

# Rajab & the concept of *isti'dād*

## What is *isti'dād*?

In our flawless religion, all acts of righteousness (*birr*) are valued and rewarded. The act can be huge or small, hidden or public - Allāh knows about them all and rewards us accordingly. Additionally however, the *preparation* for that act is also extremely important. Our Lord does not only reward the actual act, He also recompenses us for anything that we do in order to prepare for it. This preparation is called *isti'dād* in Arabic.

Why is the preparation for an act of righteousness so important? Firstly, it is so we attach importance and value to the act we are about to perform. Secondly, it is so the act in question does not become mundane and without purpose. Allāh always wants us to understand why we are doing what we are doing.

## Examples of *isti'dād*

i. *Salāh* is the embodiment of Islam. It is the ascent of a believer. Because it is so important, Allāh has also placed lots of preparation beforehand, so that we truly value *salāh* and understand its significant. So this preparation happens in the form of ablution (*wudū*), the *niyya* (intention) ensuring one's clothes and place of worship are clean and one is facing the correct direction (*qibla*). All of this is *isti'dād* for *salāh*. The preparation for it adds value to the actual act and makes it more meaningful and impactful.

ii. When we take flights to different cities and countries, the process is very straightforward. However, a journey to the Holy Sanctuaries requires spiritual preparation (*isti'dād*). One cannot enter the sacred land in Makka without the *ihrām* attire. This is a means of preparing us and ensuring we understand the importance of the place we are privileged to be visiting.

iii. With the chosen men of Allāh, the idea of *isti'dād* features strongly. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was first given the revelation at the age of forty in Cave Hirā. Prior to this, his regular seclusion (*khalwa*) at the mountain was preparation for this momentous moment.<sup>1</sup> During his youth and just before his miraculous Night Journey (*al-Isrā wa'l Mi'rāj*), the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) was subject to a spiritual procedure called *shaqq sadr* (splitting of the chest). The scholars state that this was to prepare him to receive divine revelation (*wahy*) and with the Night Journey, to prepare him to ascend to *Sidra al-Muntahā* and beyond.

When Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) was granted the unique honour of conversing with Allāh, his Lord ensured he was prepared for it first. So Allāh told him to sit in seclusion for forty days before this divine encounter (7: 142). Similarly, when he entered the sacred valley, Prophet Mūsā (peace be upon him) was told to "remove your shoes" (20: 12). This was *isti'dād*.

## The preparation for Ramadān

The idea of *isti'dād* certainly applies to the blessed month of Ramadān. Allāh and His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) have stressed the need to prepare for it. In fact, perhaps there is no period for which we need to prepare for more than Ramadān. After all, this is the month

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<sup>1</sup> *Sahīh al-Bukhārī, kitāb bad' al-wahy*

of mercy, forgiveness and emancipation from the Hell-Fire. In light of this, preparation begins in Rajab, two months beforehand.

When one reflects on the Prophet's (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) guidance on Rajab, one cannot help but feel he was ultimately preparing us for Ramadān. Consider the following points to support this view:

- i. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) famously prayed for Rajab, requesting *baraka*:

اللهم بَارِكْ لَنَا فِي رَجَبٍ وَشَعْبَانَ وَبَلِّغْنَا رَمَضَانَ

O Allāh! Provide us blessings (*baraka*) in Rajab and Sha'bān and enable us to reach Ramadān.

Please note how he (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) included Ramadān in this supplication, and in fact suggested this was the real purpose and goal (*and enable us to reach Ramadān*).

- ii. In a famous ḥadīth sharīf, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) declared Rajab as 'Allāh's month':

رَجَبُ شَهْرِ اللَّهِ وَشَعْبَانُ شَهْرِي وَرَمَضَانُ شَهْرُ أُمَّتِي

Rajab is the month of Allāh, Sha'bān is my month and Ramaḍān is the month of my Ummah.

Again, he (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) implicitly suggested all three months intertwine with one another.

- iii. Anas ibn Mālik (may Allāh be pleased with him) states that it is reported the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

‘Indeed there is a river in Paradise called Rajab. Its water is whiter than milk and more sweeter than honey. Whosoever keeps a [voluntary] fast for Allāh's sake in this month [of Rajab], then Allāh will enable him to drink from it.<sup>2</sup>

This report indicates that fasting is encouraged during Rajab. Similarly, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) encouraged optional fasts in Sha'bān. The fasting will prepare a Muslim for the golden period of Ramadān.

- iv. Shaykh Abd al-Qādir Jilānī (may Allāh be pleased with him) was reported to have said that months and years are like trees. The spring season of the trees is Rajab, it bears fruit during Sha'bān and the fruits are harvested during Ramadān. This supports the idea that Rajab and Sha'bān are in reality the preparation for Ramadān.

### *Layla al-Qadr* and its *isti'dād*

All of these points therefore suggest that Ramadān needs *isti'dād*, and this *isti'dād* starts in Rajab. And then there are strong suggestions that the month of Ramadān - though highly prized and beyond value itself - is really a preparation for the Night of *Qadr*.

*Layla al-Qadr* for Muslims is the most important night in the year. It is the night when so many angels descend to earth that the land becomes restricted for them. It is the night which is better than a thousand months. It is a night so important that it warrants a separate *sūrah* in the Qur'ān extolling its virtues. From the detailed works of *sūfi* scholars, one is left in no doubt that this night holds a very special rank.

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<sup>2</sup> *Shu'ab al-Īmān*.

Owing to its unparalleled importance, the night of *Qadr* needs *isti'dād* beforehand. This *isti'dād* is the month of *Ramādān*, a time of sincerity, hunger, crushing the ego, *Qur'ānic* recitation, acts of generosity and prostrations to *Allāh*. The countless acts of worship we do in *Ramādān* is in essence a preparation for our soul to acknowledge, experience and thrive on this auspicious night.

## What happens when there is no *isti'dād*?

When an act of righteousness has no real *isti'dād* beforehand, it lacks value, sweetness and *baraka*. In some cases, the act will not even count. For instance, if one does not prepare for *salāh* in the correct manner (in the form of *wudū*), it simply does not count.

This point is important because in an increasingly fast-moving, swift world, people spend less and less time on *isti'dād*, or prefer to confront the act without it completely. As a result, they are getting little or no benefit from the act:

i. *Jumu'a* has little or no *isti'dād* from us today. As a result, it does not have the desired effect on us. The reality is that the Messenger (peace and blessings of *Allāh* be upon him) stressed that *jumu'a* requires the *most* preparation in the form of (i) having a bath on this day (ii) wearing one's cleanest clothes (iii) applying perfume (iv) applying oil to the hair (v) removing unwanted hair and trimming nails (vi) attending the mosque early (vii) reciting *sūrah al-kahf* (viii) reciting *salawāt* in abundance. It is unfortunate to note that increasingly, many Muslims merely attend the mosque for two *rak'ats* on Friday now, with little or no *isti'dād* for it beforehand. As a result, *jumu'a* is in danger of losing its value in our hearts.

ii. *Ilm* (knowledge) has become too accessible today. Thanks to the internet and smartphone, one can learn at anytime and anywhere. But this now means there is little emphasis on preparing for seeking knowledge, so it is losing its inherent value. There was a time when one could only learn the Islamic sciences by leaving home, enrolling in a *dar al-ulum* and facing severe hardship on the way. Now, one can access the sciences sitting comfortably at home. But this now lessens the value of what is being taught.

iii. *Ramādān* preparations begin too late in our communities. As a result, the first week or so is spent getting into the spiritual mindset for this blessed month. We begin feeling the blessings of the month half way through it. But before we know it, we are preparing for *Eid*. Then we complain the month has passed 'too fast'. These sentiments are an indication of little or no preparation beforehand. In short, we prepare for *Ramādān* on the first of *Ramādān*. Our Messenger (peace and blessings of *Allāh* be upon him) wanted us to prepare for it on the first of *Rajab*.

iv. In the pursuit of *ihsān* - when you worship *Allāh* as if you are observing Him - is our *salāh* comparable to that of our pious predecessors? In terms of humility, can we even compare ourselves to the previous generation of Muslims? Perhaps the reason is *isti'dād*; that previous Muslims took the preparation for worship very seriously. They acted upon the *sunna* of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of *Allāh* be upon him), who demanded an excellent ablution at all times.<sup>3</sup> They knew the huge reward for waiting in the mosque for the next *salāh*, and thus would attend the mosque well

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<sup>3</sup> Many *ahādīth* which mention the superiority of particular types of *nawāfil* (such as the two units in *Masjid Quba*) distinctly mention *wudū*; and not just *wudū* but "whoever performs an excellent *wudū* and then comes to the masjid..." (this wording is found in many *ahādīth*). This shows that it is not just that the *isti'dād* which is required from us, but a thorough one to the best of one's ability.

in advance, sometimes hours beforehand.<sup>4</sup> They understood that an incomplete *isti'dād* could heavily impact the actual worship and indeed the worship of those around them.<sup>5</sup> If we complain today of a lack of sweetness (*halāwa*) in our *salāh*, then perhaps we need to prepare for it more thoughtfully.

## Conclusion

We often hear the phrase 'fail to prepare; prepare to fail'. Certainly, this is the case with Islamic worships and acts of righteousness. Our desire for a swift life means we are often cutting corners. The purpose of this article is to remind Muslims the amazing benefits in doing acts with full *isti'dād*, and not taking shortcuts.

The concept of *isti'dād* relates closely to two other great teachings in our religion; *niyya* and *itqān*. The Four Great Imams - in particular Imām al-Shāfi'ī - placed considerable emphasis on having the correct intention before any act of worship. In essence, the *niyya* is the spiritual *isti'dād*, the process of emptying the heart of everything but Allāh before one pursues the act of *birr*. *Itqān* means to do things perfectly. It is the hallmark of Allāh's creations, "Who perfected all things perfectly" (27: 88). In our work, we can only achieve this lofty status via *isti'dād*.

Rajab is the first real alarm bell for the advent of Ramadān. If one can remember this, then it is at least a step towards more sweetness in our righteous acts. It is however still very far behind the Companions (may Allāh be pleased with him) of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). In a famous report, we are told that six months before Ramadān started, the Companions would pray for Ramadān. Then once it had finished, they would supplicate for the next six months praying to Allāh for the acceptance of their acts during it.

May Allāh enable us to perform acts of righteousness with full preparation and sincerity, *āmin*.

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<sup>4</sup> Abū Hurayrah (may Allāh be pleased with him) reported that the Messenger of Allāh said, "Should I not direct you to something by which Allāh obliterates the sins and elevates (your) ranks." They said: "Yes, O Messenger of Allāh". He said, "Performing *wudū'* properly, even in difficulty, frequently going to the mosque, and waiting eagerly for the next *salāh* (prayer) after a *salāh* is over; indeed, that is *al-ribāt*" (*Sahīh Muslim*).

<sup>5</sup> Shabīb ibn Abī Rawh reported on the authority of one of the Companions that the Messenger prayed *ḥajr* and recited Sūrah al-Rūm, but became confused about it. When he finished the prayer he said: "What is the matter with people who pray along with us without performing the purification properly? It is only those who cause us confusion about the Qur'ān" (*Mishkāt al-Masābīh*, Book of Purification). We learn from this report that when proper *isti'dād* is not done for worship, it can affect everyone's worship.