

The Sunnah of Planning in Islam

By Faysal Burhan and Michael D. Berdine, Ph.D.

The setting of goals, making plans and designing strategies to assure the accomplishment of objectives are all Islamic Sunnah. This is according to the Qur'an and the practice of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him (p). Planning, therefore, must be at the center of a Muslim's life, in all his or her moral, political, social and economic activities. Unfortunately, this precious Sunnah, however, is not apparent in the lives and activities of the Muslims today. It is the absence of this Sunnah that has contributed much to our failures and suffering.

Planning in the Holy Qur'an

The Holy Qur'an teaches the Muslims to be strategists and planners in their affairs. It shows this in a number of ways: through the stories of the prophets, the law of Allah (swt) in nature, and in praising the people of vision and foresight.

An illustration of this can be seen in the story of Prophet Moses (p) and his strategies in approaching the Pharaoh of Egypt. When Allah commanded Moses to go to Egypt and call the Pharaoh to God, Moses accepted the order and spelled out his plans as can be seen in Surah Taha, Verses 25-32.

"Moses said: Oh my Lord! Expand my chest (with faith, knowledge and affection); ease my task for me; and remove the impediment from my speech, so they may understand what I say: and give me a minister of my family, Aaron, my brother; add to my strength through him, and make him share my task." Qur'an, 20:25-32

In this example, three major elements to build the plan clearly stand out. In the first instance, Moses prepared himself for da'wah. Crucial to an effective and successful da'wah is the strength of the individual's knowledge, wisdom and deep faith. These faculties together enable the da'ee to face difficulties and prevail over them. Thus, Moses expressed his willingness to open his heart and mind to receive deeper faith and wisdom to enable him accomplish his task successfully. The second element in Prophet Moses' planning was to deal with a problem of communication. This may have been a speech impediment that Moses (p) had, or it may be the difference of languages and customs of the tribes of Midianies and the Qubts of Egypt. One must bear in mind that each language has an associated slang and figures of speech that can only be appreciated by the local people or those who learned them. In fact, in a different verse, the Qur'an clearly points out that Moses called for his brother Aaron, who never left Egypt, to be the medium of communication in this mission of da'wah than himself. "And my brother Aaron, he is more eloquent in speech than I..." Qur'an, 28:34.

Although Moses was raised in Egypt, but he spent long time in Midian (Northwest of the Arabian Peninsula) that he had forgotten the proper and effective communication with its people. According to A. W. Najjar in the Stories of the Prophets, Page 173, Biblical scholars stated that Moses was 80 year old when he returned to Egypt. This points out more towards language differences than a physical impediment in the question of communication. In either case, eloquence of speech, in the language of the listeners, is an essential tool of every da'ee. Without a plan to deal with this situation, Moses (p)

would not have been able to effectively convey his message. Thus, providing good communication was crucial part of his plan for da'wah.

The last major element to be considered in Moses' plan was a matter of logistics and support: human elements and tools required to support him in carrying out his mission. For this reason, Moses' plan included his brother Aaron. Thus, Aaron was not only for a good communication, but also for physical and moral support in meeting the Pharaoh.

The above three points in Moses plan to approach the Pharaoh of Egypt makes it very clear that Moses did not approach the Pharaoh with no plans or haphazardly. Furthermore, one can see that Moses' plan was centered around elements that were, at heart, relevant matters to the process of da'wah. This example illustrates that the Sunnah of Planning is indeed an integral part of the Muslim's mechanism of work and faith. We must not forget that the story of Moses with the Pharaoh is an inspiration for us, not for entertainment.

Similar to the story of Moses in the Qur'an, the plans drawn by Prophet Abraham (p) in building the Ka'bah, and earlier, in breaking the idols, as well as Prophet Jacob (p) in sending his sons to find their brothers Joseph and Benjamin, are inspirations for Muslims to plan their tasks and affairs wisely.

Vision and Planning

A Muslim's plan must not be short sighted and should consider the far and behind the scene issues that are relevant to the goal. Furthermore, minute matters must not distract a Muslim from reaching his objective. Vision is the ability to see further than one's immediate surroundings and circumstances. A plan may and may not be as successful if constructed without insight and vision. Allah (swt) praises those who possess the trait of vision. As an example, Prophets Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (p) are praised by Allah (swt) for their spiritual power and vision. Allah (swt) said in Surah Sad, ayat, 45-47:

"And commemorate Our servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, possessors of power and vision...they were, in Our Sight, of the company of the Elect and Good."

Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (p) praised Sa'id ibn Mu'ath for his vision and plan, prior to the actual fight in the Battle of Badr. Sa'id's plan was centered around the safety of the Prophet, rather than just the present circumstances of the battle. The following was the plan he presented:

"Oh Prophet of Allah, let us build for you a shelter and put your riding camels in readiness beside it. Then we will meet our enemy, and if God strengthens us and makes us victorious over them, that is what we fervently desire. But if not, then you can mount and ride back to join those whom we left behind us in Medina...they would not have stayed behind, if they had known that you would be faced with war. Through them God will protect you, and they will give you good counsel and fight at your side."

The Prophet (p) praised Sa'id and invoked blessings upon him, and the shelter was fashioned with branches of palms. The driving factors for Sa'id's plan was the obvious fact that the battle was not

anticipated, and hence the Muslims were not ready. Therefore, their small number of 300, including the Prophet, could be perished by a well-equipped 1000 strong army of Quraysh who forced them into this fight.

Thus, Sa'id's plan was not only relevant to the present battle, but also to the future survival of Islam embodied in Prophet Muhammad. The survival of the Prophet Muhammad is far more important than winning the battle. Sa'id's plan of building the shelter and of the Prophet's escape if the Muslims were defeated, was of great vision and insight. Therefore, regardless of the present circumstances, a Muslim must not lose sight of the overall goal or the mission he or she is working on. It is clearly seen from our example that vision and plans, such as these, were big in the success of the early Muslims. Thanks to the Prophet and his companions for their vision, wisdom and knowledge. Prophet Muhammad, himself, commended his companions saying:

"People of wisdom and knowledge, so much so that their deep knowledge and insight enable to almost be prophets."

May Allah's blessings be on the Prophet and his companions.

Planning for short and long term projects is certainly a work based on foresight. If Allah (swt) and His Prophet love and admire those with vision and wisdom, Muslims ought to be racing one another to plan their activities so that they would be among those of vision and of wisdom. Moreover, the Qur'an inspires the believers, in a yet different way to design plans for their actions through observing of the plans of Allah (swt) in His creation. Allah (swt) said in Surah Al Qamar, ayah, 49:

"Verily, all things have We created in (planned) proportion and measure."

Allah (swt) also said in Surah Al Hadid, ayah 22:

"No misfortune can happen on earth or in your souls but is recorded in a plan before We bring it into existence."

These verses clearly show that both the conception and end result of every creation is according to a plan. Thus, Allah (swt) teaching us that His work is made according to a plan and a record. This is true inspiration for any sincere believer to follow and practice.

Planning in the Sunnah of the Prophet (p)

Turning our attention to the life and example of Prophet Muhammad (p), we learn that his actions were based on planning in both the religious and worldly domains. It was reported in Bukhari that Prophet Muhammad (p) said:

"If the Hereafter is about to occur and in the hands of one of you a plant (he is about to plant it in ground), he must do so as long as he has a chance."

The companion of the Prophet and second Caliph, Umar Ibn Al-Khattab also said:

"For your worldly affairs, construct your plans based on the assumption that you are going to live forever, and as for the work reserved for the Hereafter, construct your plans based on the assumption that you are going to die tomorrow."

The above traditions are certainly another clear order for the Muslims to conduct their affairs according to a plan. One wonders, how many Muslims have intentionally draw a plan of action based on the principles of these traditions? **Furthermore, in the Prophet's life there are many examples where he applied this precious Sunnah. For example, in the story of his migration to Yathrib (Medina), we see many instances of his careful and well thought-out planning at every step of the way. Once being inspired to migrate to Yathrib, the Prophet (p) devised a plan with his closest companion, Abu Bakr. This plan was secret and known only to those who played a part in it. First, Prophet Muhammad (p) hired Abdullah Ibn Uraqitt as a guide for the journey. He then asked Abu Baker to prepare a camel load of food and drinks.**

To ensure that he would know what the enemy was up to during this migration period, as well as be in touch with the rest of the Muslim community, he instructed Asma, Abu-Bakr's daughter and her brother Abdullah to provide him and their father with food and news in their hiding place. To further ensure a safe escape and avoid falling into the hands of the Quraysh, the Prophet (p) instructed Abu Bakr's servant, 'Aamir Ibn Faheerah to graze the heard of sheep behind Asma' or Abdullah to destroy their foot prints as they delivered the food and news to the Prophet (p) and their father.

To fully appreciate the thoroughness of his plan, it is necessary to recall all the details of the immigration. Prior to leaving Makkah for Yathrib on Hijrah, on at least two occasions the Quraysh tribes planned to murder the Prophet but did not, out of the fear of blood feud with the clan planned to murder the Prophet (p). They did draw up a plan, however, to kill the Prophet (p) without fear of reprisal. This plan calls for the murder to be carried out by a representative from each of Quraysh clans, with each plunging his sword into the victim. This way, the Prophet's clan, the Benu Hashim, would not be able to fight all the clans of Quraysh combined.

Allah (swt) told Prophet Muhammad (p) of their plan and gave him permission to migrate to Yathrib. On the night the murderers surrounded the Prophet's house, to do foul deed, the Prophet (p) instructed his faithful son-in-law, Ali Ibn Abu-Talib, to wrap himself in his cloak and lay in his bed. At midnight, the Prophet (p) slipped away through the sleeping plotters and made his escape from Makkah. To mislead his enemy, who believed he would head north to join the rest of the Muslims in Yathrib, Muhammad and Abu Baker headed south instead and hid in the cave of Thaur south of Makkah. There they spent three days until the feverish search for them subsided. During the three days, news and food were brought to them according to plan. Consequently, they were kept aware of all Quraysh actions and plans, as if they were still among them.

Prior to leaving their hideout, the Prophet instructed Abdullah to prepare the camel loads they had provided for their journey, give them to their road guide, Abdullah Ibn Uraqitt and have him meet the

Prophet and his father at a specific point on the road leading west towards the Red Sea. After leaving their hideout, they met Abdullah Ibn Uraqitt as planned and started on their journey to Yathrib by taking the longer route, first going west towards the Red Sea, then north along the shorelines of the Red Sea, then east to Yathrib, instead of the normal shorter route.

Despite Muhammad's deep faith in Allah (swt) that He would protect him regardless of the situation, he still drew up his plan of migration with care and deliberation. His actions and plans in this situation are a clear example to Muslims that, regardless of the situation they find themselves in, they must consider every possibility and its alternatives when making their plans in order to insure its success. It is thus inappropriate to do a haphazard job and assume that Allah (swt) will straighten out the mess, because "He is kind" and you are a "believer". No, the plan of escape drawn by the Prophet (p) demonstrates the extent of physical work, talent, leadership and vision that a Muslim must demonstrate in all his or her undertakings.

The leaders of Mecca offered one hundred camels as a reward to the one who apprehended Muhammad (p). However, because of well thought-out and careful planning by the Prophet, they failed to find him and after ten days journey, Muhammad (p) arrived safely in Yathrib. That day in mid June, 622 C.E. marked the beginning of the Islamic calendar and the founding of the Muslim ummah.

Regrettably, for the past several hundred years, plots to undermine if not eliminate Islam and Muslims have been devised and carried out. Massacres against Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, Kashmir, Lebanon and Palestine, are but a few examples of more recent aggressive actions against the Muslim world.

It is of concern that the state of Israel is heavily involved with the governments of Turkey and Ethiopia in discussion over control of the headwaters of the Euphrates and Nile rivers. This step is a part of a plan made to make Israel dominant in the region. This is also directly related to a statement made by Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion in 1950, when he said that the future of the Middle East is with those who control its water resources. Another example of the superiority of its opponents over Muslims in the successful use of the Sunnah of Planning is the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which gave official British government public support for a Jewish home land in Palestine. It was proposed (and primarily written) by Zionists for the British government to agreed to in return for Jewish financial aid and support in bringing the United States into World War I on the side of the Allies. At the time, the beleaguered Allies were on the brink of losing the war. This official British document later became part of the Constitution of the state of Israel. Still, it was not for another forty years when the Muslim world as a whole reacted to its implementation in 1947.

On a more basic level, Muslims have not been able to devise a plan that would unify their Eid celebrations to a single day. Regarding this, a simple plan combining modern science and the traditional sighting of the moon can be developed in two steps, thereby solving this simple problem: 1) identify the coordinates of the crescent of each lunar month at the same time it can be seen with the naked eye, and 2) send two observers to the location matching the crescent coordinates determined in Step One above

to confirm the sighting of the crescent. This observation and sighting can be repeated for the twelve lunar months of the Islamic calendar as means of confirmation. The data obtained from this exercise and existing lunar and astronomical data can then be used to draw up a lunar calendar for the next 200 years or more. This calendar will provide Muslims everywhere in the world with the date of all anticipated occasions including Eid celebrations. This simple plan may not require more than an astronomer and an alim of a religious authority to be fully implemented. Logistics and costs for this plan may not exceed transportation to the proper location where the moon can be sighted per Step One above. Why then have over 1.5 billion Muslims been unable to resolve such a simple problem? Why is it that Muslims take themselves out of the "playing field" as it were, in the Planning Sunnah of world-shaping events, but get so easily excited over the minutia.

After hearing the following passages from Surah Abraham, ayat 24-27 in the Holy Qur'an, I could not help notice the similarities between the "goodly word" and our subject matter, "Planning". These are the verses:

"See you not how Allah sets forth a parable? A goodly word like a goodly tree, whose root is firmly fixed, and its branches (reach) to the heavens. It brings forth its fruit at all times, by the leave of its Lord....and the parable of an evil word is that of an evil tree; it is uprooted from the surface of the earth: it has no stability. Allah will establish in strength those who believe with the word that stands firm, in this world and in the Hereafter."

The structure and life cycle of a typical plan is very much similar to the example of the "goodly word" given in the above verses. In fact a plan functions just like a tree in many ways. First of all, an action is based on a plan, just as are the roots for a tree. Then, a plan in its results is like a tree and its fruits. Some plans are design to yield short-term results, while others are made for the long-term. Finally, like the branches of a tree reaching to heavens, a well-thought-out and properly-executed plan can bring about a successful conclusion with far-reaching consequences.

On the other hand, actions taking without proper planning, or little or no planning at all, is as useless as an uprooted tree. It will fail to yield any fruit, just as unplanned, directionless and "unstable" work will fail to achieve its objectives. But the truth is that Allah (swt) establishes in strength those who believe in the "goodly word", or "plan" that stands "firmly fixed" or "based on vision and insight." This is the truth here in this world and in the Hereafter. With this in mind, one cannot help but agree with Muhammad Iqbal's father, who told him: "son, read the Qur'an as if it is being revealed to you."

For nations, communities and individuals, planning is essential in their growth and ultimate success. For a Muslim, planning is a Sunnah that will help establish him or her firmly in their work thereby yielding its blessed and successful fruit. Muslim councils supported by research institutions and think-tanks must be established to resolve crisis, draw and design plans for all Muslims to follow. In the book, The Solution to the Muslim Crisis, the concept of Islamic research institutions, think-tanks, the Sunnah of Preparation, Consistency, Prerequisite, Maturity, and Punctuality are studied as indivisible parts of Muslim prosperity and success.

Profile of the writers:

Faysal Burhan works for the Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the dual roles of bringing the true message of Islam to the public, as well as finding common ground between all Muslims, Christians, and Jews. On their website they provide essays on moral underpinnings of Islam, contemporary issues such as freedom of speech, and even positive quotes on Islam from famous Western minds (George Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell, to name a few). For more on this, go to <http://www.islamic-study.org/>

Dr. Muhammad As'ad (Michael Berdine)

Principal at Cambridge Muslim College:

Dr. As'ad is an historian specialising in the history of the British Empire in the Middle East and South Asia. He studied for his BA and MA in History at the University of Portland, before receiving his MA in Near Eastern Studies and then his PhD from the University of Arizona. He went on to teach there as well as at the University of Texas at El Paso and Pima Community College, Tucson. He has extensive experience in teaching several aspects of world history and Islamic studies, as well as in community outreach, especially inter-faith initiatives.