

Kindness to Parents: A Driver for Excellence?

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How do we engender excellence? Malcolm Gladwell popularised the notion of a “Tipping Point” – little things that make a big difference and move to a point where the social phenomenon gains traction that is virus-like – it becomes deeply infectious. However, what are the things we should be driving to the tipping point in an Islamic system of governance where excellence, or *ihsān*, is a key requirement? The Qurʾānic narrative on *ihsān* emphasises kindness to parents. A field-based study of ‘Operational *Ihsān*’ amongst pre-recognised top tier educators in Brunei’s public schooling system strongly affirms and heightens this component of the Qurʾānic narrative. These discoveries, both Qurʾānic and lived, manifest a simple, but deeply implicative promise – fostering kindness to parents may be an untapped well from which to feed excellence. This paper explores why this might be the case, and what the implications of such an understanding for policy design and delivery, whether at the governmental or organisational level.

Keywords: Excellence, *ihsān*, Islamic management, Qurʾānic analysis, educators

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“Verily Allah has prescribed *ihsān* in every matter.”¹

Much of contemporary governance agendas concerns itself with improving the lot of citizens. However, these agendas often lack excellence in delivery – scholarship on public policy implementation shows that, whilst well-intentioned, policies often struggle to meet the mark.² Muslim states carry added responsibility because by design, the vision and range of improvement and success lies not only in this life, but the afterlife too. Add in a requisite dimension for excellence (*ihsān*) in such delivery to citizens, as the portion of the opening hadīth implies, and the order becomes that much taller. Compounding all this, are challenges in complexities of context. Current narratives regarding the demands placed on states, and entities within them, paints a picture of uncertainty, pace and complexity, so much so, that the acronym, VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), has become commonplace. Case in point - Harvard Business Review, in 2014, labelled it a “trendy managerial acronym”^{3,4} and more recently, a Forbes article describes how the term was borne from students at the US Army College to describe the post-Cold War globe, offering the requirements to become a “Quantum Company”⁵ – i.e. an entity able to effectively deal with such volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous conditions. Unfortunately, when VUCA is the dominant narrative of what characterises present day contexts, alternative narratives may well be ignored, or unwelcome. And further, the prescriptions for dealing with issues of policy and

¹ A portion of a full hadith related in Abu Zakariyyah Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, “Riyāḍ Al-Saliḥin – A Translation and Commentary”, Ed. Moulana Afzal, Hadith 640, vol. 2, Johannesburg: Muslims at Work Publications, 2014

² Mark Bovens, Paul ‘t Hart, “Revisiting the Study of Policy Failures”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, no. 23, vol. 5, 2016, pp. 653-666

³ Nathan Bennett and James Lemoine, “What VUCA Really Means for You”, *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 92, no. 1, Jan/Feb 2014, available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2389563>

⁴ Sunnie Giles, “How VUCA is Reshaping the Business Environment and what it means for Innovation”, *Forbes Magazine*, accessed 29 November 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sunniegiles/2018/05/09/how-vuca-is-reshaping-the-business-environment-and-what-it-means-for-innovation/#10dac1faeb8d>

improvement, naturally becomes locked into such a characterisation of context.

The purpose of this paper is not to necessarily dispute the description of current contexts, but to posit the possibility of a different narrative – that perhaps VUCA is the result of the straying from very basic principles that bring calm and certainty to an unpredictable world. In particular, this paper does three things. First, it briefly considers Malcolm Gladwell's "Tipping Point" as an alternative to the VUCA narrative.¹ Secondly, it considers the implications of such an alternative narrative in an Islamic system of governance (ISG), drawing on doctoral research on a new concept called "Operational *Ihsān*" to develop insights for excellent delivery in Islamic Governance context.² In this second aim, the paper chooses to pay particular attention to the role of kindness to parents as a facilitator of excellence. And finally, it considers and offers what such insights may mean for states, organisations and individuals in Islamic Governance contexts, particularly those concerned with developing excellence in delivery and tipping to a new norm.

Gladwell, The Tipping Point and Crossovers

Main Ideas

The idea behind the tipping point is uncomplicated – small changes in critical dimensions can make a big difference and move a social phenomenon (or products or ideas) to a point where it gains traction that is virus-like – it becomes deeply infectious. As a storyteller, Gladwell's evidence is anecdotal and he relays story after story, each a case study, that demonstrates this idea of a tipping point – or what he calls "social

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference", Boston: Little, Brown, 2000

² Doctoral study being undertaken by the author at the Institute of Policy Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

epidemics”.¹ Three pertinent themes and rules of social change emerge from his work:

1. A “world that follows the law of epidemics” challenges deeply held assumptions of how change happens, and in a particular, there is a need to be attuned to seeing, and creating, contagiousness. More critically, he claims there is a need to abandon the “expectation about proportionality” seemingly engrained in us. As Gladwell suggests – “we need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly”.²
2. Social Epidemics follow three rules:
 - i. The law of the few – it is only necessary to tap into a few of the right make-up of people to make an idea or concept take off and reach tipping point. These people are of three types - (a) mavens (people with deep and wide knowledge, but who accumulate such knowledge because they love to share and help others through this sharing); (b) connectors (people with “an instinctive and natural gift for making social connections”³ and thus know and are connected to more people on average, but are not motivated by gain in such social connections) and (c) salespeople (persons with traits that allow them to persuade people of the worthiness of an idea)
 - ii. The stickiness factor – there are specific ways in which a message can be communicated to a target audience to make it contagious, and, these ways are to be deliberately discovered if one is to create a social epidemic.
 - iii. The power of context – human beings are affected by the environment within which they take action and so to create a social epidem-

¹ Ibid., pp. 27

² Ibid., pp. 11

³ Ibid., pp. 43

ic, the context must be carefully examined and constructed to allow for ideas to move to tipping point.

3. And then finally, tipping points can be engineered and wilfully sought out, if one taps into the three rules of social epidemics.

Criticism

Gladwell's work has not been without criticism. The Tipping Point grew to popular acclaim when it was published almost 20 years ago, spending 5 years on bestsellers lists¹. The biggest criticism levelled at Gladwell, often from social science academics, is his "lack of rigour", despite being the recipient of an award "from the American Sociological Association for his excellence in 'disseminating sociological research' ".² Rather objectively, one critic, states that "there is plenty of reason to criticise Malcolm Gladwell, but you get the sense that his chief flaw is being popular"³. As Gladwell himself confesses, he is a "story-teller" using academic research to "augment story-telling" and this seems to earn him the chagrin of academics.⁴ That his theory of change challenges VUCA thinking, most likely exacerbates this. Gladwell also claims that, with respect to his work, "The mistake is to think these books are ends in themselves. My books are gateway drugs—they lead you to the hard stuff"⁵. In effect, what Gladwell offers are 'openings' – openings to think about events and change in an alternate manner. And this paper posits, that they present openings to alternative narratives about the nature of our world. What Gladwell misses, from an Islamic perspective, is that tipping may not only be because of the right people, the right context and the right presenta-

¹ Terry McDermott, "Criticism of Gladwell Reaches Tipping Point", *Columbia Journalism Review*, 17 Nov 2009, https://archives.cjr.org/the_observatory/criticism_of_gladwell_reaches.php, accessed November 2019

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eric J. Hollenberg, "Why You Shouldn't Trust Malcolm Gladwell", *The Harvard Crimson*, 7 August 2014, <https://www.thecrimson.com/column/behavioral-economist/article/2014/8/7/why-you-shouldnt-trust/>, accessed November 2019

⁵ Ibid.

tion. In the context of excellence, what if doing the best of 'right things' also matter?

Crossover and Conceptual Fit in a Muslim State

In an Islamic worldview, the idea of little things creating inexplicable, disproportionate change is quite palatable and arguably, lives in the social fabric of a Muslim State as the concept of "*barakah*", often translated as 'blessings'. Demirel and Sahib propose that *barakah*, after a study of the use of the word and its derivatives in the Qur'ān is "the proliferation in quality and quantity of the things material or otherwise by Allah via unseen ways to man encompassing his multi-dimensional avocations"¹. The authors also conclude, after further study of *barakah* as it presents in hadīth, that "... the teachings of the Prophet advise continuously increasing (good) deeds"² as a means to increase *barakah* and that sins are what decrease it³. In the context of excellence in delivery for Muslim States, the idea of *barakah* and tipping points therefore opens up new ways of thinking about effecting governance agendas that seek to improve outcomes. Yet, in an Islamic System of Governance (ISG), what does 'excellence' mean and what factors might tip it? To do this, the concept of *ihsān*, within an Islamic System of Governance, is explored next.

Excellence in Islamic Systems of Governance – Operational *Ihsān*

Islamic systems of governance (ISG's), in this paper, are defined as those systems which seek to, as its primary purpose, "create a society conducive to the worship of Allah", and has the *Maqāṣid* of the Sharī'ah as the five main objectives of the overall system – i.e. the preservation and promotion of faith, intellect, health, progeny and wealth.⁴ Furthermore, such

¹ Serdar Demirel, Hikmatullah Babu Sahib, "Concept of *Barakah* in Qur'ān and Sunnah: Towards its Realization in Modern Discourse", *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Spring, no. 5, 2015, pp. 261-284, pp. 270

² *Ibid.*, pp. 275

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 278

⁴ Amin Abdul Aziz, "Madinian Polity: Visions of Islamic Governance", Lecture, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam, 13 Jan 2018

systems are bounded by a matrix of *tauḥīd*, juristics, values and culture on the one hand and individuals, society and the state on the other, each node on this matrix encompassing sets of expectations of actors within the system.¹ Within these bounds, there is the added operational dynamic of delivering with excellence and most often, by numerous contemporary scholars, such ‘excellence’ has been deemed as the concept of “*iḥsān*”.²

A current doctoral study in the Institute of Policy Studies at the Universiti of Brunei Darussalam has as its purpose to understand *iḥsān* as an operational dynamic with an Islamic system of governance and to this end, has coined the term, Operational *iḥsān* (OI) – “*iḥsān* in the workplace”. The study, nearing completion at the time of this article, had 4 main aims – (1) to explore the concept of *iḥsān* as represented in the Qur’ān and Sunnah, (2) to develop a conceptual framework for Operational *iḥsān* (OI) in an ISG, (3) to animate and enrich the conceptual OI framework by examining examples of lived *iḥsān*, and finally (4) to formulate a guiding framework for the development of OI in workplaces. This paper will focus only on the insights gained from the first aim and third aim of this study to develop answers to the question of what, out of an array of good deeds, should be driven to tipping point for excellence in an ISG.

The Concept of *iḥsān* and Lived Expressions – Methodology, Methods and Procedures

In order to unpack what *iḥsān* could mean, particularly so in workplaces, the doctoral study took a deliberately indigenous stance to knowledge production³ and adopted a tauḥīdic approach to the work¹. What this

¹ Ibid.

² See the work of authors like Abbas J. Ali, Rafik Issa Beekun, Khaliq Ahmad and Rodrigue Fontaine, specific works mentioned in the bibliography

³ Indigenous Methodology is rooted in post-Colonial Theory and seeks to study concepts and phenomenon from (often) marginalised indigenous perspectives. See the works of Holtbrügge, Dirk. “Indigenous Management Research.” *Management International Review*, no. 53, 2013, pp. 1–11, and Peter Ping Li, “Toward an integrative framework of indigenous research: The geocentric implications of Yin-Yang Balance” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, no. 29, 2012, pp. 849–872

tauḥīdīc approach implies is that all 3 of the major constituents comprising an approach – the epistemology, the ontology and the axiology – conform to a principal stance – the Qurān and Sunnah of Rasullullah ﷺ are the primary sources of truth from which inspiration is drawn. Accordingly, when investigating the primary meaning and implications of *iḥsān*, the first port of call was the Qurān to build the concept epistemologically. To understand *iḥsān* ontologically, lived expressions of ‘excellence’ were engaged in a field study of in-depth interviews with excellent professionals. To assist the ontology, these lived expressions were understood through the Prophetic Sunnah, the primary lived expression of the Quran. The original study conducted in this manner was quite broad in its range of inquiry, but what is reported in this paper, is only one emergent theme relating to kindness to parents.

To systematically develop an understanding of the narrative of *iḥsān* as it presents in the Quran, a number of analytical strategies were deployed. Firstly, the word *iḥsān* was lexemically mapped on the basis of its root word - *ḥ s n* (ح س ن). The Quran was then mined for occurrences of both *iḥsān* and the root word derivatives. Both the Arabic and English translation were used for analysis. However, coding on themes were primarily done with the English translation.² For the verses on *iḥsān* in particular, multiple translations were assessed to establish whether any major differences existed, which, for the most part, they did not. With respect to *iḥsān*, the verses were analysed for the key actors in the verse, the injunctions around the word *iḥsān*, key associations with *iḥsān* and whether any themes presented. Verses around the verses of *iḥsān* were also studied,

¹ Not to be confused with Tawhidic methodology of Faruqi as detailed in: Hashim, Rosnani, Rossidy, Imron. “Islamization of Knowledge: A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptions of Al-Attas and Al-Faruqi.” *Intellectual Discourse* 8, No. 1, 2000, pp. 19-44

² The translations offered in this chapter are those of Pickthall’s. Other translations consulted were Sahih International, Yusuf Ali and Mohsin Khan. The website project run by the Language Research Group at the University of Leeds - corpus.quran.com was a primary resource in both translations and root word analysis.

where relevant, along with the exegesis of the verses.¹ This resulted in a first phase understanding of *ihsān*. This first phase understanding, the content of which is explained later, resulted in the formation of basic codes, or components of *ihsān*. These codes were used, in part, in the field study which comprised case studies of lived expressions of *ihsān*.

The Field Study:

Excellent Teachers in the Brunei Public Schooling System

In order to animate and enrich the Quranic narrative on *ihsān*, in-depth interviews with 'excellent' professionals were conducted to generate an understanding of lived *ihsān* or lived excellence, in a workplace setting. In particular, the opportunity to study excellent teachers arose. The doctoral study collaborated with the Brunei Ministry of Education (MoE) to conduct interviews with the best teachers in their public schooling system. The MoE kindly granted access to their teacher population for this research, on the premise that data from the study would be used for future recruitment and selection instruments.

As mentioned, for the interviews, the first phase codes of *ihsān* in the Quran, were worked into a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviews attempted to both explore these Quranic codes, but also to explore nuances and possible exclusions from the code list, as part of the aim of animation. One of the primary codes (explained later) that arose was 'kindness to parents'. The semi-structured questionnaire adopted a very open line of questioning regarding parents – either leading from a question on persons or events that influenced or shaped the professional, or their beliefs on the role of parents in their students' success, or sometimes rather directly, with a request to describe their relationship with their parents. Sometimes, no question needed to be asked, since teachers naturally raised their parents in the conversation.

¹ Two primary exegesis texts were used – the English translation of Tafsīr Ibn Kathir as listed in the bibliography along with Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdūdī's 'Tafīm al-Qur'ān'.

Sampling Procedures

A total of 35 teachers were interviewed, each interview lasting 1.5-2 hours. The teachers were selected using MoE criteria of excellence. The first of these was an MoE assessment tool called the TPA (Teaching Performance Appraisals). These appraisals are conducted regularly, either by senior administrators at the school – such as the principal, or by independent auditors from the MoE Inspectorate itself. The TPA is conducted with one or more assessors present in the classroom for observation with assessment in 3 areas – student achievement, student learning and teaching itself. The teaching component is derived from the Brunei Teachers Standard and has two major components – (1) professional knowledge and skill and (2) professional engagement, as shown below:

<p>Professional knowledge and skill:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage students in intellectually challenging learning • Base learning on well-designed content and methods • Suit work to students' individual needs • Use assessment and reporting effectively 	<p>Professional Engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt and refine professional practice • Demonstrate high standards of personal and professional conduct
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Table 1. Components of Professional Knowledge and Skill and Engagement in the TPA

In the above bands of evaluation, including student outcomes and classroom performance, teachers are rated on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being exceptional, 4 being excellent, 3 being good, 2 being satisfactory and 1 being unsatisfactory. In addition to TPA's, the MoE also recognises excellent teachers through its annual awards on National Teachers Day. Here, outstanding teachers are awarded either "Special Mention Awards" or an award of the highest merit, the "Excellent Teacher Award". The special mention awards are typically subject-based, whereas the excellent

teacher award is meant to be recognition of teaching effort that is more far-reaching. The details and criteria by which the awards are made, and recipients selected were not disclosed to the research team as these were deemed confidential. The fact that the TPA did not in any way measure the codes generated were not regarded as a limitation – the interviews were being used both inductively and deductively and the study operated under the premise that if a professional demonstrated some externally validated measure of excellence, there would likely be elements of *ihsān* in that.

Given these factors, a population of teachers who either had scores of TPA 5 (with or without an award), or TPA 4, along with a teaching award in the last 10 years, was generated. This resulted in a pool of 27 teachers who were available and willing to participate in the interview.¹ In snowball sample format, each of the initial 27 teachers was asked to recommend co-teachers they themselves regarded as excellent and whom they believed should be included in the study. Two candidates received multiple mentions and were selected for interview, bringing the interview sample set to 29. These two teachers had scores of TPA 4 but no recent awards. Further interviewing stopped after these two additional teachers as codes and insights were being saturated. However, at the request of the MoE, additional interviews of a different sample nature were conducted. This request transpired given that of the initial 27 teachers interviewed, the average age was close to 46.² As the MoE wished to use the data for a recruitment instrument, on typically younger candidates, code confirmation with a younger set of ‘excellent’ teachers was deemed necessary. This younger set of teachers was selected based on having a TPA 4, but with only 3 years of service in teaching. These interviews stopped after 6 in-

¹ The total pool was actually 35. Of these, 4 refused the interview, 2 had recently retired and returned to country of origin, 1 was on medical leave so unable to participate and 1 was located in a remote village and was excluded for logistic reasons

² Measured on 26 of the teachers – actual average 45.88. One teacher refused to disclose age but was at least the average since the teacher said their age was “close to 70”

interviews as codes were being confirmed and had become saturated. The average age in this younger pool of candidates was approximately 32.

The teachers interviewed were Bruneian and non-Bruneian, female and male, and Muslim and non-Muslim. In all instances, the interview population was predominantly Bruneian (33/35), female (30/35) and Muslim (25/35). Of the 10 non-Muslims, 4 identified as being Christian, 3 as Buddhist and the remaining 3 as “Free Thinkers”.¹ Whilst *iḥsān* is a uniquely Islamic concept, the non-Muslim teachers were also interviewed since in a tauḥīdīc approach, what is ‘good’ from an Islamic perspective is regarded as universally good given that the principles in the Qurʾān are universally applicable. In addition, as a study conducted to bring life to frameworks and enrich it, the non-Muslim experience in a Muslim State (Brunei) was deemed important. It should be noted here that since interviews were semi-structured, initial interviews were not as comprehensive as latter interviews, since new lines of questioning emerged as relevant to both Operational *Iḥsān* as a whole, and as it relates to parents. Post the interviews, each interview was in effect treated as a case study, where the presence, nuance and qualitative strength of the Quranic codes was established, along with cross case analysis to establish the emergence of new codes and/or ontological insight to Quranic codes.

Findings: *Iḥsān* in the Qurʾān

Iḥsān is mentioned 12 times in the Qurʾān, in 11 verses. 8 of the 11 verses are Madīnian verses and the remaining 3 are spread across the Makkan period. The verses in question are 83, 178 and 229 (Sūrah *al-Baqarah*), 36 and 62 (Sūrah *an-Nisā*), 151 (Sūrah *al-Aʿrāf*), 100 (Sūrah *at-Tawbah*), 90 (Sūrah *an-Nah*), 23 (Sūrah *ʾal-Isrāʾ*), 15 (Sūrah *al-Aḥqāf*), 60 (Sūrah *ar-Rahmān*, twice). These verses were analysed for the key theme they offered, whether any key actor was present and if a clear

¹ This was deemed to be agnostic given the conversations in the interviews, but the interviewees actual descriptions of their belief system were “free thinker”

message presented. The major themes uncovered, along with the prevalence of the themes, are shown graphically below:

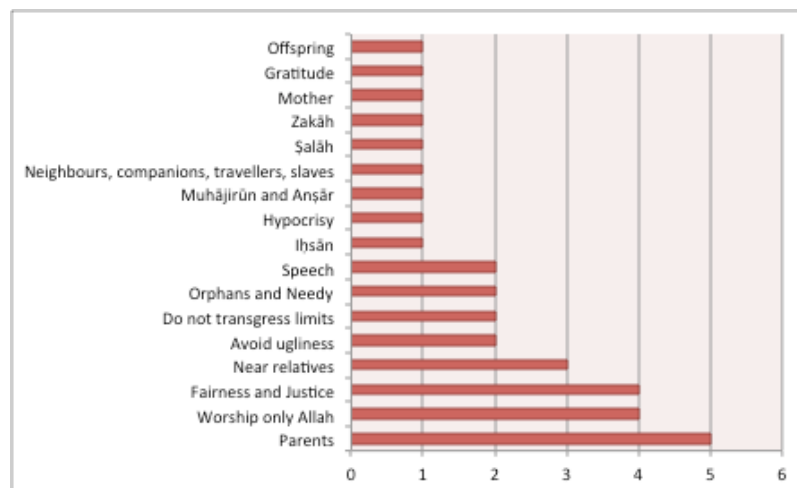


Figure 1.

Frequency of theme, actor or message in Qur'anic verses on *Ihsān*

As the graph shows, *ihsān* as a duty owed to parents is the most repeated message within the Qur'anic narrative on *ihsān*, appearing in 5 of the 11 verses on *ihsān*. In terms of frequency, *ihsān* to parents surpasses even the command to avoid *shirk* (ascribing partners to Allah) and worship Allah only. However, in all but one verse (15, Sūrah *al-ahqāf*), kindness to parents is always predicated by the command to worship Allah only and/or avoid *shirk*, pointing clearly to an anchoring in *tauḥīd*. Simultaneously, the gravity of *ihsān* (and *tauḥīd*), is coupled with strong words like “covenant” مِيثَاقٌ , “serve Allah” وَاعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ , “sacred duty” حَرَمَ رَبُّكُمْ and “decree” وَقَضَىٰ رَبُّكَ . The nature of the language associated with *ihsān* and the *tauḥīd* which precedes it, thus paints a scenario where *ihsān* is not merely a nicety, but a requirement from Allah, a “sacred duty”. The Qur'anic narrative also provides clues on what form this sacred duty is meant to take, as explained in what follows.

a) Awareness, gratitude, humility and speech

Of the 5 verses related to parents, two are Makkan and from the early pe-

riod of Islam, whilst the latter 3 are from the Madīnian period. In verse 15, Sūrah *al-ʾahqāf*, a Makkan verse, the mother is elevated with a special mention, and in this verse, there is mention of an age of ‘maturity’ of 40 years, whereupon the adherent is called to give thanks in *duā* (supplication), with a request for enduring favour for one’s own offspring, with a repentant disposition, in submission to Allah.

﴿ And We have commended unto man kindness toward parents. His mother beareth him with reluctance, and bringeth him forth with reluctance, and the bearing of him and the weaning of him is thirty months, till, when he attaineth full strength and reacheth forty years, he saith: My Lord! Arouse me that I may give thanks for the favour wherewith Thou hast favoured me and my parents, and that I may do right acceptable unto Thee. And be gracious unto me in the matter of my seed. Lo! I have turned unto Thee repentant, and lo! I am of those who surrender (unto Thee) ﴾

The ordered composition of this verse conjures up a sense that there may be a cumulative nature to *iḥsān* when coupled with (a) awareness of favours, (b) gratitude for it and (c) humility in it. This flow of actions is reiterated in a manner in verse 23, Sūrah *ʾal-Isrāʾ*, the other of the two Makkan verses related to parents, when the adherent is reminded to treat parents particularly well in old-age and to speak to them in a gracious manner – “*qawlan kareemah*”. In this instance, the beauty of *iḥsān* is to extend from action, to speech as well.

b) Parents and all others - being unselfish

The Madīnian verses (83, sūrah *al-Baqarah*, 36, sūrah *an-Nisā*, and 151, sūrah *al-ʾArʾam*) introduce a number of sub-themes alongside that of *tauḥīd* and parents. Verse 83, sūrah *al-Baqarah* and verse 36, sūrah *an-Nisā*, in particular highlight the other categories of people who are owed *iḥsān* after parents – near relatives, orphans, needy, neighbours (both re-

lated and not related), wayfarers, fellow travellers and slaves. The kindness embedded in belief and *ihsān* is thus to be demonstrated to wide range of people, from all walks of life, whether stranger or relative, whether one holds rank over them or not. In verse 83, sūrah *al-Baqarah*, specifically, the theme of goodness in speech to all of mankind, prompted earlier in the Makkan verse related to parents, once more appears as a reminder and injunction. What emerges clearly out of these verses is that *ihsān* is manifested not in the 'I', but the treatment of the 'other' – starting with parents, then relatives, then orphans and needy, then all of society. *Ihsān* is unselfish, the very basis of being kind.

c) Adherence, avoidance and vigilance

Alongside this kindness towards others, the parental *ihsān* verses also introduce themes of adherence, avoidance and vigilance. Adherence to the pillars of *ṣalah* and *zakah*; avoidance of slaying of children; all things lewd and disliked by Allah; taking of life except in the course of justice and finally; vigilance in maintaining these duties - with a reminder of previous nations' backsliding - and vigilance against pride and boastfulness. In the messages around vigilance, the narrative of awareness, reflective gratitude and humility are once more brought to the fore, albeit in a manner that highlights the opposite being aware, grateful and humble.

'Parents' in the Qur'ān

The prominence of *ihsān* and its association with parents, prompted a deeper look into the narrative of parents in the Qur'ān as a whole. Inclusive of the verses on *ihsān* and parents, the word 'parents' (using the triliteral roots ٠ ٠ ٠) is mentioned in the Qur'ān 22 times.¹ These verses were similarly analysed for key themes presented in the verses and this is

¹ The verses referred to here are: 83, 180 and 215 (sūrah *al-Baqarah*), 7, 33, 36 and 135 (sūrah *an-Nisā*), 151 (sūrah *al-An'am*), 23 (sūrah *al-Isrā'*), 32 (sūrah *Maryam*), 33 (sūrah *Luqmān*), 3 (sūrah *al-Balad*), 41 (sūrah *Ibrāhīm*), 14 (sūrah *Maryam*), 19 (sūrah *an-Naml*), 8 (sūrah *al-Ankabūt*), 14 (sūrah *Luqmān*), 15 and 17 (sūrah *al-'ahqāf*), 71:28 (sūrah *Nūh*), 233 (sūrah *al-Baqarah*), 110 (sūrah *al-Mā'idah*). It should be noted that searching on the mentioned tri-literal roots will result in verses referring to both parents and children – as these nouns share the same root – but the verses here are those referring to parents only, whether the verse refers to one or both parents

shown graphically in what follows:

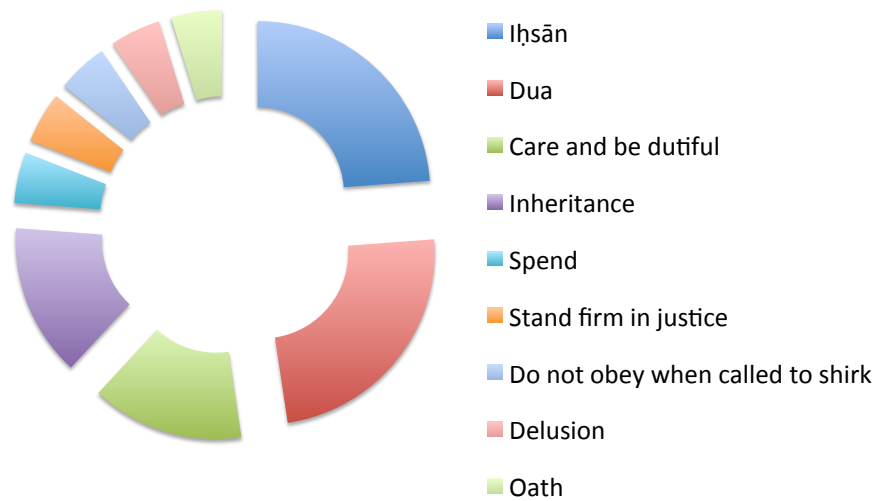


Figure 2. Themes around 'parents' in the Qur'an

As might be expected, *ihsān* as a duty to parents features significantly in the parental narrative in the Qur'an. *Ihsān* and care is balanced by a sanction to obedience to parents only in so far as it does not impede *tauḥīd*, or, justice – two of the big themes in the *ihsān* verses as well. Just dealings, and adhering to Allah's law with respect to inheritance on the passing of a parent or child, features prominently alongside this. Similarly, as *duā* (supplication) presents itself in the *ihsān* verse of 15, Sūrah *al-ʾahqāf*, the practice of *duā* is amplified in the parental narrative of the Qur'an, often conducted by the Prophets of Allah (alayhimus salām) themselves.¹ Underpinning these *adʿiyah* (pl of *duā*) are themes of gratitude toward Allah and parents, inclusion of progeny and all believers in these prayers and a desire for righteous deeds (thereby increasing Allah's favour). Interestingly, in two of the three verses on care and duty – 14 and 32, Sūrah *Maryam* – such dutifulness towards parents is contrasted with tyranny and oppression, creating strong images of opposing ways of being – one is either kind and dutiful, or tyrannical and oppres-

¹ Specifically, verses 41 (sūrah 'Ibrāhīm), 19 (sūrah *an-Naml*) and 28 (sūrah Nūh)

sive. The summative narrative, of both parental *ihsān* and parents in the Qurʾān, is most holistically captured within a mini-narrative in Sūrah Luqmān, in verses 12-19, which includes the third verse on being dutiful. In these 9 verses, in advices to his son, Sayyidina Luqmān conveys the importance of *tauhīd*, duty to parents, with gratitude, only in so far as *tauhīd* is not breached, but even then with kindness, upholding the daily prayers, executing good and denying evil with patience, protecting against pride and contemptuousness towards people, and being gentle and mild in speech.

In summary, the verses on parents and *ihsān* clearly highlights that *ihsān* is predicated upon *tauhīd*; is a sacred duty to parents foremost; followed by relatives, orphans, the needy, neighbours, wayfarers and fellow travellers and slaves. Such *ihsān* is to extend to one's speech with parents, particularly in old age, and in speech to all of mankind. In addition, practicing *ihsān* is coupled to avoidance of what displeases Allah, of upholding other duties like *ṣalāh* and *zakāh* and finally, that there is vigilance in *ihsān* – those who practice it, and the duties alongside it, need to guard against backsliding, valuing awareness of it, gratitude for it and humility in it, over pride and boastfulness in it, or because of it. Overall, the verses on *ihsān* clearly elevate the action of *ihsān* to parents as an outlier and in the context of a tipping points, certainly peaks interest. It is nonetheless only marginally elevated compared with fairness and justice and the avoidance of shirk – calling into question whether it is truly an outlier and therefore, strong candidate for actions to drive to tipping point. It is however, in the third aim of the doctoral study, where lived *ihsān* was investigated, that *ihsān* as kindness to parents really came to the fore, particularly as a candidate for the best of good deeds.

Findings: Kindness to Parents

The code of kindness to parents was strongly affirmed in the interviews, along with the associated themes of gratitude, humility and unselfishness. The vast majority of the interviewed teachers related narratives of strong and enduring relationships with both parents, in some instances, a

stronger bond with either the mother or the father. These teachers were all Bruneian and comprised Muslims and non-Muslims. Some of the teachers - a mixed category of Bruneians and non-Bruneians, Muslims and non-Muslims, expressed strained or distant relationships with their parents. However, in each of these instances, it was observed that these teachers still spoke with great respect and kindness about their parents, despite difficulties. There were no traces of bitterness or malice, and if anything, a quiet resilience and acceptance. These teachers appeared to deliberately improve their own parental practice so that their own children could enjoy the positive parental experiences they never had. They turned a less than positive parental experience into something positive for their progeny, and, this determination even appeared to spill over into the classroom.

For those teachers who expressed positive sentiment regarding their parents - some pointed to their parents as sources of inspiration, with a fair amount having had at least one parent who was a teacher. All of them spoke about their parents with reverence and respect, and most often, it was at this point in the interviews that some of the candidates could not hold back tears. This was a subject quite close to many interviewed teachers' hearts and their emotions in the moment demonstrated this. Of the most striking features of the interviews, was that most of these teachers, irrespective of where they sat in the age hierarchy in their family, seemed to carry some form of extra responsibility in care for their parents, and very often, appeared to be the 'child of choice' when it came to co-habitation. These were teachers who quite naturally took up the mantle of care for parents in old age and it appeared, quite strongly, that these 'excellent' teachers were not only excelling in their profession, they were excelling in the care of their parents too. This was a feature of these 'excellent' teachers that was particularly amplified amongst the younger, early-career teachers interviewed, and interestingly, these younger excellent teachers also demonstrated a strongly amplified outlook that their work was a form of devotion to the Creator – much more so than the older set.

This theme of excellent educators often being the ‘child of choice’ and both extending and excelling themselves in the care of their parents, emerged as an unexpected, outlier theme from the overall study. It consequently secured the suspicion of the Qur’ānic analysis that there was something out of the ordinary regarding the good deed of excellent treatment of parents. Ultimately, it engendered the hypothesis - could fostering kindness to parents, as the apparent roots of a tree of *iḥsān*, allow for trees to bear fruit that surpassed all others? To engage this question, the original source of lived expressions of *iḥsān*, the Sunnah, as encapsulated in the Hadīth was explored.

Sense-Making: *Iḥsān* and Hadīth on Parents

In the tauḥīdic approach, the Sunnah (as encapsulated in the hadīth) is regarded as a corpus of lived expressions of Qur’ānic concepts. The hadīth on parents, and *iḥsān*, as it relates to the findings on excellent teachers and their parents, were thus used to help with sense-making of these findings, in conjunction with the Qur’ānic narrative. In particular, the Sunnah was engaged to understand how or why excelling in treatment to parents (*iḥsān*) could be linked to excelling in other spheres of life (operational *iḥsān*). This engagement then also necessitated understanding the overall narrative of *iḥsān* as it presented in the hadīth.

***Iḥsān* in Hadīth and The Multiplier Effect**

There are only 2 hadīth that speak directly about *iḥsān*. The first of these is mentioned in the opening of this paper - where Rasūlullāh ﷺ advises that “*iḥsān* is prescribed in all things” and the second is the Hadīth of Jibril, which describes the three stages of Muslim development— Islam, *īmān* and *iḥsān*.¹ Sequentially, *iḥsān* becomes the pinnacle of all Muslim action – “to worship Allah as though you can see him and if you cannot

¹ Abu Zakariyyah Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, “Riyāḍ Al-Ṣāliḥīn – A Translation and Commentary”, Ed. Moulana Afzal Ismail, Hadīth 60, vol. 1, Johannesburg: Muslims at Work Publications, 2014. Other narrations of this same hadith sometimes have a different order – Iman is placed ahead of Islam, but *iḥsān* is always the third in the order.

visualise this, then know that He is watching you”.¹ These hadith imply that (a) *ihsān*'s application is far-reaching – it is meant to be practiced in every sphere of existence and (b) that it demands a mental presence in executing tasks, with an awareness of service to Allah, Most High, in that task. It is particularly in the latter, that there is a natural ‘check and balance’ to one’s actions – if work is done sincerely for Allah, *ihsān* follows. In addition, the human being’s innate desire for craftsmanship in their tasks is activated in this presence when they call upon themselves to realise, they are on ‘display’ – whether in public or private. So, as an adherent prepares to engage in an activity, it is through intentionality of service to Allah and the concomitant hope for reward, or fear of punishment, or, out of gratitude and love, that *ihsān* is manifested.

At this point, it is opportune to return to the Qurʾān. Whilst the Qurʾānic narrative on parental *ihsān* and parents have been discussed, within the larger *ihsānic* narrative, there is one powerful verse that seemingly applies to what was observed – verse 60, Sūrah *ar-Rahmān* – “is the reward for *ihsān* anything but *ihsān*?”. In this verse, the message regarding *ihsān* is both clear and far-reaching – the reward for *ihsān*, is *ihsān*. There is, as it were, a multiplier effect.² The shape, form, time and realm that this *ihsān* finds its way back and multiplies, is however, not determinable. But that it will be rewarded is clear. Very simplistically, on the basis of what was observed with the teachers, it seems plausible to consider that at some level, teachers may be ‘rewarded’ with *ihsān* in their work (craftsmanship) for their *ihsān* towards their parents. Or, if a teacher starts with a good awareness of Allah in their work (*ihsān*), this act of presence could be rewarded with the awareness, gratitude and humility that is associated with kindness to parents and this act of *ihsān* is developed, thereby setting up a highly virtuous cycle of *ihsān* and rewarded *ihsān*. And while this may

¹ Ibid.

² Similarly, the close counterpart of *ihsān* - gratitude - has a multiplier effect - verse 14:70 - “And when your Lord made it known: If you are grateful, I would certainly give to you more, and if you are ungrateful, My chastisement is truly severe”. Gratitude increases favour upon the adherent and there is no telling in which sphere this favour will manifest

sound idyllic, it is only so in the imagination of its outcome. Drawing on the reality of the narratives of the teachers interviewed and the overall Qurʾānic narrative on *iḥsān* – the path to these ‘idyllic’ outcomes are rarely easy, and most often, arduous. This reality is reflected in the hadīth on parents quite succinctly.

Parents in Hadīth

Hadith on parents are plentiful across the authentic collections. Some of these speak to rulings regarding inheritance, others refer to taking oaths by the lives of their parents, while others speak about the honour parents receive when having lost a child before puberty or raising children who recite the Qurʾān and act according to it. There are others too which instruct how one might honour parents after their passing and how Allah’s pleasure is earned through earning the pleasure of parents and that disobedience to parents is regarded as a major sin. There are however, three particular hadīth that speak to treatment of parents that lend specific insight into what was observed in the field study. The first of these relate to acts of extreme kindness to parents done sincerely for the sake of Allah, the second considers the elevation of kindness to parents over jihad (holy war) and the third, the importance of daily prayers in relation to kindness to parents.

a) Sincerity in kindness to parents moves mountains

Narrated `Abdullah bin `Umar:¹

The Prophet ﷺ said, "While three men were walking, it started raining and they took shelter (refuge) in a cave in a mountain. A big rock rolled down from the mountain and closed the mouth of the cave. They said to each other, "Think of good deeds which you did for Allah's sake only,

¹ Saḥīḥ al-Bukhari, Translated by Dr Muhammad Muhsin Khan, Hadith 2333, vol 3, Darussalam, 1999

and invoke Allah by giving reference to those deeds so that He may remove this rock from you." One of them said, 'O Allah! I had old parents and small children and I used to graze the sheep for them. On my return to them in the evening, I used to milk (the sheep) and start providing my parents first of all before my children. One day I was delayed and came late at night and found my parents sleeping. I milked (the sheep) as usual and stood by their heads. I hated to wake them up and disliked to give milk to my children before them, although my children were weeping (because of hunger) at my feet till the day dawned. O Allah! If I did this for Your sake only, kindly remove the rock so that we could see the sky through it.' So, Allah removed the rock a little and they saw the sky. The second man said, 'O Allah! I was in love with a cousin of mine like the deepest love a man may have for a woman. I wanted to outrage her chastity but she refused unless I gave her one hundred Dinars. So, I struggled to collect that amount. And when I sat between her legs, she said, 'O Allah's slave! Be afraid of Allah and do not deflower me except rightfully (by marriage).' So, I got up. O Allah! If I did it for Your sake only, please remove the rock.' The rock shifted a little more. Then the third man said, 'O Allah! I employed a laborer for a Faraq of rice and when he finished his job and demanded his right, I presented it to him, but he refused to take it. So, I sowed the rice many time till I gathered cows and their shepherd (from the yield). (Then after some time) he came and said to me, 'Fear Allah (and give me my right).' I said, 'Go and take those cows and the shepherd.' He said, 'Be afraid of Allah! Don't mock at me.' I said, 'I am not mocking at you. Take (all that).' So, he took all that. O Allah! If I did that for Your sake only, please remove the rest of the rock.' So, Allah removed the rock."

This moving hadīth clearly shows how acts of sincere kindness to parents, above one's own wife and children, can literally (and figuratively), move mountains. In addition, choosing to act with righteousness and justice in the face of temptation when coupled with sincere acts of kindness to parents – are even more impactful. Building from what was learnt from the hadith on *ihsān* and its multiplier effect, it appears that pathways to excellence can be cleared for those who are sincerely kind to parents, alongside those who complete this pathway with acts of vigilance and obedience and taking a just course of action.

b) Parents over Jihad

'Abdullah bin 'Amr bin Al-'as (May Allah be pleased with them) narrates that:¹

A man came to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and said, "I pledge allegiance to you regarding emigration and jihād, seeking reward from Allah." He ﷺ said, "Are any of your parents alive?" He replied, "Yes, both of them are alive." He ﷺ asked, "And you still desire reward from Allah?" He replied: "Yes". He ﷺ said, "Return to your parents and keep good company with them".

What this hadīth suggests with respect to the findings, more than the obvious that sometimes caring for parents exceeds the honour of jihad, is that caring for parents might well be the most excellent training ground for worldly battles. It is in the care for parents that people can develop selflessness, patience, gratitude, humility, holding of tongue and practicing kind speech, hoping for Allah's favour upon them and their progeny. It is in the refinement of character during care of parents that adherents become 'battle-ready', and with *duā's* from parents, such adherents are

¹ Abu Zakariyyah Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, "Riyāḍ Al-Ṣāliḥīn – A Translation and Commentary", Ed. Moulana Afzal Ismail, Hadith 321, vol. 1, South Africa: Muslims at Work Publications, 2014

armed with treasures. Care for parents are their training ground, and the 'service orientation' that so many organisations desire, may well be formed in this very act.

c) *Salāh* in its proper time

Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd narrates:¹

I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ "Which action does Allah love most?" He ﷺ replied, "Performing ṣalāh at its proper time." I asked, "Then what?" He ﷺ replied: "Being obedient to parents". I asked, "Then what?" He ﷺ replied, "Waging jīhād in the path of Allah."

This final hadīth brings one back to the sobriety of maintaining the fundamentals – in as much as kindness to parents is an elevated act, it is secondary to one other act – prayer at its proper time. Clearly *iḥsān* cannot be divorced from its existence in the spectrum of Islam-*īmān-iḥsān*. And clearly, the three hadīth mentioned confirm that kindness to parents holds high rank amongst virtuous deeds, with significant potential to induce barakah, and is perfectly aligned to the amplification observed in the field, and in the Qur'ānic narrative on *iḥsān*.

Tipping to Excellence – Pathways to Consider

A state which takes the Qur'ānic and Hadīthic advice to heart, following these expositions, will understand that fostering kindness to parents is paramount to excellent large-scale outcomes, but, within a system where *īmān* and the acts of Islam are equally secured and fostered. Consequently, it is proposed that such states should do all it can to facilitate healthy child-parent relationships, with the belief and trust that this will engender, or tip, toward an ethos of excellence or *iḥsān* in the long run. It

¹ Abu Zakariyyah Yahya Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, "Riyāḍ Al-Ṣāliḥīn – A Translation and Commentary", Ed. Moulana Afzal Ismail, Hadith 312, vol 1, Johannesburg: Muslims at Work Publications, 2014

is not to say that states do not currently do this, however, the primary proposal that accords from these findings is the child-parent relationship should be amplified in proportion to the amplification of the narrative of kindness to parents in the Qurʾān and Sunnah – in other words, it needs greater prominence. Accordingly, the following proposals are offered for consideration in bands of activity at the State, Socio-Organisational and Individual levels. Ultimately, what shape and form the actions take will be depend on the specific context at a particular time.

State Level

At the State level, there would be two primary considerations. The first is to consider policies that would enable kindness to parents. In enabling kindness, as the graphic below shows, there are two paths that may need to be traversed – a proactive, long term path and a reactive short-medium term, on-going situational path.

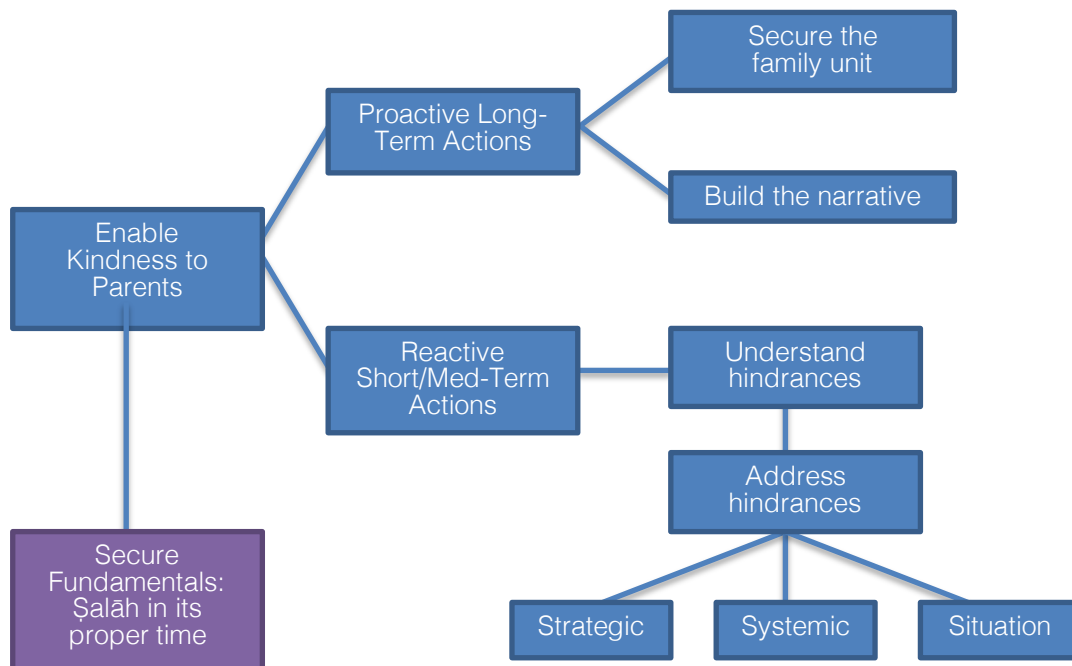


Figure 3. State Pathways for Kindness to Parents

On the proactive pathway, there would be three primary acts – (1) secure the family unit and develop policies and systems to secure the family unit; (2) build a narrative around kindness to parents and its importance, and (3) secure the fundamentals, most critically, *ṣalāh* in its proper time. In securing the family unit, a state might consider, for example, free and/or mandatory parenting training when birth certificates are issued so that through healthy parenting, a full cycle of healthy familial relationships are ensured. Or, free or subsidised family counselling services, or regular state-wide workshops for healthy familial relationships. Similarly, special allowances for the care of parents in old age, with some form of assessment for eligibility could be considered. Ultimately, the specific needs of the population, and resources of the state would determine what kind of policies get deployed here, but the options, when given thought, are vast. It is first and foremost thus, new thinking about cause and effect that is required at State level.

On the narrative building pathway, states could consider building kindness to parents into education curriculums and reinforcing the narrative through regular campaigns similar to those campaigns that reinforce good road safety or good health practices. Children, at various educational intersections, should be encouraged to develop gratitude for the role of their parents through reflective activities. Similarly, encouraging prayer at its proper time should be done in a narrative building fashion, and facilitated more systemically. This means encouraging natural stops and pauses in workflow and events for the performance of the mandatory prayers when the time arises, and planning workflows and events around this, with the necessary facilities at places of work and engagement to allow for such prayer to take place.

Socio-Organisational Level

At this level, the socio-organisational units could be state-owned enterprises, civil service units, for-profit organisations or not-for-profits. The most obvious action here is that recruitment policies should incorporate targeting people that demonstrate kindness to parents, alongside other

requisite qualities and skills. This should be non-negotiable when selecting leaders, for if a person were not able to be kind to their own parents, they would be unlikely to be kind to subordinates, thereby easily generating toxic workplace cultures. From a performance management perspective, companies who have poor-performing employees might consider asking what the situation with the parental relationship is for this employee and look at ways to assist in mending any broken relationships in much the same way as other wellness programmes are conducted in organisations. This is where good synergy between this level and the State level might assist system-wide improvement – organisations might, for example, be able to refer employees to the subsidised state family counselling services.

In addition to this, entities here should guard against workplace cultures that breakdown family structures and instead, focus of creating good work-life balance for people. Perhaps unconventional, but what stops an organisation from having ‘take a parent to workday’ much like they have ‘take a child to workday’? Similarly, leave for parental care should be regarded as equally important for leave for childcare. An astute organisation would also encourage that parents attend functions that are meant to celebrate and include family. Finally, a wise organisation would encourage employees to ask their parents for *duā* when entering key and critical phases of work, or when dealing with difficulties and, would also make a regular habit of conducting prayers for parents of employees, and including parents’ mention in prayers at the workplace. This could go hand-in-hand with securing fundamentals, so that for each mandatory prayer conducted at the workplace, it becomes a norm to pray for parents. These actions not only assist the organisation and the individuals in them, but also assists the narrative building the State is tasked with.

Individuals

The expectations from individuals is clearest of all. Secure the daily prayers. Maintain and heal relationship with parents. Seek their forgiveness and pray for them, ideally on a fixed and regular basis. Make time to un-

derstand parents needs and wishes and fulfil them to the best of one's ability. Spend time with them, care for them and speak kindly to them. Ensure one's own children observe the care and patience for grandparents. Take opportunities to reflect on and express gratitude to parents. Ask them for their prayers and blessings. Share the rewards of care with those siblings who desire it. Encourage those who do not and work to heal relationships within the family when strained. When they have passed, send prayers for them regularly, give charity in their name and visit their friends. There is no shortage of ways in which to express *ihsān* to parents and it is precisely these acts that States would want to encourage, foster and facilitate.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, between the text of the Qurʾān, the hadīth that encapsulate Sunnah on this topic and the findings in the field, there is clear indication that fostering kindness to parents, as a primary port of call, is an untapped well from which Muslim States can drink to foster excellence in its citizens. While it is merely one cog in large wheel of actions and needs to be supported in an environment that easily enables acts of faith and devotion, kindness to parents undeniably enjoys an elevated status within the lived and scriptural narrative of *ihsān*. In the context of VUCA, when these simple, seemingly mundane acts are neglected, over grander, more complex aims, is it any wonder that complexity and difficulty will ensue? Large gains may not come from grand plans, but it may well issue from simple acts of kindness and appropriate orientation to others. And in particular, kindness to parents may well be that one right action that tips the system such that kindness is manifested in all its forms, and just and fair action follows, so that *ihsān* can be manifested in a way pleases the Lord of all the Worlds. And Allah knows best.