Islamic terms in contemporary English

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Some observations on what words associated with Islam are in, and what might yet go into, current ELT dictionaries

Muslims constitute a vast number of speakers of English as a Second Language (ESL) and a Foreign Language (EFL). As a consequence, many expressions associated with Islam have been introduced into contemporary English and its dictionaries – both general and ESL/EFL. The present paper focuses on three particular works: the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (*LDOCE*, 2003), the *Macmillan English Dictionary* (*MED*, 2002) and *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (*NODE*, 1998), in order to discuss how Islamic terms are being used. It was found that few phrases or sentences are provided to illustrate such terms – even those in common use among English-speaking Muslims. The present paper therefore (1) suggests sample sentences for these terms, so that users of such dictionaries can set them in context, and (2) offers a list of common Islamic words for possible inclusion in future editions.

Introduction: the objective of this research

LDOCE, *MED*, and *NODE* are among the most popular dictionaries in current use. They include a reasonable number of terms associated with people of non-Christian backgrounds, including terms particularly related to Islam and Muslims, in the domains of religion, culture, government, society, and way of life (and identified as such).

However, not all such entries are appropriate. Ismail al Faruqi (1995), among others, considers that distortions which have arisen in the English language regarding Islam relate to three areas: *misspelling*, *mispronunciation*, and *mistranslation* when adapting Arabic into English, areas to which we might also add *semantic distortion*. Since many such terms are included in dictionaries with a wide appeal, it is imperative that they are both pronounced accurately and used correctly. In addition, the meanings of these words should be handled in such a way that semantic justice is done, while (as far as possible) the English spelling should correspond to the sound in the original language, most often Arabic. The following three examples will illustrate this point:

1 In *Macmillan*, the defining statement for *Muhammad* is: 'the man on whose ideas Islam is based' (2002:932). This is erroneous. To Muslims, Islam is the religion revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad, and so the description could have been given, quite simply and safely, as 'the Prophet of Islam'.

2 In *LDOCE*, the definition for *Islam* is 'the Muslim religion, which was started by Muhammad and whose holy book is the Koran' (2003:861).' It is true that many religions have founders, but this is not the

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case in Islam. A more appropriate definition would be: 'the religion which Muslims believe was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.'

3 The word *halal* as indicated in such dictionaries appears to collocate only with *meat*. Although the expression *halal meat* is common among Muslims living in Western societies, the word itself has a wider range of meaning, referring to what is permissible in (and not proscribed by) Islam – from kinds of food and drink to people's conduct in private and in public life.

Certain historical, geographical, and cultural topics are not necessarily described in ways which emphasize their central significance to Muslims. Thus, the important city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia is unique to Muslims because it is where Islam's holiest mosque is located. It is the place to which able-bodied and financially independent Muslims are obliged to perform their *hajj* pilgrimage. In Saudi Arabia the name of the city is spelled *Makkah* in the Roman alphabet. Dictionaries should therefore include this spelling when referring to the holy city, because the word *mecca* (with lower-case *m*) in English is often also used to refer to a popular place where visitors may indulge in activities, some of which – like gambling and vice – are abhorred in Islam.

The primary aim here is to provide sample sentences to supplement dictionary entries. These sentences have been devised from such sources as newspapers, books, and the internet by the present researcher, who is a linguist, a Muslim, and a student of Islam. With sample sentences of this kind to guide them, users of ELT dictionaries that contain Islam-related expressions will be better able to use them in context, in both spoken and written English.

This undertaking is a modest contribution to a better and more informed understanding of Muslims and Islam. In many countries, including materially advanced countries, Muslims are sometimes misunderstood because of a lack of reliable information available to non-Muslims when they have to refer in English to Islam and the followers of Islam. A study of this kind can also prove beneficial to Muslim users of English, helping them to use Islamic terms more appropriately in that language. A previous study of Islamic religious terminology by Brown (1996) has dealt with some common words.

Some Islamic terms and usages

The following is an alphabetically ordered list of Islamic terms found in the three above-mentioned dictionaries. In each entry, a term is followed by its definition in *NODE* and a suggested illustrative example of use (in sentence form) or a comment and/or a new definition that is acceptable in Islamic terms.

abaya
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a full-length, sleeveless outer garment worn by Arabs'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The firm exports Islamic abaya clothing to countries in the Middle East.'

alhaji *masculine*, **alhaja** *feminine*
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a Muslim who has been to Mecca as a pilgrim (often used as a title)'
(2) Author's examples of use: 'Alhaji Abu Bakar treated his kinsfolk to a lavish feast as part of his thanksgiving on his return from Makkah'; 'Alhaja Fatimah was looked upon with much respect upon her return from the hajj pilgrimage.'

Allah
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the name of God among Muslims (and Arab Christians)'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Muslims believe in the Oneness of God and worship Allah alone.'

ayatollah
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a high-ranking religious leader among Shiite Muslims, chiefly in Iran'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The ayatollahs in Shiite societies wield much influence in public affairs.'

azan
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the Muslim call to ritual prayer made by a muezzin from the minaret of a mosque (or now often played from a recording)'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Upon hearing the azan, Naseem performed the ablution and went to his neighbourhood mosque.'

bismillah
(1) *NODE* definition: '*exclamation* in the name of God (an invocation used by Muslims at the beginning of an undertaking)'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Ismail uttered the expression "Bismillah" before starting to drive the car.'

Black Muslim
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a member of the NATION OF ISLAM [> 'an exclusively black Islamic sect proposing a separate black nation, founded in Detroit *c.*1930. It came to prominence under the influence of Malcolm X.']
(2) Author's example of use: 'In the United States, the term *Black Muslims* refers most appropriately

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to followers of the black separatist movement known as the *Nation of Islam*.'

burqa
(1) *NODE* definition [presented as *burka/burkha*, but not *burqa*]: 'a long, loose garment covering the whole body, worn in public by women in many Muslim countries'
(2) Author's example of use: 'In some conservative Islamic societies, such as Afghanistan, the men are very serious about Muslim women wearing the burqa.'

caliph/khalif
(1) *NODE* definition: '*historical* the chief Muslim civil and religious ruler, regarded as the successor of Muhammad. The caliph ruled in Baghdad until 1258 and then in Egypt until the Ottoman conquest of 1517; the title was then held by the Ottoman sultans until it was abolished in 1924 by Ataturk'
(2) Author's example of use: 'After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, caliphs were, through a democratic process, elected to lead Muslims.'

caliphate
(1) [a run-on entry under *caliph*, simply as '*caliphate n.*': no definition provided]
(2) Author's example of use: 'The conquest of Baghdad by the invading Mongols brought about the end of the Abbasid caliphate.'

chador
(1) *NODE* definition: 'A large piece of dark-coloured cloth, typically worn by Muslim women, wrapped around the head and upper body to leave only the face exposed'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Women from all walks of life in Iran are commonly seen wearing the chador.'

dhikir
(1) *NODE* definition [presented in the form *dhikr*] '*Islam* a form of devotion, associated chiefly with Sufism, in which the worshipper is absorbed in the rhythmic repetition of the name of God or his attributes'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Hussain used the prayer beads and uttered *Alhamdulillah*, "praise to Allah", many times.'

Eid
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a Muslim Festival', with some details regarding the festivals *Eid ul-Fitr* and *Eid ul-Adha*, the first marking the end of Ramadan, the second the culmination of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca
(2) Author's example of use: 'Many people return to their hometowns to celebrate Eid ul-Fitr after a month of fasting and prayer.'

emir
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a title of various Muslim (mainly Arab) rulers: *HRH the Emir of Kuwait*; historical a Muslim (usually Arab) military commander or local chief'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The monarchs of some small Arab states are known as emirs.'

emirate
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the rank, lands, or reign of an emir'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of seven individual emirates.'

fakir
(1) *NODE* definition: 'a Muslim (or, loosely, a Hindu) religious ascetic who lives solely on alms'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The housewife gave the fakir some food and money when he stopped by her house.'

fatwa
(1) *NODE* definition: 'A ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The cleric issued a fatwa forbidding eating products which contain gelatin.'

haj, hajj
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca which takes place in the last month of the year, and which all Muslims are expcted to make at least once during their lifetime'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The hajj pilgrimage is incumbent upon able-bodied Muslims who can afford it.'

hajji, haji
(1) *NODE* terms and definition: '*haji* also *hajji*: 'A Muslim who has been to Mecca as a pilgrim': [example of use as a title] *Haji Hadi*
(2) Author's example of use: 'When Abdullah returned from the haj pilgrimage, his neighbours and friends respectfully began to call him haji.'

hakim
(1) *NODE* definition: 'A physician using traditional remedies in India and Muslim countries. [ORIGIN: from Arabic *hakim* "ruler"]'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The patient sought alternative treatment from the hakim for her ailment.'

halal, halaal
(1) *NODE* definition for *halal*, only form listed: 'denoting or relating to meat prepared as prescribed by Muslim law: *halal butchers*; religiously acceptable according to Muslim law: *halal butchers*'
(2) Author's examples of use: 'The mother advised her children to ensure that whatever they did was halal'; 'Insistence on halal products must go along with a halal lifestyle.'

haram, haraam
(1) *NODE* definition: 'forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law'

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(2) Author's example of use: 'The speaker urged the audience to stay away from activities considered haram.'

harem
(1) *NODE* definitions: 'the separate part of a Muslim household reserved for wives, concubines, and female servants; the wives (or concubines) of a polygamous man'
(2)Author's example of use: 'Only male relatives such as the husband, sons, brothers and father of the women in the harem are allowed inside.'

Hegira/Hijrah
(1) *NODE* variants and definition: '*hegira*, *hejira*, *hijra* Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina in AD 622, prompted by the opposition of the merchants of Mecca and marking the consolidation of the first Muslim community; the Muslim era reckoned from this date'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Muslims do not actually celebrate Hijrah in the same way as the Eid festivals; rather, they reflect upon what has gone before and what needs to be done in the future.'

imam
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the person who leads prayers in a mosque; a title of various Muslim leaders, especially of one succeeding Muhammad as leader of Shiite Islam: *Imam Khomeini*'
(2) Author's example of use: 'The imam gave a powerful Friday prayer sermon reminding Muslims of their duty towards their fellow citizens.'

inshallah [insha Allah]
(1) *NODE* definition: '*exclamation* if Allah wills it' [Arabic]
(2) Author's example of use: 'We shall attend your son's wedding, Insha Allah.'

Islam
(1) *NODE* definition: 'the religion of the Muslims, a monotheistic faith regarded as revealed through Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah'
(2) Author's example of use: 'Islam also has millions of followers in Western countries today.'

jihad
(1) *NODE* definition: 'A holy war undertaken by Muslims against unbeievers; *informal* a single-minded or obsessive campaign' [from Arabic *jihad* 'effort', expressing, in Muslim thought, struggle on behalf of God and Islam]
(2) Author's examples of use: 'Many Muslims consider fighting poverty, corruption and illiteracy a jihad'; 'Filipino Muslims waged a jihad against the Marcos regime to reclaim their rights on the island of Mindanao.'

Kaaba
NODE '[also *Caaba*] a square stone building in the centre of the Great Mosque at Mecca, the site most holy to Muslims and towards which they must face when praying. It stands on the site of a pre-Islamic shrine said to have been built by Abraham, and a sacred Black Stone is set in its south-eastern corner.' [from Arabic *(al-)ka'ba*, literally '(the) square house']
HMBMA 'Muslims do not worship the Kaaba, they only turn towards it when they pray.'

kafir
NODE 'a person who is not a Muslim (used chiefly by Muslims)'
HMBMA '"We have to teach the invading kafirs a lesson," the leader proclaimed.'

kiblah, qiblah
NODE (also *qibla*) 'the direction of the Kaaba (the sacred building at Mecca), to which Muslims turn at prayer'
HMBMA 'Muslims face the kiblah which is towards the direction of Makkah when they say their prayers.'

kismet
NODE 'destiny, fate: *what chance did I stand against kismet?*'
HMBMA 'The old man believed strongly that he lost his daughter in the accident due to kismet.'

Mecca/Makkah
NODE 'a city in western Saudi Arabia, an oasis town in the Red Sea region of Hejaz, east of Jiddah, considered by Muslims to be the holiest city of Islam: pop. 618,000 (est. 1986). Arabic name *Makkah*'
HMBMA 'The pilgrims departed for Makkah to perform the haj pilgrimage.'

Medina
NODE '*Medina* a city in western Saudi Arabia, around an oasis some 320 km (200 miles) north of Mecca; pop. 500,000 (est. 1981). Arabic name *Al Madinah*.' Also provides a historical/cultural background paragraph, and the separate lower-case entry *medina*, 'the old Arab or non-European quarter of a North African town'.
HMBMA 'Those who undertake the hajj pilgrimage also visit Medina to complete their journey.'

minaret
NODE 'a slender tower, typically part of a mosque, with a balcony from which a muezzin calls Muslims to prayer'
HMBMA 'A tall minaret is a common feature in many mosques throughout the world.'

Mohammed/Muhammad
NODE, at *Mohammed* 'see *Muhammad*'; at *Muhammad*, 'also *Mohammed* (c.570–632), Arab prophet and founder of Islam' [followed by a biographical paragraph]
HMBMA 'It is the central belief of Muslims that the Prophet Mohammed is God's last messenger.'

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mosque
NODE 'a Muslim place of worship'
HMBMA 'A mosque is used to pray in a congregation or individually, learn to recite the Quran and conduct study circles.'

muezzin
NODE 'a man who calls Muslims to prayer from the minaret of a mosque'
HMBMA 'The muezzin stood in the direction of the kiblah and called the faithful to say their prayers.'

mufti
NODE '(pl. *muftis*) a Muslim legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious matters'
HMBMA 'The mufti explained to the estranged couple how they could save their marriage.'

Muharram
NODE 'the first month of the year in the Islamic calendar'
HMBMA 'The first day of Muharram is regarded as the beginning of the Muslim New Year when they take stock of the past and plan ahead.'

mujahedin/mujahideen
NODE 'guerrilla fighters in Islamic countries, especially those who are Islamic fundamentalists'
HMBMA 'The most popular mujahedin were probably the Afghan groups who fought against the Soviet occupation of their country.'

mullah
NODE 'a Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law'
HMBMA 'The feuding neighbours took their dispute to the mullah for arbitration.'

Muslim
NODE 'a follower of the religion of Islam'
HMBMA 'Indonesia and Pakistan have the largest Muslim populations.'

prayer mat, prayer rug
NODE 'a small carpet used by Muslims for kneeling on and praying'
HMBMA 'Ahmad knelt on the prayer mat and sought His guidance to cope with his problems.'

purdah
NODE 'the practice among women in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of living in a separate room or behind a curtain, or of dressing in all-enveloping clothes, in order to stay out of the sight of men or strangers: *he never required them to observe purdah*.
HMBMA 'The practice of purdah in some Muslim countries is intended to help women avoid the public gaze of men.' [Note: The sample sentence in *LDOCE* is 'The bride remains in purdah until the wedding.' Macmillan provides: 'His future wife would observe purdah.']

Qur'an
NODE '(also **Quran**) Arabic spelling of **KORAN**'
HMBMA 'Muslims learn to recite the Qur'an from an early age.'

Ramadan
NODE '(also **Ramadhan**) the ninth month of the Muslim year, during which strict fasting is observed from sunrise to sunset'
HMBMA 'During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to fast from dawn till dusk, and spend much time on prayer and meditation.'

Red Crescent
NODE 'a national branch in Muslim countries of the International Movement of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent'
HMBMA 'The Red Crescent volunteers provided first aid to those who had fainted during the procession.'

salaam
NODE 'a common greeting in many Arabic-speaking and Muslim countries; a gesture of greeting or respect, with or without a spoken salutation, typically consisting of a low bow of the head and body with the hand or fingers touching the forehead; *salaams* respectful compliments'
HMBMA 'The man conveyed his salaam to the girl's parents.'

salat (salah)
NODE 'the ritual prayer of Muslims, performed five times daily in a set form: plural of *salah* "prayer, worship"'
HMBMA: 'Salat by congregation is deemed better than praying individually at home.'

shahid
NODE 'also *shaheed* a Muslim martyr'
HMBMA 'Zainab was considered a shahid because she gave her life by defending the dignity of her fellow Muslims.'

sharia
NODE '(also *shariah* or *shariat*) Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet (Hadith and Sunna)), prescribing both religious and secular duties and sometimes retributive penalties for lawbreaking. It has generally been supplemented by legislation adapted to the conditions of the day, although the manner in which it should be applied in modern states is a subject of dispute between Islamic fundamentalists and modernists'
HMBMA 'Sex outside marriage is a very serious offence according to the sharia.'

sheikh
NODE '1 an Arab leader, in particular the chief or head of an Arab tribe, family, or village; a leader in a Muslim community or organization'
HMBMA 'The sheikh exhorted his subjects to

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acquire knowledge in all fields to become a developed society.'

Shia, Shiah
NODE 'one of the two main branches of Islam, followed especially in Iran, that rejects the first three Sunni caliphs and regards Ali, the fourth caliph, as Muhammad's first true successor'
HMBMA 'Shia Muslims live in large numbers in Iran and Iraq.'

Shiite
NODE 'also *Shi'ite* an adherent of the Shia branch of Islam; of or relating to Shia'
HMBMA 'Shiite Muslims have profound respect for Caliph Ali whom they consider having the legitimate authority to succeed the Prophet Muhammad as Islam's spiritual leader after his death.'

shura
NODE 'the principle of consultation, in particular as applied to government; a consultative council'
HMBMA 'After the shura, the delegates elected the most experienced among them to assume the post of general secretary.'

sultan
NODE 'a Muslim sovereign'
HMBMA 'The sultan appointed his eldest son, as was the custom, the heir to the throne.'

sultana
NODE '1 a small light brown seedless raisin used in food such as puddings and cakes; a wife or concubine of a sultan; any other woman in a sultan's family'
HMBMA 'The sultana endeared herself to the people in the state because of her involvement with a lot of charitable work.'

sultanate
NODE [listed under *sultan* but no definition provided]
HMBMA 'The sultanate has introduced political reforms to enable the citizens to play a greater role in public life to move with the times.'

sunna, sunnah
NODE [with capital *S*; no variant with final *h* provided] 'the traditional portion of Muslim law based on Muhammad's words or acts, accepted (together with the Koran) as authoritative by Muslims and followed particularly by Sunni Muslims'
HMBMA 'The sunnah is the second source of Islamic jurisprudence, the Qur'an being the first.'

Sunni
NODE 'one of the two main branches of Islam, commonly described as orthodox, and differing from Shia in its understanding of the Sunna and in its acceptance of the first three caliphs'
HMBMA 'The Sunni and Shia basically differ on who should have become the first caliph following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.'

ulama
NODE [treated as a variant of *ulema*, which is defined as:] 'a body of Muslim scholars who are recognized as having specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology; a member of such a body'
HMBMA 'The ulama are revered people in Islamic societies.'

umma/ummah
NODE the whole community of Muslims bound together by ties of religion'
HMBMA 'The chairman exhorted the ummah to equip themselves with the latest knowledge in all fields.'

vizier
NODE 'historical a high official in some Muslim countries, especially in Turkey under Ottoman rule'
HMBMA [NB not now in common use] 'The sultan consulted his vizier on ways to quell the rebellion to his rule in the south.'

yashmak (not in common use)
NODE 'a veil concealing all of the face except the eyes, worn by some Muslim women in public'
HMBMA (NB not in common use) 'Muslim women in some countries, to avoid public observation especially by men, traditionally wear the yashmak.'

zakah
NODE [listed as *zakat*, with *zaka(t)* as the Arabic source] 'obligatory payment made annually under Islamic law on certain kinds of property and used for charitable and religious purposes'
HMBMA 'Muslim employees can make their zakah payment through salary deductions or at the zakah collection centres.'

Words recommended for inclusion

The following items, which are recommended for inclusion in dictionaries, are very common to Muslims. Non-Muslims too indirectly may need to know what they mean if they are residing in Muslim-majority countries. The meaning and sample sentences follow each recommended item:

Hadith the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an and the Hadith are the two primary sources of guidance for Muslims.

hijab head scarf worn by Muslim women. Wearing the hijab may sometimes incite racial abuse in some Western countries.

iman faith in Allah: *Don't lose hope. Your iman must be strong*.

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khalwat close proximity between a man and woman who are unmarried. In Malaysia, khalwat laws are aimed at stopping promiscuous behaviour between unmarried couples.

Khutbah Friday sermon in a mosque: *In the khutbah, the imam appealed to the congregation to practise good neighbourliness*.

umrah a minor pilgrimage to Makkah, which is not obligatory: *The family performed the umrah during the annual school holiday*.

Implications of study

Contemporary dictionaries are requested to consider including in future editions the kind of sample sentences suggested in this study, for words which are in common use. The findings of this study are the result of serious research undertaken by a linguist who is himself a practicing Muslim. The publishers should also include alternative spellings which are considered more accurate when they are pronounced. These have been given in brackets.

Conclusion

The changing reality in English-language education today includes a growing number of vocabulary items closely associated with religions, other than Christianity, and diverse peoples worldwide. In this era of globalization, users of English need not only to be familiar with the meanings of such words as those listed above but also to be able to use them in syntactically acceptable and semantically appropriate ways. ■

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