

The challenge of leadership in Islam: East and West

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If it is possible to offer one statement that epitomises the concept of leadership in Islam, it must be one made by Abu Bakar, the first person to lead the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). In his first address as *Khalifa* – or head of the Islamic state – he told his audience “I have been chosen to rule over you, though I am not the best among you. Help me if I am right; correct me if I am wrong. The weak among you will be strong until I have attained for him his due... and the strong among you will be weak until I have made him give what he owes... Obey me as long as I obey Allah and His prophet; if I do not obey them, you owe me no obedience”.

This is a remarkable statement for any leader to make. With it Abu Bakar defines a social contract with his citizens. He sets out the basis and the limits of his authority as well as the duties of his citizens. It's worth examining this in more detail.

The first point is how Abu Bakar accepts the position of leader with remarkable humility. “I have been chosen to rule over you, though I am not the best among you”. This is no ordinary leader. He carries the title of *as-Siddique* – the truthful. An honour in its own right, but doubly so since it was bestowed by the Prophet himself. And now he finds himself taking up where the Prophet left off in leading the faithful. But his words have significance beyond those special circumstances. Abu Bakar defines the basic principles of leadership. He acknowledges that he is just one of a number of companions of the Prophet, all of whom have worthy qualities. Being selected as their leader doesn't make him a better Muslim or a better person, but it confers a heavy responsibility.

Secondly, he defines governance as an on-going relationship between leader and people. Leadership creates duties for the citizens as well as obligations on the leader. “Help me if I am right; correct me if I am wrong”. This participatory relationship has important consequences. Citizens are not just the governed. The public are engaged, active participants. Let me list the pre-requisites I think are necessary in this system. One requirement is transparency on the part of the leadership. Open government, if you like. The public need to know what their leader is up to. Another requirement is an informed public. It isn't sufficient for government to be transparent – a rather passive state of affairs. Someone (or something) needs to keep the public actively informed. So a free media and all that implies – such as an educated public – is also required. Then there must be a mechanism, or mechanisms, that enable citizens to engage with their ruler – questioning, discussing, expressing their support or opposition. Let's call it accountability.

Abu Bakar's polity requires genuine engagement and partnership between ruler and citizen. It is a system of mutual obligations and duties that recognises rights and responsibilities. In short Abu Bakar is calling for a society that incorporates the essential building blocks of democracy, yet expands beyond the forms we have become used to. It challenges us to go further to achieve distinctive on-going forms of participation.

The third part of his statement focuses on delivery of social justice, the central concern of Islam. “The weak among you will be strong until I have attained for him his due... and the strong among you will be weak until I have made him give what he owes.” A just and cohesive society cannot be maintained in the face of glaring inequalities – whether in economic resources or access to services. For instance *zakat* is a tax on wealth to help the less fortunate (something Abu Barkar fought to maintain) and the principle of justice requires that all should be equal under the law, regardless of their wealth or status.

The last part of Abu Bakar's statement sets out the basis and limit of his authority. "Obey me as long as I obey Allah and His prophet; if I do not obey them, you owe me no obedience". Abu Bakar's authority derives from his implementation of the commands of a higher authority. This is the framework in which the Islamic polity operates. So long as he fulfils his end of the bargain he deserves support and loyalty. If he deviates he can expect to be held to account by his citizens. Ignore them and in effect he breaks the social compact and citizens are released from their obligation to obey him.

These ideals, although not always implemented throughout history, nonetheless enabled Muslims to establish a fine civilisation. The historians Bloom and Blair offer this description of Islamic society in the eighth century. "In the Islamic lands, not only Muslims and but also Christians and Jews enjoyed the good life. They dressed in fine clothing, had fine houses in splendid cities serviced by paved streets, running water and sewers, dined on spiced delicacies served on Chinese porcelains. Seated on luxurious carpets, these sophisticated city dwellers debated such subjects as the nature of God, the intricacies of Greek philosophy, or the latest Indian mathematics."

Comment: Bloom and Blair
Islam. Empire of Faith (London,
BBC 2001) pp 79-80)

So where do these ideals and achievements stand in today's world? Fast-forward thirteen centuries and the difference is stark. I don't offer any explanations of how we got from there to here. But since this is where we are, I would like to put forward three challenges leaders in Muslim lands must address.



For the Muslim World, the first challenge of leadership is legitimacy. The Abbasid dynasty, from the seventh to the ninth centuries, did not fully live up to Abu Bakar's standards. Theirs was essentially a paternalistic monarchy. It, but it was dedicated to advancing the cause of Islam and the welfare of its subjects. But some contemporary Muslim rulers suffer from all of the Abbasid's failures with none of their redeeming qualities. In modern times it is democracy that confers popular legitimacy. But the problem is deeper than a lack of legitimacy. It is not just that rulers are not chosen by their people. They serve only their own interests or those of foreign powers. Consequently regimes need to actively suppress their populace to maintain power.

The second challenge is effectiveness. Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924 the Muslim world has been without a unifying symbol. Oil revenues have brought considerable material advances for many in the Middle East. But the majority of Muslims live elsewhere, in Africa and Asia. Collectively they all lag behind in development: economic, intellectual, political and cultural. So wide is the gap between Muslims and the riches of their heritage and between Muslims and the West, that impatience is breeding frustration.

The third challenge is the failure to deliver the worldwide Muslim community from injustice. The injustice committed against Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya and Iraq is a constant source of anger and humiliation. Bad as this is, it is compounded by a double problem. On the one hand, there is the apparent inability of Muslim regimes – powerful at home but conspicuously weak abroad – to do anything effective; and on the other hand, the hypocrisy of the world powers in ignoring these causes in favour of their own self-interest.

Now one Muslim country finds itself on the receiving end of America's impatience and military might in the pursuit of UN resolutions. Yet in Palestine and Kashmir UN resolutions have been gathering dust for decades. Baghdad, once the jewel in the Abbasid crown, will be reduced to the state it was in after being sacked by Genghis Khan and his hordes. Ordinary Muslims look to France, Germany and Russia – not their own governments – to help prevent more suffering.

It is a matter of irony therefore that Abu Bakar's concept of leadership: of transparency, an informed public, social justice and accountability, sound more familiar to us here in the west – most of the time anyway – than to people living in Muslim countries. So, to coin a phrase, if the mountain won't come to Muhammad, Muhammad (saw) must go to the mountain. So here we are...

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Our circumstances here in Britain are different. But Abu Bakar's concept of leadership is pertinent. At one level he speaks of principles that are not exclusive, not the preserve of Muslims alone. He sets out values and ideals we as Muslims share with people of other faiths and no faith, a basis to work together. British Muslims are a minority community. But what they seek in leaders and how they evaluate leadership is inspired by Abu Bakar's principles. Within the framework of these principles British Muslim leaders face four challenges: how to maintain a role for a minority religious community in a wider western context; how to effectively represent British Muslims; how to encourage progress and development within the Muslim community and finally how to improve relations between Muslims and the state and between Muslims and their fellow citizens – non-Muslim Britons.

First, how do we maintain a minority Muslim community in a wider western context? Timothy Garton Ash recently wrote that Muslims in the west face challenges from two quarters. American fundamentalist Christians and European fundamentalist secularists. The former in their blind support for Israel believe that the “reunification of all biblical lands of Israel will hasten the Second Coming, in which Rapture they will be forever saved. European fundamentalist secularists think that all religion is blindness and stupidity, a kind of mental affliction, of which Islam is a particularly acute example.” There is a lot in that analysis that I would agree with. But I would go further.

Those who view Islam’s presence in the west as alien betray not only a misunderstanding of the present, but ignorance of their past. The west and Islam, and especially Europe and Islam have a shared intellectual history. Investigative science, philosophy, medicine, agriculture, technology as well as literary arts were all imports to Europe from Islamic civilisation. So was the university, first developed in Muslim lands and adopted wholesale, including curriculum and course work, across Europe from the 12th century. The Ottoman Caliphate’s method of consultation did not escape attention either. A tract by the English Royalist Alexander Ross published around 1650 notes that “if Christians will but diligently read and observe the Laws and Histories of the Mahometans [meaning Muslims], they will blush to see how... even the great Turk himself [a reference to the Ottoman Khalifa] will attempt nothing without consulting his Mufti...” Ross's reference to the great Turk and his Mufti is of course a veiled attack at the authoritarian tendencies of the Cromwellians and their reluctance to separate the Executive from the Judiciary.

Secondly, how to effectively represent British Muslims? Here we find conceptual as well as practical challenges. As perhaps most of you already know, there is no priesthood in Islam. We have no equivalent of the Pope, the Archbishop or Chief Rabbi. Islamic law does not entrust religious authority to any central figure. On important issues of Islamic jurisprudence, it is necessary to obtain what is called *ijma* – or consensus of the scholars. Note the reference to the plural, scholars, which is deliberate. This has its drawbacks. When extremists like Abu Hamza set out to distort Islamic teachings he cannot be censured by the head of his profession because there isn't one. But this pluralism has advantages – there can be no misuse of religious power by a single cleric, there is room for different opinions, for debate and collaboration amongst scholars. The concept of Grand Muftis – supreme religious leaders – is not one that is germane to Islam and is often the product of interference by the state to 'regulate' religion. Learning, knowledge of Islamic scholarship, is the only distinction Muslims recognise, and learning is open to all. We are *all* God's stewards on earth, not just the special few.

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So it is up to the Muslim community itself to find its leaders and representatives. There have been a number of attempts to create a national body to represent British Muslims. The Muslim Council of Britain, established in 1996, was the culmination of years of consultation. The MCB is a national umbrella organisation that serves and represents British Muslims. It is not the only organisation fulfilling that role, but one of a number. However, the MCB is distinctive for two main reasons. Firstly, with over 300 organisations affiliated it is the largest representative organisation. Secondly, the MCB is democratically constituted. Its senior leaders and executive are elected to serve fixed terms. We remain accountable to our membership. As a result, the MCB is arguably Britain's most prominent Muslim representative organisation.

Lacking a religious hierarchy, the Muslim community has to devise pragmatic arrangements to manage its affairs, based on co-operation. Recently the Prince's Trust sought to extend a halal, Islamically permissible, version of its loans to disadvantaged young people. The MCB's Business and Economics Committee helped to facilitate the scheme. They in turn took advice from scholars – the UK Sharia Council – on what constitutes a halal loan. The MCB was able to draw upon the expert knowledge of both the business community and religious scholars. As a result, a willing provider (the Prince's Trust) was able to bring new opportunities to young Muslims who might otherwise have missed out.

Representing the community is always a challenge. The Muslim community in Britain is, in many ways, a microcosm of British society itself: multi-cultural and multi-ethnic with diverse experiences and needs. Around two-thirds of Britain's one and a half million Muslims originate from the Indian sub-continent. The rest comprise people of African, Arab, Turkish and Eastern European background. To this list we must of course add increasing numbers of converts – both black and white Britons. British Muslims range from relatively affluent Indians, to some among the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis who live in considerable poverty; from the recently arrived Albanians to those whose ancestry is English, Scots, Welsh or Irish. They find themselves on these shores through different circumstances and experiences. They all face the additional particular challenges of being young or old, men and women, black and brown. The MCB strives to ensure that all these diverse groups who share a common bond of faith are represented. We're not fully there yet, but we are well on the way.

How to encourage progress and development within the Muslim community is the third challenge. The diversity of the Muslim community, in itself, is a strength. There are also many achievements to draw upon, as was marvellously illustrated by the third annual Muslim News Awards for Excellence last December. The event, organised by Britain's largest and longest running Muslim newspaper, brought together men and women who have excelled in different spheres of our national life including the arts, business, scholarship, community work, sports and politics. In recognising individual achievement the event also showed the variety of positive contributions British Muslims are making to our society.

Whilst we rightly celebrate our achievements, we must also diligently tackle our shortcomings by addressing areas practice falls short of the ideals required by our faith. For instance, we must do more to ensure our young people are given an effective voice; we must ensure that women are not denied their due rights because of cultural practices contrary to religious teachings; we must publicly oppose extremists who deliberately distort the message of Islam; we must do more to ensure Imams have a better understanding of the society they work in and serve; and we must promote tolerance, understanding, dialogue and co-operation with society at large. This requires leadership at the national and local level, coupled with the active participation of the Muslim community: young and old, men and women.

The final challenge is improving relations between British Muslims and the state, British Muslims and their fellow citizens– non-Muslim Britons. This is, and can only be, a two-way process. Muslims must be active participants in the mainstream of society. This is happening. But more needs to be done. The MCB's motto is 'seeking the common good'. We are an organisation concerned with the welfare of British Muslims. But we believe this must be sought by serving and sharing in the common good of our society as a whole. We are concerned for the welfare of all Britons – whatever their faith or of no faith. We seek 'constructive engagement' with the wider society, in playing an active part as responsible and concerned citizens. Moreover, we view this as a religious and social duty.

But we must go further than that. Muslim history offers examples as well as constructive ideas relevant to modern society. Religious tolerance and multiculturalism were the glory of Islamic Spain and the Ottoman Caliphate. They enabled Muslims, Jews and Christians to live not just peacefully, but successfully amongst one another. Indeed, many Jews fleeing persecution in Europe found refuge and security in Muslim countries. We need to rediscover our proud heritage and reapply the same principles and practices in modern society.

The collective challenge for us all – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – is to create a society based on mutual respect and understanding where faith and ethnic minorities feel at home. We must do this by tackling our most pressing social problems. Chief amongst them: the high levels of poverty and social exclusion amongst Britain's most vulnerable people – including Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Three quarters of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are living in households below the poverty threshold and unemployment is around twice the rate for the population as a whole. Poor educational outcomes, bad housing and ill health also build up the picture of despair. When these conditions are compounded by racist agitation by fascists, anger can erupt into violence – as we saw during the disturbances two years ago.

Religious discrimination is another problem faced by the Muslim community. Racial discrimination is illegal, discrimination on religious grounds is not. There are many instances where Muslims are the target of hate crimes because of their faith. Muslim women have been denied jobs because they wear the hijab. Jews and Sikhs are protected because they are classified as ethnic groups, Hindus and Muslims, who are not a single ethnic group are not. Equal provision and equal protection are British ideals we have to make real for all Britons.

Finally, I must say a few words about international affairs. I mentioned the issue of global injustice earlier. This is a sentiment shared by British Muslims, as part of the *Ummah* – the worldwide Muslim community. The prospect of war in Iraq is a matter of passionate concern. This issue has produced the single largest mass engagement of British Muslims, especially the young, with their non-Muslim fellow citizens. The search for peace, justice and equity can lead us towards an inclusive society. Though today it divides government and the people, Muslim and non Muslim.

I began with the worlds of one of Islam's most distinguished leaders of old, the first Khalifa Abu Bakar. Let me conclude with those of an remarkable contemporary Muslim leader. Alija Izetbegovic, former President of Bosnia-Herzegovina, epitomises many of the values and qualities I have talked about. A product of Islam's fusion with Europe he is a man who led his country to liberation through adversity and suffering. In his book *Islam between East and West* Izetbegovic writes: "I personally feel both a Muslim and a European, and I do not think that one excludes the other. I do not accept that there are differences between people and civilisations that cannot be overcome. If each civilisation is first of all a group of values -- which are in the final analysis moral values that are believed in - then we can talk about a possible unity of civilisations...There is an exciting sentence in the Qur'an that begins with the words: 'Come and gather around the word that is common to us...' The invitation is meant for Christians and Jews. So, I invite you to turn down the invitations for building artificial partitions between Islam and Christianity, between East and West." As leaders our collective challenge is to take up this invitation to gather round what is common to us.

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