



The Distinction Between a Masjid and a Muṣallā

نحمده ونصلي على رسوله الكريم

The Sanctity and Rank of a Masjid in Islām

The Masjid in Islām holds an exalted position - it is not merely a place of prayer, but the heart of Islamic life, where the remembrance of Allāh ﷻ, learning, and community unity are centred. Allāh ﷻ says:

فِي بُيُوتٍ أُذِنَ لِلَّهِ أَنْ تُرْفَعَ وَيُذْكَرَ فِيهَا اسْمُهُ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُ فِيهَا بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ

"In houses (Masājid) which Allāh has permitted to be raised and that His Name be mentioned therein; glorifying Him therein in the mornings and evenings". (Sūrah al-Nūr, 24:36)

And the Messenger of Allāh ﷺ said:

مَنْ بَنَى لِلَّهِ مَسْجِدًا يَتَّبِعِي بِهِ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ بَنَى اللَّهُ لَهُ مِثْلَهُ فِي الْجَنَّةِ

"Whoever builds a Masjid for the sake of Allāh, seeking thereby the pleasure of Allāh, Allāh will build for him a house in Paradise". (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

Thus, the Masjid is not owned by men - it belongs solely to Allāh ﷻ. Its construction, maintenance, and respect are acts of worship, while its desecration or misuse are among the gravest of sins.

Meanings of Masjid and Muṣallā

Linguistic Meaning

Masjid (مَسْجِد) - Derived from the root س-ج-د, meaning to prostrate. Hence, it literally refers to a place of prostration to Allāh ﷻ.

Muṣallā (مُصَلَّى / مِصَلَّى) — Derived from ṣalāh, meaning a place of prayer. The Prophet ﷺ said:

جُعِلَتْ لِيَ الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِدًا وَطَهُورًا

"The earth has been made for me a place of prostration and a means of purification". (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Ṭahārah)

This ḥadīth demonstrates that any ritually pure place on earth may serve as a Muṣallā for prayer. Yet, the legal Masjid is a site permanently dedicated to Allāh ﷻ, endowed as waqf, and subject to specific Aḥkām (juristic rulings) regarding ritual purity, property rights, and communal worship.

Note: Every legally recognised Masjid is inherently a Muṣallā, but not every Muṣallā qualifies as a Masjid. The distinction lies in its legal dedication - not in physical structure or size.

Legal Status and Irrevocability (Waqf)

A Masjid Shar‘ī (legal Masjid) is a place permanently endowed (waqf) for the worship of Allāh ﷻ. Once dedicated, its ownership is transferred solely to Allāh ﷻ, and it becomes unlawful to sell, inherit, or transfer. From that point, specific rulings apply - such as the prohibition of entering it in a state of major impurity and the permissibility of Sunnah I’tikāf (spiritual retreat) within it.

A Muṣallā, on the other hand, is a temporary or private prayer space - such as a hall, classroom, or workplace area used for prayer. It is not an endowed Masjid and therefore does not carry the same rulings, sanctity, or permanence.

Imām al-Kāsānī (d. 587H) writes:

إِذَا جُعِلَتِ الْأَرْضُ مَسْجِدًا وَأُوقِفَتْ عَلَى الْمُسْلِمِينَ خَرَجَتْ مِنْ مِلْكِ الْأَدَمِيِّينَ وَصَارَتْ مِلْكًا لِلَّهِ تَعَالَى

“When land is made into a Masjid and endowed for the Muslims, it exits human ownership and becomes the property of Allāh Almighty”. (Badā’i‘ al-Ṣanā’i‘)

The Mechanism of Waqf

A Masjid attains its elevated legal status through waqf - a perpetual Islamic endowment. Waqf entails the irrevocable dedication of property for public, charitable, or religious purposes. Once a property becomes waqf, it ceases to belong to any individual and becomes solely under the ownership of Allāh ﷻ. All donations and contributions made towards a waqf also become part of it, meaning they must be used exclusively for the purposes of that waqf and not diverted to anything else. This includes items such as books donated to a Masjid library, carpets for prayer, or funds given for its maintenance - all of which must remain within the waqf and be used solely for its intended purpose.

Conditions for a Valid Masjid Waqf

1) Legal Capacity of the Donor:

The donor (wāqif) must be an adult of sound mind and must fully own the property being endowed. A borrowed or co-owned property (mushā‘) complicates its validity.

2) Permanence and Irrevocability:

The dedication must be unconditional and final. Any temporary or revocable arrangement invalidates the legal status of a Masjid.

3) Ethical Purpose:

The property must be dedicated for a legitimate religious purpose - the worship of Allāh ﷻ or the communal benefit of Muslims.

Evidence from the Qur’ān

Allāh ﷻ says:

وَأَنَّ الْمَسَاجِدَ لِلَّهِ فَلَا تَدْعُوا مَعَ اللَّهِ أَحَدًا

“And the Masājid belong to Allāh, so do not invoke anyone along with Allāh”.
(Sūrah al-Jinn, 72:18)

Al-Imām al-Nawawī (RA) stated:

إِنَّ الْمَوْقُوفَ خَرَجَ عَنْ مِلْكِ الْوَاقِفِ، وَصَارَ مِلْكًا لِلَّهِ تَعَالَى

“Once the waqf is executed, the possession of the mawqūf becomes that of Allāh”. (Al-Majmū‘ Sharḥ al-Muhadhdhab)

Evidence from the Sunnah

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عُمَرَ، قَالَ: أَصَابَ عُمَرُ أَرْضًا بِخَيْبَرَ، فَأَتَى النَّبِيَّ ﷺ فَقَالَ: إِنِّي أَصَبْتُ أَرْضًا بِخَيْبَرَ، لَمْ أَصِبْ مَالًا قَطُّ هُوَ أَنْفَسُ عِنْدِي مِنْهُ، فَمَا تَأْمُرُنِي بِهِ؟ قَالَ: «إِنْ شِئْتَ حَبَسْتَ أَصْلَهَا وَتَصَدَّقْتَ بِهَا فَتَصَدَّقَ بِهَا عُمَرُ: إِنَّهُ لَا يُبَاعُ أَصْلُهَا وَلَا يُوهَبُ وَلَا يُورَثُ»

‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Umar (RA) reported: ‘Umar (RA) acquired a piece of land in Khaybar and came to the Prophet ﷺ, saying: “O Messenger of Allāh, I have obtained a piece of land in Khaybar, and I have never acquired any property more valuable to me than this. What do you command me to do with it?” The Prophet ﷺ replied: “If you wish, keep its principal intact and give its benefits in charity. So ‘Umar (RA) gave it as ṣadaqah, declaring that the property must not be sold, given away, or inherited.” (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

Imām al-Nawawī (RA) comments:

وَفِي هَذَا الْحَدِيثِ أَصْلُ الْوَقْفِ: أَنَّهُ لَا يُبَاعُ، وَلَا يُوهَبُ، وَلَا يُورَثُ، وَيَبْقَى دَائِمًا عَلَى حُكْمِ مِلْكِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى

“This ḥadīth forms the basis of waqf: it cannot be sold, gifted, or inherited, and remains perpetually under the ownership of Allāh”. (Al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj)

Thus, a Masjid established as waqf becomes permanent in its dedication to Allah, and its ownership is irrevocable.

The concepts of waqf (endowment) and mushā‘ (undivided property) are vital aspects of Islamic property law - especially in defining the difference between a fully consecrated masjid and a temporary Muṣallā. This distinction preserves the sanctity and permanence of the Masjid as the true house of Allāh ﷻ.

Key Concepts in Islamic Property Law

1. Undivided Property (مُشَاعٌ) — Mushā‘

Mushā‘ refers to property jointly owned by two or more individuals, where the specific physical portion belonging to each owner has not been legally or physically separated. For example, two brothers may jointly own a farm (mushā‘), but neither has marked out his particular section of land.

2. Partition (إِفْرَازٌ) — Ifrāz

Ifrāz is the legal and physical act of partitioning mushā‘ property. Through this process, the jointly held asset is divided into distinct, clearly demarcated portions, thereby ending the shared ownership and granting each individual an independent title.

3. Endowment (وَقْفٌ) — Waqf

Waqf is the foundational principle of religious endowment in Islām. It entails severing an individual’s ownership of a property’s corpus (land or building) and dedicating its benefits - such as rent, produce, or usage - to a perpetual charitable or religious cause. Once executed, the property becomes the legal possession of Allāh ﷻ, and no person retains the right to sell, inherit, or revoke it.

4. Prayer Area (مُصَلَّى) — Muṣallā

A Muṣallā is a designated area used for prayer but lacking the formal legal status of a consecrated Masjid. It may be a room within a building, an open field, or any temporary prayer space. In cases where waqf was established incorrectly - for instance, without proper ifrāz - private ownership rights may not be fully extinguished, or the condition of perpetuity may not be legally fulfilled. As such, its sanctity and rulings differ from that of a Masjid shar‘ī.

Conditions for a Place to Attain Masjid Status

A space used for prayer only becomes a true Masjid when certain conditions of waqf are fulfilled:

1. Ownership and Authority: The land must be owned outright by the person or body endowing it - not rented or shared.
2. Permanent Dedication: The endowment must be perpetual, not temporary or conditional.
3. Expressed Intention (Niyyah): The wāqif (donor) must explicitly or implicitly declare it a Masjid for Allāh ﷻ.
4. Public Accessibility: It must be open for all Muslims to pray - not restricted to a private group or family.
5. Designated Boundaries: The Masjid area must be physically defined (walls, structure, or documented limits).
6. Free from Joint Ownership: Shared land must be divided before endowment to ensure clear ownership.

If these conditions are absent, the space remains a Muṣallā, not a Masjid.

Thus, prayer halls in rented shops, schools, or offices - even if regularly used for prayer - are not legal Masājid but Muṣallās.

Ibn Nujaym, in al-Baḥr al-Rā'iq, states:

وَحَاصِلُهُ أَنَّ شَرْطَ كَوْنِهِ مَسْجِدًا أَنْ يَكُونَ سَفْلُهُ وَعُلُوُّهُ مَسْجِدًا لِيَنْقَطِعَ حَقُّ الْعَبْدِ عَنْهُ لِقَوْلِهِ تَعَالَى: وَأَنَّ الْمَسْجِدَ لِلَّهِ

“The condition for a Masjid is that its lower and upper levels be dedicated, so that the right of the servant is completely cut off from it, as Allāh says: ‘And the Masājid belong to Allāh’.”

Juristic Differences Between a Masjid and Muṣallā

Ruling	In a Masjid (Waqf)	In a Muṣallā (Non-Waqf)
Major impurity (Janābah)	Entry prohibited	Permissible
Menstruation / Nifās	Entry prohibited	Permissible
Sunnah I'tikāf	Permissible only in a Masjid	Not Permissible
Buying/selling/renting	Prohibited	Permissible if appropriate
Change of use or sale	Prohibited	Permitted if necessary
Funerals/gatherings	Permissible with decorum	At discretion

Imām al-Sarakhsī states:

الْمَسْجِدُ خَرَجَ عَنِ مِلْكِ النَّاسِ وَصَارَ لِلَّهِ تَعَالَى خَالِصًا، فَلَا يَجُوزُ بَيْعُهُ وَلَا هِبَتُهُ

“The Masjid exits human ownership and becomes exclusively for Allāh ﷻ; hence, it cannot be sold or gifted”. (al-Mabsūṭ, vol. 12, p. 131)

Imām Ibn ‘Abidīn similarly notes:

“The defining sign of a Masjid is perpetual public use for ṣalāh through a valid waqf”.

(Radd al-Muḥtār)

The Masjid Jāmi‘ is the legally recognised mosque designated for Jumu‘ah prayers. Only a Masjid established through valid waqf can fulfil this obligation, whereas a Muṣallā cannot host obligatory Jumu‘ah or I’tikāf due to its temporary legal status.

Muṣallā: Functionality and Flexibility

The Muṣallā is any valid location used for prayer that lacks the full legal dedication of a masjid. Common examples include:

- Prayer rooms in offices or schools
- Airport or train station prayer areas
- Temporary ‘Eīd grounds (‘Eīdgāh)

Legal Features

- Ownership: Remains private or commercial property.
- Sale / Transfer: Can be sold, rented, or repurposed.
- Entry of Ritually Impure Individuals: Permitted, unlike in a legally established Masjid.

Prophetic Guidance

صَلَاةُ الْجَمَاعَةِ تَفْضُلُ صَلَاةَ الْفَدِّ بِسَبْعٍ وَعِشْرِينَ دَرَجَةً

“Prayer in congregation is better than prayer alone by twenty-seven degrees”. (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī)

While a Muṣallā provides a valid place for ṣalāh, the spiritual virtue and sanctity remain greater in a true Masjid - the dedicated house of Allāh ﷻ.

Ritual and Communal Implications

Ḥadīth on Entry Restrictions:

أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ، هَذَا الْمَسْجِدُ حَرَامٌ عَلَى كُلِّ جُنُبٍ مِنَ الرِّجَالِ وَعَلَى كُلِّ حَائِضٍ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ، إِلَّا النَّبِيَّ وَأَزْوَاجَهُ، وَعَلِيًّا وَفَاطِمَةَ بِنْتَ الرَّسُولِ ﷺ

Translation: “O people, this Masjid is forbidden for men in a state of major impurity and for women during menstruation, except the Prophet ﷺ, his wives, ‘Alī, and Fāṭimah”. (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

Common Misconceptions

“Entire Building Becomes Masjid”

→ Only the space placed under an irrevocable waqf attains the status of a Masjid; commercial or residential floors above or below remain private property.

“Entry Prohibitions Apply Universally”

→ The restriction for those in a state of Janābah or menstruation applies only to legally established Masājid, not to Muṣallās or temporary prayer spaces.

“Reward is Equal Everywhere”

→ Congregational Masājid provide the highest reward, while a Muṣallā offers a valid yet comparatively lesser reward.

“If prayers are held regularly, it becomes a Masjid”

→ False. Regular use for prayer does not make it a Masjid unless it has been permanently endowed to Allāh ﷻ through a valid waqf.

“We can relocate the Masjid later”

→ Once a Masjid has been endowed as waqf, it cannot be relocated, sold, or exchanged - even to build a larger one elsewhere - unless qualified scholars and courts of Sharīah approve it under exceptional juristic necessity.

Practical Steps to Establish a Shar‘ī Masjid

- 1) Verify ownership — ensure the land is owned outright and free of disputes.
- 2) Declare the waqf — verbally or in writing, stating “I endow this land as a Masjid for Allāh ﷻ”.
- 3) Mark the boundaries — build or document the physical limits.
- 4) Hold the first congregational ṣalāh — signifying active dedication.
- 5) Register and protect — legally document the waqf under Islamic and civil law if possible.
- 6) Appoint trustees (nuzzār) — not as owners, but as caretakers.
- 7) Preserve sanctity — maintain cleanliness, avoid worldly uses, and uphold the dignity of the house of Allāh ﷻ.

Conclusion

The distinction between a Masjid and a Muṣallā is vital - it determines whether a place is truly a consecrated house of Allāh ﷻ or merely a temporary space for prayer. A Masjid established through valid waqf holds unique sanctity, legal rulings, and spiritual merit unmatched by any other location. Allāh ﷻ says: *“Only those who believe in Allāh and the Last Day build and maintain the mosques of Allāh”*. (Sūrah al-Tawbah, 9:18)

Building, maintaining, and honouring Masājid is among the greatest acts of devotion and ṣadaqah jāriyah. The Prophet ﷺ said: *“Whoever builds a Masjid for the sake of Allāh, Allāh will build for him a similar house in Paradise”*. (al-Bukhārī; Muslim)

May Allāh ﷻ grant us sincerity, understanding, and the honour of contributing to true houses of worship that illuminate our communities in this world and the next.

References:

- Badā’i‘ al-Ṣanā’i – Imām al-Kāsānī
- Al-Majmū‘ Sharḥ al-Muhadhdhab - al-Imām al-Nawawī
- Al-Minhāj Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj - al-Imām al-Nawawī
- Al-Mabsūṭ – Imām al-Sarakhsī
- Radd al-Muḥtār - Imām Ibn ‘Ābidīn

Written by: Mufti Shahid Mustafa Shah

Editors: Dr. Shabbir Ahmed, Maulana Eshfaq Akbar