Urban sustainability in the tradition of Islam

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Abstract

The attention paid by the tradition of Islam to the natural and urban environments is reflected in certain principles that are clearly found in the basic sources of this tradition, the Qur'an and sunnah. Other principles have grown within the traditional built environment of early Muslims.

This paper analyses the traditional Islamic ideals concerning the natural and urban environments. As far as the natural environment, preservation, while utilisation of natural resources, is the principle in which Islam has defined the relationship between man and nature. Islam has set up a responsibility for man towards nature. This responsibility evolves from the role of man as a user of natural resources and a preserver of the natural balance as well.

In regard to the urban environment, Shariah, the traditional Islamic law, views that planning and regulating the built environment should support morals and improvement of society. As urban planning decisions determine the shape of social life in the built environment, urban zoning and land use regulations should focus on social integration and protection of people's rights and needs. Islam views that the urban environment must reflect simple and moderate lifestyle of inhabitants. It signifies residents' equal rights to clean water, air and light. Therefore, it prohibits any source or action that directly or indirectly affects these rights.

1 Introduction

As a result of the oil crisis of the 1970s, which alarmed most decision makers in the West, a new movement emerged calling for alternative resources of energy and a lifestyle that does not depend on oil. This lifestyle has been symbolised as "sustainable living." Advocates of sustainability claim that sustainable living satisfies our needs today, without diminishing the prospects of future generations to do the same. They ask for a balance in the consumption of resources so others can benefit from them in the future. To them, sustainable living also demands a reduction in the impact of transportation and industry on humans and the environment. They propagate the importance of using materials in continuous cycles and constantly reliable sources of energy as well as
bringing people together to enrich the qualities of being human. They also demand simplicity in life and consideration of others’ needs [1]. It is interesting to note that the tradition of Islam has embodied principles for sustainability since some 1400 years ago. Indeed, defenders of sustainability admit that traditional cultures and ideologies comprise ideas and values on which sustainable living should be based. The attention paid by shariah, the Islamic legal system, to the natural and urban environments of Muslims is reflected in certain principles that ultimately aim to enhance and protect social values and rights. These principles are clearly found in the basic sources of shariah, the Qur’an and sunnah (the tradition of Prophet Mohammed), while others have grown within the traditional built environment of Muslims. This environment represents the application of what Islam has provided in the way of social and physical principles. From the birth of Islam in the seventh century until the end of the nineteenth century Islamic morals were a major force shaping that environment, providing stability and continuity in its urban planning and design.

This paper analyses traditional Islamic principles concerning the physical environment of Muslims. These principles would work as a framework for urban sustainability, anytime and anywhere. The paper contains two sections each of which deals with a scale: the natural environment and the urban environment. In these sections, some relevant Islamic principles are supported by traditional verdicts. These verdicts were ruled upon by respected judges and jurists on lawsuits in the traditional environment of early Muslims. Most of them were derived from the basic sources of shariah, namely, the Qur’an and sunnah.

2 Natural Environment

Islam has set up a responsibility for man towards the natural environment. This responsibility evolves from the role of man as God's khalifa (inheritor or vicegerent) on earth. In this regard, the Qur’an says, "He is that has made you inheritors in the earth: if, then, any do reject (Allah), their rejection (works) against themselves" (Qur’an, Su. 35:39.) In their research on the Islamic principles regarding conservation of the natural environment, Abou Bakr Bakader, et al. [2], interpreted this Qur’anic verse to mean that man is only a manager of the earth and not a proprietor, a beneficiary and not an ordainer. They said, "God has created all the sources of life and resources of nature so that man may realise the following objectives: a) contemplation and worship, b) inhabitation and construction, c) utilisation, and d) enjoyment and appreciation of beauty."

Man’s responsibility towards the natural environment as emphasised in shariah can be framed within the two principles: utilisation of natural resources and preservation of the natural balance.

2.1 Utilisation of Natural Resources

According to shariah, the utilisation and sustainable use of natural resources and elements are the right and privilege of all people. This right is to a certain degree considered by Islam as an obligation. Both the Qur’an and sunnah stress this right or benefit in commanding Muslims for example to restore derelict lands and act as good stewards of nature. In fact, the Qur’an makes it clear that the relationship between man and nature is a relationship of utilisation and development. It says,
Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alteration of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their salves between the sky and the earth (Here) indeed are signs for a people that are wise (Qur'an, Su. 2:164.)

In another verse the Qur'an also says,

It is He who sendeth down rain from the skies; with it We produce vegetation of all kinds: from some We produce green (crops), out of which We produce grain, heaped up (at harvest); out of the date palm and its sheath (or spathes) (come) clusters of dates hanging low and near: and (then there are) gardens of grapes, and olives, and pomegranates, each similar (in kind) yet different (in variety): when they begin to bear fruit, feast your eyes with the fruit and the ripeness thereof. Behold! in these things there are signs for people who believe (Qur'an, Su, 6:99.)

In a hadith (a Prophetic saying) indirectly reveals the command of the sunnah to benefit from available natural resources, the Prophet says, "On Doomsday, if anyone has a shoot in hand, he should plant it" [3].

While Islam supports utilising local natural resources and elements, it disapproves of any selfishness associated with this utilisation. Natural resources have been provided by God for the welfare of all people. The monetary benefit derived from these resources should, therefore, permeate to all people and should not under any circumstances be allowed to be diverted to certain individuals or groups. Islam also disapproves of harm that could be inflicted upon others as a result of this utilisation.

2.2 Preservation of the Natural Balance

Although Islam asks people to benefit from the natural environment for their living necessities, it requires them to maintain it. Many Qur'anic verses and Prophetic hadiths command Muslims not to abuse or damage plants and animals. For example, a Qur'anic verse that underlines the obligation of protecting nature says, "There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you" (Qur'an, Su, 6:38.) A similar verse (Qur'an, Su, 6:59) tells us that all creatures are of His domain, and not a leaf falls but by His will. Both verses are testimonies to the fact that natural creatures and elements are co-inhabitants on this universe and are to be treated as communities as humans and should not be harmed.

Likewise, the Prophet not only prohibited damaging natural elements such as cutting trees, but also mentioned that irresponsibility in doing so is a severe act. In an attempt to maintain a clean environment that supports the health and efficiency of people, the Prophet emphasises cleanliness as a fundamental habit of the Muslim's daily life. He says, "Cleanliness is half of faith" [4].

The Islamic principle of preventing the destruction or abuse of any natural element that provides benefit (i.e. food, shade, etc.) for others aims also to protect people's rights (e.g., utilisation) to the natural environment. Therefore, man should not distort natural elements; they should remain permanently suitable for human life and settlement. Nor should he use natural resources irrationally or in such a way as to destroy other resources or spoil their habitats and food bases. For instance, water as a basic natural element, is, according to the Qur'an (i.e. Sus. 21:30, 2:164, 6:99, etc.), created as the source and origin of life. Then this element should be preserved by avoiding any action or
element that spoils it. Similarly, air is created for the perpetuation and preservation of life. It is also another clear evidence for God's omnipotence, bounty, provision and perfection (i.e. Qur'an, Su. 21:164), thus, it should be kept pure and unpolluted. Chemical and biological products that could directly or indirectly damage natural elements are forbidden by Islam. This is also applied to noise, wastes, exhaust gases, radioactive substances, insecticides and other pesticides and intoxicants.

The intention of this law is to preserve the harmony that is provided in the natural environment. Indeed, the Qur'an stresses the preservation of this harmony and says that whatever God has created in this universe was created in due proportion and measure both quantitatively and qualitatively. It says, "Every single thing is before His sight, in (due) proportion" (Qur'an, Su. 13:8.) And, "It is He Who created all things, and ordered them in due proportions" (Qur'an, Su. 25:2.)

The harmony God has provided in nature symbolises His greatness, hence guides man to meditate upon and contemplate God. Therefore, it is a responsibility of man to preserve this ecological order.

3 Urban Environment

Islam signifies urbanisation as the concentration on the performance of most of Islamic pillars requires a fixed settlement or settled way of life. However, neither the Qur'an nor sunnah contains precise urban planning codes that could be used in planning and designing an urban environment. On the other hand, Islam, through its shariah, has provided principles that determine the way of life of Muslim communities and individuals in the urban environment and in turn the environment itself. In this respect, Oleg Grabar [5] says in his study of the traditional urban environment of Muslims, "it is Islam which gave resilience to the Muslim city and to its bourgeoisie, not because it was necessarily aware of all urban problems but because it had the abstract form in which all of them could be resolved."

The traditional urban environment of Muslims was not an external appearance of buildings and streets per se. It was less the result of individual's desires than the result of society's collective objectives and aspirations. This is why the urban characteristics and conditions of most traditional Muslim cities share great similarities. These characteristics are the Islamic principles of urban sustainability. Their logic is different from that of modern urban and building regulations. It does not confine man's creativity or his individual or free response to his necessities, while the logic of modern regulations obliges man to behave according to pre-determined clichés. The first depends on the restraint of the self, but the second depends on the restraint of the law.

A deep insight into the principles, which Islam has set up for sustainable urban environment of Muslims, could be obtained by inspecting the response of Islam towards three issues: wealth consumption, humility and rights to natural light and air.

3.1 Wealth Consumption

Islam is the religion of justice and moderation, and the Muslim 'ummah (nation), as God describes it, is a "middle nation." He says, "Thus have We made of you an Ummah justly balanced..." (Qur'an, Su. 2:143.) Therefore, the Muslim should be balanced in all of his affairs. Islam prohibits wastefulness and extravagant spending and commands Muslims to be moderate in their living
habits and financial affairs. He says, "O children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer: eat and drink; but waste not by excess, for Allah loveth not the wasters" (Qur’an, Su. 7:31.) The Qur’an describes those who are extravagant in spending as Satans' brothers. It says, "But squander not (your wealth) in the manner of a spendthrift. Verily spendthrifts are brothers of the Evil Ones" (Qur’an, Su. 17:26-27.)

According to Islam, increased income does not mean a higher level of consumption. Instead, self-restraint should be the principle of consumption in the Muslim's living. M. Kahf [6] claims in his comparative research on the Islamic state and the welfare state that the concept of richness (or high income) was defined by the Prophet as being contentment with what one has. And the general rule of spending is to keep the level of consumption to a minimum. This was expressed in the life of the Prophet and his companions and treated as a virtue throughout Islamic history. A hadith says, "Jabar b. Abdullah reported that Allah's Messenger said: There should be a bed for a man, a bed for his wife and the third one for the guest, but the fourth one is for Satan" [7].

Islam confirms that wasting wealth means to spend it, in large or small amounts, on what God has prohibited or to squander it on unnecessary things. Such waste also jeopardises the rights of society. About this matter, the contemporary scholar Yusuf Al-Qaradawi [8] says,

Just as the wealth of others is sacred and any violation of it, whether secret or open, is prohibited, in like manner a person's own wealth is sacred with respect to himself; he should not waste it by extravagant spending, scattering it to the right and left. This is because the Muslim 'ummah, which constitutes an owner in addition to every other owner, has a right to the wealth of individuals. For this reason Islam has given the 'ummah the right to manage the properties of the weak-minded who squander their wealth.

On the other hand, balanced or frugal spending means resources are kept for benefiting other members of the society. This also minimises the competition for raw materials and maintains their prices at a relatively low level. It allows the needy members of the society to share the surplus. In the early days of Islam, the surplus of income, after keeping the consumption to the minimum, was set aside to meet socio-religious obligations such as the maintenance of kith and kin, orphans, widows, invalids and economically deprived members of the society. About how the individuals of the traditional Muslim society responded to this principle, Muhmud Ahmad and M. Akram Khan [9] in their study of the opinion of Islam on a number of economic issues say, "... it was in line with the overall philosophy that life in this world was transitory and the real value was attached to the 'akhirah [or the Hereafter]. So, involvement in increasing the material objects of this life would have been a contradiction."

God says, "Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just (balance) between those (extremes)" (Qur’an, Su. 25:67.) Explaining this verse, Al-Qaradawi [8] says, "spending much is squandering while spending little is greed, and moderation is best." One of many hadiths that stress the principle of moderate spending and are included in the outstanding shariah scholar 'Ibn Taymiyya's (1263-1328) [10] study of public duties in Islam, states, "Three things are the cause of salvation: fear of God in secret and in public, moderation in poverty and wealth, and speaking the truth whether angry or calm."
3.2 Humility

Islam is against obtrusiveness, vaingloriousness, conceit, or any behaviour that emotionally harms others and encourages injustice and discrimination. Thus, Islam requires the Muslim to be humble in all aspects of his life. This obligation has directly and indirectly been repeatedly declared in the Qur’an. God mentions in His book that life offers diversions and incitements including things that infatuate and encourage the individual to glorify and advocate himself. On the other hand, He states that there is a severe punishment for those who cannot control their desires and emotions toward the beauty of life and magnify themselves. The Qur’an is full of verses (e. g., 17:37, 57:20-23, 28:76-77, 31:18, 4:36, and 53:32) that ask for humility as a personal attribute of the Muslim and state the punishment for those who do not practise this virtue.

It is in an attempt to prevent vainglorious and self-advocating while encouraging simplicity and sustainability that Islam even teaches Muslims how to eat, sit, sleep, walk, dress, etc. Indeed, the Prophet ordered the followers to be humble in their dress, prohibited them from drinking or eating in gold or silver pots and considered these actions *haram* (forbidden and severely punishable acts.) About this matter, Al-Qaradawi [8] says,

> There is a social aim underlying these prohibitions. The prohibition of gold and silk to males is part of a broader Islamic program of combating luxuriousness in living. From the Qur’an point of view, luxurious living leads to weakness among nations and to their eventual downfall; the existence of luxury is also an expression of social injustice, as only a few can afford luxurious items at the expense of the deprived masses of people. In addition to this, luxurious living is an enemy of every call toward truth, justice, and social reform. The Qur’an says: "And when We intend that We should destroy a township, We permit its luxury-loving people to commit wickedness therein. Then the word is proved true against it, and We then destroy it utterly" (Qur’an, Su. 17:16.) And again, "And We did not send a Warner to any township without its luxury-loving people saying, 'Assuredly we are disbelievers in that with which you have been sent" (Qur’an, Su. 34:34.)

Consequently, all activities related to human needs (e. g., eating, drinking, and clothing) are allowed as long as the motive is not pride or arrogance. And any action that shows haughtiness, flaunts social status, or is exaggerated, eccentric, affected, capricious or over elaborate is forbidden.

The Islamic prohibition of self-advocating or conceit via exaggerating spending in the house is also driven from the Islamic point of view on the purpose of housing. To Islam, the house is to provide shelter from the climate and to secure the necessary privacy and safety. This purpose does not mean that the Muslim should spend large amounts of money on building beautiful houses, concerning himself with matters of secondary importance, such as ornamentation and unnecessary rooms.

Humility in the house is also a manifestation of the Islamic prohibition of indulgence in a luxurious life. The Prophet warned against infatuation with this life and required Muslims to challenge themselves by doing good deeds and avoiding conflicts. Such a warning is essential for social justice and solidarity. Indulgence in a luxurious life-style undoubtedly has serious effects on the morals and behaviour of individuals, and on society as a whole.

The Qur’an in many places warns against extravagance in buildings and their appearance which allow people to forget that their life in this world is temporary and might be shorter than their buildings. For instance, a Qur’anic
verse says, "Do ye build a landmark on every high place to amuse yourselves? And do ye get for yourselves fine buildings in the hope of living therein (forever)?" (Qur'an, Su. 26:128, 129.) In this verse, God is pointing to the people of the Prophet Hud, who warned them against amusement in life while forgetting retribution after death by immoderate attention to buildings as if they were going to live endlessly, as the buildings would.

The prohibition of self-advocating and profligacy does not necessarily mean that people should live in miserable housing or urban conditions. Beautification and elegance with balance are not merely permitted, but are required by Islam which forbids any attempt to prohibit them. This is according to God's saying, "Say: who has forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah, which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure (which He hath provided) for sustenance? Say: they are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgement" (Qur'an, Su. 7:32.) Islam demands Muslims to be careful about their appearance, dress decently and maintain their dignity. This is also applied to for example the house which the Prophet urged to keep clean as a vital expression of Islam. The Muslim is certainly free to desire beauty for his or her house while following the principle of humility and moderation in expense, in which the characteristics of his or her dwelling can be tidiness, cleanliness, simplicity and modesty.

Islam allows decoration that is balanced, not costly and not damaging to the feelings of less fortunate individuals. For instance, the outside of the dwelling should not conspicuously project an image of wealth to generate the envy of neighbours and passers-by, nor be an ascetic structure devoid of decoration. This was demonstrated in traditional Muslim houses, some of which included decoration on the facade. Yet that fine external treatment was not for stylistic consistency, nor a desire to show off or to draw attention to oneself. Humility and simplicity of the appearance of traditional houses were dominant to the extent that in some Islamic cities it was difficult to distinguish one house from another.

### 3.3 Right to natural light and air

Islam has emphasised the right of everyone to natural elements such as sunlight and air. In a group of hadiths collected by F. Karim [11], the Prophet said, "Do you know the rights of your neighbour? ... you must not build to exclude the breeze from him, unless you have his permission..."

Traditional jurists such as 'Ibn Wahb (d. 813) and Ashhab (d. 819-20) permitted a person to open windows within his house to receive sunlight and fresh air even if neighbours rejected these windows on the grounds that they facilitated intrusion onto their privacy. These jurists expressed their permission that as long as the window was high enough so that the passer-by could not be able to see behind it, then it should be allowed. Also in the traditional Muslim environment, it was prohibited to create any element in or modify the house in such a way that sunlight and natural air was prevented from reaching neighbouring houses. Jamel Akbar [12] referred to some cases where people modified their houses in a way that blocked the neighbours' windows and cut off their light and air. Such an act was ruled as the greater injury and prevented.

Shari'ah not only ensures the entry of natural air to houses but also its quality. It prohibits the spoiling of that air by smoke from other houses, and it considers causing a nuisance to neighbours by smoke as an act of damage. To Muslim jurists, smoke of any kind is considered harmful because of the reference in the Qur'an to it as a "penalty grievous." The Qur'an says, "Then
watch you thou for the Day that the sky will bring forth a kind of smoke (or mist) plainly visible enveloping the people: this will be a penalty grievous" (Qur'an, Su. 44:10, 11.)

Similar to smoke, excessive smell and any source which creates it, should not be allowed to offend others. The origin of this injunction is the Prophet's exclusion of those who have eaten onions and garlic from attending the mosque. He says, "Those who have eaten it should not come near our mosque. If you have to eat it, then cook it first." 'Ibn al-Rami [13] mentioned particularly that this hadith was followed in most jurists' ruling regarding the removal of garbage, effluent, and sources of unpleasant smells to neighbours.

In his analysis of scholastic rules of conduct in traditional residential areas and industry, Saleh Al-Hathloul [14] emphasises that traditional jurists ruled that the source of pollution whether it was dirt, noise, smoke, or odour must be prevented and kept away from people or residential area. As a result, residents' rights were supported by keeping or moving unneeded industries such as building material and comparable factories to the peripheries of the city.

Moreover, several traditional jurists disallowed any source of noise that caused discomfort to inhabitants. Noise was regarded as a harm which should be prevented. In a lawsuit, a person was prevented from constructing a stable next to his house because the animals' movement during the day and night prevented neighbours from sleeping. But at the same time, some jurists allowed the source of noise in the house if it was very necessary for the livelihood of its inhabitants, yet this ruling was not absolute especially if the noise was associated with vibration. There was a common agreement among Muslim jurists that vibration which caused damage to neighbours or their houses was not allowed and should be prevented. In one of the cases, a person in Tunis was ordered by a judge to remove a door in his house due to the vibration and discomfort it caused to neighbours by its creaking and slamming [12].

4 Summary and conclusion

The principles that tradition of Islam has set for urban sustainability come within two frameworks of teachings. The first is concerned with the natural environment while the other is with the urban environment. The traditional Islamic view on natural environment is that man should benefit from natural resources for his living. Yet, this benefit should be balanced and without any damage either to these resources or other individuals. Furthermore, and most importantly, future generations should be considered in the utilisation of natural resources.

As far as urban environment, Islam requires moderation in wealth consumption. It prohibits wastefulness and extravagant spending. It demands that self-restraint should be the principle of consumption in Muslims' life. Likewise, simplicity and humility in all aspects of life are required. Self-advocating and vaingloriousness through for example buildings are prohibited. Built environment therefore must reflect the simple, moderate and humble lifestyle of residents.

Islam made it clear that all individuals have the same right to clean water and air. It forbids any source or action that directly or indirectly affects the
quality of natural light, water and air. Excessive noise, smoke, heat and vibration are regarded harmful and should be prevented.

References