A distinctive characteristic of Muslims is the exchange of greetings saluting one another with *al-salām* *ʿalaykum*! – along with the response *wa ʿalaykum al-salām!* This is usually translated as “peace be upon you!” and “and upon you peace!” (This is a shortened form of the fuller phrase; see below.) Here *salām* is normally understood today as ‘peace’, while its sense might better be rendered: ‘greetings of security-peace’. This greeting is known as *tahiyyat al-islām*, ‘the salutation of Islam’, and conveys wishing for the other person that God grant them a long successful life of peace secure from harm. When the Prophet’s paternal cousin Jaʿfar b. Abī Ṭālib in 615 (seven years before the migration of the Prophet to Medina in 622) described the essence of Islamic guidance to the Ethiopian Emperor, the ‘Negus’ (*al-Najāshī*) of Islamic literature, at his court in Axum, Jaʿfar emphasised this ‘salutation of Islam’ as a new practice specific to their religion. A closer examination of this important phrase frequently expressed on the lips of Muslims, discloses how inseparable the conceptions of security and peace truly are in Islamic experience.

**Greetings in Prayer**

A parallel use of this famous greeting occurs at the very conclusion of Islam’s ritual prayer with the double salutation of *taslīm*, first to one’s right and then to the left, marking the completion of the formal *ṣalāt*. The act of *taslīm* involves dual repetition of the full phrase: *al-salām* *ʿalaykum wa raḥmat Allāhī wa barakātuḥ*, “Peace-Security be upon you, and God’s Mercy and His Blessing”. This word *taslim* derives from the Arabic verbal stem II *sallama* (‘to make or render salutations of peace-security’), as in the formula of praise and blessing invariably invoked upon mentioning the Prophet Muḥammad – see Qur’ān 33:56, “God and His angels make blessings upon the Prophet; O you who believe, do you also bless him and...”
render him salutations of peace-security” ([…] ṣallū ‘alayhi wa sallimū taslīman).¹

The frequently uttered eulogy praising God’s Messenger Muhammad – “May God bless him and give him peace” (ṣallā llāh ‘alayh wa sallam) – conveys sincere benedictions and hopes that the Prophet enjoy the highest reward and beatitude in the Hereafter, namely in Paradise. We should recall that the phrase dār al-salām, ‘The Abode of Peace-Security’, refers to Paradise. Qur’ān 10:25 states: “God invites to the Abode of Peace-Security and He guides whom He wills upon a straight path” (wa ‘llāh yad‘ū ilā dār ‘l-salāmi wa yahdī man yashā‘u ilā širāṭin mustaqīmin).

The faithful who gain entry to Paradise by working good deeds attain to friendship with God, as Qur’ān 6:127 states: “For them is the Abode of Peace with their Lord, and He is their Friend on account of what they performed.”

The taslīm is always preceded by the ‘benediction of salutations’ (al-taḥiyyāt)² forming an integral part of the ritual prayers, in which greetings and praises are pronounced upon God, while ‘salutations of peace’ are declared upon the Prophet and upon the righteous worshippers of God. In its fullest form at the end of the cycle of prostrations (two at dawn; three at sunset; or four at noon, mid-afternoon and eve),³ it includes the portion of benedictions termed al-tashahhud – where the witnessing to God’s Oneness and His Messenger is declared. It is significant that the taḥiyyāt voices ‘salutations of peace’ (al-salām ‘alayk; and al-salām ‘alaynā) upon the Prophet and one’s fellow worshippers – but not specifically to God.

There remains another frequently repeated utterance closely associated with the taslīm which completes the daily prayers, namely the supplication offered by the individual upon consummating each of the five daily prayers, affirming God as the ultimate source and origin of all peace. This beautiful invocation is not obligatory yet highly recommended, being known in Islamic tradition as the personal practice of God’s Messenger and recorded in authoritative ḥadīth:

O God, You are Peace-Security (al-Salām), You are the Source of Peace, and Peace properly belongs to You.⁴ So greet us Lord with the salutation ‘Peace!’ (ḥayyinā rabbanā bi ‘l-salām), and admit us into the Paradise Garden the Abode of Peace. Blessed and Exalted are You our Lord, Possessor of Splendour and Reverence. (reported by al-Tirmidhī and al-Nasā‘ī)

The Muslim aspiration for peaceful security in this world and ultimate salvation and security in the Hereafter is echoed in this prophetic supplication. This confirms the reality that peace and security together involve both material and spiritual factors in the most inclusive sense. We may observe that here again, ‘salutations of peace’ are not uttered specifically upon God, although the word salām occurs five times. Here the phrase “so Greet us Lord with the salutation ‘Peace!’” (ḥayyinā […] bi ‘l-salām) has the meaning of our beseeching God to include us among the...
faithful admitted to Paradise, and to whom He extends His glorious salutation of ‘Peace-Security’.

Such a meaning is clearly established by several verses in the Qur’an affirming that the greatest boon the inhabitants of Paradise may receive from God is His saluting them by the salutation of ‘Peace!’: 36:58 “[They will be greeted with:] ‘Peace!’ – a word (of greeting) from the Merciful Lord”; and 10:9–10 portrays the faithful who perform good works as guided by God to Paradise, where: “[…] Their supplication therein shall be, ‘Glory be to Thee O God!’ and their salute to one another therein shall be ‘Peace!’” The highest degree of the faithful in Paradise are ‘the Foremost’ (al-sābiqūn), who merit the outstanding grace described in 56:25–6 whereby “They will hear therein no vain or sinful speech, only the word of salutation – ‘Peace, Peace!’” The highest hope and aspiration of Muslims should be to reach the place where only the greetings and declarations of peace are uttered. Thus, they must strive to achieve peace, just as they implore God to grant them peace.

Safety and Resignation

The fact that ‘greetings of peace-security’ are daily repeated by Muslims in their prayers and social interaction reinforces the essential relevance of al-salām for the religion which named itself Islām. Arabic linguistic sources emphasise that the name al-islām for the religious polity established by the Prophet Muḥammad is etymologically derived from al-salāmah – ‘safety-security from harm-evil’ or ‘avoidance of defects-vices’. This conjunction with al-salāmah coincides with the notion of providing assurance of safety and security from harm or evil through guarantee of peaceful intent conveyed by the greeting salām ‘salutations of security-peace’. The authoritative philologist Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. c. 791), who authored the first etymological dictionary in Arabic, made clear the connection with the greeting al-salām ‘alaykum instituted by Islam:

The term al-salām conveys the meaning of al-salāmah, so the saying by the people “al-salāmu ‘alaykum” denotes “al-salāmah from God be upon you”. It is further stated that al-Salām is a name among God’s Names; and it is said that (al-Salām) is God. Thus if one says “al-salāmu ‘alaykum” it may mean ‘God is above you’. […] The term al-islām denotes ‘seeking-conformity (al-istislām) to the command of God’, denoting submission to His obedience and acceptance of His bidding (al-inqiyyād li-tā’ atiḥ wa ‘l-qabūl li-amriḥ).

The verb inqāda used here denotes ‘to follow-obey, yield, submit’. Khalīl was one of the earliest authorities to employ the idea of ‘self-resignation’ or ‘submission’ (inqiyyād) as a main synonym for al-islām, something frequently repeated until the present day.
In fact, verbal stems II sallama (‘render salutations of peace-security’; or to make taslīm), as well as IV aslama (‘to deliver oneself up, surrender oneself up to’) may both also signify ingāda (‘to follow-obey, resign oneself to’). Verbal stem sallama – as in the phrase sallamā′ amrahī ilā ʿllāh, ‘to resign oneself [one’s cause or affair] to God’; as well as verbal stem aslama – as in aslamā′ nafsahī [or amrahī] ilā ṣilāma, ‘to commit oneself, resign oneself to God’s bidding’, came by extension to signify ‘to enter into al-Islām’ or ‘to enter into peace-security’ (al-silm). Also recall that the qur’ānic nouns silm as well as salm (from base form salima) were understood to be homonyms for islām – the salvational religious polity originated by God’s Messenger Muḥammad.7

Why God is al-Salām

The early linguistic analysis tracing the name of the faith Islām to the notion al-salāmah ‘safety-security from harm-evil’, and taken as synonymous with al-salām ‘salutations of security-peace’, was indirectly supported by the exegetes of the Qur’ān who often asserted that God Himself is named al-Salām on account of His being free of defects and faults (al-salāmah min al-sū′ wa l-ikhtilāl).8 They observed that in the tongue of revelation God is not denominated salīm nor sālim, but only al-Salām. Nevertheless, a cogent critique of this established linguistic and exegetical consensus was offered by the twelfth-century Andalusian scholar Sīdī Abū ‘l-Qāsim ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd-Allāh al-Suhaylī (d. 1185), in his al-Rawḍ al-ʿunf regarding the taḥiyyah, ‘salutation of safety-security’ (or tashahhud), and the divine name al-Salām.9 Al-Suhaylī bases his interpretation squarely upon utterances of the majority of Companions and early Muslim authorities, pointing out an alternative understanding overlooked in most contemporary discussions about the understanding of peace in Islam.

Al-Suhaylī asserts: “al-salām denotes one from whom others are safe-secure (man sulīm minhu), while al-sālim denotes one who is safe-secure from others (man salīm min ghayrihi)”. He argues that the qur’ānic commentators have displaced the former with the latter’s meaning, contradicting the utterances of the pious forebears (salaf) who taught that al-salāmah is one quality among the characteristic-traits of al-salām. The presence of the tā’ marbūṭah (ﺓ) on salāmah points to a greater conceptual difference endowing this term with far more encompassing significance (just as e.g. with terms al-jalāl and al-jalālah).

Therefore, in the famous Prophetic supplication uttered after the closing taslīm of ritual prayer (given above), one does not say: al-salām ʿalā ʿllāhi min ʿibādih – “salutations of safety-security upon God from His servants”. Rather, al-salām is sought for and beseeched from God by His servants, as petition through prayer and gratitude for bounty. Al-Suhaylī reminds us that the form of this term in the

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Prophetic supplication which man renders towards God, is cast in the construction: [...] wa minhu 'l-salām – “and from Him (we seek bounty of) safety-security.”

Now al-Suhaylī invokes an interesting proof-text to support his view: the report in Ibn Hishām’s Sīrah regarding the very early incident of the Prophet’s revelation when Gabriel, the angel of revelation, instructed God’s Messenger Muḥammad to convey to his wife Khadījah the salute or greeting from God: al-salām min rabbihā, “salutations of peace-security from her Lord”.10

The Prophet said: "O Khadijah, this is Gabriel, he extends salutations-of-peace from your Lord!" So Khadijah said: “God is Peace – and from Him comes ‘peace-security’ – and salutations of safety-security be upon Gabriel (Allāhu 'l-Salām, wa minhī ‘l-salām, wa ‘alā Jibrīli l-salām).”

As al-Suhaylī observes,11 Khadijah rightly uttered: “God is ‘Peace-Security (al-Salām)’, because the term al-salām on the tongue of the creature is a petition for safety-security from the source of all security and safety; such a petition cannot be an assertion of God’s need for security from any harm.

Therefore, states al-Suhaylī, “the meaning of her utterance ‘God is al-salām’ was her thinking: ‘How can I respond to the divine salutation by my saying: “Upon Him peace/may security-safety be upon God (ʿalayhi 'l-salām)”’ because security-safety comes from Him, and it is beseeched of Him, and it is bestowed by Him?! But upon Gabriel may there be security-safety.” Indeed, al-Suhaylī strongly emphasises that God as al-Salām must not be burdened with any defect, or any fear of harm or injury, nor any variation or shortcoming. Rather, God bestows His care enclosing the entire creation (all creatures) within safety and security from harm or defect, due to His providential wise order. Therefore, God may truly be called ‘Peace’ on account of His being the ultimate source and goal of safety-security.

Conclusion

We conclude by observing that essentially islām connotes self-resignation and security (al-inqiyād or al-salm), for it mediates the fundamental idea of ‘affording security from harm-injury to another’, as well as ‘resignation affording safety and peace-security to oneself’. This conclusion could be tested by examining further statements employing forms of verb stem IV aslama attested in the Letters of God’s Messenger. We hope to do so at another time.

Notes

1. But in Qurʾān 4:65: [...] wa yusallimū taslīm, here the verb sallama connotes ‘granting satisfaction-security by the ruling’.
2. Singular ُتَحییه (verbal-noun of stem II ُحییّ or ُحیيّّa) denotes ‘salutation, greeting’ (i.e. ُسَلَامُ ‘َعَلَيْك’); as well as ‘security from death and evils’, or ‘everlasting existence’. Note the familiar salute ُحیيّ ‘َاللَّهُ، ‘May God make you secure from harm-evil’ – or simply ‘May God prolong your life’.

3. The ُتَحییهات are uttered in short form after every second prostration, and in prolonged complete form (تَشْهُد) after the third or the fourth cycle of prostrations; except of course for the dawn prayer which consists of only two cycles.

4. ُالْتَحییةت are uttered in short form after every second prostration, and in prolonged complete form (تَشْهُد) after the third or the fourth cycle of prostrations; except of course for the dawn prayer which consists of only two cycles.

5. For the etymological data on verb ُسَلَمَ consult the standard Arabic linguistic sources, beginning with al-Khallīl b. َعَلِّمُ ‘اللَّهَ، ‘May God make you secure from harm-evil’ – or simply ‘May God prolong your life’.


8. See the treatment of the Divine name ُسَلَام in the genre of writings on God’s Most Beautiful Names (اَسْمَاءُ ُاللَّهِ اَلْحَسَنَّا).

9. Abū ُلْحَمَّام ُعَلِّمُ ‘اللَّهَ، ‘May God make you secure from harm-evil’ – or simply ‘May God prolong your life’.

10. Cited by Ibn Hishām on an unnamed authority; this ُهَدیث on the phrase ُسَلَام is also cited by al-Bukhārī in his ُصَحِيح, and in Muslim, ُفَاضِلُ ُالْعَشَاءِ ُسَلَام 91(via ُآيَةٌ).