

# UNDERSTANDING ISLAM TODAY: A BRIEF GLOSSARY OF ARABIC TERMS

By Rosalie Cuneo Amer, Professor Emerita, Humanities & the Library, Cosumnes River College

## For Academic Audiences

**ISLAM:** A way of life and a religion that is intensely monotheistic. Islamic peoples comprise cultures the world over and created diverse civilizations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe. The main focus of Islam is submission to the will of God, Allah, in the Arabic language. The Islamic message continues the Judeo-Christian traditions that clarifies them through the Qur'an in a message that began with Adam, and continues through other prophetic messengers, like Abraham, Moses, Jesus ending with Muhammad. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century Muslim peoples number 1.8 billion (2015 -2020 Pew Research) adherents, including between 4-10 million Muslims in North America. Islam is derived from a tri-consonantal root, SLM, meaning submission or being secure, and is related to the Arabic word for peace, *salam*.

**MUSLIM/MUSLIMA:** A male or female who submits to the will of Allah, that is, a believer in Islam.

**AL-QUR'AN (KORAN):** The Holy Scripture of Islam, meaning recitation. The Qur'an is the words of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic through the Angel Gabriel in the environs of Mecca and Medina, between 610-632 Common Era (C.E.). An oral tradition, the Qur'an was written down, and its 114 chapters remain unchanged in Arabic since codified in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, C.E. There are translations into the world's languages, however, only the original Arabic Qur'an is considered sacred.

**HADITH:** The second most important book in Islam; contains the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad, and transmitted by his Companions and wives. The hadith transmits the traditions and custom (*al-Sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad, the seal of the Qur'anic prophets.

**ACTS OF WORSHIP (IBADAT):** The 5 pillars (*ARKAN*) of activity: 1) profession of faith (*al-shahada*); 2) prayer 5x a day (*al-salat*) directed towards the ka'ba in Mecca; 3) annual charity (*al-zakat*), 2.5% levy on wealth to be distributed to the poor and needy; 4) fasting (*al-sawm/siyam*) from dawn to sunset during the Islamic month of Ramadan (9<sup>th</sup> month), 4/24-5/23/20, as an act of self-purification, self-restraint, self renewal; and 5) a pilgrimage (*al-hajj*) to the Ka'ba sanctuary and its environs in and near Mecca, Saudi Arabia, once in a lifetime if one has the means and is physically able, performed between the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Zulhijjah, which coincides with 7/30-8/2/20 *Eid al-Adha* is 7/31/20.

**FAITH (IMAN):** 6 beliefs of a Muslim: belief in 1) Divine Unity- Oneness of God (Allah); 2) God's angels, like Gabriel, Michael; 3) God's Books (the Torah, the Gospels, and the Qur'an); 4) God's Prophetic Messengers (e.g., Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad); 5) the Day of Judgment; and 6) Predestination/Self-responsibility (Measuring out of Good and Evil). The Prophet Muhammad defined faith as a "knowledge in the heart, a voicing of the tongue, and an activity of the limbs; faith involves knowing, speaking and doing." (Murata and Chittick 37). In addition to the 6 beliefs, the Shia branch accepts two more: justice (*'adl*) and the imamate (*imama*).

**IHSAN:** doing what is beautiful, performance of good deeds.

**SHARIA:** The divine law of Islam, the "path to the watering place", based upon the Qur'an and the Sunna; the entire body of rules guiding the life of every Muslim in law, etiquette and ethics. To Sunni Muslims, the four basic sources of legal authorities are the Qur'an, the Hadith, consensus of the community and analogical reasoning.

**SUNNIS:** The largest group/branch of world Muslims (87-90%) who believe in the customs and traditions of the Prophet, including his sayings. They accept the authority of the first generation of Muslims and the validity

of the historical community. They exist the world over. There are 4 legal schools, not denominations, in Sunni Islam.

**SHIA:** The second largest group/branch of Muslims (10-13%); the faction/party of Ali, the Prophet's cousin, who held to his right and his descendants right to community leadership. Its main doctrine after Islamic tenets is the Shia *imam-mahdi* dogma, referring to a spiritual and temporal leader, divinely appointed, rightly guided, infallible and without sin. Shias are concentrated in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, the Persian Gulf nations, Pakistan, and India, and exist throughout the world. Shia is also transliterated as Shiah, Shiite and Shii in western literature. There are 3 legal schools in Shia Islam,

**FITRA:** The basic God created human nature of individuals to understand *tawhid*, Divine Unity.

**SALAFI:** The first generations of the Muslim community. Because of their closeness to the Prophet Muhammad their beliefs, practices, and moral code are authoritative.

**JIHAD:** To struggle or strive in the way of God. The greater *jihad* is an inward personal struggle to stay on the straight path, exercise self-discipline. The lesser *jihad* is an outward struggle to preserve one's faith, if threatened, to protect one's home/property, or to act in self-defense, even a military jihad meaning action in warfare. However, it is not considered "holy" war. Another action exemplified by *jihad* is to speak out against an unjust ruler. A marginalist splinter group, Al-Qaeda, formerly led by Osama Bin Laden, currently by Ayman Zawahiri, defined a global jihad as an offensive against the land of unbelief, in a cosmic conflict of good and evil. The unbelievers are non-Muslims and Muslims who don't fit his definition of a true Muslim. Radical, extremist ideology as developed in Iraq and Syria by *Daesh* led by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi is regrouping after his death. The Islamic State, also known as ISIL and ISIS, has continued a brutal global jihad, expanding to other regions in the Middle East, Africa, along with attacks in Europe and the U.S.

**HRB (ha ra ba):** root of Arabic words to be furious, fight, wage war, mutual struggle. Appears four times in Al-Qur'an. The primary justification for war is to halt earthly corruption by stopping evil; the secondary requirement is righteous intention, fighting in the way of God, and not to be aggressive.

**TAWAFIQ:** harmony, from the Arabic tri-consonantal root, WFQ, *wa fa qa*, with meanings of agreement, compatibility, reconciliation, balancing, to be favored by God, and to have success and prosper. Some Qur'anic verses containing words derived from the *wa fa qa* root are 3:103, 4:35 and 62. Another word with related meaning is **TA'LUF:** harmony, from the Arabic root ALF, *a la fa*, from which words for concord, agreement, union, and coalition are derived. The word *muta'alif*, harmonious, comes from the same root. Al-Qur'an (8:62, and 24:43) contains words derived from the root ALF.

**TASAMUH:** acceptance or tolerance, connoting generosity, ease and reciprocity, from Arabic root SMH, *sa ma ha*, to be generous, kind, liberal, treat kindly, to practice mutual tolerance. The condition of normal relations among people is that of peace. Al-Qur'an says: "O Humanity, We formed you into nations and tribes that you might know each other" (49:10) and relate peacefully to each other.

**DA'WAH:** The "call" or invitation to heed the message of the Qur'an. It is directed to Muslims through prophets and messengers to serve God alone and practice Islam, i.e., improve their faith and practice; and to non-Muslims to be reminded of the basic *fitra* to become Muslim or revert to it. Some writers and Muslims call it missionary activity.