

Community Building in Islam, Part 1

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Part 1 of this series illustrates on the importance of community- building in the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's efforts to put it into practice. Prioritized qualities that ensure a dynamic Islamic community will also be expounded on, such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, persistence, and maintaining a healthy balance in working for this world to eventually lead to a blissful hereafter.

This series is based on a nine session course conducted by the author on Community Building at the Islamic Centre of England in London in 2009.

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Community Building, Part 1

Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Abstract

To consider a group of people a successful community involves specific requirements and qualities. Though personal identity is truly important, it is essential for a community to likewise have an identity that is shared by other members of the same group, and to work in a united way for the same causes. Regardless of whether it is on a worldwide or lesser scale, establishing a community is becoming more and more vital in today's day and age. Indeed, apart from possessing the task of purifying the people and educating them on how to create social justice, the prophets established successful communities.

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Introduction

The issue on how to establish an Islamic Community has always been of great importance but is especially so for today, whether it is on a general scale in the worldwide Islamic community or on a smaller scale in minority Muslim communities in non–Muslim countries. It is essential for us to know the qualities and characteristics of an Islamic Community and how we can move towards establishing it.

It is not simply the case that when we have a number of Muslims living, working or worshipping together that we can finally call it an Islamic community. However, in many cases this is actually what we find: a group of Muslims interacting together is deemed an Islamic community, even though it is not.

As we will explain, a community must be a very unified and integrated group of people who behave like one body, and in addition to his or her own personal identity, every individual should have an identity that is shared with other members of the community. All must work together in a united way for the same causes.

This article in this series briefly highlights some of the most important points relating to this issue, which will then be further elaborated on in future parts of the series.

The importance of community in the Qur'an

From an Islamic point of view and in particular from a Qur'anic point of view, the development of community, society, or nation is of utmost importance rather than focusing on individuals.

The Qur'an gives attention to every person as each one is unique in the sight of Allah. Allah does not say that because He has created billions of people, He does not care about them as individuals. Every person receives attention from Allah as if he or she is the only creature of God. However, relatively speaking, we cannot compare the significance and importance of society and community with that of individuals. We cannot sacrifice the formation or development of a community in the interest of personal gain. We do not want to sacrifice or ignore the needs of the people, though at the same time we must not forget that it is imperative for us to move towards establishing a community. Given the many signs and evidence for this, we shall begin with considering a few notions and then gradually build upon them.

In the Qur'an, Allah addresses human beings collectively:

1. When reading through the Qur'an even once, it is crucial to ask ourselves who exactly Allah is addressing when He talks to us. Of course, sometimes Allah addresses the Prophet himself as "*Ya ayyuhar-Rasool*" or "*Ya ayyuhan-Nabi*" and then the Prophet delivers the message of Allah to us.

However, when Allah wants to talk to us, or asks his Prophet to speak to us on His behalf, is He talking to each and every person independently from other people, or is Allah primarily focusing on the community as a whole?

There are approximately 200 cases in the Qur'an where Allah uses the word '*al-naas*' when speaking directly to the people. '*Al-naas*' can mean people, a group of people, a community, a society, humanity, or mankind. In addition to these cases, sometimes Allah says '*Bani Adam*', (the children of Adam). It is rare that Allah talks to one individual person. This means that the message of Islam is in large for the masses, societies, communities, or humanity as a whole.

Even the word '*al-insan*' (human being) in the Qur'an is meant in a general sense because when Allah says "*Ya ayyuhal-insan*," He is not referring to any specific person – He is once again addressing the general public. Furthermore, the cases in which Allah talks about '*al-insan*' are much fewer, about 80, compared to the 200 cases in which '*al-naas*' is mentioned.

2. Secondly, when it comes to the community of the faithful, many times the Qur'an uses the expression "O those who believe" or "O those who have faith". However, as far as I remember, we do not have a case in which Allah says "O the one who has faith". Allah always addresses us in the plural form.

3. Regarding our daily obligatory prayers, Allah commands us to recite the chapter al-Hamd – The Opening – in every first and second units (rak'at) of the prayer. In this chapter, we do not say "I worship only You..." rather we say "We worship only You..." and then we say "We ask and seek assistance from

You" – in the plural form.

We can make requests from Allah during any part of our daily prayers, whether we are in bowing or prostrating, and especially so in the *qunut*; but if we are going to ask for something, it is better to ask in the plural form. For example, in the qunut we usually begin our prayers with "*Rabbana*" (Our Lord), such as in the supplication,

"Our Lord. Grant us good in this world and good in the hereafter, and save us from the chastisement of the fire." (2:201)

When we conclude our prayer we say "Assalaamu 'alayna..." ("May Allah's peace be with us!") not "Peace be with me." This is the outlook of a person who belongs to a community.

Thus, the Qur'an is clear that although complete respect and full attention are given to people as individuals who are indeed the building bricks that make up the community, the community is the final goal. The most productive conditions for nurturing good people is when we have a good community.

The task of the prophets in the Qur'an

To purify people

Regarding the task of the prophets, the Qur'an at times refers to individuals and sometimes about the community. The purpose of the prophets and indeed all the Divine Books is to take people out of the darkness into the light. For example, in Surah Maidah, verses 15 and 16, Allah tells the People of the Book:

O People of the Book! Certainly our Apostle has come to you, clarifying for you much of what you used to hide of the Book, and excusing many (an offense of yours). Certainly there has come to you a light from Allah, and a manifest Book. With it Allah guides those who follow (the course of) His pleasure to the ways of peace, and brings them out from darkness into the light by His will, and guides them to a straight path. (5: 15–16)

Moreover, in verses 2: 151, 3: 164, and 62:2 Allah speaks of the Prophet's task as purifying the people. Thus, the individual aspect is mentioned, the task of helping each and every person to move towards Allah by purifying themselves and moving from darkness into light.

To guide people to establish social justice

However at the same time Allah says:

Certainly We sent down Our Apostles with manifest proofs and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice... (57:25)

The prophets were sent to guide so that people can establish social justice and equity. It is noteworthy that Allah does not say He sent His prophets and provided them with the Book and the Balance so that the prophets could establish justice. On the contrary, the prophets have come so that people themselves can establish justice. It is the role of the people with the help of the prophets to establish justice, otherwise people would probably sit back and expect the prophets to establish justice for them, and then they would simply come and enjoy and benefit from it once it was established. However, the Qur'an states:

"Allah would not change our affairs unless we ourselves decide to change (13:11)."

If we want to develop into good, pious, and prosperous people, we cannot relax and wait, asking and expecting Allah or the Prophet to perform miracles for us to make achievements. They show us the way and approach, and then we are to take action.

To establish communities

From the beginning of their mission, every prophet had two goals in mind: to help individuals who are willing to become good and move from darkness into the light, and also to establish a community.

No one will succeed in their mission unless they plan to establish a community. Even if we settle and spend decades reforming and training individuals, when we eventually leave that place or even die there, those individuals and the effect they have will gradually disappear.

The people may continue to exist in that place although the purpose behind the movement will not remain. However, if good people are found, and efforts are made to educate and train them, then together we can establish a community, and then there would be lasting results.

This is what the prophets bore in mind. This was the responsibility they were given. Every prophet either came to establish a new community or nation or instead to lead and guide a community or nation that was already established although they were facing difficulties. For example, there were many prophets of the Bani Israel (the Children of Israel), living in the period of time prior to the advent of Prophet Jesus, and it was even the case that sometimes there were dozens of these prophets alive at the same time. These Prophets strove to preserve the community of the Bani Israel by reminding them of the covenant they made with Allah to stop them from deviating and becoming scattered.

Thus, whilst some prophets founded entirely new communities, other prophets tried to preserve, develop, and advance existing ones, they were all concerned with the issue of community.

Prophet Muhammad's efforts to establish a fledgling Islamic

community

Like many other prophets, Prophet Muhammad was given two tasks. Of course, either of these two can be divided into sub-tasks but essentially, one task was to educate and train individuals, and the second was to form and establish a community. For example, when the Prophet went to the city of Yathrib, later known as Madinat al-Nabi, he quickly established an Islamic community.

Moreover, in a matter of only 10 years, this community spread nearly all over the Arabian Peninsula; and in a matter of a few decades it spread to many parts of the world until today. If the Prophet had not followed this strategy of establishing a community and merely focused on individuals, he could not have achieved what he did in forming a new civilisation.

The first task he launched in Medina was a community centre – a masjid. A masjid is the House of Allah and simultaneously the house of the people. No person has the right to prevent people from entering this House. As soon as a building is consecrated as a masjid, it becomes the property of the entire community. Everyone can enter it and benefit from it. When Allah speaks of Masjid al-Haram, He says:

Indeed the first house to be set up for people (nas) is the one at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all nations. (3:96)

Upon arrival in Medina, the Prophet laid the foundations of Masjid of Quba as a place for congregational and Friday prayers and a hub for the Muslims in that district. Jum'ah Prayer is very much related to the community because we believe that it was the Sunnah of the Prophet. It is the teaching of the Ahlul Bayt that Jum'ah must be held in only one place in every town.

Of course, if the town is large with a specific distance between the two places of prayer, then another Jum'ah Prayer can be held, but Jum'ah Prayer cannot occur in every district or masjid. People can perform their daily prayers in their local masjid or in the main central masjid, but when it comes to Friday Prayer they should all gather in one place.

Thus, in Islam, the idea of coming together and forming the community is crucial, and the Prophet did this from the beginning by establishing a masjid and leading congregational and Friday Prayers. After arriving in Madinah, he asked each Muslim from Madinah, the Ansar, to be a brother to a Muslim from Mecca, thus forming the covenant of brotherhood (al-ukhuwwah) between them. Although they both were from Mecca, the Prophet remained with Imam Ali and they made the covenant of brotherhood with each other. Following on from this, he made great efforts to establish a close-knit, homogenous, and friendly community.

The need to provide good examples of Islamic communities

Most people would surely be interested in Islam if in addition to having good individual Muslims we were

able to show the world that we have two, three, or four full-fledged Muslim communities meeting the Islamic requirements. Unfortunately, it seems that we have not established good enough examples or set high standards to set as a model for other communities. Of course we should not be too pessimistic because there are many strengths: good individuals, small yet progressive groups, and in some parts of the world there exists some forms of an Islamic nation on a larger scale. However, we are still far claiming to have established a community that is well-pleasing to Allah and His Prophet from a social and communal point of view.

Therefore, as part of a requirement for having a road map, it is essential to be able to identify and clarify the signs of a healthy community. When can we claim that our community is an Islamic community? As said before, it is not a matter of having a few thousand or even a few million Muslims and then claiming it a Muslim community. The same way every person is to wholeheartedly embrace and implement Islam in their lives, so too must every community fully embrace and implement Islam on the shoulders of individuals who have already fully embraced and implemented Islam on a personal basis.

For example, there might be a group of a thousand Muslims living as a minority in a non-Muslim country, or even a million Muslims living in a Muslim country, all believers as individuals yet as a community are like non-believers because they do not uphold Islamic social values. This is the great challenge. Thanks to God, throughout the ages and in every generation we have had good people.

However, we have not witnessed the same success regarding establishing full-fledged Islamic communities. The Prophet managed to start establishing an Islamic Community, but the time was too short and there were many challenges externally and internally. Unfortunately, Imam Ali and other Imams also were not given the opportunity to do so. Indeed, throughout the centuries we have very few cases of a community, society, state or nation which we could honestly describe as an Islamic community, nation, or state.

Even many Muslim organisations, parties, and movements may not meet the standards that Islam sets up for such communal entities. This has happened not because Islam is negligent regarding the social aspect of life; on the contrary, Islam is clear about this.

Unfortunately we Muslims have sadly neglected this important aspect of Islam. On the whole, the most we have generally done has been to take care of our own personal piety and looked after our own families. And throughout the greater part of our history, those in power such as the Bani Umayyad and Bani Abbas were not interested in a comprehensive Islamic system and thus had no interest in establishing a true Islamic community.

Some qualities of a true Islamic community

We are gravely in need of deciding the requirements for an Islamic community, in identifying and clarifying the signs of healthy Muslim community, that which portrays our community as pleasing Allah

on a collective, rather than individual, basis.

Truthfulness and trustworthiness

There are some signs which indicate that a believer (mu'min) is healthy, not just physically but religiously and spiritually healthy. For example, according to the Ahlul Bayt, as stated in our hadiths, if you want to know whether someone is really a believer or not you should test them in two things: Are they truthful (sidq al-hadith)? and do they keep their promises (ada' al-amanah)? It is our responsibility to care for and return to the owner any item that has been entrusted to us.

These are two fundamental signs of a believer. We cannot recognise a believer by looking at their outward appearance, countless prayers, or pilgrimages. These acts are undoubtedly important, though to really test whether a person is a true believer, what is important – in addition to other signs – is their honesty or truthfulness, and reliability or trustworthiness. ¹

Persistence

Let us examine one idea from the life of Prophet Muhammad. Among the many aspects, I would like to draw your attention to this verse where Allah tells the Prophet in the chapter Hud:

"So be steadfast, just as you have been commanded – [you] and whoever has turned [to Allah] with you – and do not overstep the bounds. Indeed He sees best what you do." (11:112)

Allah tells the Prophet to be steadfast and to persevere on the right path, to be persistent, as he is commanded by Allah, and He says that the same thing applies to whoever has returned to Allah with the Prophet. This means that it is the responsibility of the Prophet and his followers to remain persistent. In the chapter al-Shura, verse 15, a slightly similar verse is stated:

So summon to this [unity of religion] and be steadfast, just as you have been commanded and do not follow their desires... (42: 15)

The verse from Hud is a command for the Prophet and his followers, whereas in Surah Shura it is a command solely for the Prophet.

Regarding this, the Prophet said: *'The Chapter Hud made my hair turn gray.'* It was because of this command to remain persistent along with his followers. Although remaining persistent is also mentioned in the Chapter al-Shura, the Prophet referred only to the verse in the Chapter Hud as causing his gray hair. Regarding this, the late Imam Khomeini wisely remarked, *"It was not a challenge for the Prophet as an individual to remain persistent; rather the challenge was to ensure that the whole community remains loyal."*

This is the challenge of leading a community. Every so often there are good leaders who are not given due attention and are not followed. The Prophet knew that ensuring that he himself as well as the

Muslim community do not disperse or move in the wrong direction was a real challenge.

Right direction, right path

In the Qur'an, verse 142 of the Chapter al-Baqarah appears in the middle of several verses on the change in the Muslims' direction of prayer, the qiblah. In the early days, Muslims faced Jerusalem, Bayt al-Muqaddas, during prayer. However, they were being criticised, blamed, and made a mockery of for not having their own qiblah. Then Allah asked the Prophet while in Masjid Qiblahtayn in Madinah, to change the direction to Mecca.

Related to the change of qiblah, Allah says:

The foolish among the people will say, 'What has turned them away from the qiblahh they were following?' Say, 'To Allah belong the east and the west. He guides whomever He wishes to a straight path'. (2:142)

Those who did not understand asked the Muslims for the reason for the change of direction, and consequently were told by Allah to say that it does not matter which way we face for prayer because both the east and the west, and indeed everything, belongs to Allah.

Immediately after that, Allah states that He guides those with whom He is pleased towards the Right Path. The Right Path is a very important concept. It is not necessarily a physical direction. There are those who are concerned about whether they should face East or West, but Allah says that these are merely physical directions. What is of utmost importance is your direction in life. It is not as important which way your body faces, if your whole purpose in life is misdirected and disorientated.

Of course, someone who has correctly orientated themselves spiritually also tries to physically face the direction of the Holy Land. However, there is little or no benefit in being concerned with the physical direction when the entire soul is deviated from the way of Allah.

Although the Right Path is an important spiritual concept, Allah has, however, also used the metaphor that the Right Path is neither towards East nor towards West, as we also find in that beautiful Verse of Light, in the chapter The Light (al-Noor), where Allah says:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche wherein is a lamp-the lamp is in a glass-the glass as it were a glittering star-lit from a blessed olive tree, neither eastern nor western, whose oil almost lights up, though fire should not touch it. Light upon Light. (24:35)

The oil of this lamp is from the olive tree. Light is emitted from this oil because it is so transparent and glistening that even without lighting it, it is shining. One of the qualities of this olive tree is that it leans neither towards the East nor towards the West. It is neither eastern nor western. Again Allah is saying

that the East and the West both belong to Him, so we should not be too concerned about them; what is of utmost importance is '*Sirat al-Mustaqeem*' – the Right Path.

Balance, moderation, and the best example

In the Chapter The Cow, Allah says:

"Thus We have made you a middle nation that you may be witnesses to the people and that the Apostle may be a witness to you." (2: 143)

The Arabic word '*wasat*' means balanced. Sometimes it also means beautiful but beauty is also related to balance; if there is no balance then there is no beauty as it becomes exaggerated and unrealistic like a caricature or a cartoon drawing.

The Islamic way of life is made balanced by Allah: it is moderate and does not go to extremes. This is '*al-Sirat al-Mustaqeem*', the Right Path. If we turn in any direction that would be eventually causing our loss of balance and moderation, then we are distancing ourselves from Islam. Allah has made us into a nation that is balanced and moderate.

Furthermore, the Islamic community must endeavour to become a witness and set standards for others. If people want to know how to best look after their elders, we should set the best example. We should become the best example in every aspect for others look up to as a model: how to raise children, care for the poor, create jobs, spend their leisure time, establish social welfare, and have a peaceful life. All they have to do is observe our communities and nations. The Prophet is our example whom we should follow and become examples for other people.

This is different from racism, from saying that we are the chosen people of God and so everyone must serve and worship us. Being better certainly does not mean that your life is more important than others' lives or that your blood is more important than others' blood so that everyone must worship and serve you. Being selected in Islam is for those who have been given the responsibility to benefit others. Being better is surpassing others in benefitting and serving people. We will expand on this later when discussing the verse 3:110.

Allah has made us a balanced and moderate nation with the aim of becoming witnesses for other people, while the Prophet is witness over us. We are to follow the example of our Prophet and practically demonstrate his teachings, especially in our community life.

It is not very effective or helpful if we merely keep telling people what our Prophet said regarding care for children, spouses, strangers, the sick, the deprived and oppressed, and so forth. It is not always useful to verbally repeat the teachings of our Prophet. It is through modelling his teachings of looking after the elderly, the deprived, vulnerable and oppressed people that we can exhibit a true Islamic community that we encourage and nurture closeness and intimacy amongst ourselves because this is what our Prophet

has taught us.

Balance between this life and the hereafter

Being balanced has various different dimensions. We have to strike a balance between working for worldly affairs (*dunya*) and working for the hereafter (*akhirah*), instead of sacrificing one of them for the sake of the other. We cannot merely work for this life for the sake of a healthy and prosperous material life while forgetting about our eternal life.

Similarly, it is unacceptable to merely work for our hereafter and overlook the development of this world and, for example, disregard progress in science and technology. A Muslim community must have both. This is mentioned in a well-known hadith narrated from Imam Hasan which begins with: "*With respect to your life in this world, be as if you are going to remain here forever.*"²

If we believe we will remain in this world for eternity, we would do our utmost to achieve the best in all aspects of life. For example, with respect to the environment, why do people destroy it through wastage and pollution?

Perhaps they think that since they are only going to live on this planet for a few years or decades then the environment available at present is sufficient. We tend to disregard what will happen after we are gone. But if we believed that we will remain in this world forever then we would surely try to implement a sustainable plan.

The hadith of the Imam continues: "*And with respect to your eternal life, to the hereafter, imagine as if you are going to die tomorrow.*"³

If we believe that we may die tomorrow, we would not postpone anything that will benefit us in the hereafter, such striving to be good and repenting to Allah for our wrongdoings.

Whether as individuals or collectively as a community, Muslims must strike a balance between working for development in this world and for happiness in the next life.

Conclusion

From an Islamic point of view each person is very important and unique in the sight of Allah, to such an extent that Allah says if you give life to one person it is as if you have given life to all humankind, and if you kill one person it is as if you have killed all people. However, whilst each and every person is very important, the community and the society are extremely significant.

Every Prophet held the task of purifying, educating, and training individuals, while simultaneously working to either establish a community of faithful people or to lead and move forward an already existing community.

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1. For further discussion on these two qualities, please refer to the series "Indicators of Piety" by the same author in the Message of Thaḳalayn.
 2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 44, p. 138.
 3. Ibid.

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