

Martial Arts, Masculinity and Muhammad

by Nisar Shaikh

THE CURRENT POPULARITY OF MARTIAL ARTS

What connects Khabib Nurmagomedov with the city of Sialkot in northern Pakistan and Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE? There is an unseen yet common thread shared by the renowned Dagestani fighter and these two contrasting cities—something nobody would have guessed.

The Muslim 500 2022 edition saw the introduction of a chapter on Muslim Olympians for the first time, highlighting the growing number of Muslim medallists, their nationalities, and respective sports. Interestingly, 67% of these Olympians medalled at the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics in martial arts.¹ This observation mirrors the increasing popularity of MMA and its associated martial forms, namely Boxing, Muay Thai kick boxing, Freestyle and Greco-Roman styles of wrestling, Sambo, Judo and Jiu-jitsu, and has garnered more followers and practitioners than each of these arts have accrued individually over the last three decades. There also appears to be a noteworthy correlation between increased viewership in MMA—with the top three being Muslim majority countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey²—and the highest purchased pay-per-view UFC event in history, UFC229 in 2018.³ At 2.4 million purchases, the event was headlined with a championship bout between an Irishman and a Muslim mixed martial artist. With the number of Muslims engaging in sports on the rise, it seems pertinent to ask: what value does martial arts have in Islam—if any?

Following an intense training session at the renowned Carlson Gracie Team London headquarters in Hammersmith, the conversation between the students and instructors is often heightened by the natural endorphins a tough Jiu-jitsu session releases. All manner of discussion takes place on the wet tatami mats as the humid steam begins to settle from the live

sparring just moments before. It's no holds barred, with the brown and black belts claiming authority in all manner of topics—from politics to religion, nutrition to sex advice—as their more 'naïve' white belts listen on eagerly.

On one particular evening, the conversation was unusually refreshing and nuanced, with a debate on the most valuable contributions to the world of grappling in the 21st century. One instructor, presumably aware that I discuss and write on grappling from an Islamic perspective, said abruptly, "Nothing more than a call to arms, Nisar. Getting ready for that 'holy war', eh?"

I was saddened by yet fully expecting such a narrow-minded, bigoted comment. I batted back that the contributions of Muslim individuals and nations were significant, positive, and far-reaching. I remarked how ridiculous and prejudiced he sounded by suggesting that the Muslim contribution to and interest in martial arts is solely rooted in an apparent "call to arms", when he stood there dressed head to toe in a Jiu-jitsu Gi, belt, rash guard and spats all manufactured in Sialkot, Pakistan.³ Or the fact that Khabib, who he praised as "his favourite MMA fighter", was a practising Muslim and not just "a Russian". Or that what he deemed the "best grappling comp in the world" was indeed founded by a particularly competent Muslim grappler in the UAE.

Among the eighteen sons of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan (b.1918-d.2004)—statesman, philanthropist, and first president of the United Arab Emirates—two of them, namely, Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed, a highly skilled Jiu-jitsu practitioner, and his older brother, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed, the current president of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi, are credited with the creation of the two major grappling revolutions of the 21st century.

Firstly, through the introduction of what is considered the most prestigious international submission

1 There are eight martial arts at the Olympics: Archery, boxing, fencing, judo, karate, taekwondo, freestyle wrestling, and Greco-Roman wrestling.

2 UFC Viewership Statistics - <https://www.mmahive.com/ufc-viewership-statistics/#:~:text=million%20of%20revenue.,How%20Many%20MMA%20Fans%20Are%20There%20In%20The%20World%3F,7%25%20of%20the%20global%20population>

3 Sialkot is the 13th most populous city in Pakistan. Since 2017, Sialkot has enjoyed renown as a central manufacturing and exporting hub of the Indian Subcontinent, exporting an average of \$3 billion per annum, about 10% of Pakistan's total exports. The city is known as the world's largest producer of combat apparel, producing items from MMA gloves, punch bags and mitts to Jiu-jitsu Gis, wrestling singlets and compression rashguards. Often the sole supplier for major global combat federations, organisations, and events, bespoke and custom designed combat clothing is churned out en masse to meet the huge demand of practitioners around the world. Undoubtedly an impressive contribution to the world of combat sports from a Muslim country.

wrestling⁴ competition, ADCC Submission Fighting World Championships, a grappling competition held every two years, in which professional grapplers of every conceivable grappling style compete amongst each other in what can be considered the “Olympics of Submission Wrestling”. Secondly, through the instituting of Jiu-jitsu, a ground grappling style identical to *newaza* found in Judo, into all schools within the UAE since 2008, in which the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) adopted Jiu-jitsu in the curriculum of public schools.⁵ There are now more than 76,000 students participating in Jiu-jitsu, with regular competitions throughout the year.

Along with the valuable contributions of a developing Muslim nation by clothing the world in combat apparel, and soon after the founding of possibly the greatest grappling competition on earth, comes an unlikely hero from a troubled land. The great-grandson of Muhammad Nur, who assisted the great Imam Shamil (the Dagestani Muslim spiritual and military leader who resisted Imperial Russia’s attempts to annex the Northern Caucasus region in the 1800s), is a courageous fighter, whose legendary rearing as a child included wrestling bears, swimming in the icy rivers of Dagestan and training with elite fighters “until they, and not he, became exhausted and could no longer continue”.

Khabib Nurmagomedov, an undefeated Mixed Martial artist whose dominating and “smashing” style against the best of the world’s fighters, whose humble demeanour and simple post-fight discussions filled with “Alhamdulillah” and “InshaAllah” and unabashed Muslimness provided the Ummah, for perhaps the first time since the great boxing legend Muhammad Ali, a truly pious and endearing role model. For many Muslims, he provides a living example of someone who embodies martial skill yet is wholly committed to his faith, family values and the Prophetic way. Known for his 29-0 undefeated MMA world record, he revived in many not only a return to the Prophetic art of wrestling on the mats, but also provided a model of conduct in the face of racist and anti-Muslim bigotry off the mats. His advocacy of the removal of ring girls in event promotions, extensive charitable work, and desire to give back to his country not only showcased his principled manner,

but challenged the stereotypical image of arrogant, tattooed fighters and caffeine-fuelled drama MMA viewers have become accustomed to.

Far from the suspicions of “radicalisation” laid upon young Muslims who take up physical training,⁶ we are witnessing a far-reaching revival of the martial arts amongst Muslims. From the high velocity throws of Judo, the lightning body slams of Greco-Roman wrestling to the speedy scrambles of freestyle wrestling and the devastating locks of Jiu-jitsu, the Western world is slowly witnessing a growing dominance of Muslim martial artists. But is this something new?

MARTIAL ARTS IN MUSLIM CULTURES

There is a slight amnesia amongst Muslims relating to the martial arts of our pious predecessors. We must not and should not forget the important figure of the Prophet ﷺ; that amongst his many roles as an educator, statesman, spiritual leader, father, and husband, he ﷺ was also indeed a warrior. The Prophet ﷺ was a man of unparalleled martial prowess, with tremendous combative skill and great physical strength. He was a swordsman par excellence, adept in spear fighting, able to tame and ride the wildest of Arabian stallions, taken to archery and a master grappler. Amongst his many miracles are recorded feats of strength, wrestling, and overcoming the strongest men of his time in multiple bouts, his ability to dismantle rock boulders during military excavations and swiftly traversing the desert with walking strides that left his more youthful companions exhausted, watching on as the earth would seemingly fold up for him ﷺ.

His bravery in battle was exemplary; when in the most intense moments of combat his companions took shield behind the Prophet ﷺ himself. Amongst the most courageous and capable companions, his own cousin, Ali ﷺ said “When the situation grew hot, fearfully intense and the fighting fierce, we sought protection behind the Messenger of God ﷺ. None was closer to the enemy than he. I saw him ﷺ on the Day of Badr when we were keeping close to him, and he was the closest to the enemy. He was the bravest person that day.”⁷ Abdullah Ibn Umar ﷺ said “I never saw anyone more courageous,

4 Differs in rules and victory criteria from conventional freestyle or Greco Roman wrestling which are primarily concerned with taking down one’s opponent and pinning their shoulders to the mat. The aim of Submission Wrestling is to end the match by applying a joint lock or choke hold to one’s opponent and forcing them to submit.

5 <https://sportsjournal.io/youth/introduction-to-uae-jiu-jitsu-school-program/>

6 Suhaimyah Manzoor Khan, *Tangled in Terror: Uprooting Islamophobia* (Pluto Press, 2022)

7 Ibn Hanbal, an-Nasai, at-Tabarani, al-Bayhaqi, Muslim has part of it (taken from Qadi Iyad’s *As-Shifa*, p.60)



"The Wrestling Master Is Challenged By His Pupil"
by Mahmud Muzahhib, Bukhara (AH 968/1560-61 AD)

intrepid, generous or pleasing than the Messenger of God ﷺ.⁸ This warriorhood was finely tempered and balanced in his noble person ﷺ; never excessive nor lacking, maintaining the epitome of chivalry and a perfect disposition as a fighter.

Grappling, the wider genre of the more specific art of wrestling, was amongst the dominant martial arts of the Arabs, considered the “King of Sports” and extensively used in unarmed combat at the time of the Prophet ﷺ. Bouts would involve grappling to pin one’s opponent’s shoulders on the ground, and forcing them out of the designated arena with a single or multiple number of falls constituting victory.

With wrestling being the staple of mainly young men across Islamic civilisation, the histories of the various caliphates and Muslim empires are littered with legends of grappling. The Abbasid caliph Amin al-Rashid was known as a man of physical strength and combat who famously wrestled a lion. Years later, the Buyid caliph al-Mustakfi organised wrestling tournaments that were held in public squares along with swimming races in the Tigris River. The Buwayhid, Mu’izz al-Dawla at Baghdad hosted regular grappling bouts:

Wrestling matches of the 4th/10th century held at the bidding of the Buwayhid Mu’izz al-Dawla at Baghdad present a remarkable scene. On the day of the Wrestling competition a tree was set up in the race-course (*maydan*) with prizes containing valuable things hanging thereon and purses of dirhams were also placed at the feet of the tree. The contest continued for hours and the winners received rewards and robes of honour from Mu’izz al-Dawla.⁹

The men and women around the Prophet ﷺ were undoubtedly people given to martial conduct. They led difficult lives of poverty, conflict and confrontation, but maintained a stoic discipline to traditional martial training that not only readied them for war but also elevated their worship to their Creator.

Upon seeing some of the Companions preoccupied in shooting arrows and having not offered their obligatory prayer, another Companion asked the Prophet ﷺ whether it would not

be better for them to pray instead. To this, the Messenger of God ﷺ replied,

“Their busying themselves with the bow is as if it were part of the prayer...”¹⁰

IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE OF GRAPPLING FOR MUSLIMS

It seems the ‘Eagle’s’ hopeful and timely arrival into the MMA world ruffled a few feathers in the face of what many perceive as the crisis of modern Muslim masculinity. In a recent publication, *Futuwwah and Raising Males into Sacred Manhood*, the notable scholar Imam Dawud Walid penned an Islamically-embedded solution to this problem, first by establishing what he perceives as the main issues surrounding a type of Muslim emasculation:

[There are] an endless array of young men embroiled in ‘arousal addiction;’ instead of undergoing the difficulty of carrying familial and societal responsibilities, men are now content to just engross themselves in endless hours of pornography and video-game addiction. Why bear the nagging of a spouse and the crying of babies when sexual arousal without all that ‘baggage’ is available? This problem has been exacerbated further by the current pandemic with men flocking to social media platforms like OnlyFans for companionship at ever-increasing rates. Suicides, dropping out from education and occupations, increasing rates of obesity, pursuit of criminal activity in gangs, and illegal drug use are many ways in which men in the West, and the East to a lesser degree, are crying out for help.¹¹

This resonates with my own observations as a martial arts instructor, having spent the last ten years teaching grappling within a growing mosque and instructing in Muslim-concentrated communities around the UK. I have had countless encounters with young Muslim men who appear sadly emaculated, immature, and blindly chase vain pursuits. The compound effect of the entrenched racism and Islamophobia prevalent in the UK,¹² anti-Muslim sentiment and negative portrayal in national media

8 Ad-Darami (taken from Qadi Iyad’s *As-Shifa*, p.59)

9 Nisar Shaikh, *Prophetic Grappling* (Beacon Books, 2022)

10 Ibid, p.16

11 Dawud Walid, *Futuwwah and Raising Males into Sacred Manhood* (Imam Ghazali Institute, 2022)

12 Suhaimyah Manzoor-Khan, *Tangled in Terror—Uprooting Islamophobia* (Pluto Press 2022)

along with the disabling effects of pornography and social media addiction, has resulted in a generation of Muslims feeling disenfranchised and disabled. It has become clear to me that one conducive solution would be to combine physical training with an awareness of mental and spiritual rectification.

Whilst “smothering” by well-intentioned mothers has certainly proven to exacerbate this ‘failure to launch’, fathers must also re-evaluate what values and example they are setting to their children. It seems the appearance of the Imam at the Friday prayer—often overweight, sedentary, and seemingly only giving lip service to the Sunnah—is enough hypocrisy for the youth to “check out” of this religion. The rigours of grappling, an emphatic practice of the Messenger of God ﷺ and his Companions, provides a wholesome means to train the entire body, with functional movements strengthening each joint and a cardiovascular workout that is unrivalled.

Grappling, a language of the physical, is like the “verb”, in that it is very much a *doing* art. It inherently teaches the practitioner through a theatrical yet completely improvised live contest (sparring) how to move, what to do and when to do it. A cerebral conversation takes place between the practitioner and his opponent, which after years of sparring, tactile touch, feeling and a deep exploration of the exponential combative situation results in a mastery of the craft, and to some extent yourself.

The grappling arts only but drive intentionality on the part of its proponent, only right action will garner the desired outcome.¹³

In a strange metamorphosis, we witness a positive transformation take place in the young man who may have once walked with a lack of confidence, indecisive in every action or disabled through irresponsibility, but now through the practice of grappling is capable, confident and knows the need to act. Or perhaps it was that arrogated bully, who mistreated the women in his home, showed disrespect to those around him through a false sense of self, that after being continually humbled by much smaller or apparently less capable opponents was forced to concede, check his ego and self-reflect.

There is much to be gained from a physical art that helps to unearth the unsavoury elements within us,

brings about a closeness to true causation, continually challenges the ego and even draws us near to our own mortality.

Nothing is more real in our existence than closely experiencing or contemplating its end. Death is the great leveller, the most certain of matters, the ‘destroyer of pleasures’. And yet it is this closeness of death that compels us to truly live.¹⁴

And once bitten by “the grappling bug”, the practitioner is then further drawn into a wholesome landscape of self-improvement—abstaining from processed junk food, meticulousness in developing one’s strength and conditioning, disciplined immersion in the techniques and drills of a noble art—all of which provide healthy alternatives to modern addictions, substance abuse and indecent habits.

That which inspires one to pursue his highest self, losing himself and human weakness along the way, through complete immersion in a medium; when one cannot be distracted by the world because he has created his own; a more vivid, real existence in the expression of himself through his chosen pursuit.¹⁵

Earnest application of any given Prophetic practice, from daily acts of prayer, personal cleanliness, distribution of wealth or physical activity, with a sincere intention promotes it to the realm of the sacred. It is through this sacredness that hidden wisdoms are revealed, and its practice sustained. It seems one of the wisdoms behind the practice of the Prophetic art of grappling is to provide not only a physical elevation of self, but a sacred and metaphysical elevation.

REFINEMENT OF SELF, REPLACING VICE WITH VIRTUE

Upon looking at his noble person in a mirror, the Messenger of God ﷺ supplicated “*Praise be to God. O God, as you have beautified my form, beautify my character.*”¹⁶ This acknowledgement of the waning of physical attributes and intrinsic connection to one’s character and conduct provides us a subtle indication of perhaps a greater import in the way Muslims participate in sport.

¹³ Nisar Shaikh, *Microcosm on the Mats* (Unpublished)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Chris Matakas, *On Jiu-jitsu* (Build the Fire Publishing, 2017)

¹⁶ *Kitab al Athkar*—Imam Nawawi

It is my contention that such physical disciplines of the Messenger of God ﷺ, when practised conscientiously, with a noble intention and observing one's conduct, can reveal knowledge of self and specifically an awareness of the propensities of the self (*Amrad al-Qulub*). It can serve as a valuable tool in unearthing those unbecoming vices and base inclinations which manifest in the face of true adversity or have remained hidden for years, and immediately turning thereafter to God's guidance and the Prophetic tradition for the remedy.

It would be remiss of us to believe that such physical practices in and of themselves would rid us of these spiritual maladies, of which Islamic scholars contend are at least twenty-five in number.¹⁷

The Day of Judgement is described as, "The day when neither wealth nor children will benefit, save one who comes with a sound heart."¹⁸ A sound heart, free of spiritual defects and blemishes of character, is what our Lord calls us to. This was the principal understanding of the third and final part of the famous hadith of Gibril: "Excellence is to worship God as if you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He surely sees you." (Muslim)

The spiritual heart (as opposed to the physical one) is one acknowledged by nearly all religious traditions. Islam's great libraries are filled with volumes upon volumes written by true masters of the self who articulated the symptomatic features of the sick spiritual heart, the subtleties of each sickness and their remedies through the Quran and the Prophetic way. Ridding oneself of miserliness, envy, ostentation, vanity, covetousness, or anger for instance, requires a degree of concerted study of their signs, symptoms and remedies from the Book of God, Prophetic traditions, and the company of the Righteous. They are subtle and the degree to which one may possess them (or more importantly, remove them) can become more and more granular.

Equally, personal experience has shown me, that alongside the conceptual understanding of these maladies and the observation of the masters of the heart (*Ulama al-Qulub*), there is certainly an unveiling of them through the traditional martial arts. I recall my own experience training in the dojo and how vanity (*'ujb*), or the pursuit of a physical form proved useless in the face of true mastery and skill. The ostentatious posturing (*riya*) on the mats and the bouts of boastfulness (*fakbr*) were unbecoming and in fact, led to an arrogance (*kibr*) and leaving of the martial art in the face of inevitably not being able to fulfil one's brags. As sufficient time passes and knowledge increases a type of miserliness (*bukhl*) sets in, with the self wanting to withhold knowledge of techniques and their consequences. Covetousness in seeking leadership (*sum'a*) is quelled through the demonstration of true authority and deep knowledge of an instructor over superficiality in training. Or maybe a more honest regulation of the deep-seated anger (*ghadab*) remaining uncontrollable within you which is only crushed through true provocation in the dojo. Or even the regular exposure to something that resembled death that led to a relinquishing of the love of the material (*hubb ad-dunya*) and a recognition of the pointless nature of excessively lengthy hopes (*tiil al-amal*) through continual, albeit temporary, exposure to semblances of death and dying found in submission wrestling.

Whilst the reasons for the popularity of martial arts in recent times are numerous, I suspect that the "addiction" of many to the grappling arts, for Muslims and others, is closely tied to this unveiling of the self, an opportunity to rectify those vices and the hope for a sound heart.

"The mats are honest, even if you're not."

Nisar Shaikh is an avid grappler, having trained extensively in Jiu-jitsu and cross trained in freestyle and Greco-style Wrestling, Judo and Sambo. He holds a 2nd Degree Black Belt in Jiu-jitsu under the Carlson Gracie Team London and has been instructing all levels, from professional MMA fighters to children, for over twenty years. He has also authored *Prophetic Grappling*, a short publication on the history of grappling in the Islamic world and the Objectives of Sports in Islam.

¹⁷ Hamza Yusuf, *Purification of the Heart* (Starlatch Press, 2004)

¹⁸ Ash-Shura-26:88/89