

DISABILITY IN THE QUR'AN:  
THE ISLAMIC ALTERNATIVE TO DEFINING, VIEWING, AND RELATING TO  
DISABILITY

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this study is to seek a first-hand understanding of the Islamic position and attitude towards disability by examining the primary sources of Islamic teaching—the *Qur'an* and the life example of the Prophet Muhammad as preserved in his sayings and teachings (*Hadith*). We search the Qur'an for references to such terms as *blind, mute, deaf, lame, weak, orphan, destitute/needy, and wayfarer*. We attempt to understand the intent of these terms by examining the roots of the Arabic words and investigating their possible synonyms; cross-referencing the Qur'anic verses containing the same terms; and confirming the meaning with the Hadith. We conclude that the concept of disability, in the conventional sense, is not found in the Qur'an. Rather, the Qur'an concentrates on the notion of *disadvantage* that is created by society and imposed on those individuals who might not possess the social, economic, or physical attributes that people happen to value at a certain time and place. The Qur'an places the responsibility of rectifying this inequity on the shoulder of society by its constant exhortation to Muslims to recognize the plight of the disadvantaged and to improve their condition and status.

**KEYWORDS.** Disability, disadvantage, Qur'an, Hadith, Islam.

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## Introduction

Islam, the third of the Abrahamic religions, is the faith of about 1.2 billion people in the world today (Rauf, 2003). They can be found spread over a large portion of the global map, from the Atlantic into China and from Southern Europe well into Africa, not to mention their relatively recent presence, mainly through immigration, in Western Europe, the Americas and Australia. In this paper we explore the attitude and position of one of the major spiritual and thought systems in the world towards an issue of critical importance in this day and age, that of disability.

Because we seek a first hand understanding of the Islamic attitude and position, we examine the original sources of Islamic teaching, which are the *Qur'an* and the life example of the Prophet Muhammad as preserved in his sayings and teachings (*Hadith*). We also examine the stories of the companions and the contemporaries of the Prophet to seek an understanding of how people closest to the origin, both in time and place, comprehended and carried out the Islamic attitude towards people with disabilities.

### *The Qur'an*

As in the case with Judaism and Christianity, Islam has as its source a divine revelation or scripture, the Qur'an. *Qur'an*, derived from the Arabic verb *qara'a* (meaning *read* or *recite*), is to be understood as the reading par excellence. The Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad over the twenty-three years of his mission, starting in the year 610 AD and ending with his death in the year 632 AD (Asad, 1980).

To Muslims, stretched over fourteen centuries, the Qur'an has always been God's direct, personal and unadulterated address to mankind, which he revealed, in the Arabic language, through his last prophet, Muhammad. To Muslims, the Qur'an represents "the ultimate

manifestation of God's grace..., the ultimate wisdom, and the ultimate beauty of expression: in short, the true word of God" (Asad, 1980, p. ii). It also, to Muslims, is a message appropriate for all human beings, times, and places.

Muslims take great care in ensuring that the Qur'an remains in its original form and language without any revision, editing, or addition. The Qur'an exists only in its Arabic form. Interpretations and translations to other languages, while numerous, are considered to only represent the interpreter's understanding of the Qur'an and are, therefore, neither the Qur'an nor a translation of it (Lang, 1997).

The Qur'an is not a compilation of individual injunctions and exhortations. It is not arranged, despite its 114 chapters, in the form of a thesis. It is, as Asad (1980) states:

[A]n exposition of an ethical doctrine in which every verse and sentence has an intimate bearing on other verses and sentences, all of them clarifying and amplifying one another. Consequently, its real meaning can be grasped only if we correlate every one of its statements with what has been stated elsewhere in its pages and try to explain its ideas by means of frequent cross-references, always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic. (p. vii)

Moreover, while it contains many historical references and numerous allusions to phenomena of natural science, the Qur'an is neither a historical account nor a science textbook. "[N]o part of the Qur'an should be viewed from a purely historical [or scientific] point of view" (Asad, 1980, vii). Any reference to historical circumstances or scientific aspects "must be regarded as illustrations of [and for] the human condition and not as ends in themselves" (Asad, 1980, vii). Instead, emphasis should always be placed on the underlying purport and the ethical teachings of the Qur'an.

As stated before, the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. Its style and form are of the highest literary quality. Muslims assert that the Qur'an succeeds in reconciling two problematic premises: that its message is universal, in both time and place, and that it is clear and concise in itself when it was revealed to seventh century Arabs. The Qur'an uses the language of the Prophet's milieu and reflects their intellectual, religious, social and material customs. At the same time it employs allegory, parables, and other literary devices to reach a wide audience. The Qur'an says: "He it is who has bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, containing messages that are clear in and by themselves – and these are the essence of the divine writ – as well as others that are allegorical"(3:7<sup>i</sup>). Therefore, "the Qur'an itself insists on its use of symbolism, because to describe the realm of realities beyond human perception [whether in time or in place] would be impossible otherwise" (Lang, 1997, p. 11).

Muslims believe that the Qur'an, owing to its timeless and universal nature, must contain layers upon layers of meaning. Interpretation of the significance of Qur'anic terms must, therefore, consider the widest and deepest possible meaning in order to fully understand the divine message. The Qur'an says: "And if all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were] ink, with seven [more] seas yet added to it, the words [and their meaning] of God would not be exhausted: for, verily, God is almighty, wise" (31:27). Muslims are commanded, by the Qur'an itself, to read and recite the Qur'an constantly and to strive to comprehend its meaning, each to his or her intellectual capacity. This injunction seems to intend for Muslims to develop a first hand knowledge and understanding of the tenets of the Islamic message (Lang, 1997; Rauf, 2003).

*The Hadith*

To Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is much more than the conduit of God's revelation. He is its exemplar and living manifestation. The Qur'an says: "Verily, in the Apostle of God you have a good example" (33:21). It also says: "An apostle from among yourselves to convey unto you Our messages, ... and to impart unto you revelation and wisdom, and to teach you that which you knew not" (2:151). And, when asked about the Prophet's manners, his wife Aisha replied: "The Qur'an was his manners" (Muslim, 746<sup>ii</sup>).

For these reasons, Muslims have always sought to learn and follow the Prophet's sayings and deeds. These sayings and deeds, collectively known as *Traditions* or *Hadith*, were meticulously collected by the contemporaries of the Prophet and related to others. Later, these traditions were painstakingly scrutinized and verified by scholars (such as Al-Bukhari and Muslim), who then compiled them in collections of Hadith that continue to be studied and examined by all Muslims to this day (Asad, 1934/1999).

These Hadith collections provide interpretation, elaboration, and illustration by the Prophet of the meanings and purports of the Qur'an, and how the Qur'anic tenets should be understood and put into practice. It is, therefore, not possible to attempt a full interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an without examining the Prophet's traditions or Hadith regarding the subject.

## Methodology

We, the authors, were born Muslim and were raised in Arabic speaking countries where we received education that included only basic and elementary knowledge about Islam. As we grew up, we found it difficult to accept many of the religious notions and practices espoused by the majority of Muslims. After several years of reflection and research, we arrived at a renewed

understanding that the common Muslim has a duty and a responsibility to examine the original sources (Qur'an and Hadith) and reach his or her own conclusions rather than relying *entirely and uncritically* on second hand interpretations made by religious scholars several centuries ago (a practice known as “*Taqlid*”). Accordingly, we base our exploration of the attitude and position of Islam towards disability on the Qur'an, in its original Arabic form, and the Hadith.

We do not compare Islam, in this respect, to other religions, philosophies, or disability models (Eastern or Western), nor do we examine the popular notions or current practices towards people with disabilities in Muslim countries—an issue that has been undertaken in other studies (Such as Al-Abdulwahab & Al-Gain, 2003; Bazna, 2003; Dols, 1987; Hoffman, 1995; Legander-Mourcy, 2003; Miles 1995; Morad et al., 2001; Turmusani, 2001; Williams, 2001). We expect that the findings of this research might not coincide with many of the practices in Muslim countries, for we believe, like many other Muslims, that the practices of the current day Muslims have been tainted by their local cultures and influenced by outside factors, and their understanding of Islam has been calcified by the accretions of centuries of decay and the stagnation of the scholarship and industry that mark the early period of Islam (Abdu & Reda, 2002 version; Asad, 1934/1999, 1987/2000; Rauf, 2003).

Our sources for this study include the Arabic text of the Qur'an; the two most reliable and thoroughly corroborated compilations of Hadith, which are Bukhari and Muslim (Al-Nawawi, 1998 version; Sabiq, 1946/1993; Shah, 1999); the stories of the companions of the Prophet (Khaled, 1994; Shah, 1999); *Lisan Ul-Arab*, which is an expanded 18-volume-dictionary that contains the root, origin, variations of words and their usage (Ibn Mandhooor, 1986 version<sup>iii</sup>); and several Qur'anic exegeses, both classical (Abdu & Reda, 2002 version; Ibn Kathir, 1885/1986) and modern (Ali, 1996; Asad, 1980; Malik, 1997; Pickthall, 1992).

To find a suitable starting point for our research, we searched the Qur'an and Hadith for terms that are conventionally associated with disability, such as *blind*, *mute*, *deaf*, *lame*, and *weak*. In our initial reading of the verses in which these terms appear we found that one of these terms (i.e., *weak*) had both physical and social implications. This finding suggested that we also consider other terms that were mentioned in conjunction with *weak*, such as *orphan*, *destitute/needy*, and *wayfarer*.

We located the verses and traditions that contained all of these terms, and then we sorted the verses and traditions by term. Because, as stated previously, the Qur'an was revealed in the language of the Prophet's milieu, we looked up the meaning of the Arabic terms in Lisan Ul-Arab to help us arrive at a deep understanding of the searched terms and their various shades of meanings. Lisan Ul-Arab is a comprehensive compilation of five dictionaries that were composed before the time of Ibn Mandhoor (1233-1311 AD). One of these five dictionaries (i.e., *Mu'jam Tahthib Al Lughah*) was composed by Abu Mansur Al-Azhari (852-980 AD) who lived among the early Bedouin Arabs and spoke their language and wrote his dictionary based on his knowledge of the Bedouins' older way of using Arabic words.

Abdu & Reda (2002 version) believe that the Qur'an explains itself by itself and that the best proof for the meaning of a term is its agreement with the meaning of the same term in other places in the Qur'an. Therefore, we cross-referenced the verses containing the same term. And, since the Prophet's tradition and Hadith provide clarification of and elaboration to the Qur'an, we cross-referenced the verses with the Hadith. The Qur'an, being of the highest literary quality, uses every term, word, verb, and so on in the most deliberate manner and for a very specific purpose (Abdu & Reda, 2002 version). Therefore, we studied the meanings of each and every word in the selected verses and investigated their possible synonyms and their various shades of

meanings in Lisan Ul-Arab in an attempt to reach the full meaning and to glean an insight into the real intent of the Qur'an. We also consulted several classical and modern Qur'anic exegeses. All through our analysis, we were guided by the principle that our interpretation had to conform to the general meaning of the Qur'an and to be congruent with the overall purpose for which the entire Book was revealed.

## Discussion

### *Disability in the Qur'an*

Central to a discussion on disability in the Qur'an is the concept of perfection from the Islamic perspective. Asad (1934/1999) says: "As long as we have to do with human, biologically limited beings, we cannot possibly consider the idea of 'absolute' perfection, because everything absolute belongs to the realm of Divine attributes alone" (p. 10). Human perfection, in its true physical, psychological and moral sense, must necessarily have a relative and purely individual bearing. "It does not imply the possession of all imaginable good qualities, nor even the progressive acquisition of new qualities from outside, but solely the development of the already existing, positive qualities of the individual in such a way as to rouse his innate but otherwise dormant powers" (p. 10). Because of the natural variety of the life-phenomenon, the inborn qualities of human beings differ in each individual case. It would be absurd, argues Asad, to "suppose that all human beings should, or even could, strive towards one and the same 'type' of perfection" (p. 11). He further explains: "If perfection were to be standardized in a certain 'type' men would have to give up, or change, or suppress, their individual differentiation" (p. 11). But this would violate the divine law of individual variety, which dominates all life on this earth. Humans' "duty is to make the best of [themselves] so that they might honor the life-gift which [their] Creator has bestowed upon [them]; and to help [their] fellow-beings, by means of



[their] own development, in their spiritual, social and material endeavors. But the form of [one's] individual life is in no way fixed by a standard" (p. 11-12). In Islam, humans' original nature is essentially good. The Islamic teaching holds that people are born pure and, in the sense explained above, potentially perfect.

It is said in the Qur'an: "Verily, We create man in the best conformation" (95:4). But in the same breath the verse continues, "and thereafter We reduce him to the lowest of low – excepting only such as attain to faith and do good works" (95:5-6). Thus, according to Islam, "evil is never essential or even original.... The Islamic teaching definitely asserts, we—everyone of us—can reach a full measure of perfection by developing the positive, already existing traits of which our individualities are composed." (Asad, 1934/1999, p. 12-13). The concepts of perfection and imperfection in the physical sense, therefore, have little application in the Islamic view of human life. By extension, so too do the concepts of normalcy and abnormalcy.

The Qur'an's attitude towards all human beings could be drawn from this verse:

O [people!] Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him.

Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)

All people belong to one human family; every person is created out of the same father and mother – implying that this equality of biological origin should be reflected in the equality of the human dignity common to all. This connects with the exhortation, in the preceding two verses (49:11-12) to respect and safeguard each other's dignity. Human evolution into "nations and tribes" is meant to foster rather than to diminish their mutual desire to understand and appreciate the essential human oneness underlying their outward differentiations (Asad, 1980).

According to the verse, the noblest of human beings in the sight of God is the most deeply conscious of Him. God's measure of a human being's worth relies not on physical attributes or material achievements, but on spiritual maturity and ethical development. The Prophet most explicitly communicates this message when saying: "Verily, God does not look at your bodies or your appearances, but looks into your hearts" (Muslim, 2564).

The Qur'an and the Hadith take an extra step to stress the necessity of applying the above stated attitude towards people with disabilities. For example, what could be seen as a minor act of discourtesy on the part of the Prophet towards a person who was blind caused a "sharp Qur'anic rebuke" (Asad, 1980, p. 930) to further stress lessons that expand beyond the verse's immediate cause.

As recorded in many well-authenticated traditions, some of the most influential chiefs of pagan Mecca were sitting in the Prophet's assembly. The Prophet was earnestly engaged in trying to persuade them, and through them the community in Mecca at large, to accept Islam. At that very point, the Prophet was approached by one of his followers, who was blind, to seek explanation on certain passages of the Qur'an. Annoyed by this interruption of what he considered a very important endeavor (i.e., spreading the message of Islam) the Prophet frowned and turned away from the blind man. Right then and there, the following ten verses of the Qur'an were revealed:

He frowned and turned away because the blind man approached him! Yet for all thou didst know, [O, Muhammad,] he might perhaps have grown in purity, or have been reminded [of the truth], and helped by this reminder. Now as for him who believes himself to be self-sufficient – to him didst thou give thy whole attention, although thou

art not accountable for his failure to attain to purity; but as for him who came unto thee full of eagerness and in awe [of God] – him didst thou disregard! (80.1-10)

Our initial reading of these verses indicated that people with disabilities are to be treated with full regard and to have the same subject-to-subject relations that are granted to the non-disabled. A deeper analysis, however, revealed even more. Considering the timing of this incident (at a very early stage of the Prophet's mission) and Muhammad's apparent keenness to gain followers among the wealthy and powerful members of society, the verses indicate that the value of a sincere seeker of God, even though weak and/or disabled, is more than that of one who is heedless of God, no matter how wealthy or powerful.

The above stated examples comprise Islam's position and attitude towards evaluating mankind: the real merit of people lies in the degree with which they seek the truth. Following are more specific findings of our research.

*Blind (A'ma).* Our search for the word *blind* and the derivatives of the root *amiya* resulted in 32 occurrences. According to Lisan Ul-Arab, Arabs used the verb *amiya* to mean *not seeing*, or *not being able to see*. The passive voice of the verb *amiya* was used in at least nine verses to mean *was not able to see* the spiritual guidance. Only three times the word *a'ma* was used in the Qur'an to refer to a person who has lost his or her eyesight (24:61; 48:17; 80:2.) Interestingly, when referring to this person, the Qur'an uses the word *a'ma*, but not the word *dhareer*, which is another word that was and is still used to mean *blind* in a physiological sense. According to Lisan Ul-Arab, the word *a'ma* has many usages, one of which is the person who is physiologically blind, whereas the word *dhareer* has a much more limited usage and was mainly used to refer to the person who has lost his or her eyesight. The word *dhareer* is derived from the root *dha-ra-ra*, which implies harm or disability, whereas the word *a'ma* is derived from the

root *amiya*, which means *not see*. In other words, unlike *dhareer*, the word *a'ma* did not carry a negative connotation for the seventh century Arabs. It merely referred to the specific condition of not seeing.

In all of the rest of the verses (20 verses), derivatives of the verb *amiya* are used to refer to the loss of spiritual insight and not the loss of vision or eyesight in the physiological sense (Ali, 1996; Asad, 1980). The Qur'an clearly states: "Have they, then, never journeyed about the earth, letting their hearts gain wisdom, and causing their ears to hear? Yet, verily, it is not their eyes that have become blind – but blind have become the hearts that are in their breasts!" (22:46).

The following verse was revealed in conjunction with fighting in the cause of God—a duty on all Muslims:

No blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick [for staying away from a war in God's cause]; but whoever heeds [the call of] God and His Apostle [in deed or in heart], him will He admit into gardens through which running waters flow; whereas him who turns away will He chastise with grievous chastisement. (48:17)

The verse provides permission to people with physical conditions not to fight. The second part of this verse, "*but* whoever heeds [the call of] God and His Apostle [in deed or in heart], him will He admit into gardens through which running waters flow," stresses that despite permission, it is still better for those exempted to participate within their power, that is, "heed [the call]" in whatever form they can, as by providing help and consultation (See 9:91).

The following tradition narrated by one of the Prophet's companions helps illustrate what it means to participate within their power:

A blind man came to the Apostle of God and said: 'Messenger of God, I have no one to guide me to the mosque' [Muslims are required to perform the five daily prayers in the mosque]. He, therefore, asked the Apostle of God permission to say prayer in his house. He [the Prophet] granted him permission. Then when the man turned away he called him and said, 'Do you hear the call to prayer?' He said, 'Yes.' He [the Prophet then] said, 'Respond to it.' (Muslim, 310)

The implication here is that if the man could hear the call to prayer, then he must be close enough to the mosque, in which case the permission to say prayer at home does not apply. All people are expected to constantly do the best they can within their powers, and people with certain conditions are no exception.

As reported by Shah (1999), Abdullah Ibn Umm Maktum was a companion of the Prophet and he was blind. Ibn Umm Maktum is the person about whom God revealed verses 80:1-10 admonishing Muhammad (See pages 10-11). Upon migrating from Mecca to Medina, Ibn Umm Maktum was given the important position of calling Muslims to prayer. On more than ten occasions, the Prophet put him in charge of Medina when he, the Prophet, was out of town. In spite of being excused from fighting, Abdullah Ibn Umm Maktum was not content with staying among those who remained at home while others had to fight. He fixed a role for himself on the battlefield saying: "Place me between two rows and give me the standard. I will carry it for you and protect it, for I am blind and cannot run away" (Shah, 1999). He took part in several battles before he was killed on the battlefield clutching the flag of the Muslims.

*Mute (Abkam).* Our search for the word *abkam* (conventionally known to mean *mute*) pointed to six occurrences in the Qur'an. According to Lisan Ul-Arab, the word *abkam* was used to refer to a person who can speak, but cannot speak well because of ignorance, cannot reason

his answers, or cannot turn to his or her heart for guidance. Interestingly, we learned that, at the time the Qur'an was revealed, the word used to refer to a person who was born mute or who lost the physiological ability to speak was not *abkam*, but *akhras*. The word *akhras* is not mentioned in the Qur'an.

In all of the six verses (2:17-18; 2:171; 16:76; 6:39; 8:22; 17:97), the Qur'an uses the word *bukm* (the plural form of *abkam*) in a parable to those who strayed from the way of God (Ali, 1996; Asad, 1980). The context in which the word *bukm* appears in these verses stresses that the parable is not intended to be with people who are physiologically mute. For example, the Qur'an describes those who stray from the way of God in verse 2:18 as "bukm" who "cannot turn back." In verses 2:171 and 8:22 they are described as "bukm" who "do not use their reason," and in verses 6:39 and 17:97 they are "bukm" who "do not go the straight way." Cross-referencing these verses leaves us with the conclusion that the word *abkam* in the Qur'an is intended to signify one who is spiritually, ethically, or morally bereft.

When asked by one of his companions: "[F]rom what do we give *sadaqah* if we do not possess property? [Sadaqah is a collective term that typically signifies giving of material possessions. It is something to be performed by each Muslim everyday for her or his own good and reward in this life and the life hereafter.] Muhammad replied, 'The doors of *sadaqah* are...guiding the blind; listening to the deaf and mute until you understand them; guiding a person to his object of need if you know where it is; hurrying with the strength of your legs to one in sorrow who is appealing for help; and supporting the weak with the strength of your arms'" (Sabiq, 3.98), thus laying down the responsibility of everyone to treat the deaf and mute with patience and courtesy.

*Deaf (Assum).* According to Lisan Ul-Arab, the word *assum* has numerous meanings and usages. For example, an *assum rock* means a solid crack-less rock, and an *assum month* signifies a period of time during which there was no war. Only one usage of the word *assum* implies loss of the sense of hearing. Interestingly, Arabs of the time employed, exclusively, the term *atrash* to refer to a person who was born deaf or was hard of hearing.

Our search revealed 14 Qur'anic verses that contain the word *assum* or its plural (*summ*). We found no mention of the word *atrash* in the Qur'an. By examining the verses, we found that *assum* was not used to mean *deaf* in the physiological sense. To illustrate, the Qur'an says: "And there are among them such as [pretend to] listen to thee: but canst thou cause the [summ] to hearken even though they will not use their reason?" (10: 42). If the word *summ* were intended to mean *deaf*, then the verse would have read "even though they will not hear" not "use their reason." For the Islamic treatment of the deaf, please refer to the Prophet's Hadith (Sabiq, 3.98) mentioned in the previous section.

*Lame (A'raj).* We found two verses containing the word *lame*. The Qur'an says: [N]o blame attaches to the blind, nor does blame attach to the lame, nor does blame attach to the sick, and neither to yourselves for eating [whatever is offered to you by others, whether it be food obtained] from your [children's] houses, or your fathers' houses, or your mothers' houses, or your brothers' houses, or your sisters' houses, or your paternal uncles' houses, or your paternal aunts' houses, or your maternal uncles' houses, or your maternal aunts' houses, or [houses] the keys whereof are in your charge, or [the house] of any of your friends; nor will you incur any sin by eating in company or separately. But whenever you enter [any of these] houses, greet one another with a

blessed, goodly greeting, as enjoined by God. In this way God makes clear unto you His message, so that you might [learn to] use your reason. (24:61)

This verse explicitly mentions the lame, alongside the blind and the sick, and removes any superstitious notions that people might attach to people with disabilities, often leading to their exclusion. By doing that, the Qur'an reverses many of the prevailing customs, even to this day, towards people with disabilities and urges their inclusion in the society. Verse 48:17 (See page 12) removes any blame from, and grants permission to, the person who is lame for not going to war. As stated earlier, even though permission is granted to certain people, they are still advised to heed and obey the call of God as much as they can.

Amr Ibn Al-Jamuh was already an old man when Islam reached Medina. He was also partially lame in one leg. After adopting Islam, he felt strongly about joining his three sons who were preparing to fight in the Battle of Uhud. The sons were against their father's wish given that he was excused from the duty to fight because he was old, weak and lame. Amr took his case straight to the Prophet who told the sons to let their father have his wish. Amr and one of his sons were close to the Prophet during the battle, they defended the person of the Prophet when matters got really dangerous, and they fell on the battlefield and died within moments of each other.

*Weak (Da'if)*. The Arabic word for *weak* is *da'if* from the root *da-'a-fa*. The word *da'f* (weakness) means, in Lisan Ul-Arab, the opposite of strength, and the meaning applies equally to physical, mental, spiritual, and moral attributes. We searched the Qur'an for words from the root *da-'a-fa* such as *da'f*, *da'if*, *du'afa'* (*weakness*, *weak*, *weak* in plural, respectively). We counted 22 mentions of words that belong to this root.



Verses 4:28 and 8:66 seem to explain the Qur'an's position towards humans in general; that humans have been created weak (both in the physical and moral sense) and that God wants to lighten their burden both in the temporal as well as spiritual and religious matters.

The Qur'an says:

It is He who creates you out of dust, and then out of a drop of sperm, and then out of a germ-cell: and then He brings you forth as children; and then [He ordains] that you reach maturity, and then, that you grow old—though some of you [He causes to] die earlier—: and [all this He ordains] so that you might reach a term set [by Him], and that you might [learn to] use your reason. (40:67)

And it also says: “It is God who creates you [all in a state] of weakness, and then, after weakness, ordains strength [for you], and then, after [a period of] strength, ordains [old-age] weakness and grey hair” (30:54). Cross-referencing these two verses leads us to conclude that childhood and old age are two of the Islamic definitions of weakness to which the Qur'an alludes.

Another meaning of the term *da'if* came out of the story of Shu'ayb, who was an early prophet sent by God to the people of Madyan (as narrated in verses 11:84-91). Shu'ayb was confronted by the haughty and powerful from his people who rejected his message. They told him that they saw him as *da'if* (*weak*) among them. This, to us, indicates that low social status is considered a source of weakness from the Islamic perspective. Our interpretation was confirmed in a tradition of the Prophet Muhammad where he warned his people: “O' people, the nations before went astray because if a noble person committed theft [a crime in general] they would let him go, but when a weak person from among them stole [committed the same crime] they

exacted legal retribution on him” (Al-Bukhari, 8.779). The contrast between noble and weak explains our point.

An interesting term appeared in our search, that of *mustad'afun*. According to Lisan Ul-Arab, *mustad'afun* denotes those who are deemed or seen to be weak and, therefore, oppressed or exploited. The Qur'an makes a distinction between *du'afa'*, those who are weak, and *mustad'afun*, those deemed weak. The Hebrews of Egypt at the time of Moses are described in the Qur'an as having been *mustad'afun* by Pharaoh and his ilk. It seems to us, since the Hebrews were not few in number nor were they any weaker, physically, than any other group in society, that their weakness was in their low standing in the Egyptian society, which was the basis for their oppression and humiliation at the hands of Pharaoh's people.

The term *mustad'afun* appears several times in the Qur'an and encompasses men, women and children without distinction. For those described as such, the Qur'an urges extreme help and protection of rights. Interestingly, however, the Qur'an says:

Behold, those whom the angels gather in death while they are still sinning against themselves [the angels] will ask, “What was wrong with you?” They will answer: “We were [mustad'afin] on earth.” [The angels] will say: “Was, then, God's earth not wide enough for you to forsake the domain of evil?” For such, then, the goal is hell—and how evil a journey's end! But excepted shall be the truly helpless [mustad'afin]—be they men or women or children—who cannot bring forth any strength and have not been shown the right way. (4:97-98)

These verses seem to imply that one who has an option to flee the condition of oppression or weakness cannot label herself or himself truly *mustad'af*. This term is reserved for those who have no recourse and can find no way out of their condition.

The Qur'an is replete with exhortations towards protecting the rights and dignity of the weak members of society. However, the most poignant Qur'anic statement on the issue is found in the following verse:

And how could you refuse to fight in the cause of God and the [mustad'afin] men and women and children who are crying, "O our Sustainer! Lead us forth [to freedom] out of this land whose people are oppressors, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, a protector, and raise for us, out of Thy grace, one who will bring us succour! (4:75)

In fact, Asad (1980), when explaining this verse, wonders what is amiss with believers who do not fight for the weak, helpless, and oppressed children, women, and men. The implication here is that followers of Islam have no moral excuse for refusing to take every measure and action in order to protect those who are weak.

There are also several authentic traditions from Hadith that further elaborate how Islam accounts for those who are weak, and the position of the weak from the Islamic perspective: "If anyone of you leads people in prayer, he should shorten it for amongst them are the weak, the sick and the old; and if anyone among you prays alone then he may prolong [the prayer] as much as he wishes" (Al-Bukhari, 1.671). In another Hadith (Al-Bukhari, 2.589), a woman said to the Prophet: "O Apostle of God! The obligation of Hajj [pilgrimage] enjoined by God on His devotees has become due on my father and he is old and weak, and he cannot sit firm on the mount; may I perform Hajj on his behalf?" The Prophet replied: "Yes, you may." The following Hadith explains the duties of the community towards its weak members. The Prophet said, "If someone leaves some property, it will be for the inheritors, and if he leaves some weak offspring, it will be for us to support them" (Al-Bukhari, 3.583). And in exhorting the community to care

for the weak the Prophet said to Muslims, “You only succeed and prosper to the extent that you treat your weak well” (Al-Nawawi, 272).

The story of Julaybib, as reported by Shah (1999), shows the extent to which the Prophet, consistent with Islamic teachings, took active steps to make the Muslim society inclusive of the weak and disadvantaged. Julaybib was described as an ugly and dwarfed man. His lineage was not known, which in the tribal society of the time was a serious disadvantage since people relied on their tribal structure and family ties to succeed. Julaybib was a good Muslim but, because of his perceived serious physical and social disadvantage, Julaybib was shunned away from society. The Prophet went to the family of the most eligible unmarried woman in Medina and asked her parents if they would marry her to Julaybib. The act of marrying Julaybib to a desirable woman would ensure Julaybib total inclusion and immersion into society in the short as well as the long term. It was also a deliberate act to remove any stigma that society might have placed on Julaybib because of his disadvantage. Julaybib fought bravely alongside the Prophet and was killed in battle. The Prophet buried him himself and said: “He [Julaybib] is of me and I of him”, thus proclaiming this disadvantaged man as being like a member of his family.

*Orphan (Yateem).* The Arabic word for orphan is *yateem* from the root *ya-ta-ma*. The traditional meaning of the word signifies one who has lost his or her father before reaching the age of puberty. A more generic implication is the loss of backing and support (represented by the father) before attaining to strength and independence. According to Lisan Ul-Arab, *yateem* also bears the meaning of one who is ignored or forgotten that help or aid never finds its way to him or her. In general, the term means the absence of a champion or an advocate during weakness and youth. The word appears in some form (singular or plural) 20 times in the Qur'an, five of which speak specifically and directly about the case of an orphan whose wealth is

administered by someone else, and the duties of such a guardian to preserve and protect the wealth and turn it over once the orphan child reached maturity. However, the majority of the occurrences where *yateem* is mentioned just speak of an unspecified *yateem*, and very often in association with *miskeen* and *ibn us-sabeel* (the destitute and the wayfarer). One particular verse (4:127) enjoins that Muslims should stand firm for equity for the *yateem*. All this leads us to believe that Islam accorded the *yateem*—in the wider sense of the word—a special status.

One verse of the Qur'an says: "And they will ask thee about [how to deal with] orphans. Say: 'To improve their condition is best.' And if you share their life, [remember that] they are your brethren: for God distinguishes between him who spoils things and him who improves" (2:220). The implication here is that if one shares his or her life in any form with the *yateem* (in the most generic meaning of the word), she or he should treat them like siblings, look for and after what is in the *yateem*'s interest, and not damage their interest in any way. As explained by Ali (1996), believers are urged to improve the lot and condition of life of the weak and the *yateem*.

The Prophet said: "I and the one who looks after a *yateem* will be like this in Paradise,' holding out his middle and index fingers and separating them only slightly" (Al-Bukhari, 7.224). By this, the Prophet was encouraging all Muslims to take part in caring for the *yateem* so that they may gain this high reward.

*Destitute (Miskeen) / Needy (Faqeer)*. We looked up the meaning of the term *faqeer* in Lisan Ul-Arab and found that it means one who is deficient or has a need for something, and that it is the opposite of *ghani*, meaning one who is self-sufficient and has no need for anything or anyone. We also looked up the term *miskeen*, and found that it signifies one who cannot satisfy her or his most basic needs in food, shelter, clothing, and so on. According to Lisan Ul-Arab,

experts have debated the difference between *miskeen* and *faqeer* as to who was in fact in a worse condition.

The Prophet described the *miskeen* saying, “the miskeen is not the one who goes around and asks for a mouthful or two or a date or two [begging], but the miskeen is that who has not enough to satisfy his needs and whose condition is not known to others that others may give him something in sadaqah, and who does not beg of people” (Al-Bukhari, 2.557).

Nineteen verses in the Qur'an call on Muslims to address the issue of the *miskeen* (which we will refer to as *the destitute*) and only five verses call on them to address the issue of the *faqeer* (which we will refer to as *the needy*). The calls for the destitute and those for the needy differ also in scope. For example, whereas Muslims are exhorted mainly to give sadaqah and *zakat* and to feed the needy, they are exhorted to show *ihsan* towards the destitute (2:83; 2:177; 4:36). The term *ihsan* is explained as the highest level of *al-birr* (Abdu & Reda, 2002 version), and *al-birr* means to do all kinds of good deeds, to fix and put things right (*al-islah*), and to abstain from doing harm and from withholding the rights of people (Ibn Mandhooor, 1986 version). Furthermore, God stresses the importance of carrying out his call for the destitute by linking it to the most important principle in Islam, which is believing in one God:

And worship God [alone], and do not ascribe divinity, in any way, to aught beside Him.

And [show ihsan to] your parents, and near of kin, and unto orphans, and the [masakeen], and the neighbor from among your people, and the neighbor who is a stranger, and the friend by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom you rightfully possess. Verily, God does not love any of those who, full of self-conceit, act in a boastful manner (4:36)

The destitute does not ask for help or beg of people. As such, his or her condition remains unnoticed. The Qur'anic command to Muslims to show *ihsan* toward the destitute

implies, therefore, that it is incumbent upon Muslims to seek out those in destitution and to fulfill the command of God.

The Qur'an says in verse 30:38: "Hence, give his due to the near of kin, as well as to the [miskeen] and the wayfarer; this is best for all who seek God's countenance: for it is they, they that shall attain to a happy state." Cross-referencing the command in this verse with that in verse 4:36 (See above) indicates that showing *ihsan* to the destitute (or the near of kin or the *yateem* as well) is not an act of mere pity or obligation on the part of the person to whom the Qur'an issues the command, but rather, a *duty*. Conversely, *Ihsan* is a *right* due the destitute.

*Wayfarer (Ibn Us-Sabeel)*. We had always understood the term *ibn us-sabeel* to mean the traveler. It was only after we resolved to re-examine all the terms in a wider and deeper sense that this term took on an added dimension.

The Qur'an mentions people who are in travel or on a trip by using the term *ala safar* and, with the exception of some accommodation to ease the performance of required rituals, it treats them quite casually. *Ibn us-sabeel* is repeated eight times in the Qur'an, virtually always adjoined by the terms *yateem* and *miskeen*, and always with the strong exhortation to Muslims to show kindness and to show *ihsan*. It became clear to us that the term couldn't mean the casual traveler.

When we searched *Lisan Ul-Arab*, we found that the term literally means *son of the road* and was explained to denote the stranger whom the road brought. Abdu & Reda (2002 version) interpreted the term to apply to one who is cut off in travel and does not have a connection with kith or kin so that the road has become his mother, father and family. Asad (1980) wrote:

Son of the road denotes any person who is far from his home and especially one who, because of his circumstances, does not have sufficient means of livelihood at his disposal.

In its wider sense it describes a person who, for whatever reason, is unable to return home either temporarily or permanently. For instance, a political exile or refugee. (p. 36)

We add immigrant or foreigner.

Immigrants or foreigners in a land are always displaced; they might face difficulty being accepted in their new home for reasons of ethnicity, religion, appearance, or language. They, naturally, lack the social contacts and connections with family and friends to help them succeed as the native people do. The Qur'an seems to have recognized their predicament, and that might explain why the term *ibn us-sabeel* is always mentioned alongside *miskeen* and *yateem*, which represent other disadvantaged groups, and the constant exhortation to treat them with *ihsan*.

It might be telling to learn that, as narrated in the authentic tradition, Prophet Muhammad “did not leave a *Dinar* or *Dirham* [the currency of the time] or male or female slave. He left only his white mule on which he used to ride, and his weapons, and a piece of land which he gave in charity [sadaqah] for *ibn us-sabeel*” (Al-Bukhari, 5.738).

The history of several of the companions of the Prophet tells us that foreigners and immigrants reached high and exalted status in the Muslim community. Salman Al-Farisi (Salman the Persian) was one of the closest companions to the Prophet and was among his advisers. Suhayb Al-Rumi (Suhayb the Byzantine) was appointed provisional leader of the community while the process of selecting a Caliph was underway after the second Caliph, Umar, had been assassinated.

### Conclusion

Our exploration of the attitude of Islam towards disability focused on terms that belong to two general groupings. The first group represents individuals with a physical condition (For the lack of a better word, we use the word *condition* to refer to a *difference*). The superstitious



society associated these conditions with some divine punishment and proceeded to segregate people with such conditions and discriminate against them. The Qur'an, consistent with its view that every person is potentially perfect so long as they work on developing their innate and individual qualities to the limit of their individual differentiation, seems to view these physical conditions as morally neutral. Consistent with Musse (2002), our findings indicate that physical conditions are viewed in the Qur'an as neither a curse nor a blessing; they are simply part of the human condition. The Qur'an removes any stigma and barrier to full inclusion of people with physical conditions. Consistent with the Qur'anic tenet that "God does not burden any human being with more than he is well able to bear" (2:286), Islam offers relief from certain commands and requirements so as to address the difficulties that arise from the nature of the specific condition. Despite the permission, the expectation to exert oneself to the best of one's individual ability, both in the spiritual and temporal spheres, remains the same for everyone.

The second group is composed of those who are viewed by fellow human beings as not measuring up to certain standards that are valued in society, such as society's emphasis on family/tribal ties and origin; society's obsession with social and economic status; and so on. People belonging to this group are taken advantage of, abandoned, ignored, discriminated against, oppressed, looked down on, and treated as *the disadvantaged*. It is to this group that the Qur'an seems to devote more time and space, and for whom it reserves its most ardent call for action. Muslims, who constitute society, are constantly called upon to seek, improve the condition of, put right the affairs of, be good to, stand up for the rights of, treat as sisters and brothers those who are, and give generously of one's property and time to the disadvantaged.

The Qur'an does not mention each and every physical condition or social disadvantage. There is, however, no reason to believe that the Qur'anic view is limited to the list mentioned

above. Instead, we believe that this list serves only as an example, and that the definitions of these two groups can be, and indeed need to be, expanded to cover any and all physical or social conditions as might arise or develop in different societies at different times. We base this opinion on one of the main principles of interpreting the Qur'an, that is, the Qur'an is valid and appropriate for every time and place.

In general, we find that the concept of disability, in the conventional sense, is not found in the Qur'an. As a matter of fact, our search for the word *disabled* and its derivatives did not return any results. Rather, we find that the Qur'an concentrates on the notion of *disadvantage* that is created by society and imposed on those individuals who might not possess the social, economic, or physical attributes that people happen to value at a certain time and place. Since this disadvantage is created by society, it isn't surprising that the Qur'an places the responsibility of rectifying this inequity on the shoulder of society by its constant exhortation to Muslims to recognize the plight of the disadvantaged and to improve their condition and status.

Owing to the nature of the Qur'an, it would be presumptuous to claim that we have reached the intended meaning of the Qur'an since "but none save God knows its final meaning" (3:7). We also recognize that our research is limited by constraints of space and scope, and that, as is the case with any and all studies, this research is not final. It is, however, safe to conclude that the Islamic view encompasses physical, economic, and social disadvantages; asserts that the focus needs to be on people's attitudes as well as actions towards the disadvantaged; promotes respect and esteem for the disadvantaged; expects personal responsibility and personal development from the disadvantaged; proclaims the right of the disadvantaged to full inclusion and full support; and affirms the responsibility and duty of society towards its disadvantaged members. And God knows better.

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### Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup>All translations of Qur'anic verses are taken from Asad (1980). The numbers between parentheses indicate the location of the verse in the Qur'an. The first number is that of the chapter, and the second number refers to the location of the verse within the chapter.

<sup>ii</sup>The sayings of the Prophet (Hadith) are each referenced by: a) the name of the person who compiled and authenticated the Hadith; and b) the number of the Hadith as listed in the specific compilation.

<sup>iii</sup>Sometimes the name "Ibn Mandhooor" appears as "Ibn Manzur."