VIEWPOINTS

The Greeting of Peace-Security (*al-Salām* ‘*alaykum*): Uncovering the Basis of Islamic Peace

Karim D. Crow*

A distinctive characteristic of Muslims is the exchange of greetings saluting one another with *al-salām* ‘*alaykum*! – along with the response ...*wa ‘alaykum 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 *taḥiyyat 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 Ja‘far 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, Ja‘far 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* ‘*alaykum wa raḥmat Allāh*’ *wa barakātuh*’, “Peace-Security be upon you, and God’s Mercy and His Blessing”. This word *taslīm* 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

* Karim D. Crow is Principal Research Fellow at IAIS Malaysia.

render him salutations of peace-security” ([...] *ṣallū ‘alayhi wa sallimū taslīman*).¹ The frequently uttered eulogy praising God’s Messenger Muḥammad – “May God bless him and give him peace” (*ṣallā llāhū ‘alayhi 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 ‘llāhū yad ‘ū ilā dārī ‘l-salāmi wa yahdī man yashā ‘ū ilā ṣirāṭin mustaqīmīn*). 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!’ (*fa-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’ān 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’.⁵ 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 ‘Abd 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.⁶ 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-inqiyād li-ṭā’atihī wa ‘l-qabūl li-amrihī*).

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’ (*inqiyād*) 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 *inqāda* ('to follow-obey, resign oneself to'). Verbal stem *sallama* – as in the phrase *sallam^a amrah^u ilā 'llāh*, 'to resign oneself [one's cause or affair] to God', as well as verbal stem *aslama* – as in *aslam^a nafsah^u [or amrah^u] ilā llāh*, '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 *sālīm*, 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 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Abd-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 sulim^a minh^u*), while *al-sālīm* denotes one who is safe-secure from others (*man salim^a 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^a 'alā 'llāhi min 'ibādihi* – "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

Prophetic supplication which man renders towards God, is cast in the construction: [...] *wa minh*“ ‘*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 Khadījah, this is Gabriel, he extends salutations-of-peace from your Lord!” So Khadījah said: “God is Peace – and from Him comes ‘peace-security’ – and salutations of safety-security be upon Gabriel (*Allāh*“ ‘*l-Salām*, *wa minh*“ ‘*l-salām*, *wa ‘alā jibrīl*‘ *l-salām*).”

As al-Suhaylī observes,¹¹ Khadījah 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 (‘*alayh*‘ ‘*l-salām*)]”?’ because security-safety *comes from Him*, and is *beseeked 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 Qur’ān 4:65: [...] *wa yusallimū taslīm*“, here the verb *sallama* connotes ‘granting satisfaction-security by the ruling’.

2. Singular *taḥiyyah* (verbal-noun of stem II *ḥayyā* or *ḥayyiya*) denotes ‘salutation, greeting’ (i.e. *salām*^{am} ‘*alayka*’); as well as ‘security from death and evils’, or ‘everlasting existence’. Note the familiar salute *ḥayyākā llāhu*, ‘May God make you secure from harm-evil’ – or simply ‘May God prolong your life’.
3. The *al-taḥiyyāt* are uttered in short form after every second prostration, and in prolonged complete form (*tashahhud*) after the third or the fourth cycle of prostrations; except of course for the dawn prayer which consists of only two cycles.
4. *Allāhumma anta 'l-salām wa minkā 'l-salām wa ilayka ya'ūdū 'l-salām...*
5. For the etymological data on verb *s-l-m* consult the standard Arabic linguistic sources, beginning with al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad’s *Kitāb al-‘ayn* and al-Jawharī’s *Ṣiḥāḥ al-lughah*; compare Qur’ān 21:69, *kūnī bardan wa salāmam*, ‘Be cool and safe-from-harm!’; c.f. Qur’ān 97:5.
6. See the eulogy of divine names in Qur’ān 59:23: “[...] *al-Malik* ‘*l-Quddūs* ‘*l-Salām*’ ‘*l-Mu’min*’”, ‘the Sovereign, the Sanctified, the Source-of-Peace, Bestower-of-Security’. Recall the close association of *salm* with *amānah*, ‘security’ – and thus with *īmān*, ‘faith’. (It makes little sense to conceive of God as *mu’min* – ‘believing’ in something other than Himself.)
7. Consult my “Peace and Security: The Islamic Understanding”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 2, no. 4 (July 2011), 708–13.
8. See the treatment of the Divine name *al-Salām* in the genre of writings on God’s Most Beautiful Names (*asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*).
9. Abū ‘l-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. ‘Abd-Allāh al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-‘unf*, ed. Majdī b. Maṣṣūr b. Sayyid al-Shūrā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, n.d.), 1:418–19. *Al-Rawḍ* is an important commentary upon the Prophet’s biography, the *Sīrah*, compiled by Ibn Hishām (d. 833), who drew upon the famous eighth-century work by Ibn Ishāq (d. 761 or 767).
10. Cited by Ibn Hishām on an unnamed authority; this *ḥadīth* on the phrase *Allāh* ‘*l-Salām*’ is also cited by al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, and in Muslim, *Faḍā’il al-ṣaḥābah* §91 (via ‘Ā’ishah).
11. Al-Suhaylī, *al-Rawḍ al-‘unf*, 1:419–20.