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Basic Islamic Terms

Every way of life has its own vocabulary. This enables people to communicate about detailed topics using only a few key words. It is important that Muslims learn the vocabulary of Islam so that we all know what we're talking about. This unites us as Muslims and brings us closer to a sense of belonging to the same community.

Abdul: This means "Servant of."

Adab: Manners.

Adhan: (Athzan) The call to prayer.

Ahl al Kitab: This means the "People of the Book." Allah uses this term in the Qur'an to refer to any people who received revelation from an authentic Prophet in the past.

Akhee: My brother.

Akhirah: The next life.

Akhlaq: Your character and behavior.

Alhumdu lillah: All Praise is for Allah.

'Alim: A scholar. The plural is 'Ulema.

Allah: The name for God in the Arabic language. (Literally: THE GOD). Muslims prefer to say "Allah" no matter what language they speak because in Arabic it is a stand-alone word. In other words, you can't make it masculine or feminine, plural or whatever. In English you can change "God" to Gods, Goddesses, Demi-God, etc... There is no way to do that in Arabic to the name, Allah.

Allahu Akbar: "Allah is the Greatest." This is the universal catch-all phrase of Muslims. When a Muslim shouts, "Takbeer" (Who's the Greatest!) everyone replies with "Allah Akbar!"

Angels: In Arabic they are called the Mala-ika. They are created from light energy. Their only purpose is to serve Allah. They are behind the forces of nature. Some Angels are given the job of watching humans and noting their deeds for judgment day. Angels can take on physical form, sort of like a hologram, and can appear as humans or whatever. They are all good and never disobey Allah. They are not male or female.

Ansar: The helpers. The basic reference is to the new Muslims of Medina who helped the Prophet and the Meccan Muslims after they fled Mecca.

Arabic: A language which originated in the Middle East, specifically in the Arabian peninsula. It is the language Allah chose to reveal His last revelation to the world in.

Arkan al Islami: This means the Pillars of Islam. There are five main practices or "pillars" in the life of a Muslim.

Assalamu 'alaykum: "Peace be upon you." This is the universal Muslim greeting. The Prophet said that Muslims must use this greeting when they meet. There are also verses in the Qur'an about it. If a person approaches a group, the person should say it first. A younger person should greet an older person first. The reply is "Wa alaykum assalam." "And upon you be peace."

Ayah: A verse of the Qur'an. The word literally means a "sign." The plural is Ayat.

Barzakh: The time in between our death and the day we are raised up for judgment. Our souls will be in "storage" or Barzakh. The word literally means, "Partition" or "Dividing Line."

Bid'a: This means "Innovation" or "Unauthorized Changes." The Prophet forbade people from making any changes to the teachings or practices of Islam. He said such things and people would go to the Hell fire.

Da'wah: This means calling people (to Islam). If you're talking to someone about Islam you're doing Da'wah. A Da'i is the person who does Da'wah.

Deen: Way of Life. Islam is not only a religion, it's also a way of life.

Dhikr (Dhikr): This means to remember Allah. When you repeat words or sentences over and over so you can meditate on Allah and cleanse your mind, you are doing or making dhikr. Common dhikr phrases are: "La ilaha illa Allah" (There is no god but Allah.) "Subahanullah wa Bihumdeehee" (Glory to Allah and His is the Praise.) Saying that last one 100 times gets all your sins forgiven according to the Blessed Prophet. There are many more.

Du'a: This means to call on Allah. Whenever you ask Allah for something, whether out loud or inside, you are calling on Him. You can make du'a in any words, in any language and Allah has promised to respond, although in a way we might not expect. Many Muslims like to learn some of the du'as that the Prophet said, but you can use your own words to talk to your Maker.

Dunya: This world. "Hayatud Dunya": "The life of this world."

Eid: (Or: 'Id.) The Muslim holiday. There are two Eid's. One at the end of fasting in Ramadan is called Eid ul Fitr. The other after the Hajj is over is called Eid ul Adh ha.

Fard: Something you must do in Islam. Something that is required by Allah for us to do.

Fatwa: A scholar's opinion or judgment on an issue related to Islam. It is not binding on a Muslim if there is doubt about it or it can be shown to be faulty. Only a recognized scholar, or 'Alim can issue Fatwas and other scholars must investigate the veracity of their basis.

Fiqh: The science of understanding the Shari'ah.

Ghusl: A full shower. A Ghusl is required after any sexual discharge or activity before prayers can be offered again. A Ghusl is highly recommended on Fridays before going to Jum'ah prayers.

Hadith: A saying or report by or about the Blessed Prophet. The most reliable collections of Hadith are named after the scholars who collected them in the early days of Islam and checked on them for accuracy. They are: Bukhari, Muslim, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawud, An Nisa'i, Ibn Majah. There are some good books that take Hadiths from the main six and group them by topic. Those good resource books are as follows: "Riyadh as Saliheen" "Mishkat ul Masabih" and "Al Muwatta."

Hafiz: (Hafithz) A memorizer or guardian of the entire Qur'an.

Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca.

Halal: Allowed for a Muslim.

Haram: Forbidden for a Muslim.

Hijab: The scarf a woman wears over her head. Some Muslims who like to compromise their beliefs say it's not required in Islam. It is, however, required and all women must wear it.

Hijra: To migrate. This term refers firstly to the great migration of the Muslims in the year 622 from the hostile city of Mecca, which was controlled by idol-worshippers, to the safer city of Madinah (then called Yathrib) where Islam could exist freely. The Islamic calendar begins with the Hijra as the first year.

'Ibadah: This term is often translated as "worship" but it is not a correct translation. The word worship in English just means praying and bowing. But the term 'Ibadah literally means "service" and it comes from the root word, "to serve." When we say that Islam considers all life to be 'Ibadah, we mean that our whole life should be lived in the service of Allah. We are here to serve Allah. In Islam, any good deed, action or thought, even just holding a steady job or smiling at someone is considered doing 'Ibadah for Allah.

Iftar: The meal you eat after sunset in Ramadan. Suhoor is the light breakfast before first light in the morning during Ramadan.

Imam: Literally: leader. Although most Muslims take this term in the sense of a leader of the prayers, it does apply to the group leader outside of prayer as well. An Imam must be elected by the Muslims or at least accepted by them if he is appointed from outside. If the community rejects him, then he cannot be the Imam.

Eman: Belief or faith. It implies three meanings: 1) to believe, 2) to confirm that belief in your heart, and 3) to feel safe. Eman is what makes a person a Muslim. Often spelled "Iman".

Ihsaan: Usually translated as "goodness". The Prophet (p) defined it as knowing that Allah is watching you even though you don't see Him.

Injeel: The Gospel of Prophet 'Esa (Jesus).

Insha'llah: If Allah wills.

Iqamah: The second call to prayer just before the actual prayer begins.

Islam: To surrender to Allah and find peace.

Jahannam: Hell.

Jam'a: Together, in a group.

Jannah: Paradise, Heaven. It literally means "the Garden."

Jibra'il: The angel that brought Allah's revelation to the Prophet. Allah is so powerful and majestic that it is beneath him to reveal Himself to humans. We are like an ant next to a star in comparison to Allah. He sends the angels to do these small jobs, though He doesn't need them. In English his name is Gabriel.

Jinn: These are another type of creature Allah created. They are invisible to us but they can see us. They were made from fire elements and thus are pure energy. They are not like ghosts or weird monsters. They can influence your thoughts, encourage you to do wrong, and whisper fears into your mind. They can be good or bad. The good jinn leave us alone. The bad ones, who are also called Shayateen, or Devils, want to destroy you. Astrologers and fortune tellers get their "predictions" and "readings" from them. Jinn spy on the Angels and learn secrets about the future, then they whisper it into the minds of the fortune tellers. Jinn live, die and have families like us but they exist on another plane altogether. The Prophets could control the Jinn but none of us ordinary people can. Although we believe Jinn can possess a human body, Islam teaches that it's not very common. Don't believe every "Jinn story" Muslim immigrants will tell you about their aunt or second cousin's brother. Most of it will be superstitious stories that are culturally based.

Jumu'ah: The Friday Prayer in which all Muslims gather to hear a sermon called a Khutba. It's time is in place of the Zuhur Salah, usually somewhere between 12 pm and 2 pm. It is mandatory on all men to attend. It is optional for women. The Prophet said if you miss three Jumu'ahs in a row then hypocrisy will start to enter your heart.

Khalifa: This word means Steward, Manager or Care-taker. Allah made humans to be the Khalifa of the earth. In other words, we were given the earth as a trust to take care of. We shouldn't ruin it or pollute it. The head of the Muslim Ummah is also called a Khalifa because he is to take care of the Muslim community. Muslims are supposed to elect a Khalifa, but there hasn't been a world-wide Khalifa for a long time.

Khatib: The person who gives the Khutba. The preacher on Fridays.

Kitabullah: The Book of Allah. (The Qur'an.) The word Kitab means book.

Mahr: The money (or whatever else) that the man has to give to a woman in order to marry her. It is called the marriage-gift and a woman can ask for whatever she wants. If it is money, it can be deferred and paid gradually over time. The husband can never take it away for any reason.

Malik ul Mawt: The Angel of Death.

Masjid: Literally means, "the place of bowing." This is the name for a Muslim prayer hall.

Madh-hab: This means, "School of Thought." In Islam we have the Qur'an, the example of the Prophet and the sayings and guidance of the Prophet's companions. Through the centuries, various Muslim scholars have tried to make those teachings easier for Muslims to live by through organizing them, talking about them and trying to use those tools to find answers to questions where those first three sources are quiet.

Mecca: (Also spelled Makkah). A city in Arabia founded thousands of years ago by Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham). At that time it was called "Becca." Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was born there in the year 570.

Medina: (Also spelled Madinah). A city about 200 miles north of Mecca. The Prophet established the Islamic community there. He passed away there and is buried there.

Mu'adhan: The person who does the call the prayer.

Mu'min: A person with Iman. A true believer.

Mus-haf: The Arabic text of the Qur'an. "Brother, hand me a Mus-haf." (Qur'an with the Arabic in it).

Mushrik: A person who commits Shirk (making partners with Allah). Usually an idol-worshipper. A Hindu would be considered a Mushrik because they bow down to statues.

Muslim: A person who surrendered to Allah and is working at finding peace.

Nabi: This term means Prophet.

Nafs: This is often translated as "soul" but it really means "the self," i.e. "You and only you."

Naar: The fire (of Hell).

Nikkah: The wedding ceremony.

Qadr: This term is often translated as "Destiny" or "Pre-destination." This is not entirely accurate. It means literally "to measure." The religious idea behind it is that Allah measured everything in the universe. The length of your life is "measured," as is your fortune and your life's circumstances.

Qiblah: The direction of Prayer. All Muslims make their Salat facing Mecca. Allah commanded us to do this in the Qur'an as a show of unity and to remember Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) who built the first shrine there in that place so many thousands of years ago.

Qur'an: This is the name of the Book Allah revealed to the Prophet Muhammad from the years 610-632. Allah revealed it in stages, one section at a time, as the Muslims were ready to follow it. It has 114 chapters called Surahs. It was revealed in the Arabic language and has never been lost, changed or edited.

Ramadan: The ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Muslims are required to fast from before sunrise to sunset every day of this month. There are many details concerning this so consult the section on beliefs and practices.

Rasul: This term means Messenger.

Ruh: Your spirit or soul. Allah gave it to you on loan and thus you had better not sin and dirty it up.

Sadaqah: Charity.

Sahaba: A companion of the Prophet.

Sahabiyat: The female companions of the Prophet.

Sajda: Bowing on the floor.

Salat: (or Salah) This means prayer, the prayer in which you stand, bow and prostrate. The literal meaning of the word is: *to make a connection with*.

Shahadah: The Declaration of Faith. By believing in and declaring the following phrase, a person becomes a Muslim: "Ash hadu an la ilaha illallah, wa ash hadu anna Muhammadar rasulullah." "I declare that there is no god but Allah, and I declare that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." There are other ways to say this formula but this is the most common one. When a person accepts Islam, all his or her past sins are forgiven and his or her record is wiped clean and they start again from that moment as if they were just born.

Sheikh: Literally: Chief or Boss. It is the title that Muslims sometimes give to their scholars. It is not required in Islam but many people like to use this term.

Shari'ah: It is usually translated as Islamic Law. It means the path of Islam.

Shirk: This is the greatest and most terrible sin. It is the one sin that can keep your soul out of Paradise and doom you to Hellfire. It means making partners with Allah.

Shaytan: (or Shaytan) It means Satan. (The literal meaning is to separate from.) Islam teaches that a Jinn named Iblis didn't want to bow when Allah commanded a bunch of angels to bow down to Adam in respect of his knowledge. Iblis thought he was better than both humans and angels. Allah banished him to earth and let him have extended life until the Day of Judgment. That is because Iblis challenged Allah and said if he had time he would corrupt all human beings. Iblis's name literally means "Frustrated." He is also known as the Shaytan, or Satan.

Siyam (or Saum) Fasting.

Subhanullah: "Glory to Allah." This phrase is said whenever we're happy or when we see something wonderful.

Suhoof: "Scrolls." This is the name of the revelation given to Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) about 4,000 years ago.

Sunnah: The example or "way" of the Prophet. How he lived his life and what his practices were.

Surah: It is a chapter of the Qur'an. The word literally means "a step up in progression" or a "fence."

Tafseer: Commentary or explanation of the Qur'an. Many Qur'an translations will have footnotes on the bottom of the page to help you understand the meaning of an ayah. That would be called Tafseer.

Taqwa: This term means many things at once. The first meaning is that you are always aware that Allah is watching you. This brings you to the second meaning and that is that you will try to be good always. Do you see how the two things wrapped together can be so beautiful? When a Muslim has Taqwa, we say they are "Aware of Allah" Conscious of Allah" and striving to be righteous.

Tauhid: Sometimes it's spelled Tawhid. It means the Oneness of Allah. Allah has no partners, He is not divided up into parts and He is not in need of anyone to help Him in anything whatsoever.

Taurah: The revelation given to Prophet Musa (Moses).

Ukhtee: My sister.

Wahy: This word means revelation or inspiration. When Allah was revealing His messages to the Prophet, we would say the Prophet was receiving "Wahy." The Blessed Prophet once said that after him, all Wahy from Allah was finished except for one thing: dreams that can come true.

Wudu: Washing for prayer.

Yowm ul Qiyamah: The Day of Judgment. (Literally: Day of Standing.)

Zabur: The revelation given to Prophet Dawud (David).

Zakah: This is often translated as "Charity" or "Poor-due" but the literal meaning of the word is actually, "Purifying." Zakah is the third pillar of Islam. It involves giving 2.5% of your yearly wealth, after expenses, for the benefit of the poor and the needy. The "purifying" part comes in by learning not to be greedy. If you give some of your money for the sake of Allah to the poor, you make your heart less prone to greed.