, there is no single more important factor to the success of this important organization than a clear, crisp, shared vision. Now let me tell you why.

From my life experience I have seen a lot of projects; big projects involving hundreds of people over many years and with tens of thousands of variables, small projects involving few people, and many in between. While it is self-evident that having a clear, shared vision isn't a magic bullet that solves all problems, it is equally clear that every project without a vision struggles and often fails. A vision for Rabita must be clear and compelling. It should represent the ultimate purpose that will always be ahead of Rabita, helping to remind it of its *raison d'être* in order to move forward with firm steps.

Formulating a vision however, will only be the first step toward developing a strategic plan. Rabita must and can develop a strategic plan that will include specific and measurable goals, a comprehensive plan that will recognize where the organization is today, and cover all the areas where action is needed in order to move towards that vision. The bottom line is that visioning is not a discrete event, or a one time in a lifetime event but rather an ongoing process.

Scenarios' planning

Scenario planning is a method for learning about the future by *understanding the nature and impact of the most uncertain and*

حدثنا أبو الحسن أحمد بن محمد بن الصلت، ببغداد، قال: حدثنا إبراهيم بن عبد الصمد الهاشمي، قال: حدثنا الحسين بن الحسن المروري، قال: ¹ حدثنا محمد بن عبيد الطنافسي، قال: حدثنا جويبر، عن محمد بن واسع، عن أبي صالح، عن أبي هريرة

important driving forces affecting our world. It is a group process which encourages knowledge exchange and development of mutual deeper understanding of central issues important to the future of Rabita.

Among the many tools a manager can use for strategic planning, scenario planning stands out for its ability to capture a whole range of possibilities in rich detail. By identifying basic trends, uncertainties and key driving forces Rabita executives can cross-impact competencies against scenarios and will develop alternatives that will help to compensate for the usual errors in decision making - and prepare the change agenda.

Scenario analysis is a tool used by intelligent organizations to deal with strategic uncertainties, when the environment is undergoing rapid and unexpected change, and when the future does not appear to be predictable through simple extrapolation of historical trends applied to the current environment. Most importantly, scenario analysis does not attempt to predict the future, or to identify one single future, but to increase the possibility space for the organisation. Strategic planning seeks to identify several futures that are worthy of further study, futures with high impact, and futures that are characterized by new threats and high risk or by high reward. Hence, we test out different strategies and plan different responses, so that if and when the scenario actually folds we know what to do and how to do it most effectively.

The reason we adopted this methodology of future planning is simply because we were ordered by Allah to be prepared as He said in Surat Al Tawba: 46 “If they had really wanted to go out [to battle] with you, they would have made preparations”

From scenarios to alternative futures

Scenario of the future can offer “stretch zones” for the imagination. Such scenarios provide several alternative model future worlds for

consideration and exploration by teams seeking breakthrough innovation. Investigating the constraints and possibilities of these future worlds increases the range of “what we have experienced” and “what is relevant to our future”.

Because scenarios offer a glimpse of what “different” futures are like, the new Rabitas's innovating executives can more readily and imaginatively experience planing under the particular constraints and opportunities of a number of possible future conditions.

The critical questions that Rabita’s strategic thinkers should think about are:

- What are the alternative, plausible scenarios for the future of Rabita?
- What are the most robust strategies, based on these scenarios that can maximize Rabita’s ability to become an effective and empowered organization to fulfill dreams and aspirations of Muslims around the world?
- The alternative plausible pictures of the future for Rabita to 2020, 2030, 2040, 2040 and 2050.

The answers are of course provided through the strategic plan that we were asked to prepare for Rabita if its leadership accept to follow all the steps needed for the discovery stage preceding the plan preparation².

Five alternative futures

In an essay that was prepared for publication at “Future Brief³”, Sohail Inayatullah⁴ explored “Five alternative futures for Muslims⁵” .

² See Appendix A

³ <http://www.futurebrief.com/>

⁴ Professor, Tamkang University, Taiwan; University of the Sunshine Coast

“In the first, the Islamic world attempts to return to its historical memory of grandeur. As this return is not a contextual return but a reiteration of the conditions of the 7th century, a medieval feudal Islam gains supremacy. For most Muslims, this is decline.

In the second possible future, divisions within the Islamic world heighten. War with the West, among Islamic nations, and among sects in Islam is primary. This is a slow, but potentially dramatic decline.

In the third, Islam follows a linear trajectory, becoming part of the modern secular world.

In the fourth, Islam and the West undergo pendulum shifts, where one declines and the other rises.

The final future is a “virtuous spiral” that imagines not only an alternative modernity for the Islamic world, but an alternative global future. Pluralism within Islam and within the world system is fundamental. As a result, Islam becomes part of a planetary ethic of ecology, gender partnership and global governance – the solution to the global crisis of meaning, sovereignty, and politics”.

But why do we need to think about alternative Islamic futures? Basically because this is a discussion that is long overdue as most intellectual Muslims are not happy with where we are. We can either continue to drift or we can call on concerned scholars that are entrusted with the welfare of the Umma to get engaged in the discussion of these alternative futures. They have a responsibility toward future generations and above all toward Allah. However approaching the future is only a first step. This is above all a discussion of Planning and strategy. A clear vision and a practicable mission are a must if the Rabita intends to succeed in responding to the Umma’s future aspirations. Without

⁵ <http://www.futurebrief.com/sohail.pdf>

strategic planning Rabita will never be able to reach its goals and objectives. As such this is not a paper about presenting various possible futures. Rather, it is a road map for Rabita to follow if it wants to be responsive to the Islamic Umma's aspirations for a better and a secure future.

Planning is at the heart of this process. Planning for the future of our children and our grandchildren is basically choosing the kind of future that is best for them. Unfortunately, planning is not known to be one of my generation's fortes.

For this process to be successful, another attribute is needed; the ability to think out of the box, to be innovative and to be able to think freely without any inhibitions. What will be needed is "creative imagination".

The Rabita does not operate in a vacuum. It operates within a very hostile world at this time. This world is led by forces that are not in favor of Muslim unity or even progress. They are opposed to even our attempts to be moderate as they prefer to demonize Muslims as a first step toward attacking Islam itself. But is religion at the root of the conflict with the West, or is it maybe our wealth and their desire to have access to our economic resources? Is it the Israeli lobby or the evangelists that are motivating the American people to perceive us as enemies? Or is it something very different? The problem is further complicated by our lack of a convincing unified response. We all, like parrots, kept condemning violence and singing the praises of Islam as a religion of peace. Most of us said it without believing it as we still divide the world between Dar al Islam and Dar Al Harb. The West knows this and this is why they don't believe us. We have not settled yet on what future we want and how we want to get there.

We are still looking for our “Roads to Modernity⁶”. While some of us see that progress is in holding steadfast to our Salaf heritage, others put emphasis on the power of reason to discover new solutions to contemporary problems. Still others emphasize the limits to reason and propose to reform from within, without losing site of the endless possibilities that reason can offer.

Are we supposed to live with others while looking for the most suitable path to modernity? Or are we suppose to remain aloof and suspicious? Do we blow up the past in order to build a better future or do we continue to reform from within?

“This debate has been ongoing among Muslims for 1300 years. It differs from the debates in the West because the Islamic debate centered on the search for truth, whereas the Western debate centered on the search for power. Superficially the West has won, but transcendent truth never disappears whereas secular or immanent power never lasts”⁷.

In this paper we will examine probable future scenarios for the Muslim Umma in order to understand the possible environment Rabita will have to operate within. We will then propose a powerful “Real-Time Strategic Planning system,” a fluid, organic process that engages staff and board in a program of systematic readiness and continuous responsiveness. With it, Rabita will be able to identify, understand, and act on challenges and opportunities as they arise. Rabita, we propose, must become an interpretive organization focused on alternative futures of the Umma. A fast changing world requires a creative strategic approach such as this.

If we’ve learned one thing about today’s world it is that it changes continuously and rapidly. It’s naive to believe that strategies should not change accordingly and not every strategic planning will do. Traditional strategic planning has locked leaders into a process that’s divorced from

⁶ Gertrude Himmelfarb, 2004 book

⁷ Dr. Robert Crane in an email to me titled: Conservative traditionalism versus liberal radicalism.

today's reality. That's why plans sit on the shelf of many Muslim leaders and why smart ones are always seeking alternatives.

The strategies that work best will be determined by a complex interaction of forces that are not immediately apparent. The tool that should be used by Rabita for understanding both these forces and their interaction is strategy workshops attended by Rabita executives and a panel of experts (planners, policy analysts and futurists), and strategists, which we believe will be valuable in exploring scenario analysis and planning our responses as events continue to unfold.

At this time of human development this sort of preparation أعداد is more relevant to what Allah asked us to do in order to be ready with the kind of resources that are needed. Blind force is no longer sufficient as an answer and it is no longer available to us. Smart force is more effective. We need to always remember that one nation's problems are another nation's opportunities. This is a passionate call for us to become proactive, because we care about the future of our grand children let us start the planning process today.

Today's Environment

During the last 10 years, hundreds of conferences and workshops on Islam were held in the United States and Europe by a variety of think tanks.

Average Americans actually read a lot during the post 9/11 years about Islam from books available in their neighborhood bookstores. Some of these books offered valuable and factual information while others were biased and anti Islamic.

At this time, we notice that many Americans call themselves scholars on Islam and Muslims. Some are true scholars while others like to ride the

wave in order to show up on TV and offer their comments. As a result, conferences were held and research papers were commissioned and hundreds were written on the subject analyzing and dissecting our past, present and projecting futures for various Muslim countries and their Muslim population.

This scholarly examination of Islam led several honest and courageous Western scholars to express positive opinions about Islam and the future of Muslims. This can be found in the writings of David Forte⁸, John Esposito⁹ and others. These activities, regardless of their objectivity represent how Muslims are perceived by the other on a particular scholarly level. Usually scholars are mostly aware of other scholars' opinion. I am assuming here that unless one lives in the United States, one's knowledge about American perception of Islam and Muslims is based on published scholarly papers. This unfortunately does not tell the whole story.

What really helps shape the American public's opinion is what is preached in the local churches and the thousands of articles that are written every month in news papers and on the internet. Daniel Pipes of the New York Post wrote in one of his articles¹⁰ "Rather than rail on about Islam's alleged 'evil,' " he wrote, we all need to pitch in and "help modernize this civilization." By about a 5-to-1 margin, his readers disagree. Three main points emerge from their letters:

⁸ *David Forte is professor of law at the Cleveland-Marshall College of Law at Cleveland State University and author of Studies in Islamic Law (Austin and Winfield).*

⁹ **John Louis Esposito** (born 19 May 1940, Brooklyn, New York City) is a professor of International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University. He is also the director of Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal center for Muslim-Christian understanding at Georgetown University. He earned a PhD at Temple University, Pennsylvania in 1974, studying Islam and held post doc appointments at Harvard and Oxford. He is well-known as a promoter of strong ties between Muslims and Christians and has even challenged the Vatican to make greater efforts to encourage such ties.

¹⁰ Islam's Future by Daniel Pipes *New York Post*, August 13, 2002

“Islam has always been on the warpath. "The violent conquest against the infidel was present at [Islam's] inception," writes one respondent. It "is based on war, conquest and forced conversion," asserts another. "The war, declared by Muhammad in [the year] 600 . . . , continues to this day," notes a third.

Militant Islam is Islam. The readers insist that the evils I attribute to a modern, radical utopian ideology inheres to the faith at large. What I call militant Islam, they say, "should properly be called, 'real Islam. "One writer asks, "what exactly is it that the Wahhabis and other Islamic extremists are doing that is not in accord with Muhammad's doctrine?" He then replies: "The answer is they are behaving very true to Muhammad's doctrine!"

Mild Koranic verses were abrogated. They argue that the Koran contains contradictory passages that Muslim scholars handled by deciding that chronologically latter verses superseded earlier ones. Specifically, the conciliatory verses I quoted ("There must be no coercion in matters of faith!" and "O people! We have formed you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another,") were voided by one of the aggressive ones I cited ("Then fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them. And seize them, beleaguer them and lie in wait for them").

Do these Daniel Pipes readers' opinion represent a prevalent opinion amongst the millions that went to their neighborhood bookstores in the U.S. and bought copies of the Qur'an translation? Yes it does. We see those Americans in churches and we meet them in our neighborhoods. They are influenced by their superficial knowledge of Islam and Muslims and the not so accurate translations of the Qur'an they bought. The opinion leaders in the U.S. go on TV and feed into the fear that common Americans have. In the mean time, few misguided Muslims make our worst nightmare come true. One, attempted to light explosives hidden in his underpants on an airplane and another tried to explode an SUV on Broadway in New York. We, including Rabita, should not be

simply watching or mildly disapproving. However, Rabita cannot influence the public opinion in the United States. It cannot even influence the opinion of few Muslims there, because it does not have a presence there at this time.

At one time the Rabita decided to move boldly and get in touch with every Muslim community around the globe and it succeeded. It even succeeded in the United States to have representation at the United Nation. It saw itself as a strong international organization. It employed indigenous people to manage its offices in the important world centers. It held conferences to make sure that everyone is informed and that leaders of local communities' voices are heard and it was not bashful about what it stood for. The results at that time were phenomenal. It is how you perceive yourself that will make a difference.

It is high time that the Rabita regain its self confidence and return to the United States. Its office in New York is still there and its seat at the United Nations is waiting for the right representative to fill it.

The world is watching us and the West is watching our every move. They listen to our TV stations and they read our newspapers. Gone is the time when we say what we want, away from the eyes and ears of the world.

Our paralyzes and lack of resourcefulness and our enemies' creative thinking and vast outreach have only consolidated the single-poled new world order which leads the fight against international terrorism, while putting the Islamic world in the spotlight and under scrutiny. American troops are still in Iraq and Afghanistan trying as they say to help Muslims gain liberty.

Our goal is to chart out a path from the present impasse, to develop insights into managing and anticipating change, and map out desirable alternative futures for the Muslim people.

It behooves us at this very important juncture of our history to look at our own state of affairs and the world around us and to start wondering with honesty and courage about what can “The Muslim World League” do for the next fifty years for Islam and Muslims. It should develop plans to offer Muslims everywhere alternatives for sustainable development, to educate Muslim community leaders to be at the forefront of a planetary ethic of ecology, gender partnership, “peace, prosperity, and freedom only through faith-based, compassionate justice”¹¹. So the question becomes where do we go from here?

First we need to make a real effort to understand the other. Not in a superficial way or in a lip service’s way, but in a serious effort based on surveys and research to truly understand. Most of us don’t understand what happened to the West as a result of Sept. 11 and we tend to minimize its effects by citing daily disasters that engulf the Muslims world with much larger magnitudes. This is basically because we don’t understand the West. We need to put ourselves in their shoes and only then we can ask them to understand us. Their perception of Sept. 11, 2001, not as "the day everything changed," but the day that revealed to the west how much the world had already changed and they were horrified. They have been studying these changes and planning to encounter their effects ever since. Regardless, what we need to understand is their reaction to what they perceived happened on that day. To them, “on that Tuesday morning the top of the iceberg bobbed up and toppled the Twin Towers. What follows is what we need to understand.

The West emphasis was immediately directed toward “the larger forces at play in the developed world that have left Europe too enfeebled to resist its transformation into Eurabia and that call into question the future of much of the rest of the world. The key factors are: demographic decline; the unsustainability of the social democratic state;

¹¹ See Dr. Robert Crane.

and civilizational exhaustion”¹². They perceive what happen as an existential threat and they are planning accordingly. We still don’t understand this and they don’t understand why we don’t understand. They perceive our lack of sensitivity to their concerns as insistence on harming them and we perceive their emphasis on changing certain cultural and/or Islamic practices as enmity toward our religion. Hence the importance of understanding them and equally important is to explain ourselves to them. But while we are doing this through conferences and people to people strategies, we need to chart a clear future path for ourselves, using strategic planning as a tool.

From a macro perspective, the Rabita transacts its business today in a global marketplace. Change is occurring at an unprecedented pace. Time and distance continue to become less and less relevant thanks in great part to the explosive growth of technology and the Internet. “What is required is for the Islamic world to develop its own long range simulation model using Islamic concepts. Such a project would help qualitatively envision and quantitatively forecast the future ahead”¹³. Hence, based on the understanding of the alternative futures we will formulate our plans based on that forecasted future.

If this generation wants to work toward a moderate future (wasati), it should plan for it. If we want to blame the west for our present problems, we cannot blame it for our future. For if we don’t plan, we will be living according to the plans devised for us, by others.

Strategic planners start by doing a situation analysis. This requires investigating issues like the following:

¹² **The future belongs to Islam** MARK STEYN | Oct 20, 2006, Regnery Publishing from America Alone © 2006 by Mark Steyn

¹³ Dr.Sohail Inayatullah. From a paper presented to the Islamic Development Conference Meeting on the Islamic Ummah 2025 held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, March 26-28, 1996.

- The Rabita is an organization that represents Muslim people and not states; as such we need to look in depth into how Muslims see their role versus others. What issues are of importance to them in each of their countries? Then we need to look at the mandate the Rabita has. Does its mandate allow it to effectively represent Muslims' hopes and aspirations in today's world versus the vision Muslims have of themselves and their role?
- If the Rabita has such a mandate (mission), how does it intend to accomplish this mission? Did it define clear goals and objectives for itself?
- Does the Rabita have the tools that will enable it to implement such role in the Muslim world?

There was a time when strategic planning was done by the biggest organizations, and those who lead change. Now it is a requirement just to survive. Leaders must look ahead, anticipating change, and developing a strategy to proactively and successfully navigate through the turbulence created by change.

At a micro view, the level of any individual organization, strategic planning provides a purpose and direction. How are you going to get somewhere if you don't know where you are going?

The "strategic" part of this planning process is the continual attention to current changes in the organization and its environment, and how this affects the future of the organization.

Without strategic planning, an organization will simply drift, and it will always be reacting to the pressure of the day.. Organizations that don't plan have exponentially higher rates of failure even if they continue to exist, than those that plan and implement well.

The framework of a strategic plan will cover the following:

- A modern vision for Rabita
- A clear mission to replace the antiquated one¹⁴ that exists at this time.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of Rabita at this time?
 - Does it have the internal strength to implement such objectives? How lean is it? And how focused is it?
 - Does it have the needed resources?
- What are the opportunities and threats that it has to deal with?
 - Does it understand its environment (in this case the whole world)?
 - Does it distinguish between the needs of Muslims in Pakistan and those of Muslims in France?
 - What does it need to do to gain better understanding and to empower Muslims all over.
- What are the key success factors that will help Rabita achieve its goals and objectives?
- Are the specific issues facing Rabita determined? Are they prioritized in order to enable the Rabita leadership to deal with the most urgent issue first?

¹⁴ The League states its functions and objectives to be the following: advocating the application of the rules of the [Shariah](#) either by individuals, groups, or states; coordinating the efforts of Islamic preachers the world over; developing methods for the propagation of Islam in accord with the dictate of the Qur'an and the Sunnah; upgrading the productivity of the Mass-Media as well as Islamic propaganda, education and culture; holding symposia, rehabilitation, and refresher courses; bringing intellectuals and opinion leaders together during the pilgrimage season with the aim of fostering closer relations among them and urging them to develop practical methods of raising the standard of Muslims in the world; overseeing the activities of the Fiqh Council and lending it the support it needs to find Islamic solutions to contemporary problems; promoting activities that aim at spreading the Arabic language and raising the standard of teaching to both Arabs and non-Arabs; setting up branch offices as well as Islamic centers to serve the purpose of Islam; extending urgent relief to Muslims affected by war and natural disasters; and making the activities and construction of mosques more effective.

Once mission-based goals and objectives have been set, individual initiative can be engaged by mobilizing all stakeholders to develop their own (measurable) action items. Such empowerment can result in an enormous burst of productive energy that can make a critical difference in the Rabita's ability to thrive.

I will not go further into the technicality of formulating a framework for a strategic plan for Rabita. We will leave the details into the discretion of his Excellency the Secretary General and the Board.

Conclusion

Not having time to plan is a plan for failure. We cannot choose our future, but we can use our understanding of the range of scenarios to provide a context for interpreting events. We will not see them as unconnected gains, losses and outrages, or even as streaks of good and bad luck or predestined events. Instead, we should be able to interpret them as parts of a pattern, or early warnings of transitions from one scenario to another. The Rabita will be able to cope with its unpredictable fast changing environment using Real-Time Strategic Planning, a fluid, organic process that engages staff and board in a program of systematic readiness and continuous responsiveness. With it, Rabita will be able to identify, understand, and act on challenges and opportunities as they arise. Rabita, we propose, must become an interpretive organization focused on alternative futures of the Umma. A fast changing world requires a creative strategic approach such as this.

With this insight our policy makers will seize opportunities for progress and respond appropriately; without this understanding the best that we can hope for is that our responses do not make the situation worse.

Recommendations:

Short term:

- **Holding workshops for Rabita executives to work on a strategic plan**
- **Recruit international, promising and visionary young leaders to re-invigorate the Rabita and rejuvenate it.**
- **To hold continental conferences to reeducate Muslims about the new Rabita vision and its new mission.**
- **Extensive program to engage the West and the East based on a multi victor strategy:**
 - **Organizing Interfaith Conferences**
 - **Organize People to People Encounters**
- **A program for continuous rehabilitation of Imams through academic training under The International Supreme Mosque Council**
- **A strategic plan for coordination between the various Ighatha organizations around the world**
- **Continuous review of plans and amending them according to new developments**

Medium term:

- **To plan and hold strategy workshops attended by Rabita executives and a panel of experts (planners, policy analysts and futurists), and strategists, which we believe will be valuable in exploring scenario analysis and planning our responses as events continue to unfold.**
- **Review and rewrite the strategic plans based on various alternative futures proposed by the Rabita executives.**
- **Reorganization of new offices of Rabita around the world and new plans for each country will continue to arrive to Rabita headquarter based on local problems and proposed solutions.**
- **Rabita office managers around the world will be trained to understand potential business opportunities:**

- **Outreach to major international companies that do business in the Muslim world showing them additional potential**
- **Inviting others that don't have a presence at this time to come to do business.**
- **The First Muslim scientists conference design to introduce technology to various parts of the Muslim world**

Long term:

- **Prepare to move Rabita headquarter to Jerusalem**