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# Islam and Global Commons: The Gap between Principles and Practices

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# About the Author

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Environmental and climate changes are gaining increasing international attention as it has become a global strategic issue affecting world security and stability. All people around the world have to shoulder their proportion of responsibility and play a part in returning the Earth to some semblance of balance. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims in the world today, who represent over 20% of the world's population. No one is exempt from the vagaries of climate change, and Muslims have to accept their share of the responsibility.

The first environmental conference held under the auspices of the United Nations in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972,<sup>1</sup> defined the environment as the balance of physical and social resources available at some time and in a place to satisfy human needs and aspirations. The Islamic concept of the environment is consistent with this definition; it is a comprehensive concept that covers human activities, flora and fauna, water and atmosphere, land use, etc.

Islamic environmentalism is embedded in the matrix of Islamic teachings. The Qur'an, the central religious text of Islam, is inherently conservationist and mainly concerns the issues of how human beings relate to the natural environment and the benefits that accrue from protecting it. The Qur'an contains approximately 200 verses dealing with different elements of the environment. Many Surahs of the Qur'an carry names of plants (e.g. Al-Tin), minerals (e.g. Al-Hadid), and natural phenomena (e.g. Al-Thunder).

According to the Qur'anic principles, Allah is the Lord, Creator, the One who sustains all beings, He encompasses everything of His creation. He created the Earth in a perfect equilibrium of natural resources and cycles in which all living beings thrive. It is in Muslims' responsibility to follow the Qur'anic principles and the example of Prophet Mohammad, who protected the rights of all the living, conserved water, established protected areas, renewed and recycled his possessions, and took delight in the created world.

Muslims like other humans are accountable for all their actions. They have corrupted the Earth in their pursuit of economic growth and consumption, causing climate change, pollution, soil erosion and deforestation, and damage to human health. They are responsible to establish good and to avert evil, with no right to oppress the rest of the Creation, or to cause it damage. Human conscience requires to treat everything with care, compassion, and utmost good.

This paper will focus on the gap between the Islamic principles that promote conservation and development of the environment and the practices in Muslim countries that are still a far cry from these principles. It also refers to some efforts to overcome this gap towards greener practices.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment', Stockholm, 1972, June 16. Available from: <http://legal.un.org/avl/ha/dunche/dunche.html>

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# Islamic Principles and Ecology

Although the global environmental crisis is rather recent, there is a solid religious case for green practices in the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition, the Sunnah, as the main two authoritative sources of the Islamic legal system, the Sharia, that all Muslims around the world have adopted. An environmental framework is inherently founded within the traditional principles of Islam, and it is possible to extend these principles considering contemporary changes.

In 1986, HRH Prince Philip, then President of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International, invited five leaders of five of the major religions of the world, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, to discuss how their faiths could help preserve the natural environment. The meeting took place in Assisi, Italy, the birth place of St Francis, the Catholic saint of ecology. It resulted in declaration of key statements of the five faiths outlining their own distinctive traditions and approach to the care of nature.

In the Assisi Declarations on Nature the Muslim statement focused on the central concept of Islam which is 'Tawhid', or the Unity of God. 'Allah is Unity; and His Unity is also reflected in the unity of mankind, and the unity of man and nature. His trustees are responsible for maintaining the unity of His creation, the integrity of the Earth, its flora and fauna, its wildlife and natural environment.' Unity is maintained by balance and harmony in the whole of the living. 'So unity, trusteeship and accountability, that is Tawhid, Khalifah and Akhirah, the three central concepts of Islam, are also the pillars of the environmental ethics of Islam. They constitute the basic values taught by the Qur'an.'<sup>2</sup> It is these values which led Prophet Mohammad to say: 'Whoever plants a tree and diligently looks after it until it matures and bears fruit is rewarded.' For all these reasons Muslims see themselves as having a responsibility towards the world and the environment, all of which are the creations of Allah. They do not have any specific festivals in which they show their appreciation for the harvest or the world. Instead they express their gratitude to Allah regularly for his Creation.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Assisi Declarations. Messages on Humanity and Nature from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam & Judaism', Basilica Di S. Francesco, Assisi, Italy. WWF 25th Anniversary, 1986, September 29. Available from: <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/THE%20ASSISI%20DECLARATIONS.pdf>

Islam, like other religions, shares special concern about the environment. There are two main dimensions of this aspect. The first dimension is preserving the environment in its comprehensive sense and preventing deterioration of the environment, pollution or wasteful use of its natural resources, which is considered corruption and disobedience.

In the Qur'an and Hadith (Statements of Mohammad), Muslims are instructed to look after the environment and not to damage it. Islam prohibits cutting or destroying plants and forbids the abuse of natural resources. The Prophet said, Allah is good, He loves good, clean and loves cleanliness, forbidding throwing garbage in the streets and in front of houses. Islam orders to preserve water and forbids excessive water consumption even if one was 'by the side of a flowing river'. Islam calls for preserving the environment even during wartime. Prophet Mohammad recommended his army not to burn a palm, not to take off a tree, and not to demolish houses. Likewise, Islam prohibits hunting and cutting plants during pilgrimage.

The Islamic perception of the natural resources has its roots in the Qur'an. The Qur'an contains important principles for environmental conservation and shows that environmental damage and mismanagement of natural resources are unacceptable. The Qur'an states: 'Eat and drink: But be not excessive. Indeed, God does not like those who commit excess' (Surah 'Al-Araf' 7:31; 'Al-An'am' 6:141). It is also stressed that 'the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful' (Surah 'Al-Isra' 17:27). Based on these statements, conservation of all natural resources from misuse is a mandatory duty. In fact, the Qur'an plays an important role in promoting sustainable development in Muslim countries.

Islamic environmentalism is based on the principle of human property of nature that is the right of all people, Muslims and non-Muslims. Environment must be preserved as it is given from God and taken care of as the inheritance of successive generations. Man is entrusted with management of and investment in the environment in which he lives. He must maintain and protect it from any misuse or destruction. The environment with its natural resources is not considered to be exclusive property of a generation, rather it is a permanent inheritance of the mankind. These principals are consistent with the postulates of sustainable development and the concept of environmental impact assessment of projects, which means that assessment of any project should take into consideration its effects on environment. The economic benefit, which may often be unsustainable for environmental considerations, should not be the only standard for projects' assessment.

The second dimension of Islamic environmentalism concerns the issue of not only preserving, but also developing the environment. Islam urges to work on agriculture and afforestation, thus expanding the green area, which provides fresh air, reduces the temperature and moisturizes the atmosphere. Planting is encouraged in Islamic teachings 'even on doomsday'. Many Hadiths instruct Muslims to plant and expand the green area while exploiting the land. Prophet Mohammad said: 'No Muslim who plants (trees) and from their fruits the human beings or the beasts or birds eat, but that would be taken as an act of charity.' Development of the environment is enough reason for the ownership of land. The Prophet said: 'Whoever revives dead land it should be his' to encourage planting. He also said: 'Whoever has land should cultivate it himself or give it to his (Muslim) brother.'

A number of Muslim scientists showed a clear interest in environmental problems, especially environmental pollution, its causes and consequences. For example, Avicenna (Ibn Sina)<sup>3</sup> spoke about water pollution. Abu Marwan Al Andalusi (Ibn Zuhr)<sup>4</sup> focused in his book *Simplification Concerning Therapeutics and Diet* on air pollution caused by swamps. Ibn Al-Matran Al Demashki<sup>5</sup> emphasized the role of the environment pollution in diagnosis of diseases in his book *The Garden of Physicians and the Meadow of the Intelligent*, which is considered an advanced vision for the science of environmental medicine. Another Muslim scientist, Muhammad Ibn Sa'id Al-Tamimi (Abu Abdullah),<sup>6</sup> wrote a book titled *The Extension of Life by Purifying the Air of Corruption and Guarding against the Evil Effects of Pestilences*. It focused on environmental – air, water and soil – pollution, its causes, effects, and methods of combating and preventing it. In his turn, Ibn Khaldun<sup>7</sup> considered air pollution a cause of frequent death. And Ibn Al-Qayyim Al Jawziyya<sup>8</sup> talked about the role of air pollution in spreading of plague.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibn Sina, or Avicenna in Latin transcription, a Persian polymath of the Islamic Golden Age (8–14th centuries), lived in 980–1037.*

<sup>4</sup> *Abu-Marwan Abd al-Malik ibn Abi al-Ala Ibn Zuhr (1094–1162), or Avenzoar in Latin transcription, an Arab physician, surgeon, and poet, was the most well-regarded physician of his era.*

<sup>5</sup> *Muwaffaq al-Din Abu Nasr As'ad ibn Abu Al-Fath ibn al-Maṭran, died in 1191, was a highly skilled and well-known Arab physician.*

<sup>6</sup> *Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Tamimi (Abu Abdullah, or Al-Tamimi, the physician) died in Cairo most likely in 990, was a physician, pharmacist and Arab botanist.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibn Khaldun, an Arab historiographer and historian of the Islamic Golden Age, lived in 1332–1406.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibn Al-Qayyim Al Jawziyya, an important medieval Islamic jurisconsult, theologian, and spiritual writer of the Islamic Golden Age, lived in 1292–1350.*

<sup>9</sup> *Al-Zayadi, MF, 2009, 'Islam and the Environment', paper presented (in Arabic) to the 19th Session of the Conference of the Islamic Fiqh Academy of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Sharjah, UAE, 26-30 April.*

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# Environmental Degradation in Muslim Countries

Putting Islamic principles of sustainable development into practice is not an easy task. Many Muslim countries are suffering from environmental challenges and face risks, especially the most populated nations such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Egypt. According to the World Health Organization two out of the ten most polluted cities on Earth in 2016 are Peshawar and Rawalpindi in Pakistan. Pakistan's urban air pollution is the cause of more than 20,000 premature deaths among adults each year.

Indonesia is another one of the most polluted countries in Asia. Air pollution caused by rapidly rising levels of motor vehicle emissions (90 per cent of vehicles still use leaded fuel) and by forest fires as a result of palm oil plantation development, have given rise to respiratory problems that have become the country's sixth most common cause of death. The human cost of air pollution in Indonesia is shocking. Haze from forest fires is an annually occurring socio-ecological crisis in Indonesia that releases greenhouse gas emissions that are monumental in scale. The 2015 haze caused upward of 75,000 cases of upper respiratory infections. Moreover, a 2010 study found that 57.8 per cent of the population of Jakarta suffered from various diseases related to air pollution, including bronchial asthma, bronchopneumonia, and coronary artery diseases.<sup>10</sup>

Indonesia's Kalimantan and Citarum River Basin in West Java, an area that is home to around 9 million people and some 2,000 factories, risk exposure to toxic pollution. The river, which is used among other causes for human consumption and to irrigate rice farms, is contaminated by a wide range of toxins, including aluminium and manganese. Drinking water tests have shown lead at levels of more than 1,000 times above standards. Indonesia is also the second largest plastic polluter in the world, coming just behind China. Earlier last year, officials in Bali declared 'garbage emergency' across 3.7 miles (6 km) of the island's beaches, deploying 700 cleaners and 35 trucks. In only several days they collected up to 100 tons of waste. The Bali officials

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<sup>10</sup> Yudha, SW, 2016, 'Air Pollution in Indonesia: Challenges and Imperatives for Change', the National Bureau of Asian Research, April 11. Available from: <http://nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=665>

announced their aim to reduce plastic waste in the sea by 70% by 2025, but it is clear that there is still much work to be done.<sup>11</sup>

In Egypt, in addition to waste management problems and garbage crisis, the skies of Cairo and the surrounding cities annually suffer from smog, known in Egypt as 'the black cloud'. The dense smoke first appeared over Nile Delta cities and Cairo in 1997. It spread rapidly, and now it accounts for 42 per cent of the country's air pollution, according to the Egyptian Ministry of Environment. The smog is partially caused by farmers piling up rice straw and burning it, because they lack the means to transfer the material from their fields to recycling centres. According to the data, 1.7 million feddans (1 feddan = 1.038 acres) were planted with rice in 6 Egyptian governorates that left 3.4 million tonnes of straw.

In Bangladesh, the electronic waste, or the e-waste, is a seriously looming challenge. It is growing exponentially in Hazaribagh, which is home to most of the country's 270 registered tanneries. Every day, they collectively produce approximately 22,000 cubic litres of toxic waste, including *hexavalent chromium* that causes cancer, into the Buriganga, Dhaka's main river and key water supply.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia are also far from transforming the Islamic general recognition of environmental principles into practice. Lack of environmental policy in Saudi Arabia can be linked to an enormous reliance on oil. Saudi Arabia's oil industry subsidises energy use and magnifies carbon dioxide emissions. Urbanization and high living standards contribute to ground, water, and air pollution. These environmental issues cause a variety of health problems, including asthma and cancer.

In general, Muslim countries are developing nations. And not unlike most developing countries, they had to pay an environmental price for their industrialization. Moreover, environmental education almost does not exist in Muslim countries, not to mention the lack of strict enforcement of laws concerning environmental pollution, or even existence of laws of this kind *per se*. This situation exacerbates the environmental degradation and makes pollution of the environment a daily practice.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Bali's battle against plastic pollution', 2018, BBC, March 7. Available from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-43312464>

<sup>12</sup> Larson, N, 2013, 'Two of World's Worst Polluted Places Are in Indonesia: Environmentalists', *Jakarta Globe*, November 5. Available from: <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/two-of-worlds-worst-polluted-places-are-in-indonesia-environmentalists/>

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# Towards Greener Practices

There is an urgent need for Muslim countries to be greener in management and business in accordance with the Islamic Sharia whereby the correlation between the protection of the natural environment and economic development is very close. Without appropriate management, great ideas could not be implemented for the purpose of achieving green economy. There are three pillars of environmental policies that every Muslim country should conduct.

The first pillar is a national policy that each state adopts. For instance, the United Arab Emirates has been the leader in applying clean technology and relying on alternative sources of energy in the past few years. Development of a sustainable international tourism industry in Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco is another example in this regard. Saudi Arabia is taking some environmental action such as the construction of a renewable energy industry. Egypt intends to supply 20 per cent of generated electricity from renewable sources by 2022. Morocco plans a 13 billion USD expansion of wind, solar and hydroelectric power generation capacity and associated infrastructure that allow the country to produce 42 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2020.

The second pillar is the collective effort by means of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the second largest intergovernmental organization after the United Nations with membership of 57 Muslim countries. One of the aims of the OIC is to achieve sustainable and comprehensive human development and economic wellbeing in member states. Within this context, the Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers was launched in 2002.

At the close of its seventh session, in October 2017, at the headquarters of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), in Rabat, the Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers adopted the draft Rabat Declaration on Environment Protection and Achieving Sustainable Development Goals. The Declaration stressed the importance of a renewed commitment by member states to support the international agenda for sustainable development, in accordance with the regionally and internationally agreed principles and instruments, in order to channel all national and international efforts into sustainable development. It also focuses on establishing national structures for sustainable development or

strengthening those existing in every member state to implement sustainable development plans and programmes, upholding them with internal follow-up bodies to optimize implementation and involving civil society organizations and the private sector in the implementation of sustainable development plans. It stressed the necessity to adopt green economy as a mechanism of sustainable development and affirmed the importance of the 'green job' opportunities that green economy creates in many economic sectors, such as renewable energy generation, energy efficiency, ecosystem rehabilitation and protection, ecotourism, waste management.

The Declaration commended the effective contribution of the UN environmental bodies and the Arab and Islamic specialized organizations to supporting the efforts of member states in the relevant areas with a view to implementing sustainable development projects, and urged the international community to take concrete steps to ensure debt cancellation, easy access to markets, technology transfer and capacity building.

The conferees adopted the Guidance Document on Green Cities and their Role in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals and launched the Programme for the Celebration of Islamic Capitals of the Environment and Sustainable Development to be supervised by the ISESCO. In addition to a prize dedicated to green cities as a fifth category of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Award for Environmental Management in the Islamic World, chaired by the General Authority of Meteorology and Environmental Protection and whose General Secretariat is entrusted to the ISESCO.<sup>13</sup>

The third pillar is the civil society effort. Parallel to these governmental efforts, there are thousands of NGOs working in the field of environmental protection in various Muslim countries. Among the most prominent ones is the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES). It is a multidimensional organization founded by Fazlun Khalid, of Sri Lankan origin, as a charity in 1994 that is becoming a part of the emerging coalition of religious and secular organizations that have come together to deal with global warming and other environmental threats. It aims to develop ecological knowledge and to promote conservation and sustainable development based on Islamic approach to environmental protection. Apart from that, the Islamic Relief Worldwide, the largest Western-based international Muslim relief and development NGO, established in 1984 in Birmingham, UK, by Hany El-Banna, an Egyptian, with an active presence in over 40 countries. Islamic Relief has raised over 26 million GBP in the last three years to address issues related to climate change.

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<sup>13</sup> 'The 7th Islamic Conference of Environment Ministers', Rabat, October 25-26, 2017. Available from: <https://www.isesco.org.ma/blog/2017/10/06/the-7th-islamic-conference-of-environment-ministers/>

Both IFEES and Islamic Relief played the main role in issuing the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, which calls for Muslims to support the Paris Agreement.<sup>14</sup> The declaration was the result of far flung collaboration between organizations and individuals that finally culminated in its emerging as a substantive document. It was launched on 18 August 2015, at the International Islamic Climate Change Symposium held in Istanbul, Turkey. It notes with alarm that people are accelerating their own destruction and approaching the threshold for catastrophic climate change. It calls for a proactive approach to halt and reverse the damage being caused. The Declaration makes a broad call for the people of all nations and their leaders to phase out greenhouse gas emissions and to commit to decentralized renewable energy. It calls for 'a fresh model of wellbeing, based on an alternative to the current financial model which depletes resources, degrades the environment, and deepens inequality.' It requires all Muslims, from heads of state to congregations and community activists, not to 'strut arrogantly on the earth', and to bear in mind the Hadith that 'the world is sweet and verdant, and verily Allah has made you stewards in it, and He sees how you acquit yourselves.' The Islamic Declaration specifically targets oil-producing nations, as they are dominantly Muslim, and calls for the oil to be left in the ground.

Interestingly, these major initiatives were promoted mainly by Western-based organizations of Muslim diasporas. They mainly stem from the European great interest in environmental protection over the past three decades and funds provided by European institutions for environmental initiatives and activities. However, these initiatives have not been implemented by many Muslim countries due to their limited belief in the role of civil society. In addition, some of these organizations are thought to be affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>15</sup>, which is considered an illegal organization and a terrorist group in some Muslim states.

Islamic principles are very positive in terms of the environment, but real practices in many Muslim countries are still far from these environmental postulates of Islam. There is an urgent need to spread solid environmental awareness and education particularly among young people, for environmental management is crucial to ensure proper environmental conduct.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Paris Agreement is an agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It aims to combat climate change and to accelerate and intensify the actions and investments needed for a sustainable low carbon future. The Agreement was reached at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP 21, in Paris.*

<sup>15</sup> *Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Sunni Islamist organization founded in Egypt in 1928.*



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