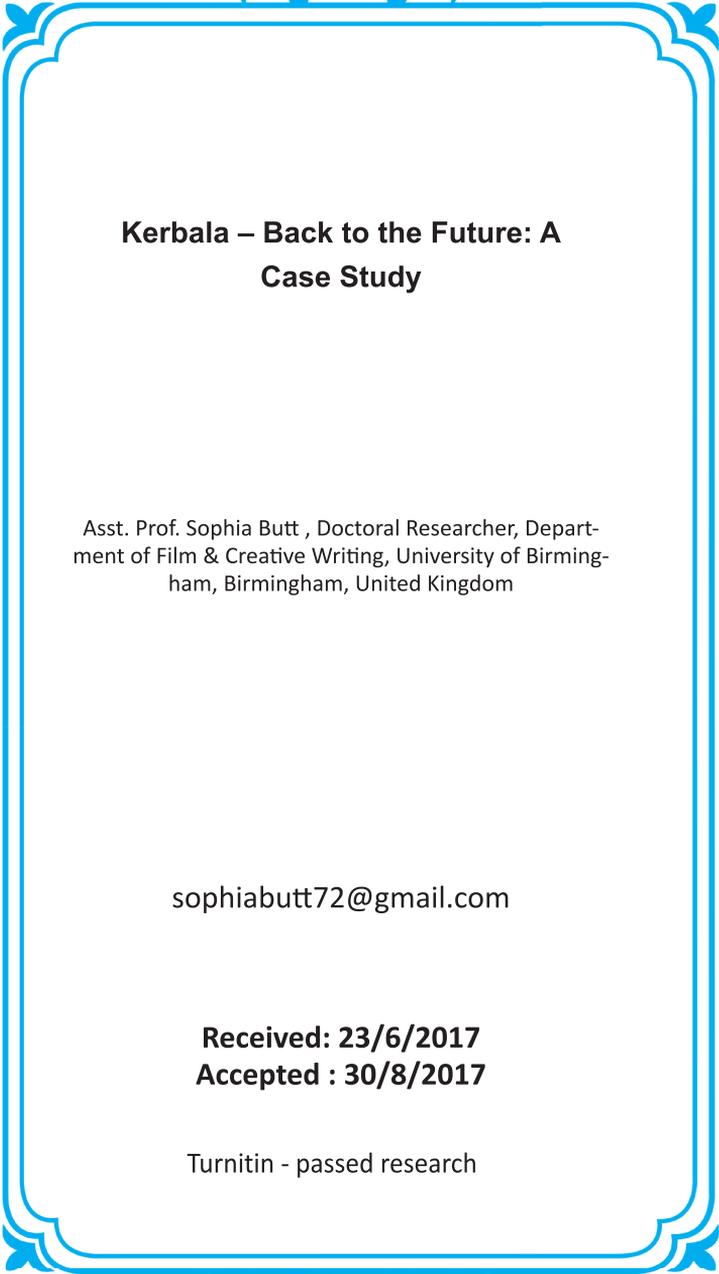


**Kerbala – Back to the Future:
A Case Study**

Asst. Prof. Sophia Butt





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Abstract

This paper endeavours to convey how even an incredibly basic understanding of the Imam's (as) wisdom gave me the strength and courage to try to fight injustice and oppression in the workplace of a major British city. It will also reveal how opportunities to promulgate the teachings of Imam Husayn (as) helped to promote fairness and raise ethical awareness in a small part of the West, demonstrating the timelessness of the Husayni (as) minbar, even after fourteen hundred years, with its enduring relevance into the 21st century.

Keywords : pulpit , justice , knowledge , Husayni minbar



Case Study Context

Being invited to partake in symposia and other events related to the Ahlulbayt (as) is a tremendous honour. Synonymous with this, however, is a considerable amount of responsibility, particularly when, as in my case, the participant only recently embraced the Islam of the Holy Prophet (saw) and his Progeny (as). Thus, when considering a presentation topic for the Husayni (as) Pulpit conference to be held in the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala in March 2017, I had significant reservations about being able to do justice to discussing the teachings of this remarkable infallible (as). It was then that I was advised¹ to approach my presentation from an applied rather than a purely theological or theoretical perspective, as using a case study approach would enable the sharing of real-life examples of the Imam's (as) influence on the essence of my professional practice.

Hence, this paper endeavours to convey how even an incredibly basic understanding of the Imam's (as) wisdom gave me the strength and courage to try to fight injustice and oppression in the workplace of a major British city. It will also reveal how opportunities to promulgate the teachings of Imam Husayn (as) helped to promote fairness and raise ethical awareness in a small part of the West, demonstrating the timelessness of the Husayni (as) minbar, even after fourteen hundred years, with its enduring relevance into the 21st century.



Introduction

An alarming number of industries and their senior employees circumvent moral and legitimate means of professional practice for financial rewards and self-advancement, very much in accordance with the Machiavellian mindset. Increasingly, it can be observed that their perspective on management is one in which they relish the opportunity to dominate subordinates by exerting power and authority, often with callous disregard for fairness and humanity in the process. Islamic thought on management, however, is that it is not merely about occupying a position of power; rather, in addition to encompassing a significant amount of responsibility, it involves accountability to those being managed.

Being an effective manager is premised on many factors, including informed decision-making and timely action to aid the accomplishment of aims and objectives with a vision for enhanced quality of provision. Gaining the trust, respect and unequivocal support of the workforce through honesty, transparency and consistency is also key, as is seeking counsel from those who not only have intellect and wisdom, but also dignity and integrity, for as Imam Husayn (as) said: “Associating with corrupt people makes you subject to suspicion².” Managers who strive to refine their consciousness through a heightened sense of spirituality tend to remain more mindful of the trusts placed in them, and are therefore more likely to act in ways that safeguard their allegiances.

Further, managers who understand the importance of fairness frequently self-reflect and, where necessary, willingly undergo personal changes for the betterment of all concerned. The Imam (as) advised that: “Among the signs of a learned man is criticising his own words and being informed of various viewpoints³.” In some circumstances, managers and leaders may be required to take risks that could seriously affect or even jeopardise their own position in the workplace for the sake of truth, justice and dignity. This paper reveals one such small example of a situation in a UK university.



1. Justice

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ بِالْقِسْطِ

“O you who believe, be maintainers of justice” (Qur’an, 4:135)

Two months into a new appointment to a senior position in a UK Higher Education Institution (hereinafter, HEI), I was selected to form part of a three-person committee of managers to establish a redundancy selection process in the Unit. During an early stage meeting, it became apparent that my committee-colleagues had preferences as to which employees they were each keen to retain from the five-person redundancy pool. What was disconcerting about this was that the aversion towards the other individuals whom they each preferred to lose was largely premised on differences stemming from past conflicts or a personality-clash, rather than it being due to issues of poor performance. Furthermore, it became evident that one of the two managers was willing to use surreptitious means to achieve her goal.

The above generated considerable unease and anxiety, since it was not immediately apparent how, being the junior member of the committee, I could insist that a just process was established. Yet, there was also an awareness of the fact that remaining silent would result in injustices towards the targeted personnel. Imam Husayn (as) said: “Those who are silent when others are oppressed are guilty of oppression themselves⁴.”

When departing from Medina en route to Mecca with his family and companions, the Imam (as) was advised by well-wishers to take an obscure mountainous route that would prevent his caravan from being noticed, thereby protecting the cavalcade from possible harm. However, rather than opting for an escape route, Imam Husayn (as) valiantly took the common path where he would inevitably be seen, stating: “No, by Allah, I will not deviate from it [the main route] until Allah shall determine what He judges⁵.”



The Imam's (as) words of wisdom were not preserved for only his followers. Even when addressing his opponents, Imam Husayn (as) reminded them to carefully consider their decisions; he told Yazid's army: "O followers of Abu Sufyan! If you are not following the teachings of Islam and don't fear the Day of Resurrection, then at least be free from tyranny and arrogance in this world...⁶⁷"

These words, which were directed at those who had deviated from the path of true Islam, clearly state the importance of conducting oneself in a way that opposes cruelty and superciliousness, regardless of religious affiliations.

Reflecting on the Imam's (Ad) advice sparked the realisation that irrespective of rank, it was unquestionably incumbent upon me to try to contribute towards creating a fair redundancy selection process for those directly impacted by it in the Unit. Soon thereafter, a non-confrontational method of fostering justice came to mind: one way in which an objective process for selection could be implemented was by having a measurable system based on individual merit; that is, a process that would yield the same results regardless of who was applying it. Thus, what was proposed was a points-based system that awarded marks to the five individuals on the basis of their qualifications, experience and achievements. This suggestion was accepted by the committee, after which it was also agreed that a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with formulae would be designed so as to minimise the risk of human error in the calculation of points. In the interests of transparency, the system was also communicated to the staff members in the redundancy pool.

However, an impromptu test-run conducted in the presence of the two managers revealed that the spreadsheet had been tampered with: the underhanded manager wanted to generate specific results for certain individuals so as to influence their ranking, as the bottom two would automatically be made redundant.



Considering the above, the matter was brought to the attention of the Human Resources Department at the HEI, who subsequently assigned me the task of ensuring that the procedure which had initially been agreed upon was correctly followed. The outcome of this was more significant than had first been anticipated: the staff member whom one of the two committee-colleagues vehemently wanted to oust – despite the breadth of his qualifications, experience and achievements – ultimately achieved the highest score putting him in the safest position in the Excel rankings. By contrast, the person who scored the lowest was someone who was well-liked in the Unit for being conscientious and helpful.

These results placed the committee in a dilemma since they were contrary to what had been envisaged, or planned-for. Consequently, it was decided that none of the members of staff would be made redundant: unbeknownst to all, this result was the direct outcome of having applied the teachings of justice espoused through the Husayni (as) Pulpit. Indeed, the Imam (as) warned mischief-makers that: “One who pursues a goal through sinful ways, will ironically distance himself from that goal, and will approach what he was afraid of.”



2. Opposing Tyrants

فَإِنْ انْتَهَوْا فَلَا عُدْوَانَ إِلَّا عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ

“...let there be no hostility except to those who practise oppression” (Qur’an, 2:193)

Despite my many faults and shortcomings, Allah (swt) blessed me in abundance in my directorship role at the HEI. He also tested my resolve and claimed intention of wanting to follow the path of righteousness by placing me in situations which demanded emphatic dissent towards those who wished to oppress not only me, but also others for whom I was directly responsible.

Knowing when to exercise compliance and when to oppose a tyrant involves an awareness of both the individual and the boundaries within which action can be taken, for as Imam Husayn (as) explained: “Stupidity...is hostility to...someone who can harm you or benefit you⁸.” The battles which necessitated a fight at the HEI due to principled disagreements, versus those which could be disregarded, was at times perplexing.

A newly created role, positioned above that of my Line Manager, had resulted in the employment of a leader with noticeably limited managerial skills and competencies. Yet, this individual had quickly and shrewdly procured protection by pledging her loyalties to the self-serving Executive Board. Soon after her appointment, therefore, the Unit was subjected to regular ill-conceived innovations, and in some cases, unethical rules which staff were not permitted to challenge.

It was at this time that Imam Husayn’s (as) determination to never exercise subservience towards a tyrant kept echoing as if to proffer much-needed courage. When referring to their caliph and his forefathers, the Imam (as) famously told Yazid’s army: “By Allah, I will



never surrender to them like a humiliated person and never pledge allegiance to them like slaves⁹.” Thenceforth, I expressed opposition towards any improper diktats that were issued within the Unit, particularly to the managers like myself whom the higher echelons wished to puppeteer for their own gains and motives.

The Imam (as) reminded his followers of the need to care for fellow believers by quoting the following verse from Surah al-Tawbah (the Repentance): “The believing men and the believing women, they are guardians of each other” (Qur’an, 9:71). For this reason, upon having become aware of the illegality and unethicity of some of the orders that had been issued by the new manager concerning proposed changes to staff recruitment and their remuneration package, I realised I had a moral obligation and a religious duty to defend the interests of my staff, lest they suffered substantial and avoidable monetary losses. Furthermore, it was imperative to take swift action as the staff were oblivious to the duplicitous operations that were underway.

Being suitably prepared to oppose the autocracy included the need to acquire relevant knowledge and facts pertaining to UK law and European legislation so that these could be used to strengthen the points made in a series of meetings. Evidence and logic-based rejections were necessary to challenge the directives that had been issued. Naturally, referring to laws and regulations enraged the corrupt manager and led to her show of intimidation aimed at me in the form of warnings that not following her orders was a dismissible offence.

Undoubtedly, as per the Imam’s (as) words: “Nothing is more disgraceful for rulers than treating their subordinates cruelly¹⁰”, particularly when these actions are completely unjustified. The threats I experienced were not limited to interactions with this manager. My non-compliance had also been reported to superiors to garner their support.

What ensued was a meeting that had been convened by members

of the HEI's Executive Board wherein, through veiled comments, they cautioned me to obey commands, or face the consequences. In accordance with the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the Husayni (as) minbar, however, a stance of resistance towards the oppressor was maintained, for the Imam (as) warned: "O' people, the Messenger of God said: Whoever sees an aggressive tyrant legalizes the forbidden of God, breeches divine laws, opposes the tradition of the Prophet, [and] oppresses the worshippers of God¹¹." While there was mindfulness of the likely repercussions of what was perceived by the executives to be insolence, through sheer strength from Allah (swt), my submission to fears was averted. The ever-merciful Almighty protected in excess of thirty people in the workforce from being exploited and tricked into signing misleading contracts.

3. Morals and Ethics

وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

"...and enjoin good & forbid evil; such are the ones who shall be successful..." (Qur'an, 3:104)

The need to develop and uphold a moral character which is premised on ethical behaviour is of paramount importance in Islam, and as such, the Holy Prophet (saw) and his infallible Progeny (as) embodied Qur'anic scriptures to enable emulation of their examples for protection from evil temptations.

Through his minbar, Imam Husayn (as) advised his followers that: "Those who worship God sincerely will be rewarded far more than what they had wished, and even more than what they deserve¹²." Being appointed to a directorship role which involved managing in excess of 300 students and 45 personnel – some of whom were almost double my age, was most humbling. Together with immense gratitude to Allah (swt) for His blessings, came deep anxiety and

self-doubt about the extent to which the responsibilities assigned to me might be suitably fulfilled. Thus, regular supplications were made to the Almighty (swt) to be granted the fortitude to meet the obligations with due care and to be given the strength of character to avoid wavering when attempting to achieve success in accordance with Islamic codes of practice, as it was this that would guarantee moral and ethical outcomes.

When I expressed the aforementioned concerns and aspirations to my Islamic mentor, I was introduced to *Moral Management*¹³, a book which offers guidance on flawless leadership and administration through specific examples from the Holy Qur'an, the Holy Prophet (saw) and his infallible successors (as). Imam Husayn (as) said: "Whoever comes to us will find at least one of these four things: he will hear sound reasoning, will see fair judgement, will face a helpful brother, and will enjoy the company of learned men¹⁴." It was direction from this book, a most treasured resource, that cultivated a leadership style that was premised on a degree of courageousness, thereby scaffolding the decisions taken at the HEI.

Despite my imperfections, by Allah's (swt) endless grace and mercy, a more than deserving level of recognition and respect was accorded to me for my work and management style. I attribute this entirely to having tried to consciously emulate the teachings of the Holy Qur'an, the Holy Prophet (saw) and the Ahlulbayt (as), and to apply these to the management practiced. The most rewarding aspect of this situation was the serendipitous opportunities that arose to propagate the traditions and virtues of the Ahlulbayt (as): together with their praise, many of the staff at the HEI would often express intrigue as to the source of my training. This provided an opening for attempts to raise social, religious and ethical awareness of Islam in my workplace, something urgently needed today considering that non-Muslim perceptions and knowledge of the religion stem largely from media bias and political propaganda.

Imam Husayn (as) told the people: "Speak our hadith clearly because we are eloquent people¹⁵." However, given my limited knowl-

edge, this became a cause for concern and trepidation due to fears of the possibility, or indeed likelihood, of unintended miscommunication regarding the Ahlulbayt (as). Yet, the solution was simple. The hadith of the Holy Household (as) could be accurately conveyed to those who were curious by simply lending or gifting them copies of Moral Management, thereby allowing them to read, first-hand, the logical and ethical teachings of Allah (swt) and His Chosen Ones (as).

What is especially remarkable about the guidance in Moral Management, as was also noted by virtually every colleague and acquaintance who delved into it with genuine curiosity and the desire to learn, is its universal appeal and timeless significance. Unsurprisingly, therefore, two of my former non-Muslim colleagues, who now offer consultancy and training on leadership and management, use this book as one of their key resources.

4. Sacrifice

وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا

“And say: Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Indeed! Falsehood is ever bound to vanish” (Qur’an, 17:81)

History shows that in their pursuit of power, their self-serving rationalisations, and their use of nepotism for unmerited lineage-based rule over the people, Yazid bin Mu’awiyah and his forefathers deviated from the Holy Prophet’s (saw) customs and pure traditions to practice a debauched form of Islam. Not only this, but the Umayyads wilfully deceived the people by spreading blatant lies about Imam Ali (as), then Imam Hasan (as), before also trying to tarnish the reputation of Imam Husayn (as) and the Shi’a. Sadly, the effects of these actions persist even today, obscuring the ability to decipher truth from falsehood. Thus, like the honourable Imams (as) before him, Imam Husayn (as) reiterated Qur’anic scriptures in

his sermons by announcing: “We must be prepared to sacrifice everything that is precious in support of the truth¹⁶.”

The infallibles (as) willingly engaged in self-sacrificing actions for moral collectivism in order to seek greater closeness to Allah (swt). However, in the case of fallible beings, often when situations present themselves calling for even the smallest of sacrifices in our private, professional or social lives, it is common for a penchant for reward, recognition and/or a ‘quid pro quo’ for the ‘sacrificial’ act to lurk somewhere in the background. Indeed, the following words from the Husayni (as) minbar continue to resonate even today: “People are slaves to the world; as long as they live favourable and comfortable lives, they are loyal to their religious principles. However, during hard times, the times of trials, true religious people are scarce...¹⁷”

At various crossroads in life, situations arise that present two paths: one involves struggles, challenges and likely opposition, while the other apparently has easier options, consisting of swifter short-term solutions, requiring less effort. The respective difference between the two, however, tends to be stark: It is that of enjoining good versus forbidding evil, whereby the former may seem to demand some degree of personal loss, yet, this is the more favourable of the two options in the long-term.

When Umar ibn Sa’ad acted on his avarice in the desire to become the Governor of Rey, Imam Husayn (as) warned him that: “Those who use unlawful means to achieve their objectives never attain them¹⁸.” Similarly, the Imam (as) wrote to ibn Ziyad that: “Any person who prefers the satisfaction of the created over that of the Creator, will never reach felicity¹⁹.” In both cases, Imam Husayn (as) was offering his addressees the chance to reflect, repent and change their course of action before it was too late.

At the HEI, my team and I were often beset with bewilderment when faced with instances in which we were repeatedly dissuaded from striving for excellence in our pursuit of set goals, as we were

informed that this was demoralising for others within the Unit who had not been as successful in their endeavours. Offers of promotion and job retention were made to me with the proviso that, in return, there would be a reduction to the quality of provision and a cessation of opposition towards the malevolent actions of the new director. When I rejected these offers, the levels of bullying against me were significantly intensified, until finally, the threats were sanctioned and my seventeen-year employment within the Unit was brought to an unjust and abrupt end.

My small 'sacrifice' for the cause of justice, truth and ethics has had notable personal, professional, and financial ramifications. Yet, they pale into total insignificance when considering what Imam Husayn (as), his companions and the Holy Household (as) had to endure leading up to, during and after the events of Kerbala. Knowing that the ultimate sacrifice and one that would be brutally brought about by Yazid's army was now upon them all, on the eve of A'shura, the Imam (as) told his companions and family members who had joined him: "Tomorrow, I will be slain, and all of you will be slain with me; nobody will survive, even al-Qasim and Abd Allah al-Radi [the infant]²⁰." As he had done so on several occasions during the journey from Medina to Kerbala, the Imam (as) also benevolently told his companions that they could be freed of their commitment to him should they choose to revoke their support and return to their families.

Unquestionably, the Imam (as) was blessed with the best of companions, as those who stayed with him until the eve of A'shura remained completely loyal in their willingness to sacrifice everything that was precious to them for the grandson of the Holy Prophet (saw) in his mission to support the truth and reject falsehood. It is no surprise, therefore, that Imam Husayn (as) uttered these heartfelt words: "I do not know of any companions more loyal and better than mine, and no family members more truthful and confident than mine. Hence, may Allah grant all of you the best of rewards²¹."

Following the martyrdom of her beloved brother, Imam Husayn

(as), and all the other Shuhada-e-Kerbala, Bibi Zainab (sa) emphatically proclaimed to Yazid in his court, "By Allah (SWT), you cannot remove us from the minds [of people], and you cannot diminish our message." Truly, the Holy Qur'an states: "And think not of those who are slain in the way of Allah as dead. Nay! They are alive, with their Lord, receiving their sustenance" (3: 169). Visits to the shrines of the Ahlulbayt (as) offer irrefutable evidence of this.

5. Back to the Future

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أُنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

"Verily, those who disbelieve, it is the same to them whether you warn them or do not warn them, they will not believe" (Qur'an, 2:6)

Contemporary theologians often refer to the events leading up to the battle in Kerbala as a 'university for life' due to the endless lessons which can be learnt from it. Like his noble ancestors, Imam Husayn (as) led by example so as to eliminate all doubt and any ambiguity surrounding correct conduct and the actions that please Allah (swt). The following advice from the Husayni (as) minbar continues to function as a reminder in the present-day: "Act in this world like a person who knows that he will definitely be rewarded for good deeds and punished for sins and crimes²²." On the surface, it may appear to some that the massacre of the Imam (as) and his 71 companions in Kerbala ended in a colossal defeat with their brutal slaying. Yet, the victory was theirs.

The reprehensible and savage actions against the infallibles (as) and the subsequent attempts to dishonour the women, children and future Imams (as) of the Holy Household are almost inconceivable. However, if victory is measured in terms of who becomes the last man [or army] standing and whose bodies remain intact, Imam Husayn (as) would not have uttered the words: "To me, death is

nothing but happiness, and living under tyrants nothing but living in a hell²³.” He would not have stated: “I advise you to keep piety and chastity and warn you of the Day of Resurrection and death...Still you care more about your body (rather than soul)²⁴.”

Furthermore, when Syeda Zainab (sa) was taken to the court of Yazid where he foolishly and arrogantly asked for her thoughts on what had happened to her beloved family, the Bibi (sa) responded with a powerful and eloquent sermon which oozed complete submission to Allah’s (swt) will. Her famous reply included the words: “I saw nothing but beauty. They rushed towards their graves (with honour)...²⁵” These words of the Holy Prophet’s progeny (as) are far from the words of the defeated.

Returning to the analogy of learning lessons through university, it is common knowledge that degree awards are divided into different classifications, whereby at undergraduate level, the best of students, who are but few in number, achieve a first-class honours degree, though the majority secure an upper- or lower-second (i.e.: “2.1” or “2.2”). Others only manage to gain a third-class degree. Similarly, at postgraduate level, Master’s students are awarded a distinction, merit or pass; and PhD students emerge from their viva with either major corrections, minor corrections, or in exceptionally rare cases – no corrections. While the aforementioned awards all equate to successful completion, their value is by no means equal, nor is the subsequent and life-long recognition and reward upon which job offers and other opportunities (e.g.: scholarships) are premised. Irrespective of the knowledge acquired or the degree classification secured, though, true scholars are those who are able to translate their knowledge into practice by intelligently applying this to real-life situations for the betterment of their future. This is also how our deeds in this life will have an everlasting bearing on our destiny in the hereafter.

The Imam (as) pertinently proclaimed that: "Wisdom will not be complete except by following the truth..."²⁶ It is therefore imperative that we seek ways in which lessons from the Husayni (as) minbar and the events of Kerbala can continually be projected back to the future, that is, to the present-day, for the benefit of all humankind.

By placing Allah (swt) at the centre of our affairs, the challenges we face today can be met with ease. Despite human differences across the globe, there is an ever-present need and thirst for a moral, ethical and social awakening, in which the beauty of justice is experienced by all; oppression and tyranny are replaced by freedom and sound judgment; and truth supersedes all forms of falsehood.



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