

Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism

2018 Edition

| Editors: Zayn R. Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Jehan Bagli

Ummah

- Golam Dastagir (1) (2) Email author (m.g.dastagir@gmail.com)
- Ismath Ramzy (2)

1. Department of Philosophy, Jahangirnagar University, , Savar, Bangladesh
2. Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya, , Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Reference work entry

First Online: 06 July 2018

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2016

- [2 Downloads](#)

Synonyms

Community (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100217); Group (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100218); Muslim community (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100219); Muslim nation (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100220); People (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100221); Religious group (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100222)

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 *sharī'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 *sharī'ah*-based Muslim states) in order to enjoy all the rights within its territory fully protected in their communities.

However, orientalist 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 *sharī'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 (*ibādāt*) and *sharī'ah* in Medina. In the Makkan 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” (*tawhīd*). 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 *sharī'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) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2057)
- [Jurisprudence](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100071) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100071)
- [Prayer](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100274) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_100274)
- [ṣawm](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2010) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2010)
- [Tawhīd](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2015) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2015)
- [Zakāt](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2059) (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1267-3_2059)

References

1. Ahmad I (1992) The rise and decline of Muslim Ummah. Ta-Ha Publishers, London
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20rise%20and%20decline%20of%20Muslim%20Ummah&author=I.%20Ahmad&publication_year=1992) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20rise%20and%20decline%20of%20Muslim%20Ummah&author=I.%20Ahmad&publication_year=1992)
2. Ataman M (2003) Islamic perspective on ethnicity and nationalism: diversity or uniformity? *J Muslim Minor Aff* 23(1):89–102
[CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000305929) (https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000305929)
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Islamic%20perspective%20on%20ethnicity%20and%20nationalism%3A%20diversity%20or%20uniformity%3F&author=M.%20Ataman&journal=J%20Muslim%20Minor%20Aff&volume=23&issue=1&pages=89-102&publication_year=2003) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Islamic%20perspective%20on%20ethnicity%20and%20nationalism%3A%20diversity%20or%20uniformity%3F&author=M.%20Ataman&journal=J%20Muslim%20Minor%20Aff&volume=23&issue=1&pages=89-102&publication_year=2003)
3. Denny FM (1975) The meaning of “ummah” in the Qur’ān. *Hist Relig* 15(1):34–70
[CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1086/462733) (https://doi.org/10.1086/462733)
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20meaning%20of%20E2%80%9Cummah%20in%20the%20Qur%20CA%BE%20C4%81n&author=FM.%20Denny&journal=Hist%20Relig&volume=15&issue=1&pages=34-70&publication_year=1975) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20meaning%20of%20E2%80%9Cummah%20in%20the%20Qur%20CA%BE%20C4%81n&author=FM.%20Denny&journal=Hist%20Relig&volume=15&issue=1&pages=34-70&publication_year=1975)
4. Denny FM (1977) Ummah in the constitution of Medina. *J Near East Stud* 36(1):39–47
[CrossRef](https://doi.org/10.1086/372530) (https://doi.org/10.1086/372530)
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Ummah%20in%20the%20constitution%20of%20Medina&author=FM.%20Denny&journal=J%20Near%20East%20Stud&volume=36&issue=1&pages=39-47&publication_year=1977) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Ummah%20in%20the%20constitution%20of%20Medina&author=FM.%20Denny&journal=J%20Near%20East%20Stud&volume=36&issue=1&pages=39-47&publication_year=1977)

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) (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)
6. Kakakhel MN (1982) The rise of Muslim Umma at Makkah. Hamdard Islam V(3):59–74
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20rise%20of%20Muslim%20Umma%20at%20Makkah&author=M.N.%20Kakakhel&journal=Hamdard%20Islam&volume=V&issue=3&pages=59-74&publication_year=1982) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=The%20rise%20of%20Muslim%20Umma%20at%20Makkah&author=M.N.%20Kakakhel&journal=Hamdard%20Islam&volume=V&issue=3&pages=59-74&publication_year=1982)
7. Troll CW (2012) Muslims ask, Christians answer. New City Press, New York
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Muslims%20ask%20Christians%20answer&author=CW.%20Troll&publication_year=2012) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Muslims%20ask%20Christians%20answer&author=CW.%20Troll&publication_year=2012)
8. Watt WM (1956) Muhammad at Medina. Oxford University Press, London
[Google Scholar](http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Muhammad%20at%20Medina&author=WM.%20Watt&publication_year=1956) (http://scholar.google.com/scholar_lookup?title=Muhammad%20at%20Medina&author=WM.%20Watt&publication_year=1956)

Copyright information

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

How to cite

Cite this entry as:

Dastagir G., Ramzy I. (2018) Ummah. In: Kassam Z.R., Greenberg Y.K., Bagli J. (eds) Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions. Springer, Dordrecht

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
- Online ISBN 978-94-024-1267-3
- 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](#).

Logged in as Ismath Ramzy University of Malaya UM (2000000861) - 6816 SpringerLink Malaysia eJournal Consortium - Higher Education (3000155375) - 8354 Springerlink Malaysia consortium (3000519906) - 10122 SpringerLink Malaysia eJourn Consortium - Higher Education (3000716851) - 13008 SpringerLink Malaysia eJournal Consortium – Higher Education (3001044276) - Ismath Ramzy (3003505080) 103.18.0.20