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Islamic Meditation: Mindfulness Apps for Muslims in the Digital Spiritual Marketplace

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Abstract

This chapter describes and analyzes three digital sites that offer guided meditations curated by and for Muslims: Sakeenah, Sabr, and Halaqah. My analysis offers thick descriptions of these mobile apps, which first appeared in the online “meditation marketplace” in 2020 and 2021, and identifies resonant themes and questions that I believe are fruitful for the study of religion in digital landscapes and for mapping the shifting contours of lived Islam. Today’s industry of online meditation and mindfulness products is highly profitable, as meditation—and, more broadly, “mindfulness”—has in recent decades been embraced and normalized in contemporary, cosmopolitan life as a key part of health and wellness. The guided mindfulness and meditation practices found on the most popular mainstream apps, however, tend to be assemblages of meditation styles modeled upon Buddhist mindfulness and yogic somatic practices, despite the frequent absence of clear markers of these religious foundations. In contrast, the Muslim-created apps I discuss here, while mirroring similar styles of meditation to those in the mainstream meditation marketplace, offer guided meditation practices imbued with the cultural, theological, and epistemological frames of Islamic piety. This, I suggest, is a noteworthy development in both the meditation marketplace and contemporary Muslim piety. These apps demonstrate Muslim efforts at carving out distinctly Muslim spaces, not just within the digital meditation marketplace but also apart from the already well-established genre of Muslim religious apps. In my view, these new developments warrant close examination as a distinct genre in the growing academic study of religion in cyberspace. [excerpt]

Keywords

Cyber religion, digital religion, Islam, meditation, Muslims

Disciplines

Islamic Studies | Religion | Science and Technology Studies

CHAPTER 9

Islamic Meditation: Mindfulness Apps for Muslims in the Digital Spiritual Marketplace

Megan Adamson Sijapati

Introduction

This chapter describes and analyzes three digital sites that offer guided meditations curated by and for Muslims: *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah*. My analysis offers thick descriptions of these mobile apps, which first appeared in the online “meditation marketplace” in 2020 and 2021, and identifies resonant themes and questions that I believe are fruitful for the study of religion in digital landscapes and for mapping the shifting contours of lived Islam.¹ Today’s industry of online meditation and mindfulness products is highly profitable, as meditation—and, more broadly, “mindfulness”—has in recent decades been embraced and normalized in contemporary, cosmopolitan life as a key part of health and wellness. The guided mindfulness and meditation practices found on the most popular mainstream apps, however, tend to be assemblages of meditation styles modeled upon Buddhist mindfulness and yogic somatic practices, despite the frequent absence of clear markers of these religious foundations.² In contrast, the Muslim-created apps I discuss here, while mirroring similar styles of meditation to those in the mainstream meditation marketplace, offer guided meditation practices imbued with the cultural, theological, and epistemological frames of Islamic piety. This, I

suggest, is a noteworthy development in both the meditation marketplace and contemporary Muslim piety. These apps demonstrate Muslim efforts at carving out distinctly Muslim spaces, not just within the digital meditation marketplace but also apart from the already well-established genre of Muslim religious apps. In my view, these new developments warrant close examination as a distinct genre in the growing academic study of religion in cyberspace.

Until 2020, there were no apps exclusively designated for “Muslim meditation” or advertised as meditation *for* Muslims among the myriad offerings on Google Play and iTunes. While a few guided and self-styled “Sufi meditations” (*dhikr*) were available on the widely used meditation app *InsightTimer*, other popular meditation apps such as *Headspace* did not feature meditations with a specific religious affiliation.³ The content on Islamic religious apps such as *MuslimPro* and *IslamiCal* included Qur’ān recitations, *ḥādīth*, prayer times, and *du‘ā’* but nothing resembling guided meditations.⁴ However, by summer 2020, as people’s lives migrated to being more virtual to a degree unimaginable before the Covid-19 pandemic, the meditation app landscape expanded exponentially in a variety of ways. In fact, two million more mental wellness app downloads were recorded in April 2020 than in pre-pandemic January of the same year.⁵ As part of this sudden and rapid development, the meditation app marketplace shifted to include new “Islamic” modes of meditation. Now guided meditations designed by and for Muslims, and marketed as such, can be downloaded from Google Play or Apple’s App Store.

In delivering to Muslims guided meditations and tools for mindfulness that are compatible with multiple forms of Islamic piety, these sites provide Muslims with alternatives to the mainstream meditation offerings online that, as I have argued elsewhere, are not as “secular” or “cross-cultural” as they present themselves to be.⁶ The introduction of Islamically framed versions of guided meditations on the new apps *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* allows for the participation in, and performance of, app-based meditation as a form of Muslim piety that is free of the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) references to Buddhist and Hindu principles that undergird most meditations offered in the mainstream meditation marketplace.⁷ In this way, *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* construct a digitally based mode of Muslim piety through an Islamically inflected, innovative, and distinctly modern ritual performance—firmly situated in both Islamic tradition and the contemporary wellness industry.

Sakeenah

Sakeenah (from *sakinah*, an Arabic term meaning “tranquility, peace, serenity”) is an app launched and copyrighted in 2020 by Muzmind FZ-LLC, based in Dubai. The *Sakeenah* website claims it is “in the business

of creating happiness for people”⁸ and describes the app as providing techniques bundled together in a cohesive, easy-to-use product designed to address mental health issues facing Muslims today. As the website explains, its content and approach:

are a marriage of religion and modern sciences serving the 475 Muslims struggling with mental health issues. By featuring Mindfulness & Meditation created by scholars, qualified experts and life coaches, *Sakeenah* assists with emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. This content is a mixture of modern mindfulness techniques with backing/references from Quran and Hadith that would create an emotional connection for a Muslim, getting them through a particular state of mind, call it anxiety, depression, etc. [*sic*].⁹

On Google Play and the iTunes App Store, *Sakeenah*'s description adds that it is “a mindfulness and meditation app for Muslims” and addresses its Islamic character more directly:

A Muslim's state of Mindfulness is to be in the continuous full knowledge that Allah is Aware [*sic*] of him or her, inwardly and outwardly. It is a complete state of conscious self-awareness in one's relationship with Allah in the heart, mind, and body.

The basis of mindfulness in Islam is our knowledge that Allah is always watching us at all times and, as a consequence, we develop greater attention and care for our own actions, thoughts, feelings, and inner states of being. As Allah said, “Remember that God knows what is in your souls, so be mindful of Him.”

Modern life involves a daily bustle of noise, distraction, and information overload. Our senses are constantly stimulated from every direction to the point that a simple moment of quiet stillness seems impossible for some of us. This continuous agitation hinders us from getting the most out of each moment.¹⁰

These claims connect *Sakeenah*'s Islamically inflected meditations on the app with a foundational theme of mainstream mindfulness: the continuous “agitation” that people experience in modern-day life, and during stressful times in particular, is best alleviated through a stilling of the mind that comes through a focus on the present moment. Here, *Sakeenah* offers the solution in an Islamic rendering, describing the “conscious self-awareness in one's relationship with Allah in the heart, mind, and body” that the app will help cultivate.

The app's website features an image of a woman in *hijāb* (headscarf) meditating with eyes closed, smiling, her hands on her knees with index fingers and thumbs touching—a bodily posture and hand gesture commonly seen on mainstream meditation apps but not typically associated with Islam (Figure 9.1). Beside this image is written, “Mental Wellbeing Solutions in light



FIGURE 9.1 An image from the *Sakeenah* app’s website (<https://www.sakeenah.io/>).

of Quran, Hadith, and Islamic Literature.” Below that are brief descriptions of the app’s content listed under green, one-dimensional images of a lotus flower; a hand with the thumb and index finger touching and the palm facing upward; and a *yin–yang* symbol.¹¹ This use of non-Islamic symbols is striking, suggesting the app’s creators believe *Sakeenah* may appeal more to Muslim users (or investors) by incorporating ambiguous—but highly marketable—signifiers of “Eastern” mysticism and spirituality. Below these symbols is a diagram of the company’s planned development phases over the next two years, as well as short bios of key team members: four men (who appear to be either Arab or South Asian) shown in black-and-white headshots. Their biographies list degrees and professional backgrounds in marketing, mobile app development, and revenue streaming. No mention is made, however, of the developers having any experience in the research, teaching, development, or practice of mindfulness or meditation, nor are there descriptions of their *madhhab* affiliations or educational lineages.¹² Whether intentional or not, this sparsity of information—coupled with the visual deployment of authority that is male and tech-savvy but not attached to any specific cultural group, teaching lineage, or expertise in jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—works to minimize any particular Muslim identity that might otherwise be associated with the app. Alternatively, downplaying, or de-linking, the sources of the meditation practices from any specific Islamic institution or school of thought could be an intentional, strategic move to broaden the app’s reach and appeal to Muslims from a diverse range of backgrounds.

The *Sakeenah* app is visually decorated with images of Islamic art and sacred sites. Upon opening the app a message appears with the user's name, saying, "Salaam, welcome back [user name]! Let's bring that smile on you, *Inshah'Allah* [God willing]. Pick a category and let's get started."¹³ Users choose their preferred background color and meditation practices are labeled with colorful pictures of iconic mosques, Qur'anic calligraphy, or geometric designs. The user then personalizes their guided meditation based on duration, topic, or their internal condition (such as anxiety). The seven-day course titled "Anxiety" offers short meditations titled "Don't fall in hopelessness," "He is *Saami al Baseer*,"¹⁴ "Allah is *Arahman & Araheem*,"¹⁵ "Allah is in Control," and "The Art of Pausing." Each link offers an audio track that guides users through a meditation practice on that specific topic.

Another example is a practice titled "[The] Concept of Meditation in Islam." The following is an excerpt of the accompanying audio track:

Assalamu Alaykum [Peace be upon you]. I would like to explain an Islamic practice that really is at the core of Islamic spirituality, yet unfortunately nowadays is not really given the attention, focus and honor that it deserves.

When we think of meditation we think of a monk, or a Zen master, someone sitting peacefully with eyes closed in a state of bliss, but what relation does meditation have with Islam? Meditation is quite simply the art, the practice, the experience of being still. It's about surrendering. Surrendered at the most fundamental levels of our existence.

Meditation is about completely letting go and aligning and immersing oneself in the divine presence of Allah the almighty. We are constantly doing, we are continually asserting will, asserting self. In meditation we learn to simply be.

Is meditation necessary in Islam? Absolutely. There is no way to attain that state of surrender and mindfulness without practicing it. And we know that Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, spent days in meditation. Not just for an hour or two, but for days at a time. And it was in that state of surrender, or presence, that he was given revelation. Meditation is about tearing away the filter that is created by our ego, our identity. *Fikr* [observation, concentration] is a *Siraj al-Qalb* [a lamp of the heart].¹⁶

By invoking the stereotypical meditator as an "Eastern" Zen monk figure, and then countering that with the claim that the quintessential meditator can also be a modern-day Muslim, and by locating the root of meditation in surrender to Allah and working with the *nafs*—both key inflections of Islamic piety—*Sakeenah* asserts that meditation should be properly understood as a fundamental expression of Islamic piety.¹⁷ The app goes even further to assert there is "no way to attain" the state of mindfulness and surrender without the practice of meditation. This claim positions meditation as a performance of individual piety alternative to (and beyond the parameters of) the mosque, the family, or traditional Islamic communities such as study

groups or Sufi *dhikr* circles. Instead, this expression of piety as a practice of “presence” and surrender (the literal meaning of “Islam”) is a solitary experience that can be performed anytime and anywhere, requiring nothing more than a mobile device.

Sabr

Sabr (from *ṣabr*, an Arabic term meaning “perseverance” or “active patience”) was launched in October 2020 and copyrighted by Deen Academy, LLC. Like *Sakeenah* and *Halaqah*, some of its guided meditations and mindfulness courses are free and others are unlocked with a Premium subscription.¹⁸ On the iTunes Store the app is listed in the “Health and Fitness” category with the description “A Guided Meditation App For Muslims: Sleep more. Stress less. *Bismillah* [In the name of God]. Improve your Relationship with Allah.”¹⁹ *Sabr*’s website explains that “Life can get tough at times. With the hustle and bustle of work, the variety of distractions, informational overload, and yes . . . the pandemic, finding time to reflect and slowdown [*sic*] seems almost impossible.”²⁰ A YouTube video on the landing page of *Sabr*’s website states that

25% of adults experience some type of mental illness, and with mental health issues across the country increasing, meditation is more important now than ever before . . . while there are many guided meditation and mental health apps in the market such as *Calm* and *Headspace*, the need for an Islamic one is more important now than ever before.²¹

Sabr positions its product as meeting this need—a lacuna, it emphasizes, that has only increased during the Covid pandemic era.

The *Sabr* website features brief bios and photos of its twenty-one teachers. On the app itself, only the instructors’ names are listed alongside the meditations and courses they lead. Notably, this downplaying of individual personalities and identities is in stark contrast to other mainstream meditation apps whose advertisements spotlight meditations led by celebrity meditators and teachers. Most of *Sabr*’s instructors hold advanced degrees either from academic institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom or from Islamic academic institutions in the Middle East, South Asia, and the United States. A number of them are based in New Jersey. Its founder is Subhaan Ashrafi,²² who reportedly came up with the idea for *Sabr* after encountering Muslim youth with mental health struggles through his sports show on YouTube and realizing the increased importance of mental health and self-care during Covid-19.²³ *Sabr*’s establishment was supported by a LaunchGood campaign in the summer of 2020.²⁴

Sabr has three categories of guided audio track practices. The first is “Guided Meditation” (*murāqabah*), which the app describes as “Research-backed guided meditation sessions through an Islamic Lens. We are working with Muslim therapists and professionals across the globe to curate this

material. Alhamdulillah!” The other modules are “Spiritually Uplifting Courses” and “*Nasheeds*” with, the app emphasizes, “AMSR soundtracks,” a common feature of guided meditations in the broader meditation app landscape.²⁵ *Sabr*’s visual design uses stock photographs of nature scenes: palm trees at sunset, deserts at dusk, northern lights, empty beaches. Most of the app’s guided meditations include a sonic backdrop of low-volume ocean waves, but the specific content and style of its meditations and courses vary by teacher. The meditations tend to interweave instructions for breathing and somatic awareness, segments of *du‘ā*, excerpts of Qur’ānic verses (*āyāt*), and motivational phrases. Within any particular meditation the user can mark “favorites” by pressing a heart symbol in the upper right corner, which then makes it accessible on the user’s “profile” tab. That is the extent of the customization allowed, however. The teacher leading most of the app’s meditations is Wali Khan, whose bio picture displays a man in a tracksuit embroidered with “RN, BSN, Trauma” and a stethoscope around his neck—a depiction perhaps meant to highlight the app’s medical-scientific claims to improve mental health.

A resonant example of a meditation on *Sabr* is a four-minute guided practice titled “I am Ready,” which is one of three meditations grouped together under the title “You Can Do This” (Figure 9.2). The instructor for this module is listed as *Imam* Wisam Sharieff, whose bio on the *Sabr* website describes him as having studied at the Institute of Islamic Education in Elgin, Illinois, the Quran Academy in Pakistan, and under (unnamed) scholars in

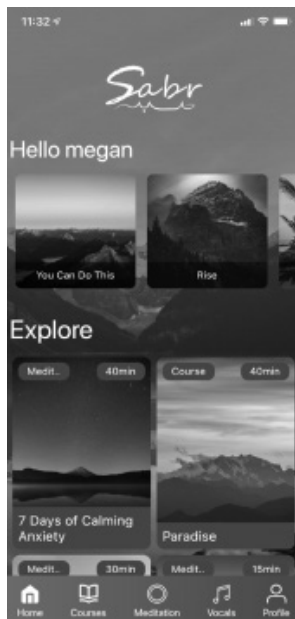


FIGURE 9.2 *Sabr* app’s opening page. Screenshot of the author’s personal account.

Mecca and Egypt, as well as being a certified radiology technician.²⁶ He begins the guided audio meditation by saying, “Let’s begin to heal. Turn the camera inwards. This moment, it’s a new moment.”²⁷ His narrative then shifts into first person as he says, “My breathing synchronizes with the universe around me. In this moment I am enjoying looking inwards and my focus is on healing my feelings, going within. . . . As I breathe in I bring in all the good around me.”²⁸ The shift from third to first person creates a sense of the teacher becoming the meditator’s own voice, guiding the listener through visualizations and imagined emotional and mental states. He then alternates between reciting parts of a *du‘ā’* and giving first-person verbal somatic cues: “*Rabbanā ātinā fi ad-dunyā ḥasanatan . . .* as I breathe out, I allow all the pressure and worries to release . . . *wa fi al-ākhirati ḥasanatan wa qinā ‘adhāba an-nāri.*”²⁹ He continues to lead the meditator through the relaxation of the body, saying, “my palms are open to receive . . . I am ready to trust myself and my inner guidance system to lead me to truth . . . I am ready to be a great listener. To myself and those around me . . . I am ready.”³⁰ These self-affirmations continue, encouraging the meditator to reflect on the good around them and to expect good things from God. He then says, “*ḥasbi Allah*” (God is sufficient) before taking a long pause. *Ḥasbi Allah* works here as a synecdoche, instantly invoking the *du‘ā’* “*ḥasbi Allah lā ‘ilāha ‘illā hu ‘alayhi tawakkultu*” [“Allah is sufficient for me, there is no god but Him, I place my trust in Him”] and the Qur’ānic verse from which it comes.³¹ This phrase aims to create a connection in the meditator between Islamic sacred sources and a universal Muslim piety—echoing the app’s foundational claim that all mindfulness is ultimately surrender to the reality that is Allah and that an embodied awareness of this ontological truth constitutes Muslim meditation.

The narration then returns to a style of guidance resembling common elements of mainstream meditations. The teacher instructs the meditator to develop a cosmic connection and breathe their negativity away, saying, “discarding negativity through the breath. . . . My breathing is synchronized with the universe. I am allowing myself to be calm . . . and graceful.” Then, once again, he switches to a supplication: “Fill me with grace.”³² Here the focus is on the individual but in relation to the God—marking a significant difference from other mainstream (and especially Buddhist) style meditations which recognize no divinity and posit the individual as the agent creating the change in their internal condition. I argue that this feature of centering the divine in the meditator’s experience of stillness and mindfulness, and hence their mental and emotional health, is one of the most distinct features of the marketing and teaching style of these new Muslim meditation apps. By shifting the agency for internal change from the modern, busy, individual meditator to God, Muslim meditation apps expressly reject the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of mainstream meditation apps.

Sabr, unlike *Halaqah* and *Sakeenah*, features a “Notifications” tab with hashtag messages that encourage users to try new features on the app. These are upbeat messages that range in style and content. Informal

motivational notes encourage users to “Always remember! Allah LOVES you for your *Sabr!* It’s going to be okay” and “Make Self-Care a Priority. Consider upgrading to premium to have full access to all courses, vocals, and meditations, *insha’Allah!*” Others include motivational quotes from influential American Muslims such as Shaykh Omar Suleiman and even non-Muslim writers such as Robert Collier, an early twentieth-century American author of self-help and New Age metaphysical books.³³ Other “Notifications” offer supplications such as “#JummahMubarak ‘Ya Allah, grant us reflect from every difficulty. Ya Allah, bring happiness into our lives” or Qur’ānic verses preceded by the hashtag #SabrMotivation, such as “‘Verily, with hardship comes ease’ [94:5]” and ‘And He is with. You wherever you are’ [57:4].” These messages work to confirm the Islamic nature of these meditations, deploying the common social media app tools of hashtags and notifications to embed references to the Qur’ān or well-known Muslim authority figures in cyberspace.

Halaqah

Halaqah (an Arabic term meaning “circle” or, more specifically, an Islamic study circle) was launched and copyrighted in 2020 as “an Islamic meditation app” and is listed in the education section of Google Play and the iTunes App Store.³⁴ *Halaqah*’s website promises users an opportunity to “Cope with Anxiety and Stress and Straighten your relationship with Allah” through “teaching people the power of mindfulness and prayer.”³⁵ On the iTunes App Store, the description begins with a verse from the Qur’ān emphasizing the ease that comes with contemplative practice (here described as *dhikr*, or “remembrance”). It focuses on the mental and emotional health challenges endemic to being human and promises relief through its collection of curated remembrance practices:

“Verily with remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest” [Qur’ān 13:28]. Anxiety, sadness, and stress. We all experience it in some form in our lives. But when we calm our mind and realign ourselves back to the source of all life, it brings us tranquility. *Halaqah* is your digital spiritual circle, with *dhikr* sessions and guided meditations, to bring tranquility and peace to your heart. We’ve created a collection of *adkhar* [plural of *dhikr*] that immerses you in a powerful collective experience that can remedy the symptoms of busy living, and also some guided mindfulness sessions to help you in your day.³⁶

The website outlines *Halaqah*’s origin story, describing that when one of the founders visited refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon and witnessed people’s trauma there he experienced acute stress and anxiety that were, in time, alleviated only through mindfulness practices. However, the site explains, “the mindfulness practices were lacking the spirituality

of the Islamic circles he used to attend.”³⁷ In response to this absence of spirituality, readers are told, *Halaqah* was specifically designed to help people, presumably Muslims, in all kinds of life situations, from refugee camps to upscale urban workplaces, through spiritually oriented meditation practices. *Halaqah* emphasizes that its meditations were created under the supervision of “mental health experts and scholars,” which is a persistent theme on all three apps. Even so, there is no information given about the founders’ “Islamic circles” (an affiliation with a Sufi order, for example), nor about the training of the mental health experts and scholars it claims created the app’s meditations and *dhikr* sessions.

A January 2021 YouTube video advertising *Halaqah* features footage of Muslims—all young adults, with women in *hijāb* and men in both Islamic and non-Islamic dress—in a variety of urban settings and dramatized situations of stress. These scenes are then contrasted with scenes of the same people making *du‘ā*’ or sitting in tranquil settings such as a city park, leaning against a tree, with cell phone in hand and earbuds in, presumably listening to *Halaqah*. The narrator says,

when we calm our mind with a daily dose of remembrance and reflection, it brings us tranquility and reminds us of our true purpose. *Halaqah* is a way to bring mindfulness and the rich tradition of *dhikr* into your life. So when you take part in any of the *Halaqah* sessions here, put your headphones on and be recharged by the remembrance and meditation.³⁸

The message communicated here is that the *dhikrs* offered by *Halaqah* are a panacea for the range of internal turmoil experienced by busy, adult, urban Muslims—that healing and wellness only require them to step into a calm space, put headphones on, and participate through listening.

On *Halaqah*’s website, cofounder Jubair Khan expands upon the place of meditation in Islam. He likens meditation to *dhikr* rather than *murāqabah* (meditation) or *fikr* (observation or concentration)—and then elides meditation and mindfulness and notes it is “rooted in science.”³⁹ In his words:

It’s been a difficult year for everyone. . . . And with the world the way it is, we need Allah’s remembrance now more than ever to bring us a sense of stability and calm. *Halaqah* is our small effort to do that. It gives you the opportunity to take part in the remembrance of Allah, and to be guided through your emotions with guided meditations.

Dhikr, or the remembrance of Allah, is part of a rich Islamic tradition going back to the Prophet Muhammad himself, peace be upon him. It focuses the mind on the source of everything, Allah. You can say it’s a type of Islamic meditation, but more powerful because of the spiritual element connecting you to Your Creator. Mindfulness is an ancient practice and now it’s rooted in science.⁴⁰

Halaqah's very name situates the app's meditations in the broader context of Islamic piety and ritual performance via an imagined gathering of users/viewers in a shared experience. Like mainstream meditation apps, it groups the meditations a user has completed and categorizes them as "My Halaqahs," which emphasizes individual choice. Although users decide which religious circles they step into, it is notable that they are not entering into a virtual community through participation since there is no interactive mode of connection with others on the app.⁴¹ The *Halaqah* app labels groups of meditations with stylized color illustrations of a woman in a blue *chādor* (a style of *hijāb* common in Iran and parts of India); a man wearing an Emirati *thobe* with hands in position for *du'ā*'; and various illustrated backgrounds such as silhouetted minarets, a crescent moon, a *muṣḥaf* (a written copy of the Qur'ān); and a Qur'ān stand. Guided practices are grouped in three categories: "Mindfulness," "Purification," and "*Dhikr*," and the user chooses to hear the meditation audio tracks in a "male voice" or "female voice" (not an option on *Sabr* or *Sakeenah*). Notably, and like *Sakeenah*, meditation practices are titled with the emotional/mental condition a user wants to either alleviate or cultivate, such as "motivation," "courage," "gratitude," "anxiety," "focus," or "sleep." Some modules are single meditations, while others are listed as a seven-day series.

An example of a *Halaqah* practice is its "Guide to Meditation" audio track: an introductory course in three segments aimed to teach "the basics of meditation and mindfulness" (Figure 9.3).⁴² No information is provided

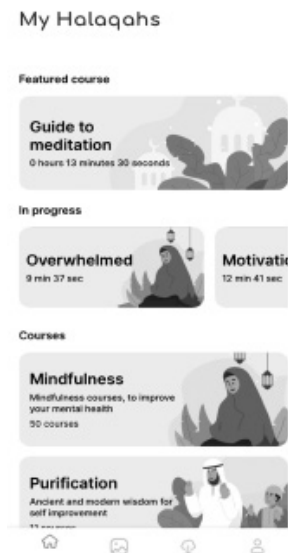


FIGURE 9.3 Halaqah app's opening page. Screenshot of the author's personal account.

about the teacher or author. It begins with the *bismillāh*⁴³ and the narrator then speaks about mindfulness while birds chirp on an audio loop in the background: “the beauty of our *dīn* [religion] is that we are encouraged to reflect and ponder. . . . Today we’ll learn the skill of observing our thoughts. Mindfulness is an ancient practice now rooted in science, which teaches us to become more aware.”⁴⁴ He then gives cues for deep breathing and body awareness techniques, similar to those found in mainstream meditation apps, such as “be aware of your body’s contact with your seat.” He also instructs listeners to focus the mind upon sounds in the room and physical sensations in the body, and to redirect the mind’s wandering thoughts to the rise and fall of the breath. The somatic dimensions of the meditations—the focus on the body as a means for stilling and focusing the mind—resemble techniques of both Sufi *dhikr* and meditations in the mainstream marketplace.

Halaqah’s pervasive emphasis on science legitimating the practice of mindfulness is noteworthy. It suggests that the app’s creators want to make clear they are not presenting meditation to Muslims as followers of contemporary, global consumer culture, but rather because meditation has objectively proven benefits. The message is that meditation is a supplementary form of Islamic piety objectively proven by modern science to be beneficial. In short, it is not any Islamic authority lending this app its legitimacy, but rather the invocations of the scientific evidence of the proven benefits of meditation for overall health and wellness.

***Sakeenah, Sabr, and Halaqah* and the Performance of Meditation as Piety**

All three apps assert that the performance of meditation and mindfulness cultivate a stillness and calm needed for Muslims to face the emotional and mental strains of modern life. *Sakeenah, Sabr, and Halaqah* espouse the view that Muslims can practice meditation to improve mental and spiritual health. At the same time they each imply that for Muslims to practice these techniques in a way aligned with the *dīn*, the meditations themselves should be aligned with core principles of Islam: primarily that God, and not the individual self, is the source and facilitator of inner states of tranquility and mindfulness. An underlying message seems to be that *‘ibādah* (ritual practices) and immersion in the *dīn* do not alone relieve Muslims from the difficult conditions of contemporary life such as stress, anxiety, depression, and insomnia because those very conditions limit one’s ability to be fully present in their piety. These apps are not suggesting that meditation should replace prayer, but rather that if a Muslim’s mental and emotional states are strained then their full potential—in both the *dīn* and *dunyā*—will not be realized.⁴⁵

A central tenet of Islamic piety is *taqwā* (God consciousness). Although the term is not invoked directly on these apps, the meditations they provide are clearly informed by the goal of aligning an individual's present-moment consciousness of God with continual surrender to the divine will. It is implied across these apps that meditation can facilitate a deeper engagement with the key reservoirs for Islamic mindfulness: the *sunnah* (the example of the Prophet Muhammad) and the Qur'ān. The Prophet Muhammad's piety is invoked as a superior paradigm for what in contemporary society is understood simply as self-driven, self-regulated "mindfulness" and "meditation." Similarly, the Qur'ān conveys divine injunctions for (and guidance to) the practice of stillness and mindfulness that are ultimately rendered in Islamic idiom as "surrender"—a stark contrast to (and a more elevated form of) contemporary secular "mindfulness."⁴⁶ We have seen how these apps continuously invoke the example of the Prophet and the text of the Qur'ān as touchstones within their guided audio meditations. In doing so, they assert that the practice of mindfulness is not only found in Islam, it *is* Islam. Islam *is* mindfulness.

Sakeenah, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* are notably devoid of sectarian markers and references to *fiqh*, *madhab*, *ṭarīqah* (a Sufi institutional order), or any single teacher, mosque, or institute. It appears these apps are strategically designed for a Muslim consumer who wants to participate in contemporary meditation and mindfulness but, at the same time, does not want the practices to be, or feel, un-Islamic. In the landscape of contemporary Islam, the stakes are high in debates about what practices are deemed authentically "Islamic" or "un-Islamic." Competing claims to what are (and are not) proper forms of Muslim piety often result in schisms and boundaries, exacerbating political and social dynamics that can minoritize and oppress. The definition of normativity—and what is recognized as *ḥarām* (forbidden) or *shirk* (idolatrous disbelief)—can be a highly contentious matter. This intra-Muslim discourse is especially complex because of the manifold approaches to the Qur'ān and *sunnah*, coupled with the global diversity of ethnic, cultural, and political perspectives. By not linking (or intentionally *de-linking*) their Islamic references with specific "normative" institutions and established authorities, these digital apps reveal a logic of practice and an intended audience very different from the digital media productions of other Muslim groups. In a guided meditation on *Sakeenah*, references are made to Sufis, Sufism (*tassawuf*), and the Sufi practice of the "purification of the self" (*tazkiyah al-nafs*). For the most part, however, the language and concepts presented on these apps are devoid of any hint of sectarian or cultural markers that would situate a practice in a particular branch of Islam. By design, this gives an egalitarian, non-sectarian feel to these guided meditations and teachings, broadening their potential access and appeal to diverse audiences.

I suggest that what we see in these apps is something of a new Muslim vernacular, spurred by the evolution of digital technology that demands

an ecumenical “language” which is comfortable for the broadest audience possible. This vernacular is ecumenical by virtue of its lack of references to normative institutions and established authorities—as well as a notable absence of the “influencer” marketing models that are at work in mainstream meditation apps like *Calm*, *InsightTimer*, and *Headspace*, wherein practices are often associated with popular (on the app) or famous (nationally or internationally) meditation teachers. This influencer model is certainly found in other Muslim digital media in cyberspace, where numerous Muslim teachers have transformed into religious celebrity figures who headline carefully designed and marketed digital “offerings” on multiple platforms (websites, IG, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok).⁴⁷ *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah*, by contrast, present no ideal Muslim personality, nor anything that would situate the app’s meditations in a specific Muslim culture, *madhhab*, *tariqah*, ethnicity, or nationality. Instead, their targeted audience seems to cast an extraordinarily wide net: English-speaking Muslims who are familiar with common *āyāt* and *du‘ā’* in Arabic and in possession of a mobile device.

Another distinguishing feature we see on these apps is that the distinctions between *fikr*, *dhikr*, and *murāqabah* go largely unaddressed. Instead, these practices are typically labeled simply as “meditation.” Does this mean the nuances of terminology are not necessary for an app’s practices to be useful—or for potential users to be “sold” on the product and willing to try it? It could be that the apps’ creators minimize their use of these signifiers to attract an audience that might not be drawn to overtly religious meditation apps, but nonetheless would find digital resources that resonate with their religion appealing. Alternatively, it could be that these distinctions were just not considered in the production of the meditation audio tracks, and that “secular” meditations were used as the default models—with references from the *sunnah* and Qur’ān added only later. In a similar fashion, although these apps emphasize that their guided meditations blend Islamic principles with modern science, they offer scarce detail about precisely what this means. This is another feature they share with meditation apps in the mainstream marketplace. In fact, medical research is inconclusive as to “the effects of meditation programs in improving the positive dimensions of mental health and stress-related behavior,”⁴⁸ and little research exists on the effectiveness of meditation apps in particular. Even so, both mainstream and Muslim meditation apps are marketed as providing simple, affordable, and self-managed solutions to mental health and stress-related problems.

Sakeenah, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* highlight the connection between their meditations and the achievement of states of mindfulness, emotional regulation, connection to God, mental health, and a better quality of life. These assertions all mirror to some degree a contemporary revival in Islamic psychotherapy and its embrace of Sufi *murāqabah* techniques for contemporary Muslims. Scholar, psychologist, and counselor Dr. Abdullah

Rothman, whose research explores the “intersections of Islamic spirituality and mental health practice,” is an example of someone whose public-interface work is reviving the Islamic science of psychology and bringing its tools for mindfulness to modern Muslims.⁴⁹ Rothman’s work excavates the observations and techniques of Islamic Sufi scholar al-Ḥārith al-Muhāsibī (d. 857) for transforming states of the mind and soul for greater wellness. Rothman aligns al-Muhāsibī’s methodological principles and psychological findings with the terminology of a twenty-first century, English-speaking Muslim audience by employing the now familiar Western notions of mindfulness and meditation.⁵⁰

Another example is the Yaqeen Institute: a US-based nonprofit research center with an expansive digital reach. One of its digital infographics, “How to Be a Mindful Muslim,” explains that “Islamic Meditation” is “a profound, forgotten tradition” and contrasts the mainstream marketplace meditations, which it calls “secular meditation,” with Islamic meditation.⁵¹ While the purpose of “secular meditation,” the Yaqeen Institute explains, is mental strength and well-being, Islamic mindfulness adds to these “spiritual strength.” Whereas the focus of “secular meditation” is “one’s own heart and mind,” *murāqabah* has “four aspects of focus”: Allah, *shaitan* (evil spirits), the heart, and the mind.⁵² The infographic lists the particular benefits of “Islamic meditation,” which range from stress relief, to “easier presence” in prayer, to increased compassion.⁵³ The digital text cites classical Sunni scholars such as al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), al-Suyūfī (d. 1505), and Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) in its explanations of the methodologies and applications of mindfulness and meditation as developed in the Islamic tradition. In this sense, both Abdullah Rothman and the Yaqeen Institute seem to be articulating the historical and scholarly underpinnings of the “Muslim meditation” products that *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* have created.

In ways that mirror the Yaqeen Institute’s view of meditation, these apps position their Muslim meditations as a perfect blend of medical science and the religious knowledge embedded deep within Islamic tradition. While mainstream mindfulness-based therapy models blend Buddhist and Western psychology, other paradigms do exist in contemporary Islamic tradition for mindfulness-based therapy grounded in the “science” of Sufism. Since the 1990s, psychotherapy practices in the West have incorporated elements of Buddhist meditation for stress-reduction. In contemporary Islamic psychotherapy, “the application of classical Sufi understanding of human nature and mental and spiritual health issues has stimulated a new and dynamic discourse about the use of the Sufi practice of mindfulness.”⁵⁴ Within a traditional Sufi *ṭarīqah* the normative meditative practice of *murāqabah* would be experienced under the direct leadership of a spiritual guide (*Shaykh*, *Shaykha*, *Pir*), “in order to avoid unpredictable unhealthy

experiences such as *waswasa* (i.e., whispers, obsessions) disturbing or frightening experiences.⁵⁵

By contrast, meditation practices on *Sakeenah*, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* lead the individual user to meditation in the absence of context, community, or teacher support. The user experience on these apps is particularly solitary in comparison to the connectivity engendered in many mainstream meditation apps, where users can see how many other people are doing the practice at the same moment via an in-app user feedback section. On *InsightTimer*, for example, meditators can post about their own experience with the app's meditations, and these messages are time stamped and listed below the module's start button. There are also options for live sessions and direct question-and-answer exchanges with teachers. These devices create some sense of a virtual community or at least a loose network in a web of interconnected users. At the conclusion of a *Sabr* meditation, by contrast, the user can only navigate to additional online meditations; there is no visible tracking that displays how many others have completed these practices. In fact, none of these three apps offer a direct way to interact with other users and to share thoughts. Since there is no one to connect with, and no way to know if other users are doing the same practice, there is little possibility of a virtual community developing. This meditation in isolation marked a curious response to a time of enhanced isolation during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Perhaps the apps' practices are simply aimed at making the experience of solitude less lonely—with an underlying assumption that meditating in these digitally mediated and Islamically inflected ways is better than being entirely alone and under duress.

Conclusion

Sakeenah, *Sabr*, and *Halaqah* each offer Islamically inflected, digitally produced, guided meditations. Though these reflect similarities with other meditation apps in what I call the online "meditation marketplace," I suggest they constitute a new genre of digital media with specific cultural, theological, and epistemological frames of Islamic piety. These apps allow Muslim religious participation in the new wave of meditation and mindfulness, revive a tradition deep within Islam (even if the apps' methods and backgrounds are often obscure), and echo the wellness industry's promises of delivering improved mental health, emotional stability, and stress reduction. Placing these sites in the broader context of the meditation marketplace, we see the creators of these Muslim apps engaging in a reclaiming of meditation as an authentic Islamic practice but without explicit reference to any institutional or authoritative sources. Breaking with historical precedent, these apps seem to signal that Muslims need not be involved in an organized community or traditional Sufi *ṭarīqah*—or even have a personal spiritual guide—to