

SUMMER '22 | #7

IKHLAAS

The OUISoc Magazine

REVIVAL

**WARRIOR WOMEN
OF ISLAM**

**TO RUST OR NOT
TO RUST**

**THE RETURN OF
COWLEY ROAD**

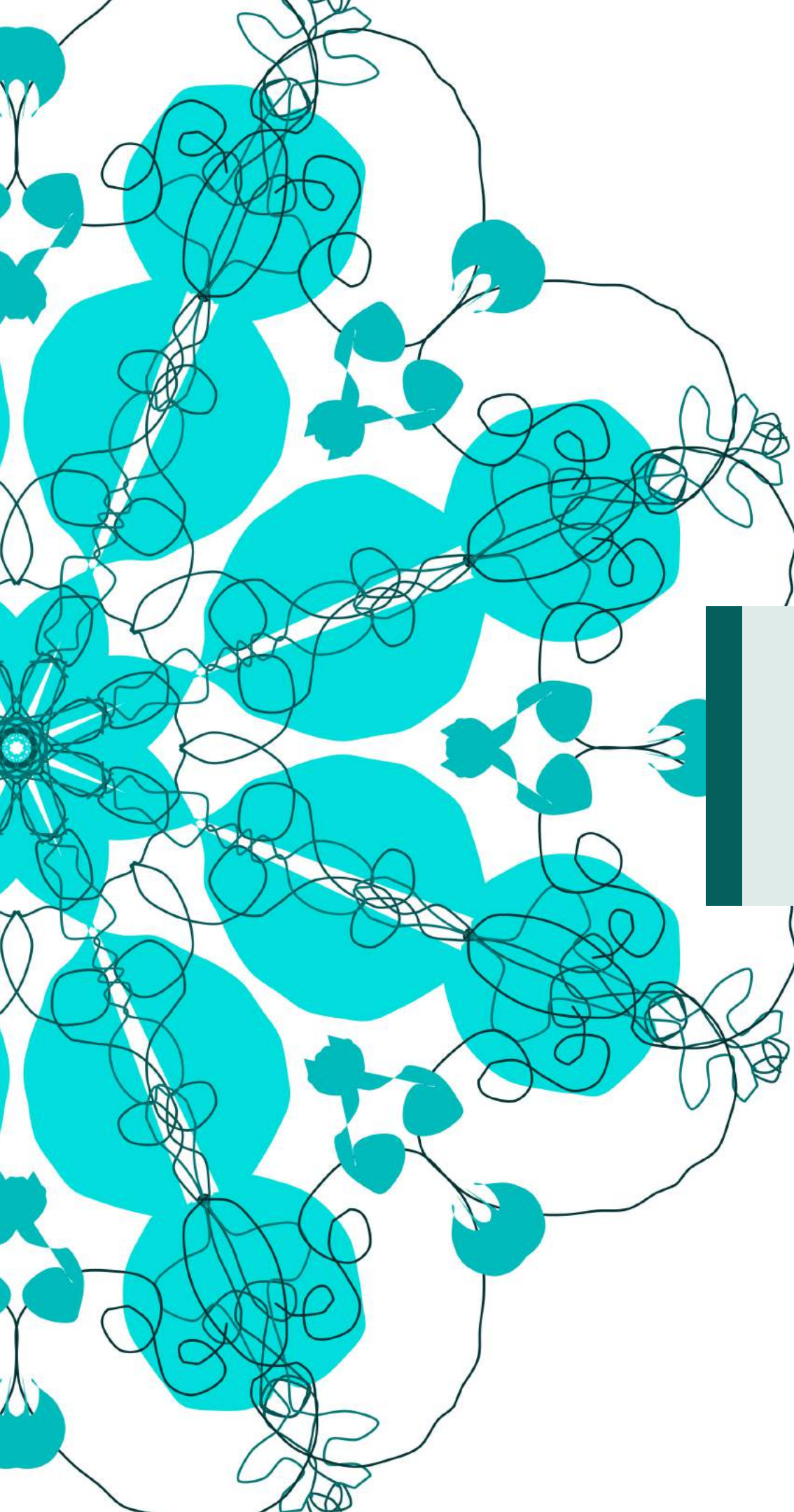


OXFORD UNIVERSITY
ISLAMIC SOCIETY

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Ikhlaas

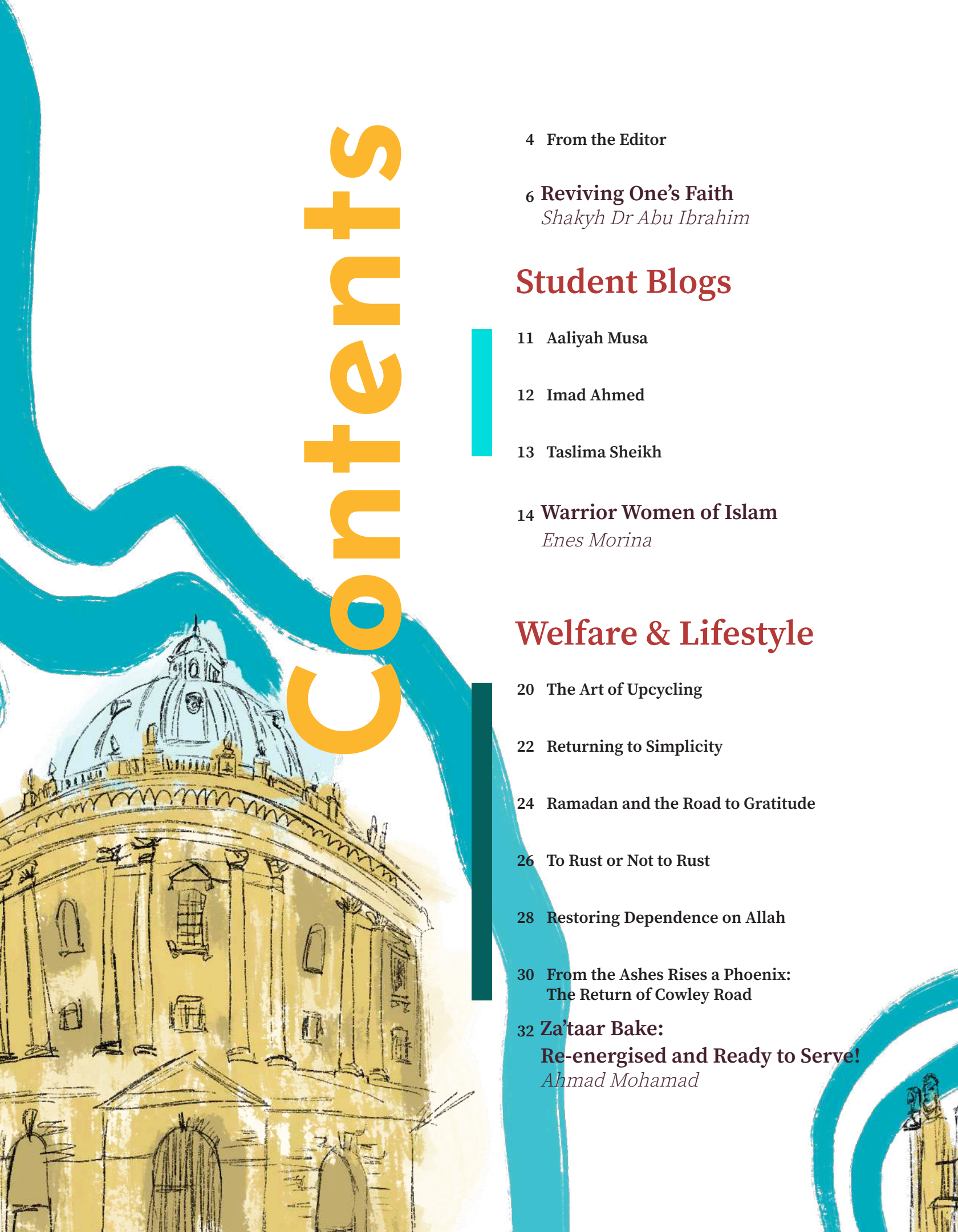
[Noun] Sincerity

Artwork by Nazanin Azimi



Issue 7
Revival

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Artwork by Nazanin Azimi



IN THE NAME OF GOD
THE MOST GRACIOUS, THE MOST MERCIFUL

From the Editor

Assalaamu alaikum, *Ikhlaas* readers. I am very excited to present what has turned out to be a full and exciting issue of the OUISoc's magazine. Whether discussing the restoration of civilisations, fashion items, stem cells or the faith within our hearts, authors interpreted the theme of *Revival* in many different ways. Alhamdulillah, every section of this issue contains wonderful articles from within and without the ISoc community. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I have and that the insight and advice contained may provide you with valuable lessons insha'Allah.

Highlights for me include Aaliyah Musa's story of forming an independent Oxford experience for herself, Ibraheem Mirza's advice on how to rusticate without getting too rusty and Alina's dissection of Muslims' portrayal in Western media. Saqlain heads to Cowley Road to interview the owners of some of our favourite businesses about post-Covid life, which Mr Ahmad Mo-hamad elaborates on further, and in this issue's independent article, Enes delves into the lives of two historical Muslim women who we should admire for their integrity and excellence – I highly encourage you to find out more.

We are lucky to have received some wonderful poems, another banging cryptogram, this time from Aaliyah Natha, and also a new type of submission! Abdullah has recently watched the series *Omar* and provides an in-depth review of its strengths and shortcomings.

This magazine did not develop without its challenges. Term-time design setbacks mean this magazine now comes out a little later than expected. Shaykh Dr Abu Ibrahim, Ibrahim El-Gaby and others refer to how to make the most of Ramadan, but whilst Ramadan is now a few months behind us, these lessons are still as important as ever, and I hope you will be able to carry them with you all throughout the year and to Ramadans to come insha'Allah.

So, it is with great pleasure and pride that I see this magazine come together. I feel that *Ikhlaas* is becoming a great platform for the ISoc community to display its wisdom, intellect, humour and talent. I am thankful to all the writers and artists who contributed to this issue and so very proud of Afiea and Mahirah for their work on this magazine and the ISoc presidential team for their support. The most enormous shoutout goes to Amirah for stepping into the designer role once again at the last minute and executing another excellent job.

Wa alaikum assalaam,
Siddiq Islam

Magazine Team



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A large crowd of pilgrims, many wearing white ihram clothing and white caps, is gathered in a stone-walled courtyard with arched doorways. The scene is filled with people, some standing and some sitting on colorful mats on the ground. The architecture is made of dark, rough-hewn stone. The overall atmosphere is one of a significant religious event.

Letter from a Scholar

Reviving One's Faith

Shaykh Dr Abu Ibrahim



Ramadan is one of the most special months in the Islamic calendar, and the only one to be mentioned by name in the Qur'an. [2:285] It is known as a month of blessings, hence Muslims greet each other during this month by saying *Ramadan Mubarak*, which means 'a blessed Ramadan'. The blessings of this month leave a profound effect lasting the rest of the year. Whether a Muslim is prepared to receive this month or not, there is no doubt that once the month has entered, they will find themselves in the Ramadan spirit. It is this spirit that causes a sense of revival within one's faith, and this is what I want to reflect upon.

For example, if we look at fasting, we find the purpose of fasting in Ramadan is not to suffer from hunger and thirst but to attain *taqwa* which means piety. As such, those who are ill or travelling are excused from fasting due to difficulty. *Taqwa* is to develop God-consciousness, often described as fearing Allah, though a more comprehensive understanding would be having awareness of our actions knowing Allah sees all. It is this mindfulness that causes us to better ourselves – one such action is to avoid arguing and fighting during the month of Ramadan. The Prophet (SAW) taught us that if someone should seek to argue or fight with you, you should say, 'I am fasting, I am fasting.' (Sahih Al-Bukhari) There

are so many positive outcomes in avoiding getting angry, especially as in the state of anger we may act irrationally or unintentionally, and therefore cause harm to ourselves or others which we may later regret and feel remorse about. The action of fasting is used to draw our attention to how a Muslim should generally be – that is in a state of calmness and not harming others through our speech or physical actions. As the Prophet said, 'A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with their tongue and hands.' (Sahih Muslim)

// Whether a Muslim is prepared to receive this month or not, there is no doubt that once the month has entered, they will find themselves in the Ramadan spirit. //

There are many other benefits of developing *taqwa*. In particular, it acts as a shield, whereby it prevents us from committing acts that are prohibited in Islam. It is this God-consciousness that allows us to rectify any wrongdoing that we do, and again, the Prophet (SAW) emphasised that we should treat people well with the words, 'Have *taqwa* of God wherever you are,

and follow a bad deed with a good one to wipe it out, and treat the people with good behaviour.' (Jami At-Tirmidhi)

God chose the month of Ramadan to reveal His final revelation. For what purpose, you may ask? It was to guide mankind. Ramadan connects Muslims with the Qur'an, and many will try to read the whole book within this month, an act known as *khatam*. In addition, many Muslims

will hear the Qur'an recited in its entirety in the *taraweeh* prayers, a congregational prayer specific to Ramadan. So, there are many opportunities to hear the words of God, and if one ponders on its meaning, this can cause a profound and lasting effect on oneself. Whilst the Qur'an is melodious and calming when recited, it is the themes that are discussed within it that can cause a positive change in a person.

For example, in the verse that says, 'God commands justice and fair dealing,' [16:90] the word used for justice is *adl* – as in God's name *Al-Adl*, meaning 'The Just'. This quality of being just is emphasised several times in the Qur'an and the prophetic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The opposite of being just is to cause *zulm* which means 'darkness' and refers to injustice or oppression. The Prophet (SAW) warned us against causing *zulm*. He said, 'Fear injustice. Injustice will appear as darkness on the Day of Rising.' (Sahih Muslim) Thus, any oppression we cause by our actions will be accounted for when we are judged by God in the hereafter. The Qur'an tells us to stand for justice even if it is against ourselves, [4:135] meaning be just even if harm will affect us as a consequence of standing for justice. We learn from the life of the Prophet (SAW) that he always stood to defend those who were less fortunate in society, even if it meant facing adversity himself. By connecting with the Qur'an, we can take lessons that can help to improve our Muslim character.

The final point I want to mention is *dua* or supplication. The daily life of a Muslim has many prescribed duas from the moment we wake up until the time we go to sleep. Ramadan puts extra emphasis on making dua. In particular, on the odd nights within the last ten nights of Ramadan,

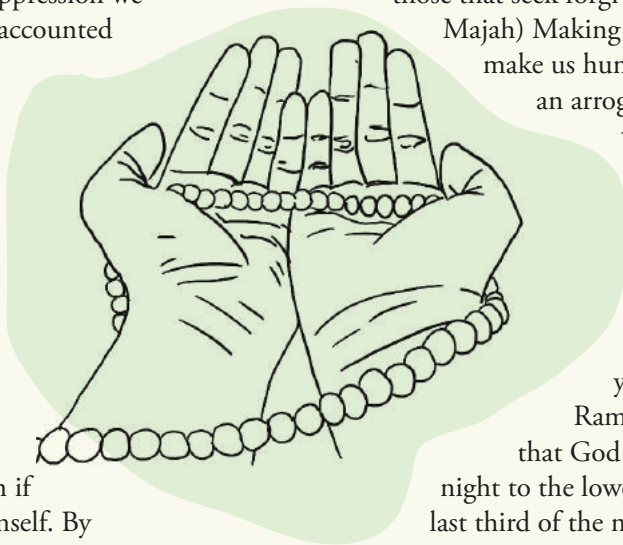
Muslims are told to seek *Lailatul Qadr* which means 'the night of destiny' or 'power'. The reward of capturing this night is greater than worshipping for a thousand months. [97:3] Sounds amazing, does it not? And truly it is a bountiful gift given by the Almighty to the believers. And what should be the main focus of our supplication on this night? It is to ask God for forgiveness. The dua we should make, as narrated by Aisha (RA) from the Prophet (SAW) is, 'O Allah, indeed You are Pardoning and You love pardon, so pardon me.' (Tirmidhi) Muslims should always seek forgiveness from their Lord and Ramadan helps us focus on this quality of *istighfar*.

Istighfar is a form of worship. Making *istighfar* helps provide us relief from despair or hopelessness by knowing that God will pardon us if we fall into error. The Prophet (SAW) reminded us that as humans, we are all prone to making mistakes in our lives, yet the best among us are those that seek forgiveness. (Sunan Ibn

Majah) Making such duas will make us humble, and it is only an arrogant person that will not realise the benefit of making *istighfar*.

We can seek forgiveness throughout the year, not just in Ramadan. We are told that God descends every night to the lowest heavens in the last third of the night, saying, 'Is there any who calls upon Me so that I may respond to him? Is there any who asks of Me that I may give him? Is there any who seeks forgiveness from Me so that I may forgive him?' (Jami At-Tirmidhi) The question is are we willing to ask? Because if we do, we are asking the One that can change our lives for the better.

May Allah grant us understanding.





Shaykh Dr Abu Ibrahim

Shaykh Dr Abu Ibrahim has a PhD in Law, specialising in Islamic Family Law. He also has a Master's in Islamic Studies and has completed his Alim (Islamic Scholar) course.

He is an imam and a lecturer of Arabic and Islamic Studies. He is also a family and relationship counsellor and has been serving the Muslim community for over twenty years.

The shaykh can be contacted via his website, www.abuibrahim.co.uk.



Student Blogs

These ISoc members have shared their personal stories and experiences of Oxford living. They are inspiring and emboldening. Aaliyah finds independence from her older sister, Imad tells of the immense support he received from ISoc brothers and Taslima explains how she overcame difficult times as a Muslim first-year undergraduate.



Aaliyah Musa

2nd Year
Experimental Psychology
Jesus College

I first visited Oxford in 2016. I knew nothing about the city, besides that it was home to an extremely prestigious university, the one that my sister Ayesha happened to attend. Visiting the Bodleian and the Rad Cam, walking past the Sheldonian, and eating in hall at Jesus were all fun tourist experiences. I even managed to spend part of Ramadan in Oxford during my sister's first year and enjoyed an iftar in the prayer room! Little did I know, three years later, I would be working in the Rad Cam, matriculating in the Sheldonian, enjoying formals in Jesus's Hall, and spending the whole of Ramadan in Oxford.

Having been offered my place at Oxford, I had set many expectations for what my life would be like based on my previous visits. What I was yet to realise is that Oxford was now a place where both my sister and I lived, not a city where I was a visitor. Living in college halls in my first year helped me to recognise this. I visited my sister often, but I spent a lot more time in the city on my own, exploring the sights and getting to grips with university life by myself.

As Ayesha was also at Jesus, I had been around the college many times before, and I was lucky that the staff already recognised me as Ayesha's sister, so all of them were very welcoming. But I was still learning – or re-learning – what it meant to be a student in Oxford. Like all other freshers, I was trying to establish myself and my place here in my own right. What made my experiences different was that I was trying to disentangle my identity as my sister's plus-one from my identity as Aaliyah, Experimental Psychology student at Oxford.

There was no easy way to make this distinction because my sister and I followed very similar trajectories: we both wear hijab, are small (granted, she's a lot smaller), and we both studied at Jesus. Naturally, students from older years and some of the staff got a bit confused, which meant I was often mistaken for Ayesha in my first year. Not only this,



but my sister is something of a Jesus legend – most people knew her and spoke highly of her too – which made the experience more daunting. How was I to live up to that?

The reality was that there was no pressure to live up to any expectations, nor was there a need to disentangle my identities. I realised my Oxford experience is my own because of the fact my sister is part of it, not in spite of it. We live together, work in libraries together and explore the city and that is a core part of my university life. My 'revival' wasn't forging a new Oxford experience for myself but joining up my unique experiences in this city to make it my home. My sister now gets mistaken for me around Jesus, which is a nice reminder that I've managed to do just that!

Bismillah Walhamdulillah Was Salaatu

Was Salaam 'ala Rasulillah

Assalamu'Alaykum Wa Rahmatullah

I began my second year in October 2020 with a lot of hope and excitement following a term cancelled due to the peak of the pandemic, of which we are still feeling the effects. I had thought that the worst was behind us, but unfortunately I was severely mistaken. Alhamdulillah, the term was a great one, but it was one full of challenges for students, particularly us Muslim students who greatly depend on *Jama'ah* (congregation). I would soon come to realise the importance of this major part of Islam.

COVID cases peaked in the following vacation and, SubhanAllah, my family felt the full brunt of this. My mother, maternal grandmother and uncle all passed away within a three-week period between January and February and as one could imagine this was an incredibly hard test that I was trialled with. I was 19 and motherless and I had also lost who I considered my second mother and my uncle, who had lived with us during my childhood. Even amongst all this, I tried to keep in mind Allah's words, 'So, surely with hardship comes ease,' [94:6] and that whilst this was a test from Allah, having patience would be worth it, for Allah rewards those that are patient. One of the biggest blessings I received amongst all this was having a community of Muslims whom I could rely on. A community I feel extremely indebted to even now. In the year and a half since, I've not once been left on my own as I've constantly had others checking in on me and making sure I'm okay. During the initial tragedy, I had the support of the whole community who raised over £2500 in *Saddiqah Jarriya* for my mother, Alhamdullilah. This is just one example of the tremendous support I've received.

The idea of *Jama'ah* is one that is repeatedly emphasised to the believers, such as in the hadith, 'The prayer in congregation is twenty-seven times superior to the prayer offered by a person alone.'



(Sahih al-Bukhari) Islam is a religion in which we rely upon one another and strive towards improvement together, both in direct worship and in our general lives. Each year, a new cohort of brothers come into our community and it's by the will of Allah that I meet amazing individuals who I feel honoured to call my friends. Friends who help bring me closer to Allah. And it is because of this blessing that I was able to heal and become a stronger person today, Alhamdulillah.

Imad Ahmed

2nd Year
Chemistry
Brasenose College

Taslima Sheikh

2nd Year

Philosophy and Theology
Corpus Christi College

My journey at Oxford began at a residential programme called Opportunity Oxford, and I can safely say it was where I made my most unserious but closest friends. I agree that Oxford teaches you more about yourself than your degree subject. Being surrounded by such caring yet carefree personalities, I learnt that university was all about the balance between work and social life, and I needed to revive both in order to survive in Oxford.

It was an overwhelming time, since I already felt behind before I had even started, and sure enough by the time term had begun, I was right. I worked non-stop from the morning to the evening and sometimes only had my first meal at 6pm. Strangely, however, I found myself doing pretty well in my first collections, so things started to brighten up for me after a rough beginning. It took me till Hilary, amidst lockdown, to find a healthy routine, since I had all that time to myself. That was until 'Mods' (Honour Moderations, exams which some courses take) began in second year, and I began to fluctuate once again.

Michaelmas of second year was my busiest term with non-stop language classes, reading groups, tutorials, lectures and drop-ins. Suddenly, I felt as if I no longer had control over my time and found it quite difficult to feel present. What truly helped me during this time was building a habit of reading Surah Mulk after Isha salaah. This Surah that challenges the disbelievers with declarations of God's total power over them and everything else, in this world and the next, was a firm reminder that nobody has true control over themselves above Allah almighty.

I remained rooted in this belief during the term of Mods and found a wealth of time for self-reflection and revision. I uncovered so much *barakah* by starting my day from Fajr. The peacefulness of sunrise, when everyone around you is fast asleep, with

complete silence other than the chirping of birds, was a beautiful time to work. I would divide my time by playing Surah Baqarah in the background, which would help me get three hours' worth of work done. The company of sisters during study dates to the library, *jamaats* in the prayer room and seeing familiar faces at the regular ISoc events helped to revive that all-important balance. I also wasn't afraid of spending more of my weekends at home, and it was nice to escape the bubble of Oxford now and then. After a term of lobbying college to provide me with a prayer room, I even had a place in college to jump back and forth to from the library, and so everything began to fall in place all at once.

Hilary began to play the same tune for me as my first year, since it provided me with an abundance of time, time for myself. Looking back, it was having *tawakkul* and leaving everything up to Allah that helped me during what could have been a very stressful period. Whilst it didn't help that I began to fall out of love with my degree, I remained hopeful in what Allah had in store for me. As we are now in the term of exams, I hope you will find this beneficial and I am, as many others are, always here to help.



Warrior Women of Islam

Enes Morina

1st Year, History
Somerville College

Military conflicts in the Middle East, and now most recently in Ukraine as well, have seen an increasing number of women not only take up arms for their country but also play a pivotal role in all aspects of war, an occupation that has, at least in the Anglosphere, traditionally been a male-dominated affair. Take the all-female Kurdish militia known as the YPJ (Women's Protection Units) as one example. They have been operating in the Levant for the last nine years, fighting on two fronts against the Assad regime and the Islamic State. Or take the example of the ongoing Ukrainian resistance against Russia, where women make up close to 20% of Ukraine's fighting force.¹

What has caused this demographic shift within modern-day military structure? An answer can be found in the ever-fluctuating nature of warfare. The past few decades have witnessed the rise of recurring insurgencies in extremely volatile parts of the world, evidenced by the increased emphasis by Western forces on more unconventional modes of combat such as counterterrorism. These insurgencies that refuse to die out, in conjunction with other factors such as rising civilian participation in combat, have driven the

social changes necessary for increased female involvement in war. This is not historically unprecedented; Yugoslav female partisans in World War II engaged in insurgent warfare against their Nazi occupiers, motivated by their desire for the destruction of an oppressive regime.²



A similar story can be found in the annals of Islamic history, where a rich tradition exists of Muslim women who were key to the political, military, and social institutions of the time. To understand the significance of this phenomenon, a look into the experience of women during warfare in pre-Islamic Arabia is necessary. From a historian's perspective, their experience is murky at best, given how politically fragmented the region was; a woman's life in a tribe in one part of Arabia could be drastically different from another tribe elsewhere.

What can be asserted, based on the prose epics written in the tales of *Days of the Arabs*, was that women in pre-Islamic Arabia were partially involved in the tribal conflicts that dominated the region; spearheading the logistics of battle camps and manufacturing leather works used in war.³ The advent of Islam, however, would come to greatly elevate a woman's political and military role in society.

Ibn Rushd, an Andalusian Muslim polymath from the 12th century, argued that women possessed 'equal capacities to shine in both peace and war.'⁴ The life of Nusaybah bint Ka'b is a prime example of Ibn Rushd's theory in action; born in Yathrib, she was renowned for her knowledge in the Islamic sciences, her involvement in the spread of Islam and her courageous exploits on the battlefield. In a secret meeting held in 622 C.E.,⁵ Nusaybah was one of two women present at the *Second Pledge of al-Aqabah*; a pledge of allegiance to the

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ by a small group of people from Yathrib,

now Medina. The pledge marked the development of Islam from a fledgling religion to a regional political force spanning two major cities, paving the way for the later mass exodus to Medina known as the *Hijra*. Her presence in the formative years of the religion was instrumental not only in its spread but also in the acceleration of the social status of women amongst the Arabs; she once pressed the Prophet ﷺ on the reason why women were not mentioned specifically in the Quranic scripture that had been revealed so far.⁶ The Qur'an had normal-

“// Wherever he turned, whether to the right or to the left, he saw Nusaybah fighting to defend him. //”

ly used the masculine gender when referring to Muslims, although the principle was that it included women in its generality. Nusaybah's questioning reveals a deeper desire for women at the time to be honoured specifically, especially

in a socio-political environment that had little to no legal rights for women in pre-Islamic Arabia. A verse would later be revealed fulfilling her request.⁷

Her involvement in early Islamic politics aside, Nusaybah was also a battle-hardened veteran. One major battle she participated in was the Battle of Uhud in 624, the second clash between the Muslims and polytheist Makkans. She had initially gone to Uhud, as did other Muslim women, to provide water to those wounded in combat. As the battle wore on, the situation became extremely precarious for the Muslims; the Muslim defence had largely deteriorated to the point where the Prophet ﷺ was in imminent danger, himself severely wounded. The Companions of the Prophet ﷺ, including Nusaybah and her sons, rallied around him, repelling both Makkani infantry and cavalry advances with the Prophet ﷺ himself saying that 'wherever

he turned, whether to the right or to the left, he saw Nusaybah fighting to defend him.’⁸ She suffered twelve major wounds but ultimately survived the battle. Her actions on that day proved decisive in not only ensuring the survival of the Prophet ﷺ but the religion itself.

The life of Nusaybah is characterised by her political and military prowess. She was major player in the battles of Uhud, Hunain, Makkah and Yamamah and key to the exportation of Islam to Medina as a teacher of religious studies there. She formed part of the select few at al-Aqabah that accelerated the spread of Islam regionally and was a crucial component in the victories in the Makkan and Ridda wars that ensured the religion’s survival. Nusaybah’s experience of warfare was likely not normative for most women at that time, but her ability to occupy and excel in differing roles suggests a trend, in early Islamic history, away from the confining gender norms of pre-Islamic Arabia.

The primary factor that drove Nusaybah to war, the immediate threat of an enemy force toward her religion, would still be an influence in the Muslim world nine centuries later. By then, Islam had made significant inroads into the European continent and was facing pushback from the Christian world. In 1492, the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon, then a dynastic union by royal marriage, completed the *Reconquista* by forcing the surrender of Granada, bringing eight centuries of Muslim rule in Iberia to an end. The *Reconquista* triggered mass expulsions of Muslims, with hundreds of thousands fleeing as refugees to North Africa. One such refugee, a seven-year-old girl from

an aristocratic family, was Sayyida al-Hurra. She grew up witnessing the struggle between the Muslim and Christian empires, herself a victim of the clash of civilisations. She quickly rose to prominence in her marriage to Abu Hassan al-Mandari, becoming co-regent of Tétouan in 1510, a major Moroccan port and a city-state. With al-Mandari constantly travelling, Sayyida al-Hurra quickly took the administrative reins of the city, becoming a capable political leader. After the death of her husband, she became the sole ruler of Tétouan, which saw unprecedented levels of

economic prosperity driven by Sayyida al-Hurra’s attacks on treasure-carrying Iberian ships, staving off further Portuguese colonisation in the region.⁹ She entered into an alliance with the legendary Ottoman corsair Oruç Reis, known in the West as ‘Barbarossa’, to control the Mediterranean basin together against the Christian Iberian threat, culminating in the sacking of Gibraltar in 1540.

Sayyida al-Hurra ruled Tétouan for over three decades, becoming a heavyweight in the geopo-

litical scene, so much so that the Wattasid Sultan of Morocco proposed to her in a marriage alliance. To her enemies, she was known as the ‘Pirate Queen,’ a military and diplomatic nightmare for the Portuguese. Yet the maritime activity Sayyida al-Hurra oversaw cannot be categorised as ‘piracy’ in the traditional sense. Tétouan was the only Moroccan port not under control, becoming a hindrance to the aggressive colonial expansion of the Iberian powers; without Sayyida al-Hurra, the Moroccan coast would likely have been a sole Iberian venture.¹⁰ ‘Piracy’ suggests the motivation of treasure, whereas in the case of Sayyida al-Hurra, the defence

// Women in the Muslim world were an integral part of the political and military institutions of the time; their lives provide an extraordinary prism through which to view the contacts and conflicts that made the early Islamic period. //

of Morocco was her primary concern. Nevertheless, due to the waning power of the Wattasids and a Portuguese trade embargo on Tétouan, her political power soon began to decline. In 1542, Sayyida al-Hurra was usurped by her son-in-law, and she lived the rest of her life in exile. She would be the last person in Islamic history to hold the title of ‘*al Hurra*’ (free woman).

The historical accuracy of the lives of Nusaybah bint Ka’b and Sayyida al-Hurra is hard to pinpoint; for the latter, there is a good deal of certainty given the Spanish and Moroccan contemporary accounts available. For the former, the lack of contemporary documents suggests there is the possibility that later attitudes were interpolated into her story. What can be asserted with a great deal of confidence is that the stories of Nusaybah bint Ka’b and Sayyida al-Hurra suggests that women in the Muslim world were an integral part of the political and military institutions of the time; their lives provide an extraordinary prism through which to view the contacts and conflicts that made the early Islamic period.



Artwork by Siddiq Islam

Footnotes:

¹ Luxmoore, M. *If War With Russia Comes, Ukrainian Women Will Be On The Frontlines*, 2022.

² Pantelić, I. *Yugoslav Female Partisans in World War II*, Cahiers balkaniques, 2013, p.7.

³ Bannerth, E. *Anthropos*, vol. 32, no. 3/4, 1937, p.694.

⁴ Ahmad, K.J. *Hundred Great Muslims*, ed. Lahore: Ferozsons, 1971, p.177.

⁵ All dates to be C.E unless otherwise stated

⁶ Ghadanfar, M.A. *Great Women of Islam*, 2001, p.214.

⁷ *Qur'an, The Clans* [33:35].

⁸ Ghadanfar, M.A. *Great Women of Islam*, 2001, p.211.

⁹ Chamorro, G.V. *Mujeres Piratas*, 2004, quoted by Verde, T. *Malika VI: Sayyida Al-Hurra*, AramcoWorld, 2017.

¹⁰ Lebbady, H. *Sayyida al-Hurra*, Oxford African American Studies Center, 2012.

Welfare

&

Photo by Amna Anwar



Lifestyle

In this section, ISoc students offer their insights into how we can implement *Revival* in our everyday lives. Zakaria, Ibrahim El-Gaby and Axel discuss how we can restore our own asceticism, gratitude and spiritual dependence, whilst Afiea gives us fun ways to recycle old objects. Ibraheem Mirza advises us on productive rustication and Saqlain discovers how COVID affected businesses on Cowley Road. Lastly, we hear from Za'atar Bake owner Mr Ahmad Mohamad on his COVID experience as a restaurant owner.

The Art of Upcycling

In this day and age, it's so easy to use something and throw it away after a single use, but there's so much potential in everyday objects you never knew existed. Hopefully, this short read will make you a pro at upcycling and repurposing (or at least you will try to do consciously better!).

Upcycling is essentially taking something no longer useful or wanted and giving it a new purpose – a *revival*, if you may. Clothes, everyday objects, and even food can be upcycled depending on how resourceful and creative you are!

For the ultimate inspiration, I will hark back to the habits of a typical desi family. Who else would trick you into expecting to find sweet treats in a biscuit tin but it actually being sewing equipment? Or the classic butter containers with curry inside sitting in the fridge? The old t-shirt as a mop or tea cloth cannot be ignored; it is a prime example of how our families have mastered upcycling and we've been neglecting it this whole time. Of course, we don't have half the fridge space or confidence to be doing this in our student accommodation (props to you if you do 😊), so I'll list a few ways we can be more eco-friendly and resourceful with daily items we might otherwise throw away.

An old t-shirt can double up as a hair towel!
(Let's keep the mop and tea cloth functions at home.)

1

2

Oily food is a staple for desis. Store the leftover oil from 5th-week samosas in an empty pesto jar or any jar you might have lying around.

Alternatively, use them to store small bits and pieces, e.g. nuts, other small foods.



If you want them to match your aesthetic, you can remove the labels, spray paint them or even add knobs from furniture for some makeshift decorative tops!

Retro/Y2K is in. Store your makeup brushes in a real neat branded tin and everyone will think it's an aesthetic 🤘.

Or you can use the same said tins as really pretty flower pots! Bonus points if you paint them to match your aesthetic!



4

Save those post-exam pretty flowers from the 'trash' (I will see myself out) with

a makeshift vase made from a water bottle – just cut the neck off. (It should be easy to source a bottle if you hate the hard water in Oxford 🙄.)



If you've got green thumbs and don't have a watering can in your room, consider making a milk bottle into a makeshift one! Heat up a needle, poke holes through the lid and hey presto!

They're so easy to fill, carry and pour, don't leak out and can be carried inconspicuously across the quad. Vary the flow by changing up the size of the holes made.

Instead of buying confetti – which, honestly, is just small, shaped paper – make your own by ripping up some newspaper or scrap paper (bonus points if it's your revision notes – what better way to metaphorically be done with your studies, eh?), or use a hole punch to vent your anger.

3

If after reading up to this stage, you feel entirely enlightened and want to fully engross yourself in up-cycling, here are a few niche ideas and inspo you can use to avoid doing your degree!

Turn old clothes into pillow covers! If you want to spice it up and have end-of-its-life stash lying around, turn these into pillows as nice memorabilia of your time here at Oxford (and of course as a memory of you having read this article!).

Sock hot pack. Fill up a sock with rice, add essential oils and sew shut. Heat up in the microwave for a minute and you'll be surprised at how long it stays warm!

If you're a broke student but want your laundry smelling like a million bucks, try making some sock dryer balls with essential oils. Grab a pair of hole-ridden socks, add as many drops of essential oils as you would like across the length of the sock and tightly roll it up from the toes to the top. Fold the top of the sock over the roll to hold it in place. Then add this sock-ball to the toe region of the other sock and repeat the above procedure, adding the oils to the sock and then folding the top of this sock over the ball, and voila! You've got an army of dryer balls ready to be dispatched to help your clothes dry faster and smell better!

Upcycle glass jars into snow globes. Spray paint the lids and use hot glue to stick your scene onto the bottom of the lid. Add glitter or fake snow and screw the lids back on.



Try dabbling in the traditional Japanese art of Kintsugi, where broken pottery or ceramics are 'joined with gold', repaired using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver or platinum. Not everything imperfect is destined to be useless!

Arts and crafts!

Reinvent jeans and jean jackets by painting on them, or buy patches from H&M to add your own flair (and favourite characters!).



Sugru™ is a type of mouldable glue that helps you repair many everyday objects – try searching it up! It can fix broken zips, frayed charger wires, and patch up rain boots and that's not an exhaustive list!

A lot of upcycling is just perspective and thinking outside of the box. It's how you can maximise the use of an entity whilst it still remains your responsibility. The moment you disregard it, it ends up in a landfill or wasting away somewhere. We need to do our best to make the most of things, especially in this fast-fashion, single-use world. I hope I have imparted some of my up-cycling wisdom to you and it would be great to see how many of these tips you take me up on. (I expect to get a boatload of community works for the next issue 😊.)

Aflea Begum
2nd Year
Biomedical Sciences
St Catherine's College

Returning to Simplicity

'O Muhammad, your Lord has sent me to you with the offer that I make you a prophet-king or a servant-messenger,' Gabriel said. 'Be humble before your Lord, O Muhammad.' The Prophet said, 'Rather, I will be a servant-messenger.'

(Musnad Ahmad 7120)

I always remembered this hadith, even though it is not one that I hear mentioned often, partly because of its otherworldly imagery of an angel descending to present the Prophet ﷺ with this essentialised dichotomy, but also because I thought that it beautifully and succinctly summarised all of the values of the Sunnah. In many ways, this hadith, and the ideas it illustrates for us, are more relevant in the modern world than they ever have been before. It is often remarked that the average person alive today, at least in wealthy countries, lives more comfortably than the kings and queens of the past.

Global commerce has opened the doors to cuisines and products from all over the world, the entertainment industry is relentlessly churning out new media that can keep us occupied for weeks at a time, and the wonders of medicine have given us more time to indulge in these worldly delights.

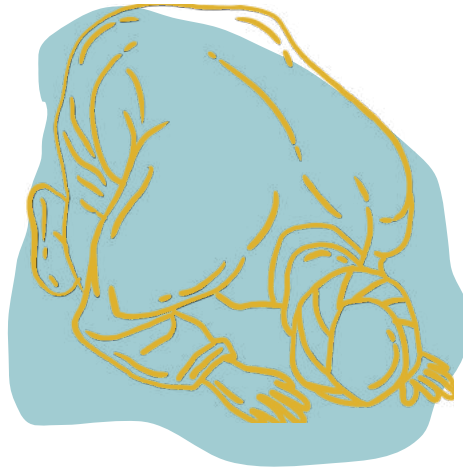
From that perspective, we are all presented with the choice outlined in this hadith. The Prophet's ﷺ choice to opt for the life of the humble slave, even though he would still have been beloved to God and would have remained His last and greatest messenger, gives us a clear indication of which one we should lean towards. The Sirah and hadith literature are replete with examples of *zuhd* (usually translated as 'asceticism'). In one incident, 'Umar (radhiyallahu anhu) wept when he saw how the mat that the Prophet ﷺ had been resting on had left marks on his body and seeing that his cupboard had only a small portion of barley in it. No aspect of the Sunnah is incidental or meaningless – the beauty of Islam is that every action and feature of life, no matter how small, can be imbued with value and meaning. It would be a tall order to expect modern-day Muslims, accustomed as we are to our



creature comforts, to conform to the particulars of this and other hadith on the topic, but we can certainly draw out a message with regards to the value of some amount of asceticism.

This is perhaps one aspect of the Prophetic way that our society as British Muslims may find it most difficult to understand. It should be noted that asceticism is a universal practice in all world religions; many millions of men and women throughout the centuries have felt the grating impact of the luxuries that often eat away at our higher faculties, and have been pushed to become monks and nuns, shedding all worldly attachments. Islam, preaching balance in all things, puts the brakes on this type of asceticism, but the point stands, the point being that the alchemy of human happiness is much more subtle and complex than simply piling on more 'pleasures.' Neurologists have spent much energy investigating the adverse effects of constantly flooding the brain with dopamine, and how this can impact our long term happiness and our ability to enjoy simpler things.

This article is too short to explore all the ways that the human mind has been ravaged by this conflation of pleasure with happiness, but we should take solace in the fact that our religion gives us so many tools to achieve the balance required, to withdraw and find repose in something higher. The month of Ramadan, whose midst (as of writing this) we are now in, is perhaps the best example of this. Ramadan, by temporarily depriving our pallet of food and water, gives us a renewed ability to reflect and helps



to develop our self-discipline; it is a yearly reset. Many Muslims describe a sense of clarity brought about by fasting, without all the cluttering of our time and our senses brought about by snacking and eating throughout the day. Perhaps this is why our Prophet ﷺ characterised fasting as a 'shield'.

Of utmost importance to the Muslims who do honour this Sunnah of *zuhd* is to guard against a sense of pride or superiority, because spiritual needs differ between different believers and between different times in their lives. Our practice of *zuhd* should always be primarily focused on ourselves – we should not seek to impose it on others. With that in mind though, we can have joy for having this escape-hatch from our usual selves, for being given this chance at carving out a more centred and peaceful existence.

Zakaria Najjar

1st Year, History
St Edmund's Hall

Artwork by Nazanin Azimi

Ramadan and the Road to Gratitude

I couldn't help but smile as I watched a new set of students tussle with the task of serving iftar to over one hundred people. A familiar adhan echoed off the walls, the carpet broke its fast with us, and the screams and cries of children gained a new-found appreciation: the prayer room was alive once again. It had been two years since an iftar was held at the prayer room; previously the highlight of the year at ISoc and a routine occurrence, now reduced to a distant memory and almost becoming stuff of legend.

Here lies a lesson that we as believers are repeatedly reminded of in our lives: the blessings of Allah (سبحانه وتعالى) (Glorious and Exalted is He) are appreciated more when they are taken away and seldom acknowledged in their presence. Reflecting on this year's Ramadan, I noticed how the month acts as the perfect focal point we can use to correct this defect in our worship of Allah, for it is the month of *shukr* (gratitude). The Ayahs in which fasting is prescribed upon believers in

Surat Al-Baqarah end with the following: 'The month of Ramadan [is that] in which was revealed the Qur'an, a guidance for the people and clear proofs of guidance and criterion. So whoever sights [the new moon of] the month, let him fast it; and whoever is ill or on a journey - then an equal number of other days. Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship and [wants] for you to complete the period and **to glorify Allah for that [to] which He has guided you; and perhaps you will be grateful.**' [2:185]

There is no bigger blessing than the *hidayah* (guidance) of Allah, through his book and through his Messenger ﷺ. So, how fitting is it that in the same month that he gifted us this, we reach our pinnacle of worship and thus *shukr*? We increase in our *'ibādāt* (acts of worship) to express gratitude for being granted the ability to do them in the first place; to be thankful for the privilege of knowing our Lord and recognising His favours upon us, all the while that our rewards are multiplied manifold. Truly, that is worthy of *takbeer* (glorification) of Allah as we perform in Eid-ul-Fitr and as mentioned in the Ayah above.

We can therefore view *'ibādah* as an expression of gratitude to Allah ﷻ. 'Ā'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) reported: 'The Prophet ﷺ used to stand in prayer at night until the skin of his feet would crack. I ('Ā'ishah) asked him, "O Messenger of Allah, why are you doing this while your past and future sins have been forgiven for you?" He said, "Should I not like to be a grateful slave (of Allah)?"' (Sahih Muslim)





This act is precisely what Iblees vowed to dedicate his life to divert us away from out of spite and jealousy of the status Allah gave us children of Adam. ‘Then I will come to them from before them and from behind them and on their right and on their left, **and You will not find most of them grateful [to You].**’ [7:17]

So, following a month of abundant forgiveness and amplified reward, it’s incumbent upon us to show recognition for the increased worship that Allah has granted us the *tawfiq* (ability/success) to achieve. Typically, we are reminded to strive to continue some of our increased *‘ibādāt* after Ramadan, after proving to ourselves that we can worship at a greater capacity. Ramadan thus acts as a training camp where, moving forward, we improve our worship and continue to refrain from the sins that we learnt to avoid. But we should also intend with this increased worship to express gratitude for being gifted Ramadan itself and the *hidayah* therein. In this way, we can embody the closing words of [2:185]. Carrying this feeling of gratitude as we perform every prayer, every sunnah fast, and as we recite the Qur’an, could perhaps aid us in achieving *ikhlaas al niyyah* (sincerity of intention).

Allah سبحانه وتعالى tells us, ‘Oh you who have believed, decreed upon you is fasting as it was decreed upon those before you that you may attain *taqwa* (God-consciousness).’ [2:183] He also tells us,

through the statement of Habel in Surat Al Mā’idah, ‘Indeed, Allah only accepts from *al-muttaqeen* (those with God-consciousness).’ Reflecting on these two Ayahs, I can see that Ramadan is both the training camp, and the Olympic final. Whilst it’s designed to increase our levels of *taqwa* through our fasts, extra *‘ibādāt*, and increased vigilance in avoidance of sin, its acceptance by Allah, as with any other act of worship, requires us to approach it with *taqwa* already established in our hearts. Just as an athlete prepares for the big stage where their performance means so much more than the remainder of the year, these very same *taqwa*-building actions can be worked on during the year, in hope that Allah ﷻ deems our worship in Ramadan worthy of acceptance.

Shukr for a blessing involves using it for what Allah intended. In our quest to be *shākireen* (those who are grateful) Ramadan should play a central role. For our worship prior to it is preparation to maximise our reward from observing it. Our worship during it is an expression of gratitude for the guidance that came in it. And finally, our worship after it is an expression of gratitude for being granted the privilege to observe it. So, may Allah make us among His grateful servants.

Ibrahim El-Gaby
6th Year, Medicine
Green Templeton College

To Rust or Not to Rust

‘Rustication is the process of something becoming rusty.’ This is what I thought rustication was before I started university. Although I now realise it doesn’t mean that, I do believe my initial definition is not far from the truth.



When I decided to rusticate, it was generally viewed negatively by tutors, parents, and relatives. If I left my studies for a year, there was the fear that, similar to an unused machine, I would start ‘rusting’, and forget the majority of my content from the previous year, putting me at a disadvantage when I return. With half the year gone, let me share some reflections.



A great analogy for rustication is coppicing, where trees are felled from their base, to promote the growth of new shoots in order to create a sustainable source of timber. Like coppicing, you have to start off the year with a clean slate. Next, plan which new shoots you want to grow. I could not have done anything this year without a clear plan. Plan for your shoots to grow upwards, rather than sideways (or downwards!). Look to do things that will make you mature as a person holistically, for your own betterment. Most importantly, you must have a core objective – for me, that was caring for my grandad – then let the other goals you have sprout around that.



One of these branches needs to be revision for your subject. Remember, your degree awaits you at the end of the year. Some struggle with over-prioritising their subject revision, so they end up focusing too much on their subject and not enough time trying



new things, but those people might as well be back at university. Others, like me, struggle with trying to do too much extracurricular stuff without focusing on their degree content. My college organises for me monthly catch-up sessions with my tutors, where they would ask me what I have been doing towards my biochemistry degree, like, have I read any interesting research articles, which lectures have I revisited, and am I practising skills transferable to my degree, such as computer programming? With these monthly meetings, my biochemistry workload becomes less arduous and I don’t have to do any strategic cramming, not yet anyway. This type of thing gives you freedom to explore other ambitions in your year off.



The next main branch is to try to find challenging experiences for yourself to accomplish in the year off. If you don’t take risks with this opportune time you have, when you are at your most healthy, then these opportunities become almost impossible afterwards, because you end up getting caught up with career and family responsibilities. For some people, they like to travel alone to foreign lands



and if you have the dough, I recommend you try this. Personally, because I have caring duties, this option was not easily available, though it's something I would love to do in the near future insha'Allah. Instead, this year off I have started working at my uncle's organic lamb and chicken farm, which sells organic, halal and *tayyib* ('good') meat. My forefathers 'back in the *gām* (village)' were cotton and cattle farmers, so farming is part of my family history. Farming, I have discovered, is the perfect job for an all-rounded individual. You have to be good at practical tasks, as well as being business savvy. However, the best bit has to be working outside in nature. Although challenging and tiring, I have never felt such contentment (unless I hurt myself – then it's just miserable). To hear the sound of birds, feel the wind on your face, the sound of the moronic sheep or the rustling of the trees, it's such an exhilarating feeling, transcending the sound of angry adolescent drivers and the smell of burnt rubber and polluted air of the town (no offence to Bolton). So, alongside cultural heritage revival, farming has reconnected me with a passion for nature.



One of the worst things has been missing ISoc friends and missing the general vibes and atmosphere of university. You cannot deny that Oxford, excluding the expensive lifestyle, is a beautiful place to be, and the scholarly atmosphere there is unique – not even Cambridge has that feeling. But I will say this: sometimes we are not meant to walk the same walk. Sometimes individuals have to leave the throng and explore the surrounding environment before they return. By then, the throng will have changed, but no problem; that is how life is. People come into our lives and then they go. At the end of the day, when you decide to take a year off, although you may feel lost sometimes, remember Allah is always with you, and if that is the case it doesn't matter where you walk. For that reason, I would definitely recommend anyone who has an inkling to take a year off should definitely find a way to rusticate, because rather than rusting, you will return well oiled, and you will be made anew.



Ibraheem Mirza

1st Year
Biochemistry
Oriel College

Artwork by Nazanin Azimi

Restoring Dependence on Allah

‘Jibriel (AS) came to the Prophet ﷺ and he said, “O Muhammad, ... Know that the nobility of the believer is in prayer at night and his honour is in his independence from people.”¹

It is truly extraordinary to witness the trust between a child and their parents. Converse with them and you will see that they are free from constraint, they have no capacity for angst, their expectations are rooted in those two pillars whom they trust with unwavering certainty. Those pillars may project perfection, but a veil of naivety conceals the cracks formed in their struggle to provide. How can we establish independence from people as in the hadith? It does not entail reviling the world – if only it were so easy. There is a natural tension in our pursuit of *dunya*. A crucial distinction ought to be made between the inherent limitation of the resources and instruments that have been given to us and the contrasting limitlessness of *Ar-Razzaq* (one of the names of God, meaning ‘The One Who Provides Sustenance’). We must receive our provisions whilst remaining conscious that it is only Allah to whom all provisions belong. ‘When the sun shines on a wall, / The wall is lit up, but by the sun’s borrowed light,’ Rumi notes. ‘O ignorant one! Love not the brick or stone. / Seek out the source that lights it up!’ The source from which we derive our honour is determined by where we place the

pillars of expectation that uphold our lives – it is to these pillars that our hearts are tethered.

However, independence from people alone is not sufficient. As was implied by Jibriel (AS) in the hadith, the honour of the believer is interlaced with their nobility; their independence from people is predicated on standing up in prayer at night. Fir’awn believed himself independent from the people. He affirmed his own lordship and declared himself a God amongst men. It is tempting to smirk in disbelief at his delusion and flip to the next page, but one must resist the urge. His story transcends Egypt; he is the archetypal representation of the egotism and arrogance which resurfaces in different forms across time. Abu Jahl, for example, admonished as the Fir’awn of our ummah, and also, to varying degrees, ourselves. In essence, ego is the illusory sense of entitlement within us, nourished by its capitulation to selfish desires, the ends of which, if left unchecked, know



no bounds. ‘Nothing will satiate the son of Adam,’ said the Prophet ﷺ, ‘except for the dust of his own grave’.²

‘Who will help me restrain my bolting ego from its wilfulness?’ asked Al-Busiri in his *Qasida al Burda*. The answer is *salat*. Amongst the first actions of prayer is to bear witness to the metaphysical fact which underlines creation: ‘*Alhamdulillah*’. All praise is due to God, all of it. It is only subsequent to this realisation of our complete dependence on Allah and his complete independence from us that we may perceive that everything we own is a gift, down to each individual heartbeat in our chests. A gift which we neither earned nor could ever hope to repay, as the giver is the one to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. A gift which we are not entitled to, yet it was bestowed on us through an effusion of mercy, untainted by ulterior motives, for us to taste its sweetness and enjoy until the day we return. To Allah we belong and to Him is our return – there is no greater comfort than this.

Through this frame, pain of the heart transforms into pain of the hand. We may be granted stewardship over something for a period, but if this trust is transferred to another, our portion has not been stolen; it was never ours to give. Awareness of this disintegrates resentment, even when befallen with calamities, which explains why the Prophet ﷺ observed, ‘Wonderous is the affair of the believer for there is good for

him in every matter.’³ Every matter serves only to purify our love and draw us closer.

The prerequisite for such contentment with the decree of *Al-Wadud* (another name of God, meaning ‘The Affectionate’) is humility. Hence prayer, standing at night, alone with the alone, the divinely prescribed antidote to the poison of arrogance, affirming one’s complete dependence on God. Shattering the illusion of permanence is only achieved by depriving the ego of nourishment. ‘I protect my love,’ said Imam Shafi in a poem from his deathbed, ‘lest my desires should pollute it and I preserve the contract of love, lest it be defiled.’ With nobility rooted in the embrace of our status as slaves owned only by Allah, the world is seen through different eyes. One can return to life, as in the freedom of childhood, with a source of spiritual sustenance beyond the limitations of others, in the same state of tranquillity intimated by Ibn Taymiyyah to his companions from his prison cell. ‘What can my enemies do to me?’ he asked. ‘My paradise and my garden are in my heart wherever I go.’ *Subhanallah*. Allah is perfect, free from limitations.

Axel Marinho
1st Year, Philosophy and Theology
Regent’s Park College

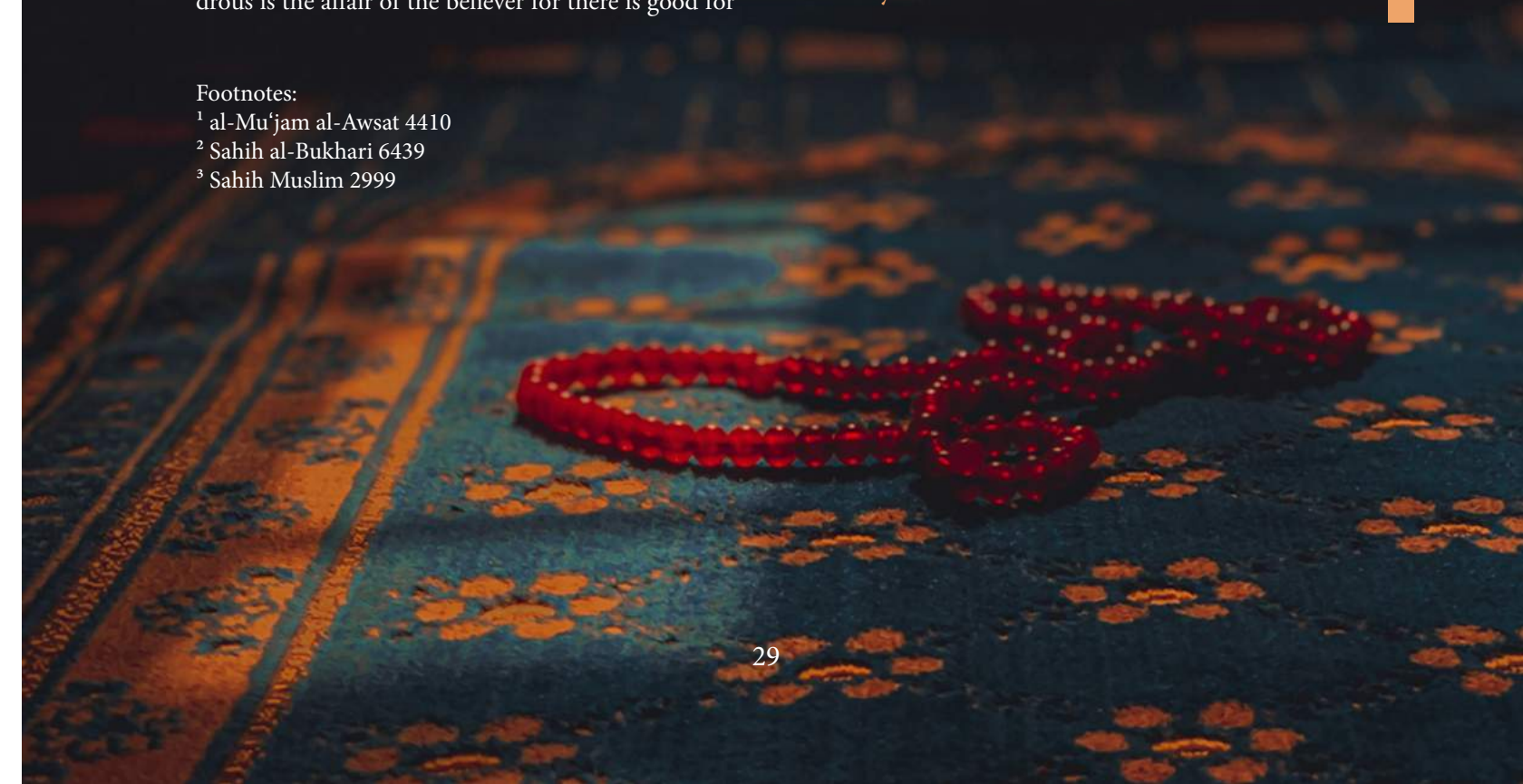
Artwork by Nazanin Azimi

Footnotes:

¹ al-Mu‘jam al-Awsat 4410

² Sahih al-Bukhari 6439

³ Sahih Muslim 2999



From the Ashes Rises a Phoenix: the Return of Cowley Road



A walk down Cowley Road is an illuminating experience, even more so if you visit some of the businesses and interact with the owners. If central Oxford has a superficial veneer of class and inherited affluence, then Cowley Road is a manifestation of the struggle of common people. For the well initiated, it begins at TikTok café and ends at Chai Wala; you could say that it is punctuated by Muslim owned businesses. You will find businesses of all kinds and varieties, each fulfilling a need of the community, from groceries to desserts. The juxtaposition between the Manzil Way Masjid dawah stands and the nightclubs outside which they are set up reflects the critical balance of the area. There is a chaotic harmony in Cowley that words cannot do justice. No doubt you could insert several places in the UK in the above description (Whitechapel comes to mind) and the statements would still ring true. It seems a unique irony that Muslims have found *rizq* in such places.

If the picture I've painted is one of vitality, then that is only so that its shattering seems starker. Indeed, like all other areas and perhaps more than other areas, Cowley was affected severely by the pandemic. Much like when a person gets frostbite, it is the extremities that die first. It is the small businesses at the peripheries which fade fastest. If you look with enough care, not that we often do, you will notice many closed down shops amongst the ones still standing – like a well-intentioned gappy smile. However, and this is of the utmost importance, Cowley's gappy smile reflects something profound about people and Muslims perhaps more so: our stubbornness not to lay down and keel over. I am forced to reflect on the passage in the Quran, 'For indeed with hardship will be ease. There is ease with hardship'. [94:5-6] The businesses I visited truly embodied the perseverance which is inspired in this verse.



My first stop was Bodrum. Situated towards the top of the road, it's a place the ISoc frequents, and I am what you could call a 'regular'. There is an unmistakable warmth to the establishment; a sceptic would say it's the open coal grill, but if you consider Cowley a home away from home then Bodrum might be compared to the kitchen. When I spoke to the manager about the hardships they encountered during COVID, he relayed the following. Like other restaurants, Bodrum was permitted only for takeaway and had to observe the social distancing and sanitisation protocols. They did it to the utmost of their ability, placing the safety of the community above all else. Strangely, though, he hardly spoke of the financial burden they faced and spoke much more about the sadness he felt in restricting the hospitality of his restaurant. His favourite part of his job is shaking hands and welcoming his customers. For the better part of two years, he was denied that privilege. The sincerity in the manner in which they conduct business astounded me – consciously or otherwise, this man had embodied the hadith, 'God shows mercy to a person who is kind when he sells, when he buys, and when he recovers a debt.' Since restrictions have eased, the blessings of their hospitality have returned. Bodrum has recovered wonderfully to its former glory and deals out free handshakes and tea with every meal it serves.

The other store I visited was Tahmid Food Store, a renowned grocer that stocks all the wonders that South Asian Muslims take for granted when at home. Their story was a bit different. They struggled more from the fear that people had about leaving the house, particularly as many people in the Muslim community live with vulnerable elders. To help the community and, by extension, themselves, they set up a delivery service for the local community. This allowed them to maintain some income but more importantly get vulnerable people the essential items they need. No doubt, Allah has repaid their immense favours; the queues were so long, SubhanAllah, I had to go three separate times to speak to the owner.

So, Cowley Road is as it was before the pandemic, a bustling and lively place. Yet the businesses there have taught me three very important Islamic traits to embody. Firstly, an unrelenting determination to overcome the trials which afflict us. Secondly, we must never relinquish our principles despite how tempting it may be. Finally, to embody an optimism born from the knowledge that Allah is the provider and all we control is our efforts. I sincerely hope that Cowley Road will continue to thrive and surpass even its former heights as a reward for the kindness of conduct and Tawhid the businesses have demonstrated.

Saqlain Choudhary
1st Year DPhil, Physics
New College

Za'atar Bake: Re-energised and Ready to Serve!

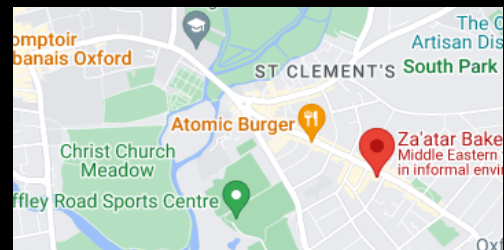
Ahmad Mohamad grew up in Damascus, Syria surrounded by culinary delights. He graduated from the Damascus Conservatoire and worked as a classical musician in Syria for over ten years before moving to the world music scene in London.

In 2004, he fulfilled his dream of opening a world music bar called Darbucka. He moved to Oxford in 2010 to raise a family and started several restaurant businesses on the Cowley road.

He now focuses on Za'atar Bake where he can put all his energy and prefers running a smaller business where he can turn his attention to serving quality Middle Eastern food and

getting to know his customers. He brings his restaurant and musical experience together. He loves learning from life, being amongst people and creating warm and entertaining atmospheres.

Visit Za'atar Bake at 166 Cowley Road, OX4 1UE.



You don't need me to tell you lockdown was tough for the hospitality industry. However, alongside the total upheaval of constantly closing and opening, there have been lessons learnt. I'm coming back to my business with a revived ambition to keep it going for my customers.

When restaurants were first asked to close, it was panic stations. We all feared the worst. How would the operational costs of running a restaurant be paid? There are so many bills that restaurants need to pay that customers do not see. It's not just the cost of the food you eat! Then came the announcement of the government's financial help and I started to feel a bit more at ease. Perhaps I could ride the wave, I thought.

Then I learnt, you ride one wave, you have to ride another.

I have to say, at each stage of the new waves, the help from the government felt like oxygen for the business, especially the furlough scheme – this was a real lifeline.

But I was still sitting at home with an empty kitchen when I knew others were going hungry. I decided to cook a free meal a day for those people who did not have the same lifeline that my business had been offered. It felt right to share my good luck with those who were not as lucky. Once people found out about it, my regular customers started offering to contribute towards the cost of the food. These gestures filled me with even more hope and

happiness as I felt blessed to have such wonderful customers in my life. I realised that Za'atar Bake attracts a certain kind of customer who values inclusivity and generosity.

Then came the Eat Out to Help Out Scheme in August. I understood the good intentions, but this attracted new customers who did not understand the Za'atar Bake values. They came with unrealistic demands and were often rude to my staff. This was a turning point for me. I became even more convinced of what Za'atar Bake is about. We are more than a place to eat. We are a place that welcomes all as long as the respect goes both ways. My staff work very hard to ensure the

customer has a good experience. They remained loyal throughout several lockdowns, and they have had to adapt to new ways of working. There is a big shortage of staff in the hospitality industry, and those staff who remain loyal and have come back to work, ready to serve customers who want to relax and enjoy their food, need recognition. I feel Za'atar Bake attracts customers who recognise this, and again, I am so grateful to serve such people.

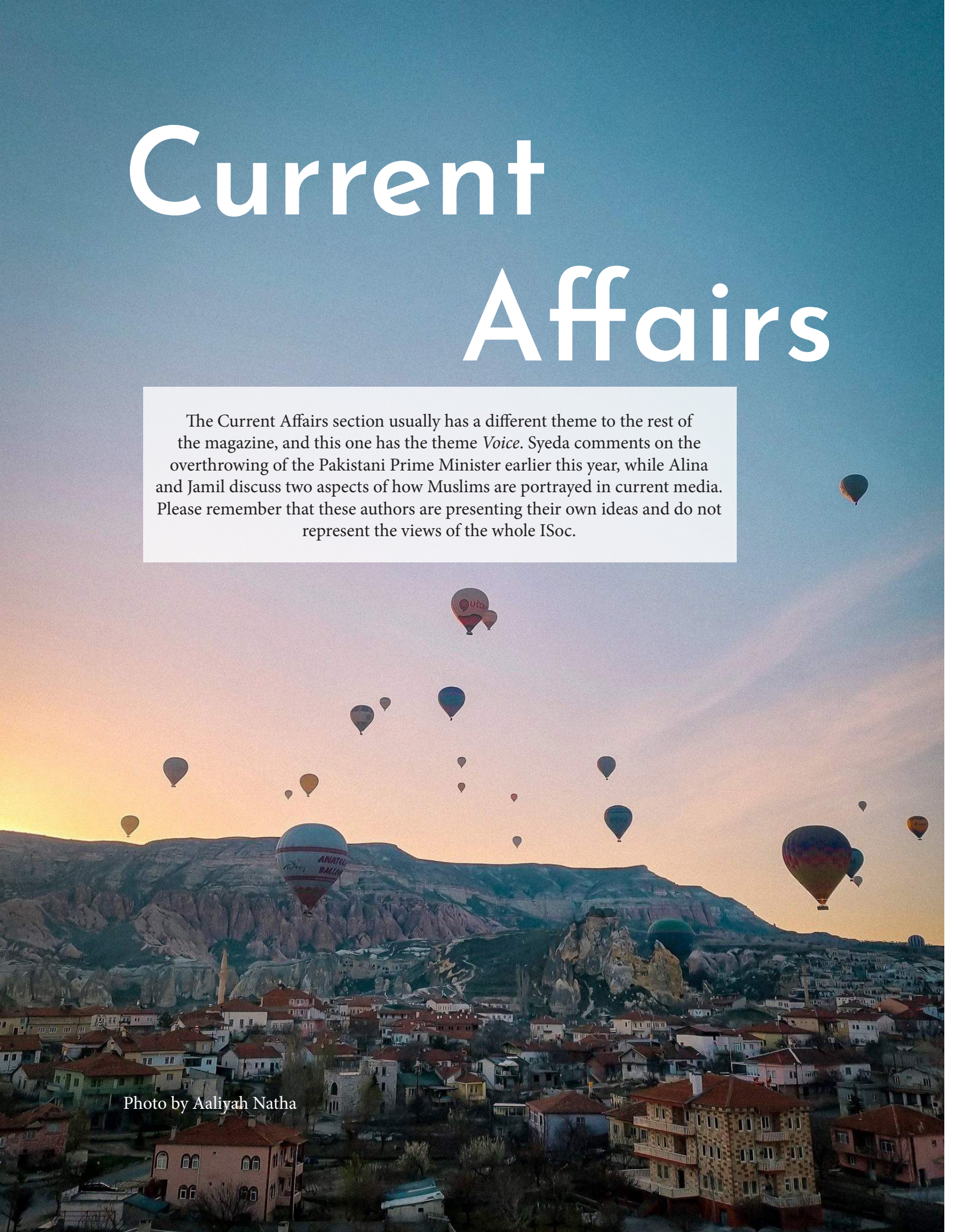
So although the lockdowns were difficult, I feel it has given me time to understand more about my business, my customers, my staff and the values that Za'atar Bake stands for. I feel revived.



Current Affairs

The Current Affairs section usually has a different theme to the rest of the magazine, and this one has the theme *Voice*. Syeda comments on the overthrowing of the Pakistani Prime Minister earlier this year, while Alina and Jamil discuss two aspects of how Muslims are portrayed in current media. Please remember that these authors are presenting their own ideas and do not represent the views of the whole ISoc.

Photo by Aaliyah Natha



Pakistan and Khan: *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

On 11th April 2022, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan was ousted from power after a vote of no confidence. The nation and the world watched, shocked and bewildered, as the charismatic cricketer-turned-politician (who is also an Oxford alum!) became yet another Prime Minister in Pakistan's 75-year history unable to complete his term in power.

It is also important to note that up until Khan's election, dynasty politics had a grip over Pakistan, with two parties alternately remaining in power. In some ways, Khan's rise to power gave the common man a sense of hope, that someone they believed in had come to power through the prevailing force of democracy. It is this belief in the possibility of change for which Khan is a symbol that people cling on to, and they don't want to let it go. An illusion of sorts – although one can argue that it is human nature to want to preserve something you have waited so long to achieve, it can also be dangerous, especially when Khan as a figurehead is held up as a messiah, and it can be argued that he as an individual is holding up the popularity of his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

Regarding the ousting, the general consensus is that the 'Pakistan Democratic Movement' – which was formed by opposing parties to Khan's PTI, including Pakistan Muslim League Noon (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) – joined hands with several people from Khan's own party to form a coalition and overthrow him. This successfully took place, with Khan's additional claims that his ousting was caused by factors including but not limited to supposed US intervention. This claim may hold some credibility due

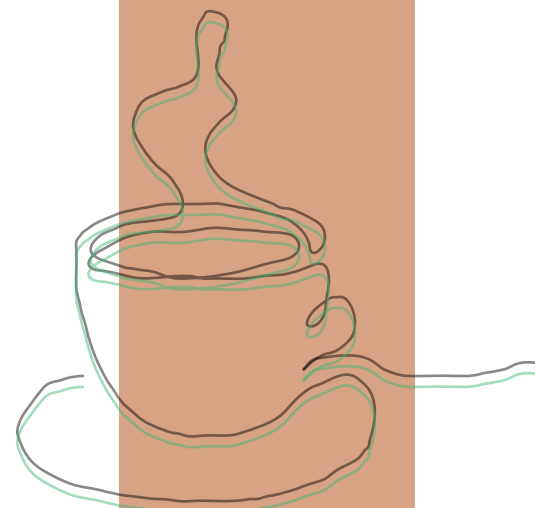
to the history the US has with meddling with foreign powers to cause regime changes that benefit them, but there is no confirmation as of yet.

Today, the cabinet and the government in Pakistan have been reshuffled. Shehbaz Sharif (PML-N), with a number of charges to his name and currently on bail, is to be the replacement Prime Minister until elections are held again, yet there is fear that this may not take place democratically and truthfully. Bilawal Zardari (PPP) has also been made the new Foreign Minister of Pakistan. A large section of the public are deeply worried that this new government and cabinet is a return to *purana Pakistan* ('old Pakistan'), one of dynasty politics. Yet, only time will tell.

Finally, this political turmoil has really highlighted that there is a new dimension to the marriage of the Pakistani public and politics, and that is because of social media. Support and criticisms have poured in from around the world. Rallies and protests have been mass-organised. Live Twitter 'Spaces' have been hosted with senior government officials, leading to a form of transparency that will definitely both impact and alter the political landscape of Pakistan tomorrow.

Syeda Maah-Noor Ali

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The Media vs Muslim Identity

Being a Muslim is an integral part of my identity. Whilst identity is formed from many things, representation in the media plays a large part in influencing a person's sense of who they are. This has a profound impact in this day and age with the 'Muslim identity' being perceived as such a controversial one. I know what being a Muslim means to me, however there is a clear disillusionment between my own definition and what I and many other Muslims may see around us.

The media creates a Muslim identity in which hijabis are eager to take off their hijabs in exchange for short term acceptance, being made victims of the male gaze. Characters are often shown to succumb to the archetypal 'terrorist' trope of our cultures. Customs are presented as 'strange' and hence subject to mockery. Such misleading portrayals not only reshape the Muslim identity to fit a Western standard but tokenise us for traits that do not necessarily represent us as individuals.

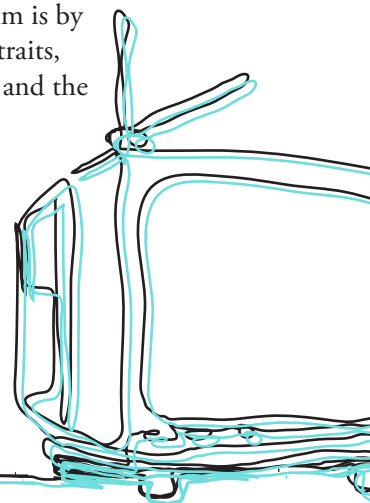
Being exposed to these media constructions of Islamic identity is damaging to one's regard of the religion, in terms of how it relates to us personally and to our daily lives. It subtly promotes an almost exclusive culture where feelings of rejection arise due to the constructed Muslim identity, where the media image is completely distinct to who I am and what my beliefs are. Media discourses often make light of things such as modesty or portray Islam as 'oppressive' on the individual. Moreover, this negative representation facilitates negative stigmas and provokes questions as to if this is how all outsiders perceive Muslims. Let's imagine how harmful it is for the self image of a teenager to see restrictive labels – of people supposedly like them – in the

news and fictional content they consume. Forming an identity is a continuous process and despite the frustrating cultural context we might find ourselves in, and consistently influenced by, sticking to our authentic self is what is of utmost importance.

The only place where I have seen an honest depiction of Muslims that I could relate to was in the recent Disney movie *Turning Red*, where Muslim cartoon characters and hijabis exist by default in the background. I truly felt happy watching that film because it showed us Muslims for who we really are, just average members of society. When highlighting characters on the basis of religion it often leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes and tends to be one-dimensional.

This is why I think it's time for a positive revival, time for us to voice our own narratives. Not only within the media, but in expressing our self-assurance of our Muslim identity. As individuals, being 'seen' and 'heard' for who we are lies in our actions and how we portray ourselves. Being a Muslim means different things to everyone – however, there are some things that we all strive towards. *Akhlaq* (good character) is one thing that is stressed in Islam and is essential to the Muslim identity. We must challenge the media proclamation of what a Muslim is by staying firm in these positive traits, as encouraged by the Sunnah and the Quran.

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The Failure of Western Media Coverage

The media coverage of the injustice being done against the Muslims in the world has been appalling. With so much noise, it is easy for those who are not keeping up with the latest trends in the Muslim world to be easily distracted from the ill-treatment of Muslims globally. Whether it's the double standards shown by the Russo-Ukrainian War, Saffron Terror, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Western media has failed to provide the appropriate coverage of such vital issues.

Following the Ukrainian and Russian wars, the double standards that exist between the treatment of Muslims and the rest of the world have become much more visible, even to those who previously denied the UK government's unfair treatment of Muslims. Instead, it serves as a sobering reminder that those of us who lack 'blue eyes' or 'blonde hair' do not deserve to seek asylum in European countries. According to the United Nations, more than 11 million people are believed to have fled their homes in Ukraine since the conflict began, with the UK issuing 71,800 visas to assist these refugees. In comparison, only about 25,000 Syrian refugees have been given the same shelter in the last five years. The Syrian refugee crisis has divided European nations, but the influx of millions of Ukrainian refugees has been met with open arms. News outlets failed to highlight the inequitable treatment of non-white refugees, while others suggested that this was because Ukrainians are white, non-Muslim, and watch Netflix just like you and me. The media's coverage of the Ukrainian war has been used to showcase Europe's generosity while ignoring the unjust treatment of Muslim refugees just a few months prior.

In India, Hindu nationalists have weaponised Islamophobic chants, escalating tensions between the two groups and demonstrating the country's growing anti-Muslim sentiment. Despite constituting 14 percent of the country's 1.4 billion population, Hindu mobs incite violence against the Muslims by chanting hate-filled songs. Neighbourhoods have been described as resembling war zones, with broken glass littering the streets, mosques burned to the ground, and vehicles charred. Bulldozers rolled into the north Delhi neighbourhood of Jahangirpuri on April 20th, on the orders of local authorities, destroying the entrance gate of a mosque, as well as several buildings, homes, and shops of Muslims. Such coordinated attacks are

aimed at destroying the Muslims and their way of life. Despite such heinous attacks on Indian Muslims, there is little coverage of these atrocities in Western media. Once again, we see Western news outlets failing to highlight these events, despite the BBC's mission to act in the public interest and serve all audiences.

Israeli Zionist colonisation of the Palestinian people has been a 100-year issue since Britain took control of Palestinian land and offered it to the Jewish people. Over the last 50 years, Israel has built settlements in Palestinian territory, evicting Palestinians. This year, Israeli police launched multiple attacks on the Al-Aqsa mosque, firing tear gas and beating worshippers. Zionist settlers have also been recorded chanting the racist and genocidal anti-Arab slogan, 'death to the Arabs.' Western media outlets, such as The Guardian, strategically frame their reports to undermine the brutal attacks on Palestinians. These news outlets misrepresent the events in Palestine by referring to these events as 'clashes' and the deadly attacks by Israeli police as 'self-defence'. Again, we see media coverage that fails to adequately address injustice against the Muslims around the world, and when it does, it fails to voice the true suffering of those victims.

Despite the fact that Western media outlets are failing to cover these issues on a large enough scale, it is still our responsibility to speak out against discrimination and raise awareness among those who are unaware of these issues. The news media has failed to adequately cover these issues and their significance, from Islamophobic chants in India and Palestine to silent politicians and their double standards wrapped in foreign aid. Therefore, we must do our best to keep up with the latest developments in the Muslim world and speak up for them when necessary.

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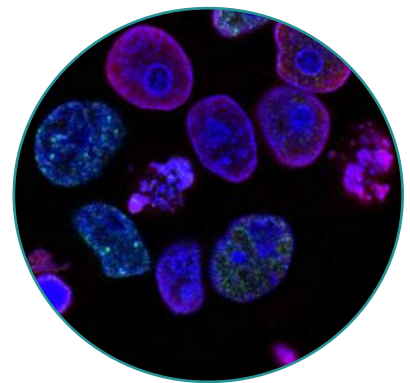
Research Showcase

This section is for ISoc students to show us what they have been working on and studying recently. In the following article, Sarah explains what iPSCs are and how they can be used to exploit new areas of medicine that cannot be achieved in other ways.

Sarah Shah

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**Induced Pluripotent
Stem Cells:
Reviving New Fates
from Mature Cells**



According to Waddington's Landscape, embryonic stem cells (ESCs) differentiate into mature cells which are unable to further differentiate. However, Shinya Yamanaka's work in producing induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) showed that this process is reversible as somatic cells may be reprogrammed into a pluripotent state to undergo further differentiation. Winning him the 2012 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine, this has opened multiple doors, including advancements in the fields of developmental biology, disease modelling, drug discovery, personalised medicine and regenerative medicine (requiring further research before widespread clinical use). Moreover, this discovery symbolises the importance of revival in multiple senses: both in terms of reviving the mature cells into pluripotent ones, but also in how scientific research leads to the revival of new areas of study and clinical potential.

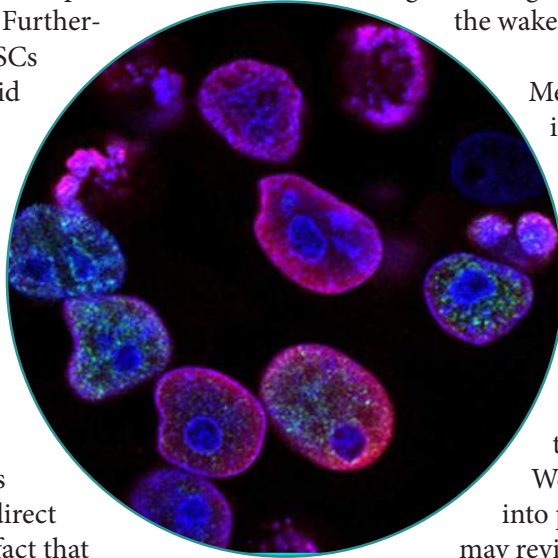
Pluripotent stem cells are able to differentiate into any cell type via the three primary germ layers of the embryo (contrasting from totipotent stem cells, which may also differentiate into extraembryonic structures such as the placenta). Such cells can be found 4-5 days post-fertilisation of the embryo, and have the clinical potential in engineering cells and tissues for transplantation, such as the production of functional pancreatic endocrine cells in the treatment of diabetes.¹ However, the use of embryonic stem cells raises ethical concerns, alongside the clinical concerns of potential unwanted immune responses. These concerns may be avoided by using somatic cell nuclear transfer technologies, or 'therapeutic cloning', in order to produce embryos genetically identical to the patient by implanting a somatic cell nucleus into an enucleated zygote. They may also be avoided by inducing pluripotency within adult cells and bypassing the need for embryos, as Yamanaka showed possible in his 2006 paper, *Induction of Pluripotent Stem Cells from Mouse Embryonic and Adult Fibroblast Cultures by Defined Factors*.

Transcription factors maintain the pluripotency of ESCs by binding to the genome at specific positions, thereby increasing the expression of pluripotency-related genes, and suppressing the expression of lineage-related genes. Yamanaka's research involved studying these transcription factors and applying them to mouse fibroblasts. His experimental research applied different combinations of the known 24 factors to mice cells using chemical treatments or electrical pulses via retroviral vectors repeatedly, to observe which cells developed pluripotent characteristics. This was measured by use of a neomycin resistance gene, which was only to be expressed if the cell behaved as an ESC: a successful experiment resulted in cell growth, despite receiving a lethal dose of neomycin. Initially, this was conducted on embryonic fibroblasts to refine four necessary transcription factors, Oct4, Sox2, Klf4 and cMyc (referred to as either OSKM or Yamanaka factors). Repeating on human fibroblasts following adult mouse fibroblasts and achieving similar results each time proved that OSKM could be applied to cells from completely mature and differentiated organisms to produce iPSCs.² This was a breakthrough discovery and displays the ability to utilise and revive differentiated adult cells into an undifferentiated state.

However, despite this breakthrough, iPSCs have their limitations in potentially resulting in cancer stem cell formation. Researchers, such as Schöler, have put forward that this method of iPSC production is too crude, as OSKM gene inactivation also changes the DNA methylation which would then be passed on to daughter cells, potentially producing tumour cells due to unexpected changes in gene expression. Oct4 (regarded as an indispensable transcription factor) is also highly expressed in both embryonic and adult tumour cells, with overexpression leading to tumorigenicity, tumour metastasis and recurrence after chemotherapy.³ Taking this into account alongside the potentially cancerous nature of iPSCs, it appears that

cautious and precise regulation of Oct4 may be necessary for clinical use. According to a study recently published in 2019 by a team led by Schöler, the removal of Oct4 still resulted in iPSCs, without any abnormal, potentially cancerous imprinting. Furthermore, when the SKM-iPSCs were tested with tetraploid complementation, the iPSC mice had twenty times higher competence than traditional OSKM-iPSCs, opening a new pathway for potential clinical developments.⁴

Although further peer reviews and clinical trials are necessary to see the direct impacts of research, the fact that many teams are looking into iPSCs seems to offer an insight into the future and illustrates its potential significance. Comparing today's research and interest to Yamanaka's initial publication, development for iPSCs has exploded rapidly, with, for example, 10 pharmaceutical companies and 23 universities working under the management of the University of Oxford to create a library of 1,500 iPSC lines for use in disease modelling and drug testing.⁵ It is reviving a whole new field and perspective



for future development. The opportunity to reprogram fibroblasts to provide autologous cell replacement therapy is not only significant in allowing us to treat diseases, but also in showing the changing nature of medicine in the wake of scientific research.

Medicine, clinically and in research, is continually being revived by such breakthroughs. Continued learning, adaptation and global collaboration are essential to this and serve as a testament to the importance of testing and development. We may revive adult cells into pluripotent cells, we may revive old therapies using new technologies and we may revive current theories in light of new discoveries. Yet most of all, we will always revive the scientific passion which drives progress towards providing widely accessible treatments and therapies.

Footnotes:

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Series Review: Reflections on Omar

Abdullah Khalil

6th Year, Medicine
New College



When a friend first recommended MBC's *Omar* series, my first response was to be concerned: I didn't want to see my all-time favourite companion delivered short nor put through the oversimplified misrepresentations of historical legends the Muslim world has become all too accustomed to. But Ramadhan in lockdown and the suspension of medical school meant something had to fill the time (in between all of that Taraweeh, of course), and how glad am I that *Omar* showed up on my YouTube recommendations when it did.

Complete with its own heroic score, *Omar* is an epic and, especially for those with childhood recollections of stories from the *Sīrah*, truly evocative 31-episode depiction of the life of 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb (رضي الله عنه), from his early days shepherding the flocks of his stern-minded father to his eventual assassination as the second Caliph in Medina. Through exploring 'Umar's relationships with characters like his father, brother and aristocratic contemporaries in Qurayshite society, the show for the most part thankfully manages to avoid devolving into a showreel of chapters from the *Sīrah* and instead aims to help viewers discover a complex, multi-layered 'Umar and understand the life





experiences that shaped this phenomenal man.

Yet the show is about a lot more than just one person (as great as he was). Themes such as family, virtue and society in early 7th century Mecca are explored through various subplots. Chances are you'll find your favourite story from the *Sīrah* featuring somewhere; for the most part this was executed tactfully, the stories carefully woven into and contributing to the emerging narrative. At other times the forcedness was difficult to overlook and less would have definitely been more. The scene depicting *The Lady of the Two Girdles* (رضي الله عنها) was perhaps the pinnacle of this excess.

The inclusion of subplots was a welcome addition although they are sure to strike up conversations around how much departure from authenticated traditions Muslim audiences are prepared to countenance for the sake of compelling storytelling (the main plot is however largely authenticated). Subplots such as Wahshi's pursuit of freedom and love, although half-baked (even as subplots go), succeed in broadening the scope of our view into Meccan society at the time.

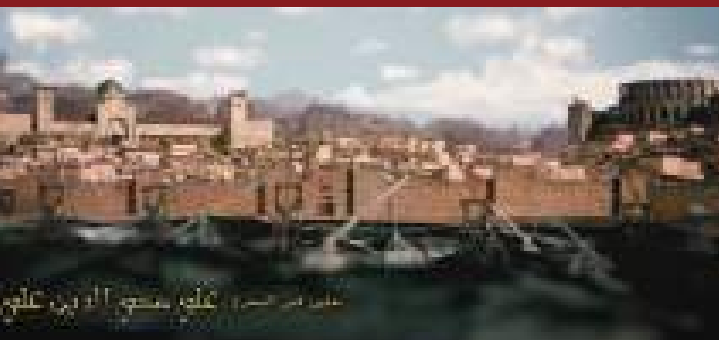
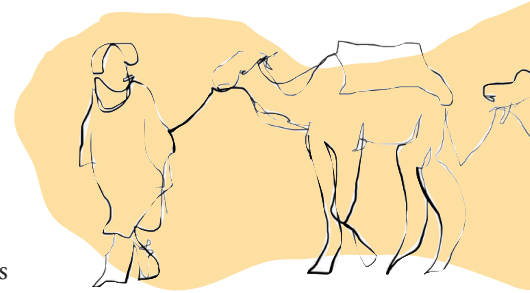
Lovers of classical Arabic are in for a treat: the dialogue meets the riveting standard set by older historical series. Sadly, with the exception of the main cast, the same can't be said for the articulation of the Arabic. Although in classical language, contemporary accents (the show was filmed mostly in Morocco) kept a continuous presence in many of the auxiliary cast. But it was the quintessentially Egyptian Qaaf

which utterly murdered some scenes and surely could have been avoided. This might just be the price we pay for being a community which knows not only what its language was 1400 years ago but exactly how it was articulated too (aspiring Tajweed students be warned that your enjoyment of historical dramas may be permanently impaired).

It is the pagan chiefs of Quraysh, acted by veterans of Arab cinema, who put on the most enjoyable performances; I had to check myself making a brief tut at the demise of Abu Jahl at Badr which marked the end of Jawad Al-Skakrji's role only one third of the way through the series. Hassan Al-Jundi as 'Utbah ibn Rabiah and Najah Safkouni as Suhayl Ibn Amr enlivened and delivered the classical prose without a semblance of performativity. Ghassan Mahmoud deserves special mention for portraying the sincerity and solemn gentleness of Abu Bakr (رضي الله عنها) with such authenticity. As does Qasim Melho who was the perfect choice to represent the shrewd and intelligent Amr Ibn Al-As. Although criticised for dubbing a voice actor, Samer Ismail was on balance a good choice for the lead role: his physical acting combined well with Asad Khalifa's voice to convey their character's often misunderstood gentleness.

Very few female characters were also given the spotlight; most notably Hind bint 'Utbah but also

Artwork by Coral Benfield





other unexpected characters like the fictional slave-girl Rayhaana. (It is not clear whether this character is intended to portray Rayhāna bint Zayd but it seems more likely that she is

a fictional addition.) May Skaf's portrayal of Hind was refreshing to watch, devoid of the theatricals that have beset preceding representations of this intense personality. The scene at the conquest of Mecca when she finally turns on her idols remains one of my favourite scenes from amongst every series in this genre (the opening scene of episode 17).

Ultimately however, I think the series' greatest success is in the message it delivers. For the first time in the telling of this epic story, enough space is given to explore the inner turmoil and personal challenges the advent of Islam brought to many of Mecca's inhabitants. This is best seen in 'Umar himself: we are not shown a convincing transformation in his character during his conversion to the new religion. Instead, it is the very virtues of loyalty, family and piety for which he is praised in Islam that led him to initially oppose the fledgling religion. Even as he sets out to put an end to the Prophet's (ﷺ) mission, he does so in full acceptance that Banu Hashim (the Prophet's (ﷺ) clan) would be entitled to take his own life in retaliation as per Meccan custom. He is prepared to offer his own life to save his community from the fragmentation and turmoil into which he

perceived it to have been cast by the new religion.

Similarly, none of the villains from our childhood are portrayed as one-dimensional. Space is given to explore their deeper motives, worries and for those who did convert, their own struggles in coming to terms with the new faith. We are reminded just how many factors can influence such pivotal decisions in people's lives and invited to look at these characters with deeper understanding and maybe even some sympathy. For many like me, this will be for the first time. I am grateful to this series for enriching my appreciation of the Sirah and helping me to look at its characters and events in a whole new light.

Although no series could ever do justice to the story of this legend, the show is a much watch for all. Old fans will find their admiration for this hero taken to new heights and those who are not acquainted will learn why Umar holds such a dear place in the hearts of Muslims throughout history and around the world.

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Alumni

These pieces from ISoc alumni offer both reflections on their time spent in Oxford as well as important lessons to be learnt in the post-university world. Danial explains how *Revival* can apply to whole societies, Afnafee reminisces about a sacred friendship he established at Oxford, and Aya suggests how to reap real life rewards from your academic endeavours.

Photo by Aaliyah Natha

Defining the Revival of a Society

The revival of a society can be interpreted through many different lenses which depend on one's worldview. Revival can be measured in many different ways, such as economic growth, scientific progress, or the development of morals. It is important as Muslims that we do not simply adopt Western definitions and metrics for revival as this will lead to the perpetuation of the problems that occur in Western societies such as economic inequality and corruption.

Revival can be defined as the improvement of society to a better condition. It is important to note that the revival of a society naturally corresponds to the revival of the individuals in the society when there is an alignment between the thoughts and ideas of the leadership and the people. When there is disagreement in the ideas of the people and the political systems and leadership in society, there will be friction, which will either lead to subjugation and suppression of the people or to the eventual reform of leadership. Thus, it is important for us to scrutinise the core ideas that emanate in society and to study their agreement with our beliefs and what we know to be the truth as it is these ideas that will lead to a truly revived society.

Capitalist societies have prioritised economic growth as one of the defining

metrics for revival. This has no doubt led to increased production, innovation, and scientific progress. However, it has also corresponded to increasing economic inequality amongst many other problems ranging from a mental health crisis to increasing levels of crime and corruption. As Muslims, we should view this as a result of the core ideas of society drifting from divine truth. This is because capitalism, where the freedom of ownership is emphasised, has been derived from

secularism, which calls for the separation of religion from politics without any emphasis placed on questions of our existence in the universe. However, we can see that there is an alignment between the thoughts and ideas of the people and the leadership of society in Western nations, which

contrasts with Muslim-majority nations, where there is friction and turmoil due to the disagreement between the two.

As Muslims, we should be confident in our Islam, which has been revealed to us from our creator, Allah (SWT), who is *al-Aleem* ('the All-Knowing One'), and knows our condition. Islam has given us clear guidance from the Qur'an and Sunnah on how we can organise every aspect of society and our lives as individuals to produce a revived society.

// It is important for us to scrutinise the core ideas that emanate in society and to study their agreement with our beliefs. //

Danial Farooq graduated in Engineering Science (MEng) from Wadham in 2020. He was on the Politics Subcommittee for the ISoc in 2017/18. He is now a PhD student, in Chemistry, at UCL, based at the Catalyst Hub in Harwell.



A Warm Embrace

Nostalgia is a beautiful feeling – a longing for belonging in a time and space imbued with peace, happiness and simplicity. I like to think it is a gift from up above when my mind retires to the past, giving me a slideshow of some of the sweetest memories treasured in the deepest corners of my heart. This article is a recollection of some of those coveted memories of the time I spent in Oxford with a beloved friend, meeting whom changed the very course of my life. This is a humble tribute to Zakir Gul who was the means of my spiritual revival.

I came to the UK in 2016 as a naïve and lost eighteen-year-old from Bangladesh. The two years leading up to my arrival in this country were perhaps the most tumultuous and trying time of my life. Soon after I finished my IGCSEs, I suffered a major existential crisis. One day, out of nowhere, I had a crazy thought that the whole idea of a supreme deity was nothing but a fallacy. These unprecedented thoughts on divine existence (or lack thereof) were slowly starting to crumble the very foundations upon which my life relied. Being brought up with traditional Islamic values, I found myself doubting the axioms of my reality. Worse still, my sixteen-year-old self was too afraid to tell anyone about this inner hellfire I was in. I suffered tremendous loneliness, desperate to find some form of spiritual balance and psychological equilibrium. Funnily and paradoxically enough, despite my reluctance to believe in a deity, every night I was immersed in Dhikr, Tahajjud and a sincere plea to Allah to relieve me of my affliction. Nearly two years of inner struggle later, there was a horrific terrorist attack during the Ramadan of 2016 at a café in Dhaka, perpetrated by students from well-renowned schools and about the same age as me. This traumatised me even immensely and pushed me further towards doubt and confusion.

Fast forward a few months – I was in Oxford, pursuing my ambition to study Engineering. Surrounded by typical Oxford philosophers, anthropologists, PPE-ists and their postmodernist mumbo jumbo, I found myself marooned, sailing in a tempestuous sea with no shore in sight.

Ramadan of 2017 coincided with the Trinity Term of my first year. I recall that by that point I was aware of the existence of the ISoc but never showed up to anything, perhaps out of my fear of judgement. At that time, a dear friend of mine and the only Muslim in college I knew convinced me to go to a Prayer Room iftar with her, a ‘trivial’ decision that would later go on to change my life. Allah bless her soul.

In the scorching heat of summer, we sat around our iftar with a massive standing fan (pre-air-conditioner days in the PR) placed in the cupboard corner blowing hot air onto our backs and faces. It was then that I laid my eyes on Zakir for the first time. Sat right across from me, he was dressed in a black salwar kameez and his signature embroidered topi. When our eyes finally locked, with his ever-effulgent smile, he asked me what my name was, which college I went to and what I studied. When I returned the favour, he mentioned he went to St Benet’s Hall. This unheard-of college became my safe haven within Oxford for the next year and a half.

A few weeks went by. I was sitting under one of the wall-mounted bookcases at the far corner of an empty prayer room well past midnight. Close to suhoor, after I finished my du’a, I turned to find Zakir sitting right beside me. ‘Where have you been all this time, my brother?’ he asked with a contented smile. This question evoked an indescribable feeling within me. It all made perfect sense – in the most miraculous and unceremonious ways, I

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had finally discovered the puzzle piece missing from my life. Suddenly, I felt I knew this man for years and years!

The last night of that Trinity will forever remain embedded in my heart. We stayed back in the prayer room after Taraweeh. And as the night drifted slowly towards daybreak, I found myself in a circle of friends, next to Zakir, chanting the words of Bushra Lana among other Qasaid. Singing in the key of light, our hearts were swarming with a million emotions, marking the end of a hard-fought year for all. Finally, when it was time to say goodbye, I was in the warm embrace of my beloved friend, two hearts reunited, each crying uncontrollably for the other. All doubts dissipated. It was at that very moment I realised Allah had answered all my desperate calls. Five thousand miles away from my motherland, I was finally home.

I have so many fond memories with Zakir that I cannot possibly encapsulate them all within my word limit. My Snowdon fiasco alone could take up an entire Ikhlās issue [ask anyone ;)]. I remember, often after ISoc events in the evening, Zakir and I would take a stroll around the city centre, revelling in the pulchritude of the dreaming spires. I vividly remember his heartwarming smile, his unrelenting empathy and sincere kindness, always paying genuine attention to whomever he had a conversation with. He was a man of self-abnegation, heart full of light. SubhanAllah, he truly was the definition of his name.

In my second year, when I was suffering from an anxiety disorder coupled with the grief of my aunt's tragic death from

liver cancer, Zakir visited me with my favourite kebab wrap from Solomon's Grill, comforting me as I cried like a baby once again in his arms. At a time when I could not travel back home to attend my aunt's janaza, I found great solace in his soothing company. Once again, he became my oasis of hope.

Then there was the time I was waiting in Heathrow, crying ceaselessly as I read *The Beginning of Guidance* by Imam Al Ghazali, a present from Zakir. Why? I know not. Perhaps it was the nature of the gift or perhaps the nature of our friendship. Allah knows best. It was a very short introduction to *Ihya 'Uloom Ad Deen*, Imam Al Ghazali's magnum opus. Four years after reading that book on revival, here I am writing a revival-themed story. Life really has come full circle!

Zakir left Oxford on Eid-Al-Fitr of 2018. I was the last person from Oxford to bid him goodbye that evening. I was there in St Benet's, heart sinking in pain as I watched my beloved friend pack up his last few books. I think I helped him carry a few boxes downstairs. With that, I knew it was the end of our intertwined journeys, at least for the time being. I thanked him earnestly for everything and for all I had learned from him. He whispered into my ear, 'La, Sidi I learnt a lot from you!' as our hearts bled together for one last time. It ended just how it began – with a warm embrace.

May Allah grant my friend a long life and always shield him with His mercy.

Affnafee Rahman completed an MEng Engineering Science at St Hugh's College (2016-2020). He served as the Politics Officer for OUISoc in his second year and the St Hugh's JCR Beliefs and Faiths Rep in his third. He is currently based in Bristol, working as a mechanical engineer at Atkins in their nuclear and power division. Outside of work, he is an avid reader, musician and bodybuilder.



Night Patrol and the Importance of Nearness (in Academia and Beyond)

Bismillah.

My favourite stories from my father begin with ‘On the banks of the Tigris River...’ and end with my longing for nearness to our beloved Iraq – and its inhabitants, who have endured unfathomable hardship. After spending a year with Iraqi refugees in the United States, seeking to understand health care disparities they face, I felt limited in what I could do for them and was propelled to expand my studies at Oxford.

Sitting along the banks of the Thames River, I contemplated ideas for my dissertation, proposing a new model to mental health care delivery in Mosul, Iraq, post-ISIS. How can I use my privileges at Oxford to seek and provide beneficial knowledge without being physically amongst Iraqis in need? What responsibilities do diaspora carry as individuals removed from the immediate struggles in our countries? Unable to do primary research in Mosul, I sought to piece together varying studies, policies, theories, and ethnographies to make Iraq as near to Oxford as possible.

Still, I felt distanced and ached to be able to provide more proximate relief for my brothers, sisters, and elders in Iraq. Ac-

ademia is many things; while constantly evolving and expansive, it tends to reside in an ivory tower or, in my case, the Radcliffe Camera.

After a day of research, I walked down the steps of the Radcliffe Camera and headed toward Little Clarendon Street past sunset. Little Clarendon Street is energised by day with pedestrians, people picking up bread, locking their bicycles, and sitting outside Gail’s for a cup of tea. By night, the enchantment fades and sidewalks become floorboards for homeless people on their mattresses,

lying side by side to keep each other warm. It was during this walk that I remembered the story of Umar ibn Al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him) night-patrolling through Medina. This was a frequent endeavour for Umar (may

Allah be pleased with him) as it was a direct way to understand and gain insight from the society he was governing. He was essentially seeking to know how the decisions he made from a distance manifested on the streets of Medina.

During an evening of patrolling, he heard a child crying from a nearby home and told the mother she should fear Allah (SWT) and care for her child crying for breastmilk. The mother had not been breastfeeding her child as, due to

// I ached to be able to provide more proximate relief for my brothers, sisters and elders. //

a policy developed by Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), only families with children who are weaned could receive a stipend. Realising how his policy decision actually unfolded within homes, Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) wept so deeply his *qiraat* during Fajr prayer was incomprehensible. After Fajr, he issued a government order to all mothers discouraging weaning children at an early age with assurance that they would receive a stipend regardless of breastfeeding.

Umar's (may Allah be pleased with him) regular night patrol teaches Muslims a profound lesson about humility, our individual blind spots, nearness to hardship, and sincerely listening and attuning to the communities we strive to serve. His actions are an important reminder for Oxford's Muslim students. We can either sit in the comfort zone of our ivory tower and segregate in our esoteric vocabulary or actively reflect on how to step down from these towers and stand beside people in need, as one. With each publication, theory, or concept studied, how can we tie this back to nearness to those in need, nearness to Allah (SWT)?

As Bryan Stevenson says, 'It's actually in proximity to the poor that we hear things that we won't otherwise hear, that we'll see things we won't otherwise see. The things we hear and see are critical to our knowledge and our capacity to problem-solve.'

This is not to say that to effectively serve or apply one's knowledge, an Oxford student must physically voyage far. There are many ways to move past our bubbles and the potential silos of our perspectives. It was in fact through sitting among Iraqi refugees that I felt the need to come to Oxford and gain more knowledge in an academic setting. To me, it is not one or the other (service on the grounds or research in a university library), but it is instead a question of how we can create bridges between these worlds. Building bridges creates nearness. Drawing connections creates nearness. This nearness provides a more truthful representation of those we seek to serve. In the process of drawing nearer, our hearts are revitalised in synchrony with our minds, to not only produce or consume an idea but to actually feel how it exists in this world.



Aya Ahmad graduated from Kellogg College in 2021 with an MSc in Medical Anthropology. Prior to this, she earned her Bachelor's of Science degree in Cellular and Molecular Neuroscience in Colorado. Since graduating from Oxford, Aya has continued research on Iraqi migrant health disparities while also working in the clinical and health policy fields. Aya is an aspiring physician dedicated to migrant health, with a particular passion for healing those chronically impacted by war.

Community Works

Here is a display of some of the artistic contributions the ISoc community has to offer. Find beautiful photographs, paintings, drawings and poems by your fellow Oxford Muslims.

Anicka Ahmed, Regent's Park College



Afiea Begum, St Catherine's College



Ramadan Mubarak 🌙

Anicka Ahmed

Regent's Park College

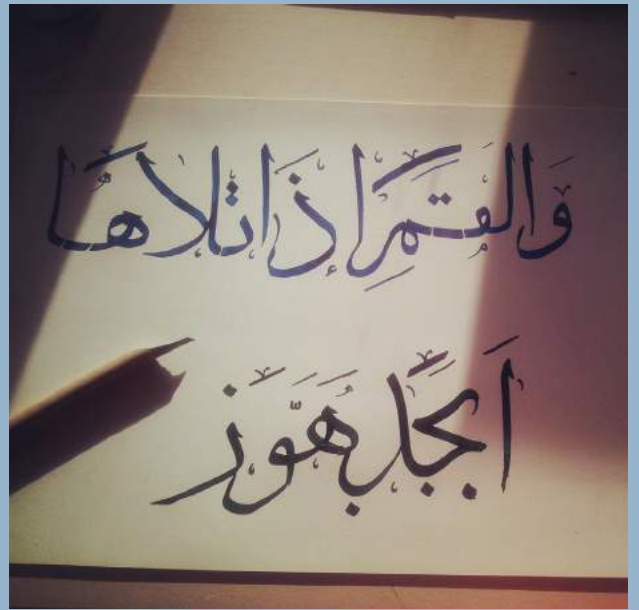
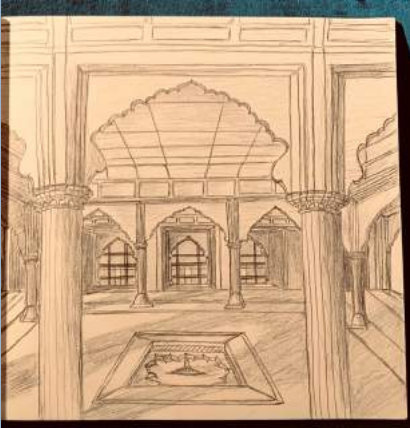
When Ramadan strolls in like it does every year,
there is an undeniable sweetness in the air
as neighbours who don't often speak
share food and joy
and the sun waves goodbye.

Despite pangs of hunger,
we keep our calmness
and only speak to each other
with a pure heart
in order to please Allah.

We submerge our Emaan
in a fountain of Ibadah
each day
and feel as though
we have been made anew
as we are
finally fulfilling our purpose.

It is a time where families come together,
barakah swarms homes
and wreaths of laughter fill our full stomachs at
iftar.

Oh, Ramadan is ever so dear to me as it is the re-
vival of the best version of me and the Ummah.



Amna Anwar, visiting student

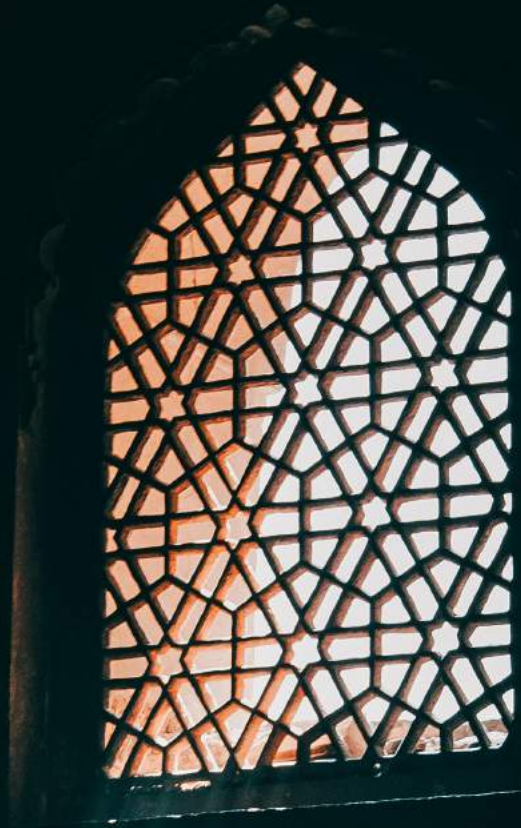
Zuhaira Islam, St Peter's College



Bahira Malik, Queen's College



Amy Russell, Oxford Brookes



Ghazal

Each night we die a death that lasts but hours
As prayer's embrace leads us sweetly into peace
Yet this death is not forever long
For the adhan will soon stroke our ears

Revived, we thought we'd never died
But only slept a while
And then one day (be it near or far)
Those who loved and prayed will smile

For they knew that life was but a dream
A step from dust to bliss
As we arise to face our deeds
And our Beloved's wine-stained lips

So fear not death, go gently into that dark night
For there and then will you taste life

Rohan Kaya
St Catherine's College



The Comfort Zone

Noor Qurashi, Oriel College

Scouring papers
Give up summer
Morning sky shows white and grey
Work is still
Like birds in nesting
Chirping on an August day

Stretch across
The wood oak desk—
A glint of sunlight warms the room
Coffee soft and linen fresh
And much the same remains 'til noon

House is light
Now venture out
But only
Climbing down the stairs
With beige-y curtains
Pillows white
Sweet scent of roses everywhere

Just here to think
To contemplate—life's virtues—
Nothing less or more
No work or danger fills my plate
Just food and water on the floor

Well not quite bored
But almost there
Now longing for the world outside—
I'll sniff the air walk out that door
And know the summer has arrived

Though visit back
That dainty house
For now just stay put standing here
With whiskers chic
And tail so sleek
This world replete with choice and fear

Photo by Aaliyah Natha



Aaliyah Natha, Exeter College

Cryptogram

Aaliyah Natha

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M

N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z

19 12 10 25 16 17 6 20 24 8 13 5 8 6 2 12

19 13 8 9 17 2 24 5

25 5 23 24 21 18 26 13 17 26 4 13 8 17

26 20 25 12 10 17 20 19 13



OXFORD UNIVERSITY ISLAMIC SOCIETY

Committee 2022/23

Everyone on committee is always eager to talk to you and help you with any questions or concerns you may have, so please don't hesitate to contact us.



Imad Ahmed
Brothers' Vice President



Zuhaira Islam
President



Aaliyah Natha
Sisters' Vice President



Zainab Bhamji
Secretary



Kaamil Kaba
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Muhsin Ahmed
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Sisters' W.O.S.



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Riazul Rahman
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Islamic Awareness Officer



Bahira Malak
Politics Officer



Iza Basharat
Student Affairs Officer



Rafiah Niha
Access Director



Ayscha Adam
Alumni Officer



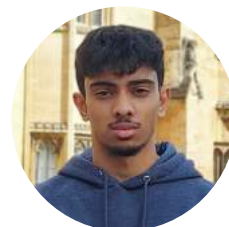
Beheshta Harghandiwal
Community Officer



Hibah Hassan
Graduate Academic



Mahirah Rahman
Tech & Comms Officer



Kamrul Ahsan
Media & Design Officer

رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

“Our Lord! Accept (this) from us.
Indeed! You are the Hearing, the Knowing.”



IKHLAAS

The OUISoc Magazine



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-  [Oxford University Islamic Society](https://www.youtube.com/OxfordUniversityIslamicSociety)