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The Shia Imams and Muslim Unity Part 1

‘Ali Aqa-Nuri

Translated by Hamid Waqar

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Abstract

This is the first part to a series of articles that will outline the stance of the Shia Imams with respect to Muslim unity. The article begins by defining the meaning of ‘Muslim unity’ and goes on to enumerate the characteristics of such unity, especially as found in the Quran and the Sunnah. It then outlines some practical methods of creating unity and preventing division, by giving examples from the *sirah* of the Prophet (s).

The next part will continue by touching on the advent of exaggeration (*ghuluw*) and the forging, infiltration, and distortion of traditions. The section will conclude by referencing the main topic of the series by noting that the Ahl al-Bayt stuck firm to the foundations of seeking unity. The common qualities of these spiritual authorities in their theological, political, legal, and social debates was their compassion and moral uprightness, as their goal was always guidance towards the ultimate truth.

Keywords: Qur’an, Sunnah, Shia Imams, Muslim unity, Shia schools of thought, Sunni schools of thought, practice of the Ahl al-Bayt, unity.

The meaning of Islamic Unity

In general usage, the terms *wahdah* and *itihad* mean unity, unison, solidarity, convergence, unanimity, unification, unidirection, community, and agreement about an issue. One of the characteristics of a movement seeking unity is that it works along a single path or in a single direction with the purpose of reaching a single goal. These two terms—i.e., *wahdah* and *itihad*—in the meanings that have been mentioned are antonyms of terms such as ‘multiplicity’, ‘dispersement’, ‘dispute’, ‘division’,

‘sectarianism’, and ‘divergence’. Therefore, unity is turning division into solidarity; divergence into convergence; dispersement into juncture; various opinions into a single opinion; and the specification of a common and agreed upon goal in order to choose the path leading to it.

One is faced with various paths and possibilities while trying to depict a role model for Islamic unity. The reason for this is that modern scholars, reformists, and followers of the various Islamic sects and theologies have their own particular opinion about this concept. For instance, many scholars today consider Islamic unity on one or more socio-political dimension as a form of union, mutually beneficial. Others give importance to religious commonalities and correcting religious misunderstandings, and this is called ‘bringing the schools of thoughts together’ (*taqrib madhahib*), or in better terms ‘bringing together the followers of these schools.’ In reality, the type of unity that is true and desired is that which applies to both the socio-political dimension and the ideological-religious one. This is an lasting unity held upon the firm foundations of the proximity of the beliefs of the various schools—it is a foundational proximity between the principles and pillars of the schools and not just a superficial coming together of a few scholars of a few sects.

Some people consider that the path leading to Islamic unity and the proximity of schools can be achieved only by adhering to the Islamic commonalities and expelling sectarian differences and merits. Others speak about a convergence of schools or choosing one of them [as a point of fusion]. Yet others state that the only way to achieve unity is by returning to the age of the righteous companions and their successors (*salaf*) and to relive their lifestyle. Again, there is a group that expresses the view that Islam should do away with all schools of thought and yet another which seeks unity through inviting others to their school. [1](#)

Each one of these scholars, despite the sympathy that they have for the Islamic community as a whole, relied upon the accepted political and religious views of their own school of thought. It is self-evident that following their opinions is not only impossible but actually leads to even further differences. Every Islamic school of thought is firm upon its beliefs and derivations (*ijtihad*); the same is true for every theological or jurisprudential scholar, and this desire to defend one’s school, of course, is quite natural. However, the interference of particular sectarian elements and using them within the discussion of unity will not get us anywhere—it will only lead to an incorrect definition of unity and an improper encouragement towards it.

The desired and effective form of Islamic unity is one that gives importance to the benefits and goals of the proximity of religious beliefs and which stem from people who have many commonalities despite their denominational differences. Muslims, for instance, believe in a single God, recognize the Messenger, and follow a common heavenly scripture called the Qur’an. Their main goal is success in this world and the next as well as proximity with Allah.

By presenting more suitable and more intellectual methods—which have roots in the path of the Ahl al-Bayt and are founded upon concrete religious sources—the desired unity can be achieved. The characteristics of such a unity include the following:

First: The desired Islamic unity affirms that Muslims, despite their various theological, jurisprudential, and political ideologies, are a single Ummah. The foundational elements of this Ummah are the acceptance of common principles such as: the oneness of Allah, prophethood, resurrection, and the belief and commitment to the religious laws and practices which are accepted by all Muslims. With the acceptance of this principle, none of the small differences and various jurisprudential, theological, or historical opinions could harm the oneness of the Ummah.

The deviant groups and innovators, such as the *ghulat* (extremists) and the *nawasib* (enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt)—with precision being taken to the meanings and instances of these two groups—have always been rejected by the Islamic society. They have been considered outside the fold of Islam by the two main sects and are separated from other Muslims. Therefore, Islamic schools of thought are permitted to protect and defend their denominational uniqueness—of course, this is only if it has a legitimate uniqueness that can be defended by firm Qur’anic beliefs which are part of the definite commonalities and principles of Islamic thought. True seekers of unity must draw a line between the foundational religious elements and denominational qualities, regardless of how defensible they are. The unique jurisprudential and theological particularities of their school of thought, even when they cause perfection, growth, increase of understanding, and proximity to the truth, should not be included in the definite principles of religion. This is especially the case for beliefs that are of less importance, such as the eternality of the Qur’an or other historical controversies including the issue of predestination, justice, and holiness. Those who focus on these minor issues and reject each other or call each other disbelievers do not seem to consider whether they themselves are being just or holy.

Second: Islamic unity dictates that intellectual disputes with other schools of thought must be in accordance with the standards of ethical debate, tolerance, and morals. Each school, while remaining firm to their beliefs, must treat and speak to others courteously. In such a unity, instead of labelling others as being corrupt, misunderstanding each others’ views, insulting one another, and nitpicking minor details, what takes its place is the respect for opinions, the regard for compassion and religion, and the desire for forgiveness of others. There is no place for hurting one’s emotions or religious beliefs; there is no place for emotional judgments about other groups; and there is no place for dissolving particular religious schools in an attempt to force their adherents into other ones—all in the name of achieving Islamic unity.

Third: The type of unity of Muslims that is correct and which is desired is one based on religious sources and principles. This should be considered a religious duty, stemming from individual desire. A contingent unity—i.e., a temporary one emphasizing the necessities of the time or the existence of a present or potential danger (which could also be called ‘tactical unity’ or ‘political unity’)—will only keep the fire alive under the ashes. If individuals of a particular group—who are considered “polytheists”, “apostates”, “disbelievers”, “hell-bound”, “more impure (*najis*) than dogs”—are tolerated for a certain time due to some contingent benefit, their acceptance will not be obtained.

On the contrary, due to the hypocrisy inherent in this form of unity, the hatred for the other group will be increased. What is necessary is a permanent and strong unity, which is when the scholars of the Islamic schools of thought officially recognize others within the fold of Islam—despite the differences in their levels—as “Muslims”, “believers”, and “people of salvation.” They must not consider that they are the only ones who believe and that their accepted ideologies and versions of history form the yardstick separating faith from disbelief. The resistance and the differences between the schools of Islam have not always been, and are not, equal to the resistance and differences of religion and the code of practice. It is possible to intellectually cooperate with others, to enjoin them to the good, and to forbid them from evil.

Fourth: In the Islamic unity that is sought after, the beliefs of a group should not cause one to consider them spurious, undesirable, or unacceptable. Taking this important matter into account, those who believe that they will be able to see Allah on the Day of Judgment do not necessarily belong to the *Mujassamah* (corporealist) or *Mushabbah* (anthropomorphist) sects. Those who believe in the quiddity of the divine essence and divine attributes do not necessarily belong to the *Mu’atTilah* sect (those who reject belief in the Names and Attributes of God). Those who deny the essential nature of good and evil do not consider Allah to be an oppressor. Similarly, it is unjust to state that one who answers his internal love for the Prophet’s (s) family by kissing and showing respect towards their holy shrines or who makes harsh statements about their enemies and stays away from them is a polytheist and permissible to murder.

Fifth: True seekers of unity (and not just the superficial ones) have not stopped their efforts due to the harms and difficulties that have and are happening in Islamic society. They do not come to a standstill due to the multiplicity of theological and jurisprudential opinions. Rather, they focus on the types of opinions, confrontations, misunderstandings, and recently, the incitement of religious sensitivities. According to the words of Shahid Mutahhari (r), the threat to Muslims that stems from unreasonable misunderstandings on both sides is more than what stems from actual religious differences. The religious differences amongst the Muslims are not ones that prevent unity; they are not ones that prevent brotherhood from forming under the Qur’anic spirit of **“the faithful are indeed brothers.” (49: 10)**

The God that all of them worship is one and they all attest to it: “There is no God save Allah.” They all believe in the prophethood of Muhammad (s) and that prophethood ended with him. They all believe that his religion is the final religion. They all take the Qur’an to be their heavenly scripture, recite it, and consider it to be their constitution. They pray in one direction and stand up to the call to prayer (*adhan*). They all fast in one specific month of the year, the month of *Ramadhan*. They celebrate the days of *Fitr* and *Adhha*. They perform the rituals of the *hajj* in similar ways and gather together in Allah’s sanctuary. They love and respect the family of the Prophet. This is enough for a connection between their hearts to be made and for the feelings of Islamic brotherhood to stir within them.

So take precaution against misunderstandings. Take precaution against the incorrect perceptions that the various schools have with regard to each other. Take precaution against all factors that only blacken

the relationship between Muslims.[2](#)

Therefore, one must refrain from bringing up the bitter past while, at the same time, prevent the spread of those moments of decline. Instead, one must focus on the points of strength and the energetic areas of Islamic culture. Imam Khumayni clearly states:

“Muslims are obliged to treat each other with courtesy and friendship; they must have love for one another as true siblings. It is clear that love and desire increases these sentiments. That which breaks the bonds of brotherhood and causes division within the congregation is hated by the Legislator and is in opposition to His lofty goals. It is well-understood that if this greater sin becomes prevalent in a congregation, it will cause hatred, envy, spite, and enmity; it will be the root of corruption in the community. The tree of hypocrisy will be created and the unity of the society will tear apart; the religious foundations will give way leading to the increase in corruption and evil.”[3](#)

Qur'an and Islamic Unity

A detailed analysis of what the Qur'an states about Islamic unity—mentioning the factors, sources, and methods of unity and the importance of refraining from fostering differences—is outside the scope of this work and beyond the ability of this author. It is clear that recognizing and presenting such an important issue would entail a complete understanding of the concepts mentioned in each verse that pertain to this subject matter and the context that the verses were revealed in. More importantly, one would require the privilege of obtaining the educational spirit of the Qur'an.

At the same time, however, the doors of research should not be closed due to this limitation especially since the Imams considered the Qur'an to be the most important axis of unity, the principles of which are taken from this sacred text. Therefore, effort has been made, to the extent that was possible, to present the principles of the Qur'anic viewpoint in this regard. They have been divided into two categories:

A. Emphasizing unity and prohibiting division

Through a general comparison it can be claimed that no school of thought or religion has emphasized unity, cooperation, and the paths of obtaining it, nor emphasized refraining from differences, division, and the negative outcomes of them more so than Islam. This is so important that it has been said: “Islam has been founded on two bases: worshiping the One and unity.” The station of unity in Islamic culture is so high that some state its necessity is supported by the Qur'an, the general divine will and its consequences.[4](#) The Qur'an praises the Islamic Ummah as being a single Ummah⁵ and which is established by exceptional men and role-models who have gathered together under the banner of faith in Allah.[6](#)

Furthermore, all humans, with all of their differences accounted for, are considered to have a single, common principle. The Qur'an, in addition to commanding people to brotherhood, unity, and cooperation

in righteousness and piety, considers these concepts to be blessings which were given to the Islamic Ummah during the time of the Prophet (s) due to their acceptance of Islam and of his prophethood.⁷ The Qur'anic insistence and emphasis towards religious unity and the Islamic society can be noted in the following expressions: “hold fast”, “correct the essence between you”, “cooperate”, “peace”, “reform”, “reform of the essence between you”, “the divine colour”, “love”, and “brotherhood”.

Likewise, the Qur'an put at the forefront of its teachings the prevention of enmity, malice, and hatred between individuals and groups as well as the negation of intellectual hypocrisy, controversy, and enmity. Aside from the Qur'an, this important issue has also been taken seriously in Islamic traditions which will be mentioned in later chapters.⁸ The Qur'an, as the most authoritative source of Islam, considers divisions and disputes in the society to be the “tunes of Satan” and the main factors behind destruction.⁹ The separation of Muslims into groups is placed in the company of divine punishment; its results are the bitter taste of war and difficulties.¹⁰

The Qur'an considers enmity and hatred to be the forgotten retribution of Allah; it counts them as sins and acts of rebellion. It states that they are the actions of Satan and therefore, severely prohibits rebellious struggle and enmity. The removal of this enmity has been listed as one of the important tasks of prophethood. In the opinion of this heavenly scripture, one of the main factors behind the destruction of previous nations was the division and separation of their society. The most important factor of the separation of a society is its differences in regards to religion. Rebellious struggle and division only achieve stagnation, separation, and the weakening of social foundations.¹¹

The Qur'an taught us—through the verses which emphasize thinking and pondering deeply about religion, and through the verses which command us to weigh opinions, choosing the best of them—that we must refrain from unfruitful arguments and from arguments that lead to enmity. It is interesting that, while the Qur'an is emphasizing social compassion and the decrease of social separation and argumentation, it orders Muslims to refrain from heated intellectual debates with the People of the Scripture; it states to leave the discovery of truth to Allah and the Day of Judgment.¹²

In addressing the People of the Scripture, an invitation is given to common principles and to adopt a single front against the polytheists and the disbelievers.¹³ While giving attention to the importance of unity and brotherhood and the grave emphasis of the Qur'an prohibiting Muslims from heated debates, division, dividing into parties, and following different paths,¹⁴ the bases of differences and division can be traced back to certain ethical-moral vices such as: distrust, backbiting, seeking faults, spying on believers, accusation, defamation, abusive language, ridicule, egocentrism, arrogance, hatred, and the severance of family ties.¹⁵

By researching the many verses and traditions in this regard, it can be stated in general that an important goal of the Qur'an was to establish a unified Ummah where heated arguments, division, war, and bloodshed would not exist. People would congregate in accordance to intimacy, cooperation, brotherhood, love, and justice. Throughout this work, we will mention over fifty verses regarding unity

and the methods of obtaining it, as well as division and the factors behind it. Here are some examples of the verses:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا ۚ وَادْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ
بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا ۚ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided [into sects]. And remember Allah's blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became brothers with His blessing. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it. Thus does Allah clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided. (3: 103)

Here, Allah, in addition to introducing the axis of unity as being a divine blessing, prohibits us from division. In another place he considers differences and division to be a disliked method of previous nations:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاخْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ ۚ وَأُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

Do not be like those who became divided [into sects] and differed after manifest signs had come to them. For such there will be a great punishment. (3: 105)

أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

... Maintain the religion, and do not be divided in it... They did not divide [into sects] except after the knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves. (42: 13–14)

وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ ۚ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُم بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

'This indeed is my straight path, so follow it, and do not follow [other] ways, for they will separate you from His way. This is what He enjoins upon you so that you may be Godwary.' (6: 153)

مِنَ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيعًا ۚ كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ

Of those who split up their religion and became sects: each faction exulting in what it possessed

(30:32)

Allah, in the Qur'an, considers division to be in opposition to the prophetic lifestyle and the Sunnah. He states:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيَعًا لَّسْتُ مِنْهُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ ۖ إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُمْ إِلَى اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ

Indeed those who split up their religion and became sects, you will not have anything to do with them. Their matter rests only with Allah; then He will inform them concerning what they used to do. (6: 159)

Muslims are prohibited from heated debates. The results of heated debates are mentioned in the Qur'an where it states:

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ ۖ وَاصْبِرُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

And obey Allah and His Apostle, and do not dispute, or you will lose heart and your power will be gone. And be patient; indeed Allah is with the patient. (8:46)

As is seen, the apparent meanings of these verses denote a prohibition from differences, heated debate, and division in religion. The command has been given to hold fast to the divine cord and division is depicted as the characteristics of the polytheists and those who have been destroyed. The condemnation of the polytheists in some of these verses is not because of their polytheism, but rather because of the differences in their speech and their role in dividing religion. [16](#)

B. Methods of creating unity and preventing division

According to what was said, it can be claimed that the general spirit of the social teachings of Islam is as follows: the prohibition of war, of enmity, of dissension, of the formation of parties, of breaking up the society of believers, of racism, and of the mistrust of individuals and groups. The positive foundations of the social teachings of Islam are unity, cooperation, mutual love, and doing well unto each other. With regard to the command and permission that Islam gives to war, it can be explained in that such permission for war can prevent social mishaps and protect the material and spiritual rights of the people. One may ask, however, if the scope of these commands and prohibitions covers the different degrees of the multiple views and understandings in the fields of theology, jurisprudence, and politics that have caused the formation of Islamic schools of thought? It seems as if it can prohibit war, heated argumentation, and unfruitful disputes and consider love, purity, brotherhood, and social cooperation in a positive light. Yet, does the religious code call for a unification of opinions and beliefs?

Answering positively to this question would bring us face to face with other questions and attempts at

answering them. For instance, inviting someone to think about and ponder deeply over religion implies that various opinions and understandings will inevitably be formed. Can it be said that Islam orders something, but does not take account of its natural consequences and in fact prohibits them? It is quite evident that one cannot tell an individual to think about something and then forbid them to express their conclusions regarding it. Of course, there is a criterion that has been placed on this process of thinking, but even if two individuals were to use the same criterion, there is no guarantee that their conclusions would be the same.

The variances in man's cognitive potential and his ability to understand and intuit is certain and undeniable. Infact, some commentators of the Qur'an have used verses of the Qur'an to prove that variation of perspectives is the rationale for creation.¹⁷ As such, these differences call for diverse intellectual understandings leading necessarily in their turn to varying beliefs and opinions. The necessity in question can only be removed when the source of variation and differences is removed. It is self-evident that the removal of the source is not possible; so how can the necessary differences be resolved without removing their source?

Therefore, the differences of opinions and the differences of viewpoints amongst the various theological, political, and jurisprudential schools in Islam cannot be judged without differentiating between the cases and without understanding the motives.¹⁸ Rather, the characteristics of undesired differences must be contrasted to those differences that are based on certain criteria. In the Qur'anic culture and the Islamic code of practice, what is given more importance than anything else is the importance of observing the limitations, expressing the theoretical and practical criteria, and expressing the methods of clarifying the differences; not uprooting its source. This article will suffice itself by mentioning two important cases in this regard:

First: Division as a result of truth-seeking or rebelliousness

The differences and divisions which stem not from contemplation in religious matters and seeking the truth, but from political, social, and personal factors—such as the love, hatred, or conceit of an individual or a group towards another—is not only rejected but outright prohibited. Examining certain verses of the Qur'an, it becomes clear that some undesired differences and divisions stem from rebelliousness, envy, and the assertiveness of the people who cause division. One of the most important factors behind wars and bloodshed in human society is the desire to be superior or the notion of it that some groups have. In the category of Qur'anic verses pertaining to differences and division, one set of verses mention how some people divided after knowledge had come to them and after the truth had been made clear to them. The Qur'an prohibits believers from such division and states in numerous verses:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاخْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ

Do not be like those who became divided [into sects] and differed after manifest signs had come

to them... (3: 105)

أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ

وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

... Maintain the religion, and do not be divided in it... They did not divide [into sects] except after the knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves... (42: 13–14)

Here, Allah states that some nations did not become divided until after they received knowledge. In other words, they knowingly and intentionally became divided and this would not happen unless there was an element of rebelliousness that they exhibited towards each other. This same motive and spirit is mentioned in other cases in the Qur'an as well.¹⁹ While narrating these differences and divisions—which are usually attributed to the Israelites and particularly their scholars—there is no mention made of them seeking the truth or desiring to understand it, or for that matter, whether or not they actually discovered any aspect of reality through it. The reason behind this is that the reality of the situation had already become clear to them—“after the knowledge had come to them”. Therefore, in Qur'anic terms, the motive behind their division was the rebelliousness (transgression, oppression, or envy) of their scholars. For this reason, 'Allamah Tabataba'i says: “Allah did not condemn division or differences in the Qur'an unless they were accompanied by carnal desires and opposition to rational guidance.”²⁰

In any case, despite the fact that the Qur'an affirms that one will not be punished for his mistakes and for what he committed out of forgetfulness, an enormous amount of attention has been paid to those who cause division intentionally (*ta'ammud*) and out of rebelliousness (*bagha*). Such actions are not to be tolerated in this world and have severe consequences in the next. Permission to fight those who continually divide and differentiate and who do so out of insubordination and rebelliousness has been granted. The Qur'an states:

وَإِنْ طَائِفَتَانِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ اقْتَتَلُوا فَأَصْلَحُوا بَيْنَهُمَا ۚ فَإِنْ بَغَتْ إِحْدَاهُمَا عَلَى الْأُخْرَىٰ فَقَاتِلُوا الَّتِي تَبْغِي حَتَّىٰ تَفِيءَ ۚ إِلَىٰ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ

If two groups of the faithful fight one another, make peace between them. But if one party of them aggresses against the other, fight the one which aggresses until it returns to Allah's ordinance ... (49:9)

Second: Holding fast to the Qur'an and the Sunnah

It is natural that when a school of thought prevents division and tries to create a congruent society, the

method of achieving it is also mentioned. Therefore, Allah introduces the two principle axes that are immune from attack: the Qur'an and the Sunnah. He describes them as being the foundations of religious unity, the tools of guiding Muslims to the straight path, and the most effective means for removing or decreasing social and theological differences and divisions. The Qur'an has always correlated the obedience of Allah with the Messenger. The method of solving disputes has been to hold fast to Allah and the Prophet (s). The following are verses of the Qur'an in this regard:

وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ ۖ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُم بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

***'This indeed is my [i.e., the Prophet's] straight path, so follow it, and do not follow [other] ways, for they will separate you from His way. This is what He enjoins upon you so that you may be Godwary.'* (6: 153)**

According to this verse, the 'straight path' is the path in which there is no division. If a person or group treads along the path of division and separation, apart from the path of revelation in which there are no differences, he would have stepped off of the 'straight path.' The apparent meaning of the verse also states that the 'straight path' is the path of the Prophet of Islam (s). The Qur'an, in another place, considers the 'straight path' to be the path of the prophets, martyrs, righteous, and truthful.²¹ It is interesting to note that in the aforementioned verse, the Qur'an first mentions the 'straight path' and the necessity of obeying it as a prerequisite to avoid becoming divided into different groups.²²

وَكَيْفَ تَكْفُرُونَ وَأَنْتُمْ تُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتُ اللَّهِ وَفِيكُمْ رَسُولُهُ ۚ وَمَنْ يَعْتَصِم بِاللَّهِ فَقَدْ هُدِيَ إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

And how would you be faithless while the signs of Allah are recited to you and His Apostle is in your midst? And whoever takes recourse in Allah is certainly guided to a straight path ... Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided [into sects]. (3: 101 and 3: 103)

'Allamah Tabataba'i writes in this regard:

"Holding fast to Allah" is holding fast to the verses of Allah and His Messenger (i.e., the Qur'an and the Sunnah), in which guidance has been guaranteed. Holding fast to the Messenger of Allah is, in reality, holding fast to the Qur'an; they both stem from one source. The reason for this is that Allah, in the Qur'an, orders us to obey the Prophet (s). Fundamentally, obeying Allah cannot be achieved, except through His Messenger."²³

Allah's cord (*habl*) is the Qur'an that has been revealed from Allah. These verses of the Qur'an are, like

a cord or rope, tied together and connected together by Allah.[24](#)

The Prophet (s) and Islamic unity

With a meager amount of reading about the Prophet of Islam's teachings in theology and about his practices, it will become clear that the establishment of the Islamic Ummah was formed upon unity. The actions and goals of the believers—which even include a merciful outlook towards non-Muslims—compose the substance and the fruit of the collection of the Prophet's teachings and practices. Here, some words and actions of the Prophet, in which the establishment of Islamic unity are primarily intended and clearly mentioned, will be presented.

A. A general invitation towards solidarity

There are many instances where the Prophet spoke about social unity, mutual understanding, and brotherhood in faith on the one hand, and the prohibition against division on the other. He also spoke about the sources, factors, and foundations of both unity and division.

Essentially, the idea of noble moral traits (*makarim al-akhlaq*)—the establishment of which, in the Prophet's words, is the philosophy behind him being raised as a prophet—is nothing other than creating a religious society based on brotherhood, common language, mutual love, forgiveness, purity, generosity, optimism, justice, compassion, and good-manneredness; it also means staying away from war, reproach, pessimism, backbiting, racism, false accusations against Muslims, and other unethical traits. The Prophet's ethical advice is full of phrases such as mutual love, mutual aid, positive confrontation, righteousness, peace, compromise, and forgiveness. Providing a list of these cases is outside the scope of this article. It will suffice to mention a few examples:

The Prophet stated that Muslim unity causes goodness and mercy while division is the factor behind destruction and punishment. He stated: "Congregating is good (a mercy) while division is torment."[25](#) The Prophet's opinion is that congregating is positive and the more a community is together, the better it is.[26](#) The Prophet's ceaseless encouragement towards congregational prayer and being present in mosques is also reported in hundreds of traditions.[27](#)

The Grand Messenger has statements where separation from the Islamic congregation is considered a form of leaving the fold of Islam and returning to the Age of Ignorance. He states, "The noose of Islam has been removed from the necks of the one who separates himself from the Muslim community." Likewise, he says, "The one who separates from the Muslim community in a small way will die in a state of ignorance."[28](#)

Other short statements from the Prophet in this regard have also been reported, such as: "Allah's hand is upon/with the congregation,"[29](#) "Be with the community and beware of division," "Do not cause division for those before you who caused division perished," "Do not cause division or your hearts will

become divided,” and “Whoever divided into sects before you perished.”^{[30](#)}

Of course, one cannot be certain that each one of these traditions came from the Prophet. Likewise, the motives for counterfeiting such traditions—especially keeping in mind the misuse of expressions such as “the necessity of a community” and “refrain from breaking the Muslims’ cane” by the Umayyad leaders—cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, the repeated emphasis that the Prophet (s) gave to the unity of the Muslim community, and more importantly, his very own actions in this regard, supports the general meanings of these traditions.

In order to solidify the manifesto “The believer is a brother of the believer,”^{[31](#)} the Prophet has narrated many traditions:

A believer befriends and is befriended. There is no good in the person who befriends and is not befriended. The best people are those who people benefit from.^{[32](#)}

“Believers are brothers: their blood is mutual. They are like one hand against those who are opposed to them.”^{[33](#)}

“A believer is like a building to another believer; each part solidifies the other.”^{[34](#)}

The example of a believer in mutual friendship, compassion, and love is the example of a single body: if a part of it feels pain the rest of the body will feel pain along with it throughout the night and with a fever.^{[35](#)}

Likewise, the Prophet said:

“Meet your brother with an open face. Making your brother smile is charity for you. Forgiveness is for the person who does not have hatred for his brother. It is not suitable for a believer to remain apart from his religious brother for more than three days. It is not suitable for a believer to abuse his brother. It would be suitable for Allah to distance the fire of hell from any Muslim who defends his brother’s honor.”

The Prophet (s) emphasized greeting one another, counting it as one of the actions that the angels would engage in. He strongly prohibited remaining angry with a Muslim brother for more than three days and encouraged the reconciliation between them. As for the person who gives and receives gifts—without taking into consideration their value—in order to create friendly relationships and strengthen the bonds of brotherhood and unity (in the place of division between parties and elements of egoism within society), his reward would be that of a person who fights on the path of Allah. Therefore, in the society where the Prophet (s) is the role-model and the official, the worthiness of an individual replaces partisanship, and compassion and intellectualism overcome violence and sensitivity.^{[36](#)}

In addition to this, the Prophet described the Muslims as a set of teeth—all being the same and equal. He said, “Muslims are equal like teeth [in one’s mouth].” He also said, “None of you are Muslims unless you love for your brother what you love for yourself.”

Emphasizing Islamic equality and brotherhood, the Prophet said:

“Muslims are brothers of Muslims. They do not oppress one another, they do not lie to one another, they do not refrain from helping one another, and they do not abase one another. A sufficient amount of the potential for evil is created for a person when he ridicules his own brother. A Muslim’s complete existence—his life, property, and loved ones—are forbidden for other Muslims.”

The Prophet (s) considered the following to be one of the signs and traits of a Muslim:

“A Muslim is a person who makes other Muslims feel safe from his speech and hands.”

There are three things in which nothing other than sincerity enters the heart of a believer [meaning that it would be impossible for him to betray them] ... the third is the issue of unity amongst the Muslims. This means that he would not be hypocritical, would not break the cane of Muslims, and would not divide the congregation of Muslims.[37](#)

B. Practical lifestyle

The universal direction that the Prophet of Islam (s) took during his role as a prophet was the establishment of a monotheistic society based upon high values such as faith, divine single leadership, piety, unity, and religious brotherhood. It is quite clear that achieving such a goal in a society where ignorant, racist, and tribalistic values are tied into all of the beliefs and social structures—be they grand or minute (the Qur’an even states that their dead were permissible to them)—is not an easy task; rather, it demands an ability that is far greater than what the average human can shoulder.

The Prophet did not have any other choice than to strengthen the Muslim social ties. Through special divine aid, he would partake upon the best method of managing disputes. There are cases of the Prophet’s actions in this regard during the period that he resided in Makkah, but the prominent cases are to be found in the period of the establishment of the first Islamic government in Madinah. In this period, there were more internal and external opportunities of division.[38](#) The Prophet did not satisfy himself with mere words and actions; rather his practical lifestyle was also formed on the foundations of reaching such important goals. A list of the efforts and methods of the Noble Prophet (s) in creating unity amongst the companions will be given:

1. The establishment of the mosque and emphasis given to the Muslims to congregate in it for Friday and congregational prayers.
2. The establishment of the single unified Ummah.
3. The creation of a religious bond of brotherhood between individuals and groups.
4. The creation of national unity and general treaties amongst the people.

5. The specification of the noble Messenger (s) as the legal reference point in solving disputes.

6. The rational battles against the customs and intolerance of the Age of Ignorance

Examining each one of these points and citing the Prophet's (s) efforts behind the establishment of the single unified Ummah rotating around Allah and the Messenger is great in its own merit. It can become a practical role model for all Muslims. Here, only a few of these cases will be surveyed.

Among the most important factors behind the division of individuals and social groups are religious intolerance, sectarianism, and tribalism. This claim is illuminated by reviewing the present divisions within Islamic society. One of the Prophet's (s) cardinal areas of effort was the prevention or regulation of these forms of intolerance. In this regard he has said, "Allah will raise a person whose heart has a shred of intolerance (*'asabiyah*) in it with the Arabs during the Age of Ignorance."³⁹

He also said, "A person who invites people towards intolerance has acquired [the punishment of] a murder similar to the murders that took place in the Age of Ignorance."⁴⁰ He performed many temporal measures in Madinah with the purpose of removing disputes and tribal competition, as well as regulating and directing them. When the Prophet entered this city and saw that the two ancient rivals, the *Aws* and *Khazraj* tribes, were competing for the honour of hosting the Prophet, he wisely said: "My house will be wherever my camel stops." Likewise, he used the tactic of quickly moving the soldiers in order to quell a dispute that arose amongst the companions during the Battle of Bani Mustalaq.

However, with the institutionalization of connections from the Age of Ignorance and the tendency towards tribalism, such conditions were not completely uprooted during the Prophet's life. Sometimes the internal intolerance and hatred between the *Muhajirin* and *Ansar* not only resulted in their coming face to face with one another, but also resulted in them coming face to face with the Prophet. For instance, Zubayr ibn 'Awwam, who was of the *Muhajirin*, fell into a dispute with a member of the *Ansar* about irrigation. The Prophet solved the dispute by stating that the *Ansar* will be able to irrigate after Zubayr. The *Ansar* judged the Prophet's decision by using the tribalistic and intolerant criterion of the Age of Ignorance. He told the Prophet: "You ruled in favour of your cousin."⁴¹

In regards to the moderate temper that he had while interacting with the people who opposed him, there are many Qur'anic proofs as well as those from traditions which show that he prevented misunderstandings, unfounded accusations, and contemptuous looks towards them. It is clearly understood from these examples, and hundreds of other examples mentioned in books of history and traditions, that the Prophet, in addition to encouraging and emphasizing a unified society, also paid attention to the methods of arriving at it. The Prophet tried in various ways to uproot the basis of dispute in the Ummah, even after his death. Specifying the pivotal nature of the Qur'an and the Sunnah as well as the political and religious position of reference assigned to the Ahl al-Bayt are all examples of these efforts. Therefore, the duties of any political, intellectual, and social leader dictate that he adopts the same methods as the Prophet, taking him as his role model.

- [1.](#) Refer to Nida-ye Wahdat, p. 182.
- [2.](#) Hajji, Guzideh-'i az yaddashtha, p. 10.
- [3.](#) Sharh Chehl Hadith, p. 296.
- [4.](#) Al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 2, p. 124.
- [5.](#) Qur'an, 21:92; 24: 152.
- [6.](#) Qur'an, 2:143; 3:10; 21:92.
- [7.](#) Qur'an, 3:102-103; 49:10; 5:2.
- [8.](#) Refer to Mizan al-hikmah, v. 2, p. 456; v. 3, p. 43; v. 6, p. 65; Tafsir ibn Kathir, v. 2, p. 194-195; v. 1, p. 396; al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 3, p. 374; v. 7, p. 393; Tafsir muhiT al-a'zam, v. 2, p. 374; Nahj al-balaghah, speeches Qasimah, 120 and 147.
- [9.](#) Refer to Qur'an, 2:208 and 253; 3:103; 4:157.
- [10.](#) Qur'an, 6:65; 5:14, 64 and 91; 2:213. For further information refer to al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 3, p. 372-375; v. 11, p. 60-65.
- [11.](#) Refer to verses such as: 26:13; 3:64; and 7:46.
- [12.](#) Examples of traditions in which Allah is considered the final judge are: 39:3; 22:68-69; 6:164.
- [13.](#) Qur'an, 3:64.
- [14.](#) Qur'an, 6:159; 30:31-32; 43:65; 21:37; 3:105.
- [15.](#) For instance, refer to Qur'an, 49:11-12; 104:1-2; 4:112; 24:4; 6:153.
- [16.](#) Al-mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 16, p. 182.
- [17.](#) Al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'an.
- [18.](#) Some commentators of the Qur'an have stated that the verses which condemn dividing into sects and differences, which were mentioned, are about the parties and congregations which are contradictory to religious principles—i.e., they are outside of religion. (Milad, al-Ta'addudiyah wa al-hiwar fi al-khuTTab al-Islami, p. 127).
- [19.](#) Refer to 2:213; 3:19; 45:16; 10:93.
- [20.](#) al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 11, p. 60.
- [21.](#) al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 7, p. 378.
- [22.](#) Ibid. p. 381.
- [23.](#) al-Mizan fi tafsir al-Qur'an, v. 4, p. 389.
- [24.](#) Ibid., v. 3, p. 369.
- [25.](#) Kanz al-'ummal, v. 7, p. 557; Nahj al-fasahah, h. 1202; also refer to traditions 56, 638, 1234, 2769, 2726, 2855, and 3211.
- [26.](#) Kanz al-'ummal, v. 7, p. 555.
- [27.](#) For instance, refer to Ibid., p. 552-585. There are over 150 traditions from the Prophet in this reference which encourage this obligation.
- [28.](#) Nahj al-fasahah, h. 2769; refer to Bihar al-anwar, v. 26, p. 67-73 for this compilation.
- [29.](#) Tirmidhi, h. 2166; Nahj al-fasahah, p. 615.
- [30.](#) Kanz al-'ummal, v. 1, p. 177; 182, 205-206.
- [31.](#) Sahih Muslim, no. 1414.
- [32.](#) Kanz al-'ummal, v. 1, p. 142 and 155; there are many similar traditions in this book, refer to pages 140-166.
- [33.](#) Bihar al-anwar, v. 71, p. 316.
- [34.](#) Kanz al-'ummal, v. 1, p. 141.
- [35.](#) Sahih Muslim numbers 2585 and 2586.
- [36.](#) Refer to Kafi, "Kitab al-iman wa al-kufr: bab al-musafahah," p. 179; likewise refer to Pezhuhishi dar sirah-e nabawi, p. 235.
- [37.](#) A more detailed and better organized research of this issue can be found, narrated from both schools of thought in: al-Wahdah al-islamiyah fi al-ahadith al-mushtarakah, p. 73-119.
- [38.](#) The internal foundations of division were the existence of an ancient conflict between the Muhajirs and the Ansar (with titles such as Makkan and Madani, northern and southern, qahTani and 'udnani), between the Hashimites and the

Umayyads, and the former enmity between the internal groups of the Ansar (the Aws and Khazraj). The external foundations of division were the evil plans of the Jews and hypocrites where they tried to cause differences amongst the Muslims.

[39.](#) Usul kafi, v. 2, “Bab al-’asabiyyah,” p. 308.

[40.](#) Sunan ibn Majah, v. 2, “Kitab al-fitan: bab al-’asabiyyah,” p. 1302, h. 3948.

[41.](#) Bukhari, v. 3 and 4, “Kitab al-masaqat,” p. 235–237; for more information refer to Majmu’eh maqalat pezuhishi dar sirah nabawi, p. 284 onwards.

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