

Our world as Eid approaches

ATLE HETLAND
EN ROUTE

This year's holy month of Ramadan is over in a few days, ending with celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr. Everyone in Pakistan has focused on religious reflection and prayer, as well as on social and family issues. We all strive at becoming better persons and do what is right towards fellow human beings. We also try to live right with God. In Islam, Ramadan is an important time for renewal. And then, when the month ends, many will miss the activities of the holy month, even the fasting, but especially the focus on reflection, the daily festive Iftar gatherings when family members come together, and sometimes, there are larger gatherings with relatives, friends and colleagues.

Ramadan is also a time for stocktaking, for thoughts about the year that has gone by since last year's Ramadan, and maybe thoughts about Ramadan a generation ago, when the holy month was at the same time of year and this year. Parents may tell their children stories from that time, and grandparents may tell stories from two generations ago. It all helps us get a perspective on the flow of time, on things that change and things that stay the same.

"This year, Ramadan has been different than all other years", said Shahrukh (24). "I have thought about my younger brother who died in the Army Public School massacre in Peshawar on 16 December 2014, as Christmas was approaching, when 132 school children and 13 adults were killed and many injured. When I go home to celebrate Eid this year, we will all remember and pray for my brother and the others who died and were injured. We will miss my brother's presence at Eid this year, still not quite realizing that he is not with us any more", said Shahrukh.

"In addition to my brother not being with us, my grandmother also passed away just a few weeks after my brother. She was getting old and had been sick for some time. But we had expected her to be with us for many more years. Her place in the home and the kitchen will be empty. We will have to get used to that, too", said Shahrukh, adding; "Although life is unpredictable, it is always in God's hands."

The holy month of Ramadan is a special time in Muslim countries – to include Muslims and everyone else in the countries. Yet, life also goes on as usual, with daily chores, work, seminars, conferences and everything else. This year, a number of important things have taken place in Pakistan and abroad. I shall mention but a few international issues of concern.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's participation in the Oslo Summit on Education for Development on 6-7 July was essential. He placed education high on the political agenda in Pakistan, and he was assisted by Pakistan's Nobel Peace Prize Winner Malala Yousafzai, who has become a symbol of 'Education for All' worldwide. The PM went on to other tasks and visits to other countries, and Malala went to mark her 18th birthday focusing on the Syrian refugee crisis. She is now an adult, albeit a very young adult and she is still a teenager.

Just this week, appropriately in time for Eid, the 'Iran agreement' was finally announced. After more than a generation, USA and the West have reached an agreement on how to re-integrate Iran in the international community, indeed how to keep the country's nuclear programme under control and restrict it from developing nuclear weapons, which is in line with the Non-proliferation Treaty of 1970, with later extensions. It was high time that this agreement was reached. I hope that Iran will again be able to contribute to the international community in the same way as other countries can, and that Iran will be able to benefit from trade and other cooperation with the rest of the world. Welcome back!

The international community seems to allow the US to be ‘is our brother’s keeper’, in this case as regards Iran. I find it difficult to understand since it is the only country that has ever used nuclear weapons (notably in Japan at the end of WWII). Yet, it is somehow in the lead when deciding on who else such have such weapons of mass destruction, and it keeps vast arsenals of nuclear weapons. It even takes the moral high ground vis-à-vis all other countries on military, human rights and other issues. When that is said, being a pacifist myself, I am against any country having nuclear weapons and would work for reduction of such weapons other military expenditures; last year, there was a slight reduction. At the same time, the West, with its military alliance, NATO, seems to place more emphasis on the role of the alliance than before. Instead, we should emphasize new and better forms of peaceful cooperation within and between countries, knowing that peaceful conflict resolution is always best.

This week, the European Union (EU) and Greece agreed on a loan payment and reform package for the debt ridden country. It will save Greece from outright bankruptcy and financial collapse for yet another few years. There is no debt relief in the package; the austerity measures are still there. On top of it, some of the country’s resources will be administered by outsiders. This is a sad situation for Greece. It is highly unlikely that it will lead to the growth, employment increase and prosperity that the country needs. Yesterday, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) pointed out this obvious fact, as it has also done earlier.

As I am writing this article, the Greek parliament has not yet voted on the EU package. If it is accepted, which is likely, it does so out of desperation since it is arm-twisted into doing so. If it is rejected, it is a brave move that will lead the country into deeper difficulties for several years, with exit from the Euro Zone, which would eventually lead to recovery and sustainability over time. The third way is more realistic, notably to stay within the Euro Zone and be granted debt relief, including write-off of major parts of the loans to European banks, with delayed maturing and repayment. In the referendum, sixty percent of the Greek voted for this type of solution, based on the assumption, too, that Greece is a true member both of EU and the Euro, and should have been treated as a member and partner, not as an outsider sitting on the other side of the table with cap in hand. EU will suffer from its heavy-handed and autocratic process for many years to come. It became evident that it was the big and strong, indeed Germany, that decided the fate of a small and weak member. I believe that Greece should over the next years plan for and orderly exit from the Euro Zone, but not the EU.

One aspect that has not been discussed openly, notably Greece’s high military expenses as an important NATO member of the eastern flank along with Turkey. Greece is unlikely to be able to continue to meet its defence obligations.

And then, as Eid-ul-Fitr approaches in Pakistan and worldwide, we focus less on the broad, secular issues, and instead, we turn to daily issues closer to home, and indeed religious reflection. I wonder if EU and Greece had done better in their negotiations if religion had played a role, as it probably did in the Iran-US negotiations.

In any case, in Pakistan, peace is settling over home and workplace, city and country, and Eid will be celebrated in extended families everywhere. Those who live away from home will make their utmost to reach home for Eid.

Dear reader, may I wish you Eid Mubarak.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.