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Islamic Concept of Brotherhood and Its Relevance for Reducing Social Polarization: A Contextual Analysis for Pakistan

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Abstract

Social polarization—marked by deepening divisions along ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, political, and economic lines—poses a formidable challenge to national cohesion in Pakistan. In this context, the Islamic concept of ukhuwwah (brotherhood) offers a profound ethical and spiritual framework capable of fostering unity, mutual respect, and social harmony. Rooted in the Qur'an, Sunnah, and centuries of Islamic ethical thought, ukhuwwah transcends kinship and tribal affiliations to establish a universal bond among believers grounded in shared faith, moral responsibility, and collective welfare. This article explores the theological foundations of Islamic brotherhood, examines its historical manifestations in early Muslim society, and critically analyzes its potential to mitigate contemporary forms of social fragmentation in Pakistan. Drawing upon classical Islamic sources and contemporary scholarly interpretations, the paper argues that a conscious revival and contextual application of ukhuwwah can serve as a unifying force that strengthens national identity, promotes social justice, and counters the divisive narratives that fuel polarization. The study concludes with

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practical recommendations for integrating the ethos of Islamic brotherhood into educational curricula, public discourse, and community initiatives to cultivate a more cohesive and resilient Pakistani society.

Keywords: Islamic Brotherhood, Ukhuwwah, Social Polarization, National Cohesion, Pakistan, Qur'an, Sunnah, Social Justice

Introduction

Pakistan, since its inception in 1947, has grappled with the complex task of forging a unified national identity amidst immense ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity. While the foundational vision of Pakistan emphasized unity among Muslims of the subcontinent under the banner of Islam, the post-independence trajectory has witnessed the emergence of deep social fissures. These include tensions between provinces, disparities between urban and rural populations, class-based inequities, and political polarization exacerbated by identity-based mobilization. In recent decades, the rise of digital media and the proliferation of extremist ideologies have further intensified societal fragmentation, threatening the very fabric of national solidarity.

In this milieu, the Islamic concept of *ukhuwwah*—or brotherhood—emerges not merely as a theological ideal but as a potent socio-ethical resource for healing divisions and fostering inclusive solidarity. Unlike secular notions of citizenship that often remain abstract, Islamic brotherhood is rooted in a divinely ordained covenant that binds believers through mutual love, responsibility, and compassion. The Qur'an explicitly declares, "Indeed, the believers are but brothers", establishing a foundational principle that transcends parochial loyalties. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) further institutionalized this principle through practical measures, most notably the *Mu'ākhāt* (brotherhood

Published:
March 29, 2025

pact) between the Muhājirūn (emigrants from Mecca) and the Anṣār (helpers from Medina), which transformed a nascent and vulnerable community into a cohesive and resilient ummah.

This article contends that a deliberate and contextual reinvigoration of ukhuwwah can serve as a powerful antidote to the forces of social polarization in contemporary Pakistan. By foregrounding shared Islamic identity over divisive sub-identities, promoting empathy across socio-economic divides, and emphasizing collective responsibility for justice and welfare, the ethos of brotherhood offers a pathway toward national reconciliation and unity. The paper proceeds in four parts: first, it delineates the scriptural and prophetic foundations of Islamic brotherhood; second, it examines its historical application in early Islamic society; third, it analyzes the manifestations and drivers of social polarization in Pakistan; and fourth, it proposes a framework for leveraging ukhuwwah as a unifying force in the Pakistani context. Throughout, the discussion remains grounded in authentic Islamic sources and aligned with the constitutional and ethical values of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

I. Scriptural and Prophetic Foundations of Islamic Brotherhood

The concept of brotherhood in Islam is not a metaphorical or aspirational ideal but a divinely mandated reality with concrete ethical and social implications. Its primary source is the Qur'an, which repeatedly emphasizes the unity and mutual obligation of believers. The most explicit articulation appears in Surah al-Ḥujurāt: "O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames... Indeed, the believers are but brothers, so make

Published:
March 29, 2025

reconciliation between your brothers and fear Allah that you may receive mercy”¹
This verse not only affirms the ontological brotherhood of all believers but also prescribes active reconciliation (iṣlāḥ) as a religious duty. The command to “fear Allah” underscores that violating this brotherhood is not merely a social transgression but a spiritual failing.

Beyond this foundational verse, the Qur’an consistently frames the Muslim community as a single body. In Surah Āl ‘Imrān, it states: “And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided”.²

The “rope of Allah” is widely interpreted by classical exegetes as the Qur’an and the unity it commands. Division (furqah) is thus presented as a deviation from divine guidance. Similarly, Surah al-Anfāl declares: “And remember the favor of Allah upon you—when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers”.³

This verse highlights divine agency in forging unity among previously hostile groups, suggesting that brotherhood is both a gift and a responsibility.

The Prophetic tradition further elaborates and operationalizes this Qur’anic vision. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, “A believer to another believer is like a building whose different parts enforce each other”⁴

A metaphor that underscores interdependence and structural solidarity. In another hadith, he stated, “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”⁵

This principle of empathetic reciprocity forms the ethical core of Islamic brotherhood, demanding that one’s concern for others mirror one’s concern for oneself.

Perhaps the most significant practical manifestation of this ideal occurred shortly

after the Hijrah (migration to Medina). Recognizing the vulnerability of the Muhājirūn, who had left their homes and wealth in Mecca, the Prophet established a formal pact of brotherhood between them and the Anṣār of Medina. Each Muhājir was paired with an Anṣārī brother, who shared his home, wealth, and resources. This was not a symbolic gesture but a radical socio-economic reorganization that dissolved tribal and geographic barriers in favor of a new, faith-based solidarity. The Prophet himself declared, “The believers, in their mutual kindness, compassion, and sympathy, are like one body: if one part feels pain, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever.”⁶

This organic metaphor encapsulates the holistic nature of Islamic brotherhood—where the suffering of any member is felt by all, and collective well-being is inseparable from individual welfare.

Classical Islamic scholars have consistently emphasized the centrality of ukhuwwah to the faith. Al-Ghazālī, in his *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, devotes extensive discussion to the rights of Muslims over one another, framing brotherhood as a prerequisite for genuine faith.⁷ Ibn Taymiyyah, in his *al-Ṣiyāsah al-Shar‘iyyah*, argues that the unity of the ummah is a divine objective (*maqṣad shar‘ī*) that must be safeguarded through justice, consultation, and mutual support.⁸

These scholarly traditions affirm that Islamic brotherhood is not passive goodwill but an active commitment to justice, dignity, and collective flourishing.

II. Historical Manifestations of Brotherhood in Early Islamic Society

The early Islamic community under the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Rightly Guided Caliphs provides a compelling historical model of how the principle of ukhuwwah can transform a fragmented society into a cohesive and just polity. Prior to Islam, Arabian society was deeply tribal, with loyalty

Published:
March 29, 2025

confined to kinship groups and inter-tribal conflict endemic. The advent of Islam introduced a revolutionary redefinition of social bonds, replacing ‘aṣabiyyah (tribal partisanship) with ukhuwwah islāmiyyah (Islamic brotherhood).

The Mu’ākhāt between the Muhājirūn and Anṣār stands as the paradigmatic example. When the Prophet paired Sa’d ibn al-Rabī‘, a prominent Anṣārī, with ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn ‘Awf, a Muhājir, Sa’d immediately offered to divide his wealth and even one of his wives with his new brother. Though ‘Abd al-Raḥmān declined the offer of a wife, he accepted guidance to the marketplace, where he soon prospered through trade.⁹

This episode illustrates not only generosity but also respect for dignity—the Anṣār offered support without condescension, and the Muhājirūn accepted it while striving for self-reliance. The brotherhood pact thus functioned as both a safety net and a catalyst for empowerment.

This spirit of solidarity extended beyond material support to include political and judicial equality. The Constitution of Medina, drafted by the Prophet shortly after his arrival, established a pluralistic civic framework in which Muslims, Jews, and other groups were bound by mutual rights and obligations.¹⁰

While recognizing religious differences, the document emphasized collective security and dispute resolution through shared mechanisms, reflecting the Islamic principle that justice (‘adl) is a universal imperative. Within the Muslim community, decisions were made through shūrā (consultation), ensuring that leadership was responsive to the needs of all, not just the elite.

Under the caliphate of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the ethos of brotherhood was institutionalized through policies of social welfare and equitable distribution. The Bayt al-Māl (public treasury) collected zakāh and other revenues

not as state wealth but as a trust (amānah) to be distributed to the poor, orphans, travelers, and other categories specified in the Qur'an. ¹¹

Caliph 'Umar famously declared, "If a dog dies of hunger on the banks of the Euphrates, I will be responsible for it," ¹²

Epitomizing the leader's accountability to the weakest members of society. This sense of collective responsibility prevented the emergence of extreme inequality and fostered a culture of mutual care.

Historically, the Islamic civilization that emerged from this foundation became a beacon of pluralism and intellectual exchange. From Cordoba to Baghdad, Muslim societies integrated diverse ethnic and cultural groups under a shared ethical framework that valued knowledge, justice, and compassion. While not without internal conflicts, the overarching ideal of ukhuwwah provided a resilient moral compass that continually called the community back to unity and fairness. This historical legacy demonstrates that Islamic brotherhood is not utopian but a practical and scalable model for social cohesion.

III. Social Polarization in Contemporary Pakistan: Manifestations and Drivers

Despite its Islamic identity and constitutional commitment to Islamic principles, Pakistan faces acute challenges of social polarization that undermine national unity and development. These divisions manifest along multiple axes—ethnic, linguistic, provincial, economic, and political—and are exacerbated by structural inequities, historical grievances, and contemporary discourses.

Ethno-linguistic tensions have been a persistent feature of Pakistan's political landscape. The 1971 secession of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was rooted in the marginalization of Bengali language and culture. Although the 1973

Published:
March 29, 2025

Constitution recognizes Urdu as the national language and English as the official language, regional languages such as Sindhi, Pashto, Punjabi, and Balochi continue to be sources of identity and, at times, contention. Provincial autonomy remains a sensitive issue, with smaller provinces often perceive Punjab as dominant in political and economic spheres. The National Finance Commission (NFC) awards, intended to ensure equitable resource distribution, are frequently contested, reflecting underlying mistrust. ¹³

Economic polarization is equally stark. Pakistan ranks among the countries with the highest levels of income inequality in South Asia. ¹⁴

The top 10% of households control nearly 30% of national income, while the bottom 40% struggle with poverty and limited access to education, healthcare, and justice. ¹⁵ This economic disparity fuels resentment and social fragmentation, as marginalized communities perceive the state and elite as indifferent to their plight. Urban-rural divides further compound these inequities, with rural populations often excluded from decision-making and development initiatives.

Political polarization has intensified in recent years, driven by partisan media, social media echo chambers, and identity-based mobilization. Political discourse increasingly frames opponents not as legitimate adversaries but as existential threats, eroding the norms of democratic engagement. The rise of populist rhetoric often exploits ethnic or regional identities to consolidate support, deepening societal cleavages. ¹⁶

Moreover, the legacy of military interventions and weak democratic institutions has fostered a culture of distrust in state mechanisms, pushing citizens toward sub-national or sectarian affiliations for security and belonging.

Digital media, while offering unprecedented connectivity, has also become a

Published:
March 29, 2025

vector for polarization. Algorithms prioritize sensational and divisive content, amplifying hate speech, misinformation, and conspiracy theories. Online spaces often replicate and intensify offline divisions, creating parallel realities where mutual understanding becomes impossible.¹⁷

The absence of robust digital literacy and ethical media frameworks exacerbates this trend.

Underlying these manifestations is a crisis of shared identity. While Islam was the ideological basis for Pakistan's creation, its interpretation and application in public life remain contested. In the absence of a unifying national narrative that integrates Islamic ethics with civic responsibility, citizens increasingly anchor their identities in narrower affiliations—be it tribe, ethnicity, or political party. This fragmentation weakens the social contract and impedes collective action on national challenges such as climate change, public health, and economic reform.

IV. Islamic Brotherhood as a Framework for Reducing Polarization in Pakistan

Given these challenges, the Islamic concept of *ukhuwwah* offers a compelling framework for rebuilding social cohesion in Pakistan. Unlike secular models that may struggle to resonate with a predominantly Muslim population, *ukhuwwah* speaks directly to the spiritual and ethical sensibilities of Pakistanis. Its revival, however, requires more than rhetorical invocation; it demands a conscious reorientation of individual attitudes, institutional practices, and public discourse.

A. Reclaiming Shared Identity through Faith

At its core, *ukhuwwah* provides a supra-ethnic, supra-linguistic identity that can transcend parochial loyalties. The Qur'anic declaration that “the believers are but brothers” establishes a bond that is deeper than blood or geography. In the

Published:
March 29, 2025

Pakistani context, this means that a Punjabi and a Baloch, a Sindhi and a Pashtun, are first and foremost brothers in faith, with mutual rights and responsibilities that supersede provincial or ethnic affiliations. Emphasizing this shared identity in religious sermons, educational curricula, and media narratives can help counter the “othering” that fuels inter-provincial tensions.

The Prophet’s Mu’ākhāt offers a powerful historical precedent. Just as the Muhājirūn and Anṣār overcame their Meccan-Medinan differences through a covenant of brotherhood, Pakistanis can forge new bonds across regional lines. Community initiatives that pair youth from different provinces for joint service projects, cultural exchanges, or vocational training can embody this spirit in contemporary terms. Such programs would not erase regional identities but situate them within a larger framework of Islamic solidarity.

B. Promoting Economic Justice and Mutual Responsibility

Islamic brotherhood entails concrete economic obligations. The institution of zakāh, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is not merely a charitable act but a mechanism for redistributing wealth and ensuring social equity. The Qur’an specifies eight categories of recipients, including the poor, the indebted, and those “whose hearts are to be reconciled” a category that historically included those new to Islam or marginalized groups needing integration.¹⁸

In Pakistan, where zakāh collection is partially institutionalized but often lacks transparency and impact, there is immense potential to revitalize this system as a tool for reducing economic polarization.

Beyond zakāh, the broader Islamic ethic of mutual support (ta’āwun) calls for proactive solidarity. The Prophet’s saying, “The upper hand is better than the lower hand” (i.e., giving is better than receiving),¹⁹

Published:
March 29, 2025

Encourages self-reliance alongside generosity. In practice, this could be translated into community-based microfinance schemes, cooperative enterprises, and skills development programs that empower the poor while fostering interdependence. Islamic finance principles, which prohibit interest (ribā) and emphasize risk-sharing, can also be leveraged to create more inclusive economic models.

C. Fostering Ethical Public Discourse and Media Responsibility

The Qur’anic injunction against mockery, slander, and offensive nicknames is profoundly relevant in today’s polarized media environment. Islamic brotherhood demands that public discourse—whether in parliament, newsrooms, or social media—be conducted with adab (etiquette), truthfulness, and respect for the dignity of others. Religious scholars, journalists, and influencers have a critical role in modeling this ethic and condemning hate speech in all its forms.

Educational institutions can integrate adab al-ikhtilāf (ethics of disagreement) into their curricula, teaching students how to engage with differing viewpoints constructively. The classical Islamic tradition offers rich resources in this regard, with scholars like al-Shāfi‘ī emphasizing that differences of opinion should not lead to enmity.²⁰

In the Pakistani context, promoting such values can help depolarize political and social debates, creating space for dialogue and consensus-building.

D. Strengthening Civic Engagement through Community Institutions

Mosques, madrasahs, and civil society organizations are pivotal sites for cultivating the ethos of ukhuwwah. Historically, mosques served not only as places of worship but as centers for education, dispute resolution, and social welfare. Reviving this multifunctional role can transform local communities into hubs of solidarity. For example, mosque committees could coordinate zakāh

Published:
March 29, 2025

distribution, organize interfaith iftars during Ramadan, or facilitate mediation in local conflicts.

Similarly, madrasahs—which educate millions of Pakistani children—can play a constructive role by emphasizing the Qur’anic values of unity, justice, and compassion over narrow doctrinal interpretations. Integrating civic education and critical thinking into their curricula would equip students to navigate a pluralistic society with confidence and empathy.

E. Leadership and State Responsibility

Finally, the state has a crucial role in embodying and promoting Islamic brotherhood. The Prophet’s leadership was characterized by justice, accessibility, and concern for the vulnerable. Pakistani leaders—political, bureaucratic, and judicial—must internalize this model, ensuring that policies and institutions reflect the Islamic imperative of equity and inclusion. This includes equitable resource allocation through the NFC, protection of minority rights as guaranteed by the Constitution, and impartial enforcement of the law.

The state can also support civil society initiatives that promote inter-provincial harmony, such as national youth camps, cultural festivals, and scholarship programs for students from marginalized regions. By aligning state action with Islamic ethical principles, Pakistan can move toward a model of governance that is both authentically Islamic and effectively unifying.

Conclusion

Social polarization in Pakistan is not an insurmountable fate but a challenge that can be addressed through a return to foundational Islamic values. The concept of *ukhuwwah*, with its emphasis on shared identity, mutual responsibility, and compassionate solidarity, offers a comprehensive framework for healing divisions

and building a more cohesive society. This is not a call for religious uniformity but for ethical unity—a recognition that our common humanity and shared faith obligate us to treat one another with dignity, justice, and care.

The historical example of the early Muslim community demonstrates that such unity is achievable even in contexts of deep fragmentation. By drawing inspiration from the Mu'ākhāt of Medina, the welfare policies of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the ethical teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah, Pakistan can forge a new social contract grounded in Islamic brotherhood. This requires concerted efforts from individuals, communities, religious institutions, civil society, and the state.

As Pakistan navigates the complexities of the 21st century, the revival of ukhuwwah is not merely a religious ideal but a pragmatic necessity. In a world increasingly defined by division, Pakistan has the opportunity to model an alternative path—one where faith becomes a bridge rather than a barrier, and where the bonds of brotherhood strengthen the foundations of the nation. The Qur'anic promise remains: “And if you disbelieve, indeed, Allah is Free from need of you. And He does not approve for His servant's disbelief. And if you are grateful, He approves it for you”. Gratitude, in this context, is expressed not through ritual alone but through the active cultivation of unity, justice, and compassion among all citizens of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

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⁵ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book 2, Hadith 12.

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Published:
March 29, 2025

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