INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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Issue 33: MARCH 2026

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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Occasional Papers of The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies Programme

Ummah in the Qur'ān: Reconciling Exclusive and Inclusive Visions of *Ummah*

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ISSN: 2661345X

Abstract

This article offers an intervention into the longstanding tension between two visions of the *ummah* – one exclusive, defined by religious boundaries, and the other inclusive, encompassing broader communities of shared values. These two visions have traditionally been treated as contradictory and oppositional. The article begins by examining the Qur'ānic usage of the polyvalent term *ummah*, to explore its intended meanings, associated injunctions, and theological implications. It then explores the contemporary debate between the exclusivist and inclusivist interpretations, before proposing a reconciliation of the two visions. Drawing on social identity theory, the article contends that the two visions can be theologically regarded as two distinct identities that can be practiced concurrently. Furthermore, the article highlights how the Islamic intellectual tradition – through the framework of *ijtihād* – allows for interpretive flexibility and adaptability, thereby challenging the tendency among some Muslim scholars to consistently privilege the exclusive vision when the two appear to clash. This article seeks to reconsider this binary through a reconciliatory synthesis of the two visions of the *ummah*, offering a theological argument that is presently absent from the current literature, and making a humble contribution to the current corpus of contemporary Islamic knowledge.

Introduction

The concept of the *ummah* occupies a significant role in contemporary discussions on Islam and the Muslim community. Numerous studies have addressed this topic, identifying two major, often competing, visions of *ummah*: the exclusive *ummah* and the inclusive *ummah*.

Existing literature typically presents the two visions either as a comparative overview or as an ongoing debate in which one side is advocated over the other. Few studies, however, attempt to reconcile these two visions, with many instead framing them as mutually exclusive. This article argues that both visions can be practiced concurrently, in harmony with core Islamic principles.

To achieve this objective, this study adopts a research framework that is based on two traditional Islamic sciences as the primary analytical tools, complemented by modern social science as a supporting framework. The two traditional Islamic sciences are *`Ulūm al-Tafsīr* - particularly the *Tafsīr Mawḍū`ī* (thematic exegesis) method - and *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, while Social Identity Theory (SIT), and, more specifically, the Theory of Multiple Social Identities (MSI) serve as the contemporary theoretical lens.

`Ulūm al-Tafsīr* refers to the traditional science of Qur'ānic exegesis, which systematises the interpretation of the Qur'an across its linguistic, historical, and thematic dimensions.[1] Among its methodologies, *Tafsīr Mawḍū`ī focuses on articulating Qur'anic teachings concerning specific themes, for example, the concept of the *ummah*, by collating, examining, and interpreting relevant verses, and finally synthesising their meanings into a coherent concept.[2] This process is guided by both classical and contemporary *tafsīr* works,[3] as well as previous research on related topics.

Uṣūl al-Fiqh (the principles of Islamic jurisprudence) provides the methodological foundation for deriving legal and ethical rulings from primary Islamic sources. It also offers interpretive tools to reconcile textual or conceptual tensions, such as between exclusive and inclusive visions of the *ummah*, through established instruments of *ijtihād*.[4] These include analysing the validity of theological evidence (*dalīl*), and balancing considerations of benefit or interest (*maslahah*) against harm (*ḍarar*).[5] *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* also identifies issues of *khilāfiyyah* (juristic disagreement) that are mutable and open to conceptual rethinking. This approach facilitates the harmonisation of classical interpretations with contemporary societal realities, resulting in religious guidance that is both ethically grounded and legally coherent.

Finally, SIT is employed to explain how group membership shapes individual identity and behaviour, while MSI – a refinement of SIT – emphasises that individuals naturally possess multiple, overlapping social identities.[6] Within the parameters of this study, SIT and MSI provide a supportive analytical framework to harmonise the exclusive and inclusive visions of the *ummah*, thereby bridging traditional Islamic methodologies with insights from contemporary social theory.

The article begins with a review of the Qur'ān's use of the term *ummah*, to ascertain its intended meaning and divine injunctions. It then presents an overview of the two visions and the contemporary

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[1] Muḥammad Khālid al-`Ik, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr wa Qawā`iduh*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Nafā'is, 1986, 30-1; Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to Sciences of the Qur'aan*, UK: Al-Hidayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999, 18-9, 289-92, 344-48.

[2] Muṣṭafā Muslim, *Mabaḥith fī al-Tafsīr al-Mawḍū`ī,* Dimashq: Dār al-Qalam, 2000, 16; Silsilat al-Ma`ārif al-Ta`līmiyyah, *al-Tafsīr al-Mawdū`ī: al-Mafhūm wa al-Manhaj*, Lubnān: Dār al-Ma`ārif al-Islāmiyyah al-Thaqāfiyyah, 2020, 18-21.

[3] Unless otherwise stated, all *tafsīr* books cited in this article is sourced from online *tafsīr* database established by The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute of Islamic Thought and certified by Ministry of Religious Affairs of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, available at: www.altafsir.com.

[4] *Ijtihād* refers to the intellectual process of deriving Islamic rulings or positions on issues not explicitly addressed in the Qur'ān or the Sunnah (the Prophet's tradition). *Ijtihād* is based on methodologies established in Islamic sciences by Muslim scholars. This methodology is often referred as *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* (Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence), though other related sciences may also be applied, depending on the issue at hand. See next note for reference.

[5] Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, Dimashq: Dār al-Fikr, 1986, vol. 1, 15-33, vol. 2, 1031-119; Muḥammad Abū Zahrah, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, Qāhirah: Dār al-Fikr al-`Arabī, n.d., 5-20, 301-18.

[6] See William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel, eds., *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Monterey: Brooks/Cole, 1979; Peter J Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory: Revised and Expanded*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 186-7; Brunhilde Scheuringer, "Multiple Identities: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach," *European Review* 24.3 (2016): 397-404; Sarah E. Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging: Pushing identity research beyond binary thinking," *Self and Identity* 17.4 (2018): 443-54.

debate surrounding them. Finally, the article proposes ways of reconciling these two visions, demonstrating that their relationship need not be antagonistic. It further contends that the two visions can be understood as distinct, yet complementary identities, that can be practiced concurrently - a claim supported by SIT.

Ummah in the Qur'ān

This section explores the polyvalent use of the term *ummah* in the Qur'ān, focusing on its different linguistic forms and contextual meanings within the Qur'ān. The word *ummah* appears 64 times in the Qur'ān, across 57 verses in 27 chapters (*sūrahs*). It is used 51 times in its singular (*mufrad*) form, and 13 times in its plural (*jam`*) form, *umam*.[7] A survey of these verses reveals that the Qur'ān uses the word ummah with a rich semantic range, applying it in diverse ways.

In its broadest sense, the term *ummah* denotes a group of people or a collective.[8] In Q. 7:34, the Qur'ān conveys that every society or nation (*ummah*) has a divinely determined lifespan. In the context of this verse, scholars like Ibn Kathīr interpret it as referring to a group of people in general.[9] Similarly, in Q. 10:47, the Qur'ān states that God will send a prophet or messenger to guide every community (*ummah*) to His path when they have strayed from the teachings of the previous prophets. Here, scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Alūsī, and Ibn `Ashūr interpret *ummah* as a general group of people.[10] An exception is made for those living after the mission of Prophet Muḥammad, as the Qur'ān clearly states that there will be no further prophets after him.[11]

The Qur'ān also uses *ummah* across temporal frames, encompassing communities of the past (for example, `Ād and Thamūd), the present (during the period of revelation), and the future.[12] According to al-Ṭabarī, Q. 7:181 highlights that God will ensure that, across time, a group of people will emerge to guide others to the truth and uphold justice.[13] The enduring presence of various righteous groups throughout human history reinforces the idea of an *ummah* – past, present, and future. Conversely, *ummah* can also refer to past communities[14] destroyed for their transgressions, as seen in Q. 6:42, where *ummah* refers to the nations that lived before Prophet Muḥammad who were punished by God for their disobedience.[15] It can also refer to the present community during revelation.[16] As inferred in Q. 3:110, most *tafsīr* scholars understand the pronoun "you" in reference to the best *ummah* (*khayr ummah*) as specifically denoting the companions of Prophet Muḥammad. However, it is also a command for subsequent generations of Muslims to achieve the same honourable status by embodying their virtues.[17] Other temporal usages are seen in Q. 11:8, where al-Qurṭubī reported that most *tafsīr* scholars understood this verse as referring to *ummah* as a time or a particular period.[18] In Q. 12:45, al-

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[7] Muḥammad Fu'ād `Abd al-Bāqī, *al-Mu`jam al-Mufaharas li Alfāẓ al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, n.p.: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1988, 80; Yoshiko Oda, "The Concept of the "Ummah" in the Qur'an: An Elucidation of the Basic Nature of the Islamic Holy Community," *Orient* 20 (1984): 93-108; Tawfīq al-Badrī, "Mafhūm al-Ummah wa Awṣāfuhā fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm," *al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu`āṣir* 24.94 (2018): 81-116; Abdullah al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 7.2 (1986): 606-16.

[8] See the Qur'ān, 2:134, 2:141, 4:41, 6:108, 7:34, 10:47, 10:49, 11:8, 11:118, 15:5, 16:36, 16:64, 16:69, 16:97, 22:34, 22:67, 23:43, 27:83, 28:75, 28:83, 35:24, 42:8, 45:28.

[9] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-`Aẓīm*, n.d., 7:34.

[10] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān fi Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, n.d., 10:47; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, n.d., 10:47; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, n.d., 10:47.

[11] See the Qur'ān, 33:40.

[12] See the Qur'ān, 2:134, 2:141, 3:113, 5:48, 7:181, 10:47, 16:36, 22:67, 28:23.

[13] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 7:181.

[14] See the Qur'ān, 2:213, 6:42, 7:34, 7:159, 7:160, 7:164, 7:168, 10:19, 10:49, 11:48, 13:30, 16:63, 23:43, 23:44, 29:18, 35:24, 35:42, 40:5.

[15] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 6:42; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 6:42; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 6:42; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi` li Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, n.d., 6:42.

[16] See the Qur'ān, 2:143, 3:104, 3:110, 7:181, 13:30, 16:89.

[17] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 3:110; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 3:110; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 3:110; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 3:110; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 3:110; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-Qadīr*, n.d., 3:110.

[18] al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 11:8.

Rāzī commented that ummah implies an extended duration, composed of a series of intervals - such as days, weeks, or years.[19]

Notably, the term *ummah* is not limited to the pious alone.[20] Q. 7:168 illustrates this inclusivity, where the term *ummah* includes both pious and non-pious groups regardless of their level of religiosity.[21] However, there are also verses that limit the meaning of *ummah* to the pious alone. *Tafsīr* scholars associate this usage with Q. 2:143, 3:104, 3:110, 7:159 and 7:181.[22] In these instances, the *ummah* signifies those who enjoin what is good, forbid what is evil, and uphold justice. Conversely, *ummah* can also refer exclusively to non-pious people,[23] such as the disbelieving communities mentioned in Q. 6:42 and 7:34. Al-Ṭabarī, al-Alūsī, and Ibn `Ashūr interpret *ummah* in Q. 7:34 as past nations who rejected the prophets sent to them to deliver God's messages.[24]

The inclusivity of *ummah* is further evident in verses, such as Q. 16:36, where *ummah* refers to both believers and non-believers.[25] In contrast, other verses refer to *ummah* as believers only.[26] For example, in Q. 22:34, as interpreted by al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn `Ashūr, *ummah* refers to the followers of the religion brought by prophets sent to them.[27] *Ummah*, specifically referring to the followers of Prophet Muḥammad can be found in verses that describe them as "*ummah wasaṭ*" (a justly balanced community) and "*khayr ummah*" (the best community) in Q. 2:143 and 3:110, respectively.[28] This interpretation is supported by scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Shawkānī, Ibn `Ashūr, and al-Alūsī.[29]

Other usages of *ummah* highlight particular subgroups within larger communities. For example, it can refer to non-believers (*mushrikīn*),[30] those who worship gods other than Allah. In Q. 13:30, *ummah* refers exclusively to non-believers. At times, the Qur'ān refers to *ummah* as the People of the Book (Jews and Christians), either collectively or as a subgroup, as in Q. 3:113, 5:66, 7:159, and 7:160. A cursory reading of these verses might lead one to conclude that the word *ummah* refers exclusively to the People of the Book. However, *ummah* is also used for a subgroup or a special group of people from within a larger society. In Q. 3:104, it refers to a subgroup within Prophet Muḥammad's *ummah*, while in Q. 3:113, 5:66, 7:159 and 7:160, it refers to a subgroup of the People of the Book.

Interestingly, the Qur'ān uses *ummah* in a variety of ways that extend beyond the common reference to a human collective. One notable instance is its use to denote a group or species of animals. This occurs in only one verse, Q. 6:38. This interpretation is affirmed by *tafsīr* scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Alūsī, and Ibn `Ashūr. Another interesting non-human application of *ummah* can be found in Q. 7:38, 41:25 and 46:18, where it is used to refer to jinn.

In a truly unique and singular instance, the Qur'ān refers to Prophet Ibrāhīm himself as an *ummah*.[31] In Q. 16:120, the Qur'ān commands Muslims to take Prophet Ibrāhīm as a role model, as he alone embodies all the fundamental qualities necessary for them to collectively form a virtuous society (*ummah*).[32]

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[19] al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, n.d., 12:45.
[20] See the Qur'ān, 2:134, 2:141, 7:160, 7:164, 7:168, 10:47, 11:48, 16:93, 42:8, 43:33, 45:28.
[21] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 7:168; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 7:168; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 7:168; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 7:168.
[22] Ibid., 3:110, 7:159, 7:181; Ibid., 3:104, 3:110, 7:181; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 3:110; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-Qadīr*, 3:110; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 2:143, 3:110; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 3:104, 3:110, 7:181.
[23] See the Qur'ān, 6:42, 7:34:16:63, 48:18.
[24] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 7:34; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 7:34; Ibn `Ashūr, a*l-Taḥrīr,* 7:34.
[25] See the Qur'ān, 5:48, 7:164, 7:168, 7:160, 10:47, 11:48, 16:36, 16:93, 42:8, 43:33, 45:28.
[26] See the Qur'ān, 2:128, 2:143, 2:213, 3:104, 3:110, 10:19, 22:34.
[27] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 7:34; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 7:34; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 7:34.
[28] See the Qur'ān, 2:143, 3:110.
[29] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 3:110; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 3:110; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 3:110; al-Shawkānī, *Fatḥ al-Qadīr*, 3:110; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 3:110; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 2:143, 3:110.
[30] See the Qur'ān, 7:34, 10:49, 13:30, 16:63, 23:44, 29:18, 35:45, 40:5, 41:25, 43:22, 46:18.
[31] See the Qur'ān, 16:120.
[32] al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 16:120; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 16:120; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 16:120; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 16:120.

Ummah is also used to denote a religion, tradition, or a way of life that serves as a binding force among people.[33] Some Muslim scholars view this usage as the Qur'ān's emphasis on religion or faith as the defining criterion for constituting a Muslim *ummah*.[34] Examples of this usage appear in Q. 43:22 and 43:23. Al-Ṭabarī interprets *ummah* in these two verses as referring to "*dīn*" (religion) or "*millah*" (creed) of idol-worshipping. Al-Qurṭubī held that it could also refer to "*ṭarīqah*" (way) or "*madhhab*" (school of thought). Similar views can also be found in the commentaries of Ibn Kathīr, al-Alūsī and Ibn `Ashūr.[35] This usage highlights the unifying influence of religion and tradition in the formation of an *ummah*.

Al-Qurṭubī offered a comprehensive classification of the diverse meanings of *ummah*, identifying eight in total. Five of these classifications occur in the Qur'ān as a group of people in general, followers of prophets, a virtuous person, a religion or way of life, and a span of time. The remaining three are drawn from the Arabic language in reference to the height of a person, an individual who holds a unique belief not shared by others, and a mother.[36] These diverse meanings are also reported by numerous studies on the Qur'ānic semantics of the term *ummah*.[37]

Linguistically, it appears to function as a synonym for terms such as *qawm*,[38] *jamā`ah*,[39] *qabīlah*,[40] and *ṭā'ifah*.[41] Moreover, the Qur'ānic usage of *ummah* aligns with its broader linguistic sense. It is not deployed as a technical Islamic term, such as *ṣalāh* or *zakāh*, which denote specific acts of devotion to God, which are distinct from their common usage in Arabic language. These varied meanings align with entries found in classical Arabic dictionaries such as *Kitāb al-`Ayn*, the oldest Arabic dictionary, by al-Farāhidī,[42] *Jamharah al-Lughah*, by Ibn Durayd,[43] *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, by al-Azharī,[44] and *Lisān al-`Arab*, by Ibn Manẓūr.[45]

These findings suggest that the Qur'ān does not offer a fixed socio-political definition of the *ummah*. Rather, it leaves room for various interpretations by Muslim scholars.[46] The usage of the term *ummah* reveals a concept that is both expansive and layered, encompassing entire communities, subgroups, or individuals, as well as non-living beings, including species of animals and even groups of jinn. This demonstrates the term's flexibility, across moral, temporal, and social contexts. Consequently, two major and contrasting concepts of *ummah* have emerged from the discourse of Muslim scholars throughout history: one that views the *ummah* as composed exclusively of Muslims, and another that includes Muslims and non-Muslims. The following sections present an overview of

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[33] See the Qur'ān, 2:213, 11:118, 16:93, 21:92, 23:52, 42:8, 43:22-3.
[34] al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," 606-16; Necmettin Gokkir, "Political Language of Tafsir: Redefining "Ummah," a Religio-Communal Concept of the Qur'an, Past and Present," *Journal of Istanbul Faculty of Theology* 15 (2007): 245-72; Maryam J. Al-Faruqi, "Umma: The Orientalist and the Qur'anic Concept of Identity," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 16.1 (January 2005): 1-34.
[35] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 43:22-3; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 43:22-3; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 43:22-3; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 43:22-3; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 43:22-3.
[36] See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 11:8.
[37] Oda, "The Concept of the "Ummah," 93-108; al-Badrī, "Mafhūm Al-Ummah," 81-116; al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," 606-16; `Abd al-Kabīr Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm wa al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf*, Qāhirah: Dār al-Salām, 2010, 104-33; Frederick Mathewson Denny, "The Meaning of 'Ummah' in the Qur'an," *History of Religions* 15.1 (1975): 34-70; Katrin A. Jomaa, *A New Paradigm for a Global World*, New York: State University of New York Press, 2021, 21-24.
[38] See the Qur'ān, 7:156; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 5:48; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 5:66; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 6:108.
[39] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 7:159, 7:164, 7:168; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 11:8; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 7:164, 7:168; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 7:164, 11:8.
[40] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 7:160; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`*, 16:92; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 16:92.
[41] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 16:92; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 3:104, 16:92, 16:120; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 4:41, 11:8, 12:45.
[42] Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 19-32; Al-Khalīl bin Aḥmad Al-Farāhidī, *Kitāb al-`Ayn*, n.d., available at: https://shamela.ws/book/1682/3198#p1.
[43] Ibid.; Ibn Durayd, *Jamharah al-Lughah*, Bayrūt: Dar al-`Ilm Li al-Malayīn, 1987, available at: https://shamela.ws/book/7032/21#p1.
[44] Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah*, 19-32; Al-Azharī, *Tahdhīb al-Lughah*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Ihya' al-Turājth al-`Arabī, 2001, 15:454, available at: https://shamela.ws/book/7031/4650#p1.
[45] Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah*, 19-32; Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-`Arab*, Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1414H, available at: https://shamela.ws/book/1687/5939#p1.
[46] Jomaa, *A New Paradigm*, 71-72.

both concepts, followed by the author's comments on how to theologically reconcile both concepts in a contemporary context.

Exclusive *Ummah*

Proponents of the exclusive *ummah* concept recognise the Qur'ān's varied usage of the term *ummah*. However, they argue that its primary and intended meaning refers to a group of people bound together by a common religious creed. They assert that the unifying factor of an *ummah* is religious belief, rather than blood, territory, or polity. This view is based on the usage of *ummah* among ancient Arabs, where it denotes groups of people united by a common creed; otherwise, different words such as *qawm*, *qabīlah*, and *jamā`ah* will be used.[47] Thus, *ummah* was used also by Arabs to mean a creed or belief of religion[48] and the Qur'ān affirms both usages in Q. 2:213,[49] 5:48,[50] 10:19,[51] 11:118,[52] 21:92,[53] 22:34,[54] 23:53,[55] 42:8,[56] 43:22-3,[57] and 45:28.[58]

From the Qur'ān's perspective, proponents argue that only creed is capable of unifying people as an *ummah,* and it can refer only to Islam, as the sole religion recognised by Allah.[59] In other words, humankind can only form themselves as an *ummah* in the eyes of Allah when they are bonded by Islam.[60]

Proponents further contend that the Qur'ān mandates unity as a religious obligation for Muslims to fulfil their collective duty of establishing Islam on earth.[61] This unity is grounded in faith, transcending ethnic, geographical, or other distinctions, and the term *ummah* is the Qur'ānic term to signify this unity. Since belief in Allah as the only God, belief in Muḥammad as Allah's final Prophet, and the commitment to practice Allah's will (as expressed in the *sharī`ah*) at a personal, communal, and global level are central to being part of an *ummah*, non-Muslims – who do not share these beliefs – are not considered part of it.[62]

The more conservative proponents of the exclusive *ummah* extend this view further, by arguing that the Qur'ān prohibits Muslims from showing *walā'* (allegiance, loyalty, friendship, or love) towards non-Muslims,[63] reserving it exclusively for fellow Muslims.[64] They cite verses commanding *barā'* (disavowal or hate) towards non-Muslims and demand that Muslims be, "firm and unyielding towards all deniers of the truth, [yet] full of mercy towards one another"[65] and "humble towards the believers, proud towards all who deny the truth."[66] According to them, including non-Muslims within the *ummah*

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[47] Al-Faruqi, "Umma," 22-7; Nāṣīf Naṣṣār, *Mafhūm al-Ummah bayn al-Dīn wa al-Tārīkh*, online: al-Maktabah al-Shāmilah al-Dhahabiyyah, 2022, 6-14, 30-31, 44-45, 53-54, available at https://ketabonline.com/ar/books/105640; Ṭāhā Jābir al-`Alwānī, *Tafakkuk Mafhūm al-Ummah wa Ḍarurat al-Murāja`ah*, available at https://alwani.org/?p=10194.
[48] Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 25.
[49] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 2:213.
[50] al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 5:48.
[51] Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 10:19.
[52] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 11:118; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 11:118.
[53] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 21:92; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 21:92; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 21:92; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 21:92.
[54] al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 22:34.
[55] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 23:53; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`,* 23:53.
[56] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 42:8; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`*, 42:8; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 42:8; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 42:8.
[57] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 43:22-3; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`*, 43:22-3; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān,* 43:22-3.
[58] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān*, 45:28; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi`*, 45:28.
[59] See the Qur'ān, 3:19, 3:85.
[60] al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," 609-10.
[61] See the Qur'ān, 3:103-4, 21:92.
[62] al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," 609-10; Abū A`lā al-Mawdūdī, *al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, Qāhirah: al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, 1980, 161-79; Ganjar Widhiyoga, "The Construction of the Umma: From Global Consciousness to an Aspirational Global Society," *The Muslim World* 109 (July 2019): 209-23.
[63] See the Qur'ān, 3:28, 4:89, 4:139, 4:144, 5:51, 5:80, 58:22, 59:1.
[64] See the Qur'ān, 3:3, 5:55-6, 43:26-7, 59:4.
[65] See the Qur'ān, 48:29.
[66] See the Qur'ān, 5:54.

would negate the core principles of Islamic faith. They believe that such inclusion is a serious aberration and could also nullify a Muslim's faith.[67] This exclusivist view has particular relevance in contexts where Muslims are minorities in non-Muslim countries. In such context, they regard an inclusive *ummah* as unacceptable since minority Muslims might be subservient to the predominantly non-Muslim community.

Notable contemporary proponents of exclusive *ummah* include Sayyid Quṭb and al-Mawdūdī, as well as groups such as Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Quṭb, whose book *Ma`ālim fi al-Ṭārīq* (*The Milestones*) and *tafsīr* work, *Fi Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* (*In the Shade of the Qur'ān*) has significantly influenced contemporary *da`wah* movements. He argued that the *ummah* can only consist of people who are willing to submit to Allah and live according to the Islamic way of life. Quṭb cited Q. 3:104, which ties the idea of *ummah* to obedience to Allah. Therefore, anyone who deviates from this path is considered outside of the *ummah*, as they logically cannot be expected to fulfil its function – to glorify and elevate Allah's religion.[68] Al-Mawdūdī, an influential figure on Islamic movements globally and also the founder of Jamaat Islami in Pakistan, advanced a similar view. For him, the *ummah* should be bound spiritually by a common faith in Allah and politically by a caliphate that would rule by the *sharī`ah*. Consequently, only those who accept this bond are included in the *ummah*.[69]

Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr regards the concept of an inclusive *ummah* as dangerous to both majority and minority Muslim communities. It argues that this inclusive concept is rooted in Western ideas such as nationalism, the nation-state, and liberal notions of equality. These concepts are positioned as alternatives to authentic Islamic concepts, such as the caliphate system, a faith-based identity that transcends race and nationality and upholds the supremacy of Islam above all else. Such compromises of Islamic principles seek to further weaken Muslims by weakening their common identity.[70] Groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State adopt an even narrower interpretation of *ummah*. For them, the *ummah* not only excludes all non-Muslims (often labelled as infidels), but also Muslims who do not adhere to their strict Salafist doctrine. They espouse a rigid, uncompromising attitude towards *al-walā'* and *al-barā,'* and practice *takfīr* – declaring others as "apostates" or "unbelievers". However, it is notable that Al-Qaeda exercises comparatively greater restraint in spilling the blood of "apostates" to avoid backlash and the potential loss of support from local and global Muslim communities, which would pragmatically be regarded as a greater harm (*ḍarar*) to their cause.[71]

Although proponents of exclusive *ummah* strive hard to frame their view in scripture, by citing the Qur'ān, *ḥadīths,* and commentaries of Muslim scholars, contemporary studies suggest that the exclusive *ummah* concept has also been shaped by socio-political contexts across Islamic history up to the present day. During the formative period of classical Islam, Muslim empires such as the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates were dominant global powers that ruled vast territories stretching from the Atlantic coast of Spain and Morocco to Central Asia. Non-Muslims lived as minorities under the two caliphates. Under the *dhimmī* system, they had no incentive to challenge the status quo. Non-Muslims enjoyed treatments that were often more favourable than those offered elsewhere.[72]

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[67] Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestone*, Birmingham: Maktabah Booksellers and Publishers, 2006, 30-44; Sayyid Quṭb, *Ma`ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*, Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq, 1979, 36-47; Ghāzī al-Tawbah, *al-Ummah al-Islāmiyyah bayn al-Qur'ān wa al-Tārīkh: Dirāsah wa Taḥlīl*, n.p.: Minbar al-Ummah li al-Dirāsāt wa Al- Buḥūth, 2009, 226-30; Christina Hartmann, "Who does (not) belong to the jihadis' umma? A comparison of IS's and al Qaida's use of takfir to exclude people from the Muslim community," *Journal for Deradicalization* 13 (2017): 213-35.

[68] Quṭb, *Milestone*, 30-44; Quṭb, *Ma`ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*, 36-47; Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Ẓilāl al-Qur'ān* vol. 2, Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003, 907-36.

[69] al-Mawdūdī, *al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, 161-79; Abu A`lā al-Mawdūdī, *Islamic Way of Life*, Riyad: IIFSO, 1997, 5-6, 34-35.

[70] Hizb ut-Tahrir, *The Ummah's Charter*, London: Al-Khilafah Publication, 1989, 5-30; Houriyah Ahmed and Hannah Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, London: Centre for Social Cohesion, 2009, 3-143.

[71] Hartmann, "Who does (not) belong to the jihadis' umma?," 213-35; James Piscatori and Amin Saikal, *Islam Beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 134-52; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "The Danger of *Takfir* (Excommunication): Exposing IS' *Takfiri* Ideology," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9.4 (April 2017): 3-10.

[72] Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman, *Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought*, Herndon: IIIT, 1993, 37-62; Tasneem Alkiek, *Religious Minorities under Muslim Rule*, Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research, 2017; Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle*

This historical context conditioned many Muslims to associate the *ummah* with fellow Muslims only, who were regarded as the dominant people of their time. There was little reason to consider non-Muslims as equal members of the *ummah*. Non-Muslims were expected to be grateful for the protection and relative security they enjoyed under the caliphate and under the *dhimmī* system, even if they were considered outside of the *ummah.* This historical context helps explain why the concept of an exclusive *ummah* became the dominant view within the intellectual discourse of classical scholars and continues to remain prevalent within the contemporary Muslim mindset.[73]

The contemporary concept of an exclusive *ummah* has gained prominence largely as a response to colonialism and Western hegemony. During the colonial era, Muslims were encouraged to unite under the banner of exclusive *ummah* to reclaim their lands. To include non-Muslims – such as European Christians – within the concept of *ummah* was deemed counterintuitive and tantamount to fraternising with the enemy. This sentiment persisted into the post-colonial era, reinforced by the perception that the modernisation of Muslim countries following independence represented a form of "neo-colonisation" or "cultural colonisation". Secular Muslim governments and intellectual elites were often viewed as proxies, complicit in undermining Islamic identity. Given this context, the reassertion and defence of an exclusive *ummah* were considered essential against the inclusive alternative.[74]

Inclusive *Ummah*

Muslim scholars who support the concept of an inclusive *ummah* – encompassing both Muslims and non-Muslims – base their arguments on several key considerations. They highlight that the Qur'ān itself uses *ummah* with various meanings, some of which refer to humanity at large, comprising both believers and disbelievers. Notably, the Qur'ān even applies *ummah* to describe non-Muslims, including People of the Book and Arab idol-worshippers. Thus, there is no Qur'ānic evidence restricting the term *ummah* solely to Muslims or prohibiting its use in reference to communities that include both Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, the Qur'ān highlights that the Prophet Muḥammad is the final prophet of Allah, sent as a guide to all humankind until the end of time.[75] Therefore, all of humanity after the prophethood of Muḥammad can be considered part of his *ummah*. While only those who accept his message are regarded as Muslims, this distinction does not exclude others from belonging to his wider *ummah*.

Prophet Muḥammad recognised non-Muslim communities as part of one *ummah* since they were signatories to the Madinah Charter alongside Muslims. The Charter was an agreement between the Prophet, his Muslim followers, and various Jewish and non-Muslim Arab communities in Madinah. It stipulated common duties towards fellow signatories, such as maintaining peaceful relations with one another, and fulfilling collective duties towards the city, including defending Madinah from external aggression through manpower and financial contributions. The Charter also guaranteed the freedom of all non-Muslim signatories to practice their respective religions and traditions. Many scholars contend that this Charter represents Prophet Muhammad's original and primary model for organising a multi-cultural society. The later introduction of *dhimmī* status for non-Muslim subjects emerged in response to subsequent events, particularly the breaches of the Charter by certain Jewish tribes in Madinah and

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Ages, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, xxi-v; Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Between Umma and Dhimma: The Christians of the Middle East under the Umayyads," *Annales Islamologiques* 42 (2008): 134-49.

[73] al-Mawdūdī, *al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, 174-79; Jomaa, *A New Paradigm*, 72, 77-78, 120; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "Citizenship: An Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 11.2 (May 2009): 121-53, 121-23, 131-35; Rached Ghannouchi with Andrew F. March, *On Muslim Democracy: Essays and Dialogue,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 102-7; Shahid Habib, Saeed Ahmad, Muḥammad Junaid Mughal and Abbas Ali Raza, "Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah in the Perspective of Globalization," *Psychology and Education* 58.3 (2021): 1884-98.

[74] Naṣṣār, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 29-30; Jomaa, *A New Paradigm*, 10-11; Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Khilāfah*, Qāhirah: al-Zahrā' li al-I`lām al-`Arabī, 1998, 153-55; Riaz Hassan, "Religion, Modernization and Islamic Ummah," *Journal Al-Tamaddun* 13.1 (2018): 57-64.

[75] See the Qur'ān, 21:107, 33:48.

the resulting hostility of those banished from Madinah who later settled in Khaybar.[76] Additionally, some scholars invoke Q. 21:92: "Verily, this community (*ummah*) of yours is one single community, since I am the Sustainer of you all: worship, then, Me [alone]!" It stipulates that all of humanity is one *ummah* whose primary duty is to worship Allah.[77]

Prominent proponents of inclusive *ummah* include notable figures such as Fahmī Huwaydī, Sheikh `Alī Jum`ah, and Sheikh `Abd Allah bin Bayyah. Fahmī Huwaydī, an Egyptian Muslim columnist and activist, authored a book titled *Muwāṭinūn... Lā Dhimmiyyūn* (*Citizens…Not* Dhimmīs). The book was published a decade prior to the 9/11 attacks. In it, Huwaydī advocates for the recognition of non-Muslims as fellow citizens with equal rights in Egypt and other Muslim countries. Citing the Madinah Charter, which regarded Jews as members of a single *ummah*, Huwaydī argues that non-Muslims should no longer be viewed as *ahl al-dhimmah* (*dhimmīs*) subjected to *jizyah* (a special obligatory poll tax). He concedes that some restrictions, such as limiting the highest political positions to Muslims only, might be applied to respect the sentiments of the Muslim majority. However, Huwaydī articulates this recognition of non-Muslims as a matter of pragmatism rather than a religious imperative.[78]

Sheikh `Alī Jum`ah, former Grand Mufti of Egypt (2003-2013), and ranked 22nd among the 500 most influential Muslims in the world in 2024, echoes Huwaydī's position. In his book *al-Namādhij al-Arba`ah min Hady al-Nabiyy fī al-Ta`āyush ma`a al-Ākhar* (*Four Models of Peaceful Co-existence with Other Communities from the Prophet*), he describes the Madinah Charter as the first constitution written by Prophet Muḥammad, which recognised the non-Muslim participants (including both Jews and Arabs) as equal members of the Madinan polity, akin to the modern concept of citizenship. The Madinah Charter ensured that no discrimination existed among its members concerning rights and duties, regardless of beliefs, lineage, or skin colour.[79]

Sheikh Bin Bayyah, a scholar on Islamic legal philosophy and the founder of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Society, initiated the Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World in 2016. One of the points of the declaration states: "We call upon Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world to develop a jurisprudence on the concept of 'citizenship' which is inclusive of diverse groups. Such jurisprudence shall be rooted in Islamic tradition and principles and mindful of global changes."[80] In his introductory speech to the Marrakesh Declaration, Sheikh Bin Bayyah recommended the Madinah Charter as the main reference for this endeavour. He echoed the ideas articulated by Huwaydī and Sheikh Jum`ah in their books on integrating non-Muslims and Muslims into one *ummah*.[81]

Proponents of inclusive *ummah* maintain that the concept is applicable regardless of whether Muslims constitute the majority or minority of a group. It is still an *ummah* within a Muslim-majority country, encompassing both the Muslim majority and its non-Muslim citizens. Similarly, a Muslim minority community within a non-Muslim majority country is still regarded as an *ummah* as it refers to the broader nation state. In both cases, the *ummah* can be seen as an Islamic equivalent of a modern nation, representing a pluralistic national community.

Although the inclusive *ummah* is less prominent than its exclusive counterpart in Muslim scholars' discourse, the idea of an inclusive *ummah* has been present since the classical period of Islamic intellectual history. Its foundational seed lies in the Qur'ān itself, through various verses that impart an inclusive meaning to *ummah*. Nonetheless, it has gained renewed relevance and prominence

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[76] Jomaa, *A New Paradigm*, 133-72; *I`lān al-Marākesh (Marrakesh Declaration)*, Abu Dhabi: Promoting Peace in Muslim Society Forum, 2016, 75-85; `Alī Jum`ah, *al-Namādhij al-Arba`ah Min Hady al-Nabiyy fī al-Ta`āyush ma`a al-Ākhar: al-Usus wa al-Maqāṣid*, Qāhirah: Dār al-Furūq, 2013, 37-8, 40-51; Maszlee Malik, "*Fiqh al-Muwāṭanah* (Fiqh of Citizenship): A New and Inclusive Islamic Approach for Multi-religious Societies," *Penang Institute*, 30 March (2018): 1-16, available at: https://penanginstitute.org/publications/issues/1047-fiqh-al-muwatanah-fiqh-of-citizenship-a-new-and-inclusive-islamic-approach-for-multi-religious-societies/.

[77] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi` al-Bayān,* 21:92; al-Qurṭubī, a*l-Jāmi`,* 21:92; al-Alūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma`ānī*, 21:92; Ibn `Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr,* 21:92; Kamali, "Citizenship," 131.

[78] See Fahmī Huwaydī, *Muwāṭinūn... Lā Dhimmiyyūn,* Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq, 1999, passim.

[79] Jum`ah, *Al-Namādhij al-Arba`ah,* 37-8, 40-51.

[80] *I`lān al-Marākesh (Marrakesh Declaration)*, 118.

[81] Ibid., 64-85.

in Islamic discourse in the modern era, largely as a result of various historical events.[82] A historical shift occurred with the introduction of a Westphalian nation state concept on formerly colonised traditional Muslim lands. This led to the state becoming the primary unifying factor of its population, also known as nationalism. It emphasised the recognition of all citizens as equals in terms of their rights and duties, regardless of race, language, or religion. This led many proponents of inclusive *ummah* to argue that the era of a central caliphate governing all Muslim lands is over and unlikely to return. Rather than romanticising the past glories, or attempting to rival the successes of European counterparts, they argue that Muslim countries should constructively engage with the current realities by uniting their populations under the notion of the nation state, promoting social harmony, coexistence, and mitigating divisions along the lines of ethnicity, culture, language, or religion. This requires a rethinking of traditional Islamic concepts, including the idea of *ummah*.[83] Furthermore, the spread of Western ideas of nationalism, universal human rights, and democracy, has challenged traditional norms, including the concept of an exclusive *ummah*. These ideas gained influence among certain Muslims, and they contributed to the prominence of the inclusive *ummah* concept.[84]

Additionally, the emergence of extremist movements in the early post-independence period has significantly impacted the perception of the *ummah*. These movements misappropriated traditional Islamic ideas to propagate a supremacist and exclusivist vision of Islam. In their view, non-Muslims are at best, granted conditional recognition as members of society, unequal to Muslims, and excluded from the *ummah*. At worst, these movements portray non-Muslims as an enemy (*kāfir ḥarbī*), inherently untrustworthy, always conspiring against Islam and Muslims, and whose lives are deemed dispensable. These movements advocate that Muslims must never show amity, friendship, and loyalty (*walā'*) to non-Muslims, instead practising the opposite (*barā'*), unless non-Muslims agree to submit themselves to Islamic rule.[85]

These ideas propagated by such movements pose serious challenges to the traditional practice and understanding of Islam. They also carry serious implications for social harmony and national security, particularly in various Muslim countries and across the globe. Notable examples of these movements include al-Qaeda, responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and Islamic State, which committed various atrocities against both Muslims and non-Muslims during its territorial control in Iraq and Syria.[86] As a result of these groups, the negative perception of Islam and Muslims was amplified, which contributed to the rise of Islamophobia among non-Muslims.

In response, a broad coalition of Muslim scholars and thinkers has actively opposed these groups. They offer a peaceful counter-narrative aligned with the concept of an inclusive *ummah*.[87] This stands in stark contrast to the supremacist, exclusivist and hate-mongering ideologies from these movements, particularly in the post-9/11 era (2001), and following the declaration of the Islamic State caliphate (2014). In an age marked by pluralism, polarisation, and persistent misrepresentation of Islam, reviving the inclusive *ummah* offers both a theologically sound and constructive path forward. As mentioned earlier, a rethinking of traditional Islamic concepts, including the idea of *ummah* is needed.

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[82] Hassan, "Religion, Modernization," 58; Habib, "Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah," 1884-98; Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 33-54.

[83] Hassan, "Religion, Modernization," 59-62; Habib, "Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah," 1884-98; Kamali, "Citizenship," 122 and 130.

[84] Hassan, "Religion, Modernization," 59-62; Habib, "Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah," 1884-98; Ghannouchi, "Islam and Citizenship, 100-7; Rached Ghannouchi, "The state and religion in the fundamentals of Islam and contemporary interpretation," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 6.2 (April 2013): 164-71; Hasnan Bachtiar, "Towards a progressive interpretation of *Ummah*," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 8.1 (2018): 87-116.

[85] Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 111-44; Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Interpreting Islam and Plural Society," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal Journal* 1.1 (October 2009): 99-120, 100-104.

[86] Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 111-44; Hassan, "Interpreting Islam and Plural Society," 100-104.

[87] *Open Letter to al-Baghdadi*, 19 September 2014, available at: https://rissc.jo/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Letter_to_Baghdadi-EN.pdf; Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombing*, London: Minhaj-ul-Quran International, 2010, chap. 12 and 17; Huwaydī, *Muwāṭinūn...,* 110-26; Fahmī Huwaydī, *Ḥattā Lā Takun Fitnah*, Qāhirah: Dār al-Shurūq, 2002, 268-87; Habib, "Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah," 1884-98.

The Debate

Within contemporary discourse, the concepts of exclusive and inclusive *ummah* remain in tension. Proponents of both concepts advocate for their vision of *ummah* and have dedicated considerable effort to critique the opposing vision.[88] The following are criticisms that each camp directs towards the other. While they are not exhaustive due to space constraints, they capture the key points.

Proponents of exclusive *ummah* raise several theological and socio-political arguments against the inclusive vision of *ummah*. They argue that an inclusive model blurs the clear distinction established in the Qur'ān between Muslims and non-Muslims in verses such as Q. 2:143, 3:104, and 3:110. This blurred distinction undermines the Qur'ānic framework for a communal identity. They further contend that the inclusive vision is a theological aberration. The enshrined concept of *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* is considered by exclusivists to be a foundational tenet of Islam. Inclusivity facilitates assimilation into secular societies, thereby contradicting the comprehensive Islamic way of life. In their view, the inclusive approach dilutes the Muslim social identity by tethering it to race, culture, language, geography, or nationality – categories that the exclusive vision of the *ummah* aims to transcend. This dilution is seen as contributing to the current disunity and precarious state of the global Muslim *ummah*, particularly in its relations with Western powers, often perceived to be Christian and Jewish. For the exclusivists, the inclusive vision represents a capitulation to Western liberalism, which they describe as defeatist.[89]

One of the most important and contested sources in this debate lies in the Madinah Charter. While inclusive *ummah* advocates cite the Madinah Charter as evidence of early Muslim engagement in intercommunal coexistence, exclusivists challenge its authenticity, coherence, and historical nature. They question its status as an authoritative authentic text, noting that it does not have a single *sanad* (chain of narrators), and was not recorded in any books of *fiqh* and *ḥadīths*. While it is part of the Prophet Muḥammad's *sīrah* (history) as reported by Ibn Ishaq, this account is unsupported by any *sanad*.[90] Although aspects of the Madinah Charter may have some corroborations in the works of *ḥadīth* scholars, this does not elevate it to the status of a *sahih* (authentic) *ḥadīth*. As such, exclusivists argue that the Madinah Charter cannot serve as a theological basis without further corroborative evidence.[91]

The Madinah Charter, in its form as a single document, appears to be a compilation of the Prophet Muḥammad's treaties with various parties, including treaties between groups of Muslims and non-Muslims, Jews, and Arabs. However, the chronological sequence of the compiled treaties remains unclear, complicating efforts to reconcile elements that might support either inclusive or exclusive interpretations. It is unclear which clauses were enacted first, whether any were abrogated by the subsequent clauses, and whether the document was compiled in a single instance or over multiple stages. The lack of clarity regarding its duration, ambiguous scope, and final form further complicates its applicability as a basis for contemporary theological or political arguments.

Exclusive *ummah* proponents highlight a clause in the beginning of the Madinah Charter which reads: "This is a writ (*kitāb*) from Muḥammad between the Believers (*mu'minūn*) and Muslims (*muslimūn*) of the Quraysh and in Yathrib, and those who join them and perform jihad alongside them. They are one "*ummah*" (people) to the exclusion of all other people."[92] For scholars such as Ovamir Anjum, this clause establishes a theological boundary. He comments, "[I]n this document, the Prophet defines the *ummah* in the way that becomes the primary meaning of the term for all time… In this context, *ummah* could only mean a community defined by belief in and support of the Prophet

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[88] Hossameldeen Mohammed and Ray Jureydini, "Umma and the nation-state: Dilemmas in refuge ethics," *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 7.7 (2022): 1-25, 4-5.
[89] al-Mawdūdī, *al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, 177-79; Riḍā, *al-Khilāfah*, 153-55; Quṭb, *Fī Ẓilāl*, 907-36; Hizb ut-Tahrir, *The Ummah's Charter*, 5-30.
[90] Akram Ḍiyā' al-`Umarī, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawiyyah al-Saḥiḥah* vol. 1, Madīnah: Maktabat al-`Ulūm wa al-Ḥikam, 1994, 273-75.
[91] Ovamir Anjum, "The 'Constitution' of Medina: Translation, Commentary, and Meaning Today," Yaqeen Institute, 21 July 2002, available at: https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-constitution-of-medina-translation-commentary-and-meaning-today; al-`Umarī, *al-Sīrah,* 273-75.
[92] al-Ahsan, "The Quranic Concept of Ummah," 611-13.

Muḥammad's mission."[93] Similarly, Rezart Beka asserts that, "It is on this confessional basis that the rest of the Charter proceeds to elaborate upon Muslims' relations with other religious communities present in Madinah."[94]

Exclusivists reject interpretations of the Charter as a precursor of a modern constitutional document providing equal rights and status to the Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants of Madinah. They argue that it more closely resembles the *dhimmah* treaties established by Prophet Muḥammad with non-Muslim tribes after the Hudaybiyyah Peace Treaty. The only difference was the absence of *jizyah* payment obligations for non-Muslim subjects under the Charter. According to this view, the Charter did not grant Jews and non-Muslim Arabs in Madinah equal rights to participate in governance, select a leader of their choosing other than the Prophet Muḥammad, negotiate the terms of the Prophet's authority, or influence his policies to advance his religious mission. They believe that these aspects of his status and mission were divinely bestowed.[95]

On the other hand, proponents of inclusive *ummah* argue that exclusivist interpretations are inconsistent with the fundamental values of Islam, such as mercy, dignity, and shared humanity. They point to Qur'ānic verses such as Q. 21:107 which refers to Islam as a mercy to all and Q. 17:70, which affirms the honour that God has bestowed upon all children of Adam. They also highlight verses that give recognition to a shared humanity, such as - "O Mankind!",[96] "O Man!",[97] and "O children of Adam",[98] as well as the names of two chapters in the Qur'ān as "*al-Insān*" (Man) and "*al-Nās*" (Mankind). These references are interpreted as expressions of a worldview that commands Muslims to extend mercy to all of God's creations, and to reach out to them. It is also a call to uphold an inclusive outlook in religious understanding and practice. They further contend that this was reflected in the Madinah Charter, where Prophet Muḥammad regarded the Jews and non-Muslim Arabs who participated alongside Muslims as members of the *ummah*.[99]

Moreover, proponents of an inclusive *ummah* highlight the dangers posed by the exclusivist framework when taken to extremes. They point to the ideological roots of groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State which have contributed to the misrepresentation of Islam to non-Muslims worldwide. While not all proponents of exclusive *ummah* are extremists, the rhetoric of absolute exclusivity, and the "othering" of non-Muslims is a hallmark of extremist ideologies.[100]

Beyond the realm of extremism, the exclusivist discourse undermines inter-religious relations in both Muslim-majority and minority contexts. In Muslim-majority societies, non-Muslim citizens tend to feel unequal and distrusted in the very country where they are born, raised, and wish to belong. Conversely, in non-Muslim societies, Muslims who embrace exclusivist positions may be perceived as unwilling to integrate into mainstream society while simultaneously demanding equal rights.[101] Over time, these dynamics can contribute to social fragmentation and tension, possibly undermining national cohesion and security.

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[93] Anjum, "The 'Constitution' of Medina".
[94] Rezart Beka, "The Reconceptualization of the Umma and Ummatic Action in Abdullah Bin Bayyah's Discourse," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 41.2 (2024): 6-44, 23.
[95] Ibid., 23-4
[96] See the Qur'ān, 2:21, 2:168, 4:1, 4:170, 4:174, 7:158, 10:57, 10:104, 10:108, 22:1, 22:5, 22:73, 31:33, 35:3, 35:5, 35:15, 49:13.
[97] See the Qur'ān, 84:6,
[98] See the Qur'ān, 7:26-7, 7:31, 7:35, 36:60.
[99] Huwaydī, *Ḥattā Lā Takun Fitnah*, 268-87.
[100] Mohamed Bin Ali, "Islam and Religious Plurality: Deconstructing Exclusivist Thinking And Practices," *Eurasian Review*, 20 March 2022, available at https://www.eurasiareview.com/20032022-islam-and-religious-plurality-deconstructing-exclusivist-thinking-and-practices-analysis/; Mohamed Bin Ali, "Inclusivism and Religious Plurality: A Quranic Perspective," *RSIS Commentaries*, 9 March 2018, available at https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co18039-inclusivism-and-religious-plurality-a-quranic-perspective/.
[101] Niel Spierings, "The Multidimensional Impact of Islamic Religiosity on Ethno-religious Social Tolerance in the Middle East and North Africa," *Social Forces* 97:4, (June 2019): 1693-1730; Samina Yasmeen and Nina Markovic, eds., *Muslim Citizens in the West: Spaces and Agents of Inclusion and Exclusion*, New York: Routledge, 2014; Shadi Hamid, "The Major Roadblock to Muslim Assimilation in Europe," *Brookings*, 18 August 2011, available at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-major-roadblock-to-muslim-assimilation-in-europe/.

The exclusivist idea is used to justify unequal treatment of non-Muslim citizens in certain Muslim-majority countries. Examples include restrictions on religious practices in public spaces, limitations on holding political office, and the suppression of public criticism of Islamic issues. This occurs despite Muslims in non-Muslim countries protesting similar treatment, often in the name of equality, freedom, and justice.[102]

Reconciliation

This section explores five key areas to reconcile the two opposing visions of *ummah* through an analysis of its Qur'ānic usage, works of *tafsīr* scholars, and arguments from both camps using the research framework mentioned in the introduction.

This aligns with the approach of Muslim scholars in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* when faced with evidence (*dalīls*) that appears to give conflicting rulings or meanings. Muslim scholars would first attempt to reconcile (*jam`*) all related evidence in order to derive a harmonised ruling or meaning. They would then proceed to *tarjīḥ,* which is the process of weighing and choosing the strongest evidence while setting aside the weaker and less reliable evidence, when reconciliation is not possible. This is followed by an assessment of whether abrogation (*naskh*) applies. This is the process by which a later revelation supersedes an earlier one. At this stage, if the chronological order of evidence is known, *naskh* can be invoked by identifying which ruling is later (the abrogating), and which is earlier (the abrogated). This is useful particularly in cases where *tarjīḥ* cannot be applied due to difficulty in determining the strength and veracity of the evidence. As a final step, if the chronological order of the evidence cannot be ascertained, the scholars would adopt *tawaqquf* – suspending the application of the available evidence on the issue until new evidence emerges that allows *tarjīḥ* to be made. Any ruling or meaning that can be reconciled is recognised as a valid opinion as long as there is no clear evidence that contradicts it.[103]

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the Qur'ān uses *ummah* in multiple and diverse meanings. It refers not only to humans as a collective, but also to animals, and jinns; and applies across temporal dimensions - past, present (during the period of revelation), and future. Additionally, the term *ummah* is not exclusively used for religiously defined groups of people. The Qur'ān applies the term *ummah* for Muslims, past damned nations, Jews, Christians, and pagan Arabs alike. This diverse usage of *ummah* in the Qur'ān reflects its linguistic meaning in classical Arabic during the time of revelation, as recorded in classical Arabic dictionaries.[104]

Secondly, the Qur'ān does not prescribe a specific singular vision of *ummah,* whether inclusive or exclusive. An analysis of its verses reveals that the term *ummah* is used to refer to both Muslims exclusively, and to mixed groups of Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qur'ān neither mandates nor prohibits either vision of *ummah*. As such, both visions of the *ummah* are classified as *ẓannī* (speculative, non-definitive) matters because they are derived from evidence open to multiple interpretations, rather than *qaṭ`ī* (definitive) proof that conveys absolute truths determined by God and beyond dispute. *Ẓannī* matters often result in scholarly disagreement since the meaning, authenticity, or application of textual evidence is essentially interpretative.[105] Theologically, this indicates that the concept of *ummah*, as both a socio-political and theological construct, is a matter of *ijtihād* that is subject to the methodology established by Muslim scholars, past and present, across traditional Islamic sciences such as *Uṣūl al-Fiqh* and *`Ulūm al-Qur'ān* (the sciences of Qur'ānic interpretation).[106] As an *ijtihādī* matter, the notion of *ummah* remains open to reinterpretation and re-evaluation.

Some may argue that the above two points are premature and inconclusive, given that theological issues cannot be solely based on the Qur'ān. Indeed, most Muslim scholars widely accept the *ḥadīth* as a second primary source to address Islamic theological matters. Hence, a *ḥadīth*-based

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[102] Spierings, "The Multidimensional Impact of Islamic Religiosity," 1693-1730.
[103] al-Zuḥaylī, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, vol. 2, 1182-4; Aḥmad `Abd Al-Salām al-Raysūnī, *al-Tajdīd al-Uṣūlī: Naḥw Ṣiyāghah Tajdīdiyyah li `Ilm Uṣūl al-Fiqh*, Herndon: Dār al-Kalimah, 2015, 134-35.
[104] Naṣṣār, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 2-3.
[105] al-Zuḥaylī, *Uṣūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, vol. 2, 1052-54.
[106] Ibid. See also Quṭb Muṣṭafā Sānū, *Lā Inkār fī Masā'il al-Ijtihād*, Kuala Lumpur: Dār al-Tajdīd, 2004.

analysis is necessary before making any conclusion. This concern is valid and acknowledged by this author. The preceding Qur'ānic insights on *ummah* remain inconclusive without further validation from the *ḥadīth*. In this regard, the author refers to the findings of a comprehensive study presented in a book titled, *Mafhūm al-Ummah fī al-Qur'ān wa al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf* (*The Meaning of* Ummah *in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth*).[107] This study demonstrates that the usage and meanings of *ummah* in the *ḥadīth,* align with those found in the Qur'ān. It could be argued also that the result of the study represents the *ḥadīth*'s explanation of the meaning of *ummah* in the Qur'ān because it has become an established principle of *tafsīr* in *`Ulūm al-Tafsīr,* and *ijtihād* in *Uṣūl al-Fiqh,* that *ḥadīth* or *sunnah* of the Prophet serve as an explainer and interpreter of the Qur'ān.[108] Thus, the two sources – the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* - mutually reinforce each other, and provide a robust basis for this reconciliation. While a detailed examination of *ḥadīth* is beyond the scope of this paper, the reference above supports the sound analytical approach towards the reconciliation of the two *ummah* visions.

Thirdly, it follows that both inclusive and exclusive visions of the *ummah* are, in fact, theological constructs rather than divinely ordained meanings. They are products of *ijtihād* by Muslim scholars in their attempt to understand the issue from an Islamic theological standpoint and to provide guidance to Muslims across time.[109] There are those who argue against the inclusive vision of *ummah* on the grounds of *al-walā'* and *al-barā',* claiming that it is a primary and fundamental element of *`aqīdah* (Islamic creed) rather than a subsidiary matter. However, *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* are indeed a subsidiary issue because there are disagreements among Muslim scholars on how *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* should be applied among non-Muslims. Many contemporary Muslim scholars argue that *al-walā'* and *al-barā'* applies to hostile non-Muslims (*ḥarbīs*), rather than to all non-Muslims. The Qur'ān commands Muslims not to treat all non-Muslims alike. It permits a positive relationship with them, based on Q. 3:11 and 60:8-9, and the experience of Prophet Muḥammad's companions who lived under the protection of the Christian king of Abyssinia.[110]

Fourthly, while inclusive and exclusive visions of the *ummah* often appear contradictory, both reflect meanings derived from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, albeit not in a holistic sense. Historically, each vision has competed for prominence. Yet, considering the theological openness of *ijtihād*, it is important to remind both factions that their disagreements should be guided by the *fiqh* maxim *al-Ijtihād Lā Yunqaḍ bi al-Ijtihād,* whereby one *ijtihād* cannot be definitively invalidated by another *ijtihād*.[111] Thus, neither side holds the absolute truth, and mutual respect should also be observed, reflecting the traditional ethos of scholarly practice in matters of *ijtihād*. This is critical, as the intense rivalry between the two perspectives can be divisive and can devolve into name-calling. In extreme cases, it has led to *takfīr,* where each camp questions the Islamic faith of the other.

Finally, the fifth point argues that both inclusive and exclusive visions of *ummah* need not be mutually exclusive. It must also be highlighted that there are many other competing conceptualisations

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[107] Humaydī, *Mafhūm al-Ummah,* 55-134.

[108] al-`Ik, *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr,* 125-30; `Abd al-Ghānī `Abd al-Khāliq, *Ḥujjiyyāt al-Sunnah*, Riyād: al-Dār al-`Ālamiyyah li al-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1995, 499-502; al-Zuḥaylī, *Usūl al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, vol. 1, 460-64; Abū Zahrah, *Usūl al-Fiqh*, 87-88.

[109] Jomaa, *A New Paradigm,* 71-72; Habib, *Redefining the Concept of Muslim Ummah*, 1884-98.

[110] Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "*Al-Wala'* (Loyalty) to Government in the Context of Muslim Minority in Singapore," in *Countering Islamic State Ideology: Voices of Singapore Religious Scholars*, eds. Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Rohan Gunaratna, Singapore: Pergas, 2021,100-112; Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, "The Qur'an and Social Inclusivism: An Analysis of Q 5:51," *Interreligious Relation* 31 (October 2024): 1-12; Joas Wagemakers, "The Enduring Legacy of the Second Saudi State: Quietist and Radical Wahhabi Contestation of al-Walā' and al-Barā'," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012): 93-110.

[111] See the meaning of *ijtihād* in the introduction section. Since *ijtihād* is a fundamentally human intellectual endeavour, issues under its scope may lead to disagreements or multiple opinions by Muslim scholars. A Muslim scholar may even hold differing views on the same issue at different times or in different contexts or may review a previous opinion. For the purpose of managing these differences and guided by traditions of the Prophet and his companions, Muslim scholars have formulated the maxim where a valid *ijtihād*, once ruled, cannot invalidate and be invalidated by an equally valid *ijtihād*. Both are considered valid and can be applied where it is appropriate in the prevailing circumstances. See Muḥammad Ṣidqī al-Burnū, *al-Wajīz fī Īḍāḥ Qawā`id Fiqh al-Kulliyyāh*, Bayrūt: Muassasah al-Risālah al-`Ilmiyyah, 1996, 384-86 and Amir Abu Ghuddah, "Uncovering the Bedrock: A Primer on Islamic Legal Maxims," *Yaqeen Institute* (2021): 49-50.

in various theological, legal, and ethical concepts in the Islamic tradition that have influenced the nature of a contemporary *ummah.* These include ideas such as *iḥsān* (benevolence) and *raḥmah* (mercy) towards all,[112] *fiqh al-awlawiyyāt,*[113] and *al-muwāzanah*.[114] While these Islamic traditions are beyond the scope of this study, they do support the point that both visions of *ummah* can coexist with a plurality of complementary identities in the broader self-conception of a Muslim. For example, one can simultaneously identify with their gender, familial role, ethnicity, citizenship, or their profession. A Muslim may also identify exclusively with the global Muslim *ummah*, while also relating to non-Muslims through shared citizenship, or a clan, where there is a common ancestry. This approach is not a theological aberration. During Prophet Muḥammad's time, his companions were identified by tribal affiliations, such as al-Ghifārī (member of Ghifār tribe), al-Ash`arī (member of Ash`ar tribe), al-Rūmī (Roman), and al-Fārisī (Persian). These titles reflected their belonging to a broader *ummah* that was predominantly non-Muslim. The Prophet Muḥammad neither reproached this practice, nor commanded the companions to cease from having such identities in favour of solely identifying as members of the Muslim *ummah*.[115]

Some contemporary Muslim thinkers argue that both exclusive and inclusive visions of *ummah* were recognised by Prophet Muḥammad and enshrined in the Madinah Charter. The exclusive *ummah* vision is reflected in the clause that bonded the Muhājirūn (Muslims who migrated from Mecca) with the Anṣār (Muslim natives of Madinah who supported the Muhājirūn) as a religious or doctrinal ummah. The inclusive ummah vision is embodied in the clauses that bonded Muslims (Muhājirūn and Anṣār) with Jews and non-Muslim Arabs who participated in the Charter, thus forming a political *ummah* or political communities.[116] Another perspective distinguishes between the Muslim *ummah* and the Islamic *ummah*. The former refers to the clause of the Charter that unified the Muhājirūn and Anṣār as a religious *ummah.* The latter refers to the clause of the Charter that bonded Muslims, Jews, Christians, and pagan Arabs into a cooperative and harmonious *ummah* tasked with defending Madinah against external aggression. These two clauses are not contradictory, as the Muslim *ummah* was established "to form the nucleus for the wider inclusive Islamic *ummah*" over the course of time.[117]

In reference to contemporary theoretical tools, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Theory of Multiple Social Identities reinforce this view, which posits that individuals naturally and inherently adopt multiple identities – religious, national, professional, familial – simultaneously.[118] Exclusive *ummah* emphasises the unique moral and spiritual bonds among Muslims, fostering group cohesion, and ethical solidarity. Conversely, inclusive *ummah* recognises shared humanity, and encourages cooperation beyond the Muslim community. By framing identity as flexible and layered, SIT provides a supporting conceptual tool for Muslims to honour both their distinct religious bonds and their ethical responsibilities toward the wider world, thereby reducing the tension between exclusivity and inclusivity. Embracing both exclusive and inclusive visions of *ummah* within a Muslim identity is neither contradictory nor far-fetched as the fluidity in one's identity remains coherent with social realities.

By tapping on SIT, this study is able to harmonise both exclusive and inclusive *ummah* visions, while remaining faithful to the Islamic intellectual tradition and frameworks. Classical Muslim scholars recognised the necessity of empirical and worldly knowledge within the practice of *ijtihād*. They regarded such sciences as instruments for *taḥqīq al-manāṭ* (determining the factual basis for a legal

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[112] Based on Qur`ānic verse, "We have sent you O Prophet only as a mercy for the whole world," (Q. 21:107).
[113] *Fiqh al-Awlawiyyāt* is the jurisprudence of priorities, guiding Muslims to rank duties and address issues based on importance and urgency. See Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *Fī Fiqh al-Awlawiyyāt: Dirāsah Jadīdah fī Ḍaw' al-Qur'ān wa al-Sunnah*, Qāhirah: Maktabat Wahbah, 1996.
[114] *Fiqh al-Muwāzanah* is the jurisprudence of balance, guiding Muslims to harmonise conflicting interests, weigh benefits and harms, and make ethical decisions that maintain equilibrium in religious, social, and personal matters. See Nājī Ibrāhīm al-Suwayd, *Fiqh al-Muwāzanāt bayn al-Naẓariyyah wa al-Taṭbīq*, Bayrūt; Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, 2002.
[115] Hassan, "Religion, Modernization," 58; Jomaa, *A New Paradigm,* 273; Muḥammad Haniff Hassan, "Racism Has No Place in Islam," *MuslimSG*, 28 July 2021, available at: https://muslim.sg/articles/racism-has-no-place-in-islam?fbclid=IwAR2gtvrSoxvclfY08rkrvlyo9f2amHwwlQO5Cocl ho1fHDOe7xKkrOHNYug.
[116] Kamali, "Citizenship," 131; Ghannouchi, "Islam and Citizenship," 102-7.
[117] Jomaa, *A New Paradigm*, 90, see also 87-88, 129-30, 143-44.
[118] Peter J Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory: Revised and Expanded*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 186-87; Scheuringer, "Multiple Identities"; Sarah E. Gaither, "The multiplicity of belonging".

ruling) and linking them to *maṣlaḥah.* Scholars also affirmed that *fatwās* are open to changes over time and shifting conditions, thus legitimising a consultative approach with experts beyond religious scholarship.[119] Incorporating insights from contemporary social sciences further enriches *ijtihād* by offering an empirically grounded understanding of group dynamics, identity salience, and intergroup relations, while ensuring that legal reasoning remains both socially informed, and religiously legitimate.

Admittedly, conflicts between the interests of the exclusive and inclusive *ummah* may arise. However, resolving such conflicts does not necessitate invalidating the possibility or permissibility of holding both identities simultaneously. Even without the inclusive *ummah* identity, a Muslim must still navigate and reconcile other social identities that may conflict with either vision. For example, the interests of the exclusive *ummah* may clash with a Muslim judge in a secular courtroom, thereby possibly creating a moral and professional dilemma.

Ultimately, Muslims are commanded to place Allah and His religion above all else. However, this does not mean that Muslims must always prioritise their exclusive *ummah* identity over all other affiliations, as often claimed by many proponents of exclusive *ummah*.[120] While Islam provides guidance for Muslims, a deeper examination of Islamic tradition suggests a more nuanced and flexible approach.

The following example illustrates the application of this nuanced approach. For brevity, only a few examples from Islamic traditions are highlighted to demonstrate how Muslims are granted flexibility, allowing personal considerations to take precedence over the collective *ummah's* interests under certain circumstances. Uways al-Qarnī prioritised familial duty in caring for his elderly mother instead of migrating to Madinah to participate in *jihād* and *da`wah* alongside Prophet Muḥammad. This represents a case where his identity as a dutiful son conflicted with his identity as a member of the *ummah*. Uways was never reprimanded for his choice by Prophet Muḥammad. On the contrary, the Prophet praised his filial piety and acknowledged his unwavering commitment to the religion.[121]

In another example, the early Muslims in Abyssinia delayed joining Prophet Muḥammad in Madinah, even during the early post-*hijrah* period, when Muslims faced serious threats from Meccan forces and engaged in fierce battles. The Meccans had superior manpower and weapons, while the *ummah* was in a dire situation, fighting for its survival. Despite such circumstances, no reproach was made against Muslims in Abyssinia when they finally arrived in Madinah after the conquest of Khaybar in 6 AH. Prophet Muḥammad expressed no negative remarks to Muslims in Abyssinia for their delayed arrival, or their decision not to engage in *jihād* by targeting Meccan trade caravans in the region. This approach recognised the importance of preserving Abyssinia's political and economic stability and bilateral relations with Mecca.[122] This example demonstrates how broader considerations can take precedence over the immediate interests of the *ummah* when navigating complex circumstances. Moreover, Muslims in Abyssinia prioritised harmonious coexistence above active *da`wah*. They did not actively propagate Islam among Abyssinians. Despite this lack of effort to expand the *ummah*, these Muslims were never faulted for their approach.[123] As a result, Abyssinia remained predominantly Christian and free from Islamic caliphate rule for centuries. Hence, this example highlights that prioritising harmonious coexistence and respecting the sociopolitical dynamics of a host nation can be fully compatible with Islamic principles, even when it does not directly advance the immediate goals of the Muslim *ummah*.

Another example is Nu`aym al-Naḥḥam, who prioritised his tribal responsibilities over immediate migration. Upon meeting with Prophet Muḥammad, he expressed regret and explained that

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[119] al-Raysūnī, *al-Tajdīd al-Uṣūlī*, 734-7, 787; Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwi, *Mūjibāt Taghayyur al-Fatwā fī `Aṣrinā*, Saint Denis: Maktab Lajnat al-Ta'līf wa al-Tarjamah, al-Ittiḥād al-`Ālamī li `Ulamā' al-Muslimīn, n.d., 75-82, 97-100; Office of the Mufti Singapore, *The Fatwa Institution in Singapore: Journey and Methodology*, Singapore: MUIS, 2024, 27.

[120] al-Mawdūdī, *al-Ḥukūmah al-Islāmiyyah*, 174-79.

[121] Muḥammad Haniff Hassan, "Refuting Islamic State (IS) Jihad Propaganda with the Story of Uwais Al-Qarni," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 10.10 (October 2018): 12-16.

[122] Jum`ah, *al-Namādhij al-Arba`ah,* 15-32.

[123] Ibid.; Egypt's Dār al-Iftā', *How was the life of the Prophet's Companions in Abyssinia?*, available at: https://www.dar-alifta.org/en/article/details/732/how-was-the-life-of-the-prophet%E2%80%99s-companions-in-abyssinia.

his tribe had dissuaded him from leaving, as he was providing support and care to many orphans and widows. Prophet Muḥammad commended him, contrasting the protection he received from his tribe with the hostility of the Quraysh, and he said: "My people chased me away and wished to kill me, whereas your people protect and defend you." This incident demonstrates that Prophet Muḥammad allowed al-Naḥḥam to use his discretion to prioritise the needs of his tribe over his immediate participation with the wider *ummah*.[124] It underscores the flexibility within Islamic tradition, recognising that personal or community obligations can, at times, take precedence over collective, *ummah*-centric duties.

Islamic jurisprudence also accommodates similar flexibility. Muslim scholars have debated what should take priority when the protection of religion (*ḥifẓ al-dīn*), one of the five religious essentials (*al-ḍarūriyāt al-khams*), clashes with another religious essential, such as protection of life (*ḥifẓ al-nafs*). Some scholars argue that the protection of life takes priority over the protection of religion.[125] This highlights the need for a nuanced approach in Islamic jurisprudence, where differing circumstances and priorities are carefully considered to guide decision making. Similarly, Muslim scholars have extensively debated whether duties to God always take precedence over duties to fellow humans. They conclude that neither takes priority in all situations as it depends on the situational context. In some instances, most scholars would hold that the duty to fellow humans may be prioritised above one's duty to God. For example, a person who has sufficient savings to perform obligatory pilgrimage (*ḥajj*) but is also in debt. In this scenario, most scholars argue that repaying the debt should take precedence over performing the *ḥajj*.[126]

This attempt to reconcile both visions argues that the Qur'ānic usages of *ummah* are theologically open, flexible, and nuanced. It accommodates both the exclusive and inclusive visions of *ummah* as valid interpretations. Since the Qur'ān does not mandate a single definition, both visions of *ummah* – as products of *ijtihād* – can coexist without contradiction. Exclusivist arguments are context-dependent, and therefore not definitive. SIT further supports the notion that individuals can naturally hold multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities. Likewise, *fiqh* debates also accommodate contextual judgement, requiring a nuanced understanding of various dynamics at play. Ultimately, both *ummah* visions can coexist, guided by mutual respect and the prevailing scholarly ethos in matters of *ijtihād*.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that *ummah* is a polyvalent term, reflecting its broader usage in the Arabic language. Based on this, two key conclusions emerge: first, that the Qur'ān does not provide a definitive concept of *ummah*, and second, that it neither prohibits nor prefers the inclusive or exclusive visions of *ummah*. The same conclusions apply to *ḥadīth,* as evidenced by a study on the meaning of *ummah* used by Prophet Muḥammad. Since the classical period, Muslim scholars have offered a divergence of views on the concept of *ummah*, rooted in their respective scholarly *ijtihād*, rather than divine injunctions. These differing interpretations can broadly be categorised into two visions: the exclusive *ummah,* which only includes Muslims, and the inclusive *ummah,* which encompasses both Muslims and non-Muslims. Historically, the two visions have often been regarded as contradictory and have generated intense and divisive debates. Some proponents of the exclusive *ummah* regard the divergence as a matter of religious principle, rather than *ijtihād.* In contrast, some proponents of inclusive *ummah* regard the exclusive vision as a symptom of intellectual stagnation that has plagued the Muslim narrative, and therefore must be reformed.

This article demonstrates that the two visions of *ummah* need not be regarded as mutually exclusive, rivals, or contradictory. Drawing on various *ijtihād* tools found in Islamic jurisprudence, the article offers a reconciliatory perspective, where these visions of *ummah* can be complementary. A

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[124] Ibn Sa`ad, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* vol. 4, Bayrūt: Dār Ṣādir, 1985, 138; Ibn Al-Athīr, *Usud al-Ghābah fī Ma`rifah al-Ṣaḥābah* vol. 5*,* Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, n.d., 326-27.
[125] Jamāl al-Dīn `Atiyyah, *Naḥw Taf`īl Maqāṣid Sharī`ah*, Dimashq: Dār al-Fikr, 2003, 28-48.
[126] Aḥmad bin Idrīs al-Qarafī, *al-Furūq* vol. 1, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-`Ilmiyyah, 1998, 256-59; al-`Izz bin `Abd Al-Salām, *Qawā`id al-Aḥkām fī Iṣlāḥ al-Anām*, Dimashq: Dār al-Qalam, 2000, 219-59.

Muslim can relate simultaneously to a global Muslim collective (exclusive *ummah)*, and to a multi-religious society as a fellow citizen (inclusive *ummah)*. This perspective aligns with Social Identity Theory, which recognises the natural coexistence of multiple identities within the individual self. While it is acknowledged that these two visions of *ummah* may clash at times, the article contends that a resolution of such clashes need not rely on the rigid prioritisation of the exclusive *ummah's* interests, as suggested by some Muslim scholars and thinkers. Rather, this article argues that the Islamic intellectual traditions – when guided by context, and sound *ijtihād* – provide the conceptual capacity and theological flexibility necessary to navigate the complexities and evolving social realities of today.

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