Definition and Meaning

_Ummah_ is an Arabic word, meaning “people” or “group” or “community” formed based on some common and coherent features like language, race, religion, culture, and economic interest with a common leader, goal, and constitution. The derivation of the term _ummah_ is referred to the Arabic action verb _amm_, meaning “to aim” or “to intend” [6]. In this sense, _ummah_ refers to the people who intend to follow a leader, or adhere to a religion. However, it is also used to mean to belong to one place, or generation.

Historical Background

Harking back to what can be called historical development, the term _ummah_ is traced back to the root word _umm_, meaning “mother,” or Hebrew word _em_, meaning also “mother,” or “stock” or “race,” or “community” [3, 4] that have significantly
contributed to enhance the meaning of the concept of ummah over time, expressing intimate relationship among the members rather than misperceived conception of female monarchy.

However, the usage of the term ummah is markedly distinct from that of sha'b, meaning “nation” derived from the Latin verb natalité (to give birth). The term sha'b is strictly a geopolitical concept defined as a community of people possessing a territory, government, and citizenship, regardless of a person’s religious affiliation. Over time, increasingly belonging to the ummah necessitates religious affiliation. In this sense, the concept of “nation” lacks vision and explicit fortitude without having criteria of unison, as opposed to the concept of the ummah (religious community).

Ummah and Church

The concept of ummah cannot be equivalent to that of Church in Christianity, even though both terminologies connote community of believers, encompassing social and worldly dimensions. The membership in the case of ummah requires one to become a Muslim, either by birth or by conversion, while membership of a Church is only determined through baptism, which includes the confession of faith in Jesus as the Son of God and circumcision [7]. Suffice it to say that there are also differences between the conditions of maintaining adherence to ummah and church.

Ummah in Islam

At the outset, the term ummah was hardly used in the pre-Islamic Arab world to the extent it is used in Islam to mean religious community. Abu Qais bin Aslat, the poet of Medina, who died before the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, is believed to be the first person to have used the term ummah in the sense of community, or group of people. The Qur’ānic revelation of the term ummah in the sense of “religious community” occurred just before the hijrat (migration) of the Prophet of Islam [1]. However, ummah denoting the “community with vision and mission” was introduced first by the Prophet Muhammad in the “Charter of Medina” (Constitution of Medina) drafted after the hijrat in 622 A.D. [2], which is believed to be the first written constitution of the world [5].

In the Qur’ān, the term ummah has been used in different places with a variation of meanings such as “nation” (II:128, 134; XIII:30; X:47; XVI:36), “religious community” (II:143; III:110), “group of people” (III:143; V:66; VII:159), “period” (XI:8; XII:5), and “religion” (XVIII:22–23). Furthermore, the Qur’ān applies the term ummah to mean both the Muslims and the non-Muslims (Q. XIII:30), to whom God sent the messengers (Q. XVI:36), and for whom the divine law was prescribed (Q. V:48). Broadly speaking, the term ummah has also been used in the Qur’ān to address “community” in general; for instance, the Qur’ān says, Mankind were one community, and Allah sent (unto them) prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and revealed therewith the Scripture... (II:213).
The *ummah* in Islamic tradition represents a universal world-order governed by an Islamic government (the Caliphate) in accordance with *shari'ah*, and therefore, it is not restricted to any particular territorial nation, due basically to its provision to allow non-Muslims to live as *dhimmī* (non-Muslim citizens in *shari'ah*-based Muslim states) in order to enjoy all the rights within its territory fully protected in their communities.

However, orientalists as well as Muslim scholars have dealt with the issue in the context of the differences of geographical location, political situation, and historical perspectives, especially in relation to self-determination, freedom of choice, and human rights. For instance, Muslim jurists (*fuqahā*') restrict it to the Muslims alone, and to that effect, the *ummah* is designated as such a religious community that believes in the unity of Allah and the finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad, and that fulfills all the obligations required by *shari'ah* law.

### Ummah and Its Integration

The concept of the *ummah*, as revealed by Allah, was scripturally integrated at Mecca (also transcribed as Makkah), but was socially and politically strengthened by rituals (*ibādat*) and *shari'ah* in Medina. In the Makkah period (referring to those Qur’ānic verses revealed in Mecca), the people who used to subscribe to different tribal laws and to fight in defense of them became members of the *ummah*, pledging to the Oneness of God. This led them to unite themselves as a single Muslim community – a universal brotherhood on the basis of equality in the spirit of “Oneness of God” (*tawḥīd*). So the concept of fraternal belongingness initiated in Mecca was aimed primarily to achieve spiritual integration, encompassing social and economic aspects as well in Medina. Therefore, although the conceptual development of the *ummah* emerged in Mecca, it further developed in Medina with the practice of *shari'ah* [8].

In Medina, the religious practice of Muslims was further strengthened – both morally and spiritually – by a wide range of ritual practices such as prayer (*ṣalāt*), poor due (*zakāt*), fasting (*ṣawm*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*), etc. For instance, fraternal love among the fellow humans, realization of the unity with God, the institution of *ṣalāt*, and the like were made obligatory, and as such, the members of the *ummah* were characterized as “one human family,” regardless of one’s social status. Thus, the so-called clans, or tribes, to which the Muslims belonged before the advent of Islam, were of no avail with the practice of the values of the *ummah*. Similarly, *zakāt* was prescribed to support the destitute and to provide a healthy economy to the fellow members of the *ummah*, just as *ṣawm* was intended to make them realize the suffering of poverty and to feel the grace of God, while empowering the members with increased efforts to become conscious of God. Pilgrimage to Mecca, known as *ḥajj* – which is also one of the pillars of Islam recommended for those capable in terms of physical, mental, and financial strength – is a universal congregation to bring to the fore the current socio-political and religious issues of the *ummah*, as well as remembering the glorious history and paying homage to the legacy of prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) and his great sacrifices to the divine will of God. Islamic jurisprudence, to some extent, can also add value to comprehend the coherent system of the *ummah*. With the formation of the *ummah*, some crucial social issues like fraternal bond, equality of men and women, equity of wealth, abolition of slavery, and so on permeated the ideological framework of Islamic civilization.
Cross-References

- [Hajj](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2057)
- [Jurisprudence](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100071)
- [Prayer](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100274)
- [ṣawm](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2010)
- [Tawhid](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2015)
- [Zakāt](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2059)

References

   [Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20rise%20and%20decline%20of%20Muslim%20Ummah&author=I.%20Ahmad&publication_year=1992)

   [CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000305929)

   [CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1086/462733)
   [Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20meaning%20of%20%E2%80%9Cummah%E2%80%9D%20in%20the%20Qur%CA%BE%C4%81n&author=FM.%20Denny&journal=Hist%20Relig&volume=15&issue=1&pages=34-70&publication_year=1975)

   [CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1086/372530)
5. Hamidullah M (1968) First written constitution of the world: an important document of the time of the holy prophet. Ashraf Press, Lahore
   Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=First%20written%20constitution%20of%20the%20world%3A%20an%20important%20document%20of%20the%20time%20of%20the%20holy%20prophet&author=M.%20Hamidullah&publication_year=1968)


   Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Muhammad%20at%20Medina&author=W.M.%20Watt&publication_year=1956)

Copyright information

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V., part of Springer Nature 2018

How to cite

Cite this entry as:

About this entry

- First Online 06 July 2018
- DOI https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3
- Publisher Name Springer, Dordrecht
- Print ISBN 978-94-024-1266-6
- eBook Packages Religion and Philosophy
- Buy this book on publisher's site
- Reprints and Permissions

SPRINGER NATURE

© 2018 Springer Nature Switzerland AG. Part of Springer Nature.