

# Islamic Basis for Environmental Protection

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The idea of “conserving the environment” as it is understood today is relatively new having emerged as a matter of concern to the human race only recently. This is seen to be a reaction to human excess, which is increasingly threatening the mizan (balance) of Allah Ta’ala’s (Allah the Exalted) creation. The main reason for this is that the earth once considered by humankind to be sacred has now been reduced to an exploitable resource.

At its very basic the Islamic approach to understanding the environment is based on an awareness of the fitra (primal condition of humankind in harmony with nature). Conservation in Islam is about mu’amalat (acting in the public interest; civic responsibility). It is an integral part of life, an expression of existence in submission to the will of the Creator in harmony with the natural pattern of creation. As there was an Islamic code of conduct that governed social behavior and an individual’s rights and responsibilities within a community, so there was a code of conduct governing an individual’s behavior towards other sentient beings and the rest of the natural world. This however was not expressed as an ism, but rather as an integrated expression of life in all its manifestations. It would seem that this was how the human species, in spite of all its faults, lived within their respective traditions until very recent times.

The natural order works because it functions within certain limits. Similarly, there are limits to human behavior and The Qur’an defines these limits for us, which were subsequently clarified and codified by the Sharia (legal modality or code) that evolved in the Islamic milieu. Living within these limits may be defined as living holistically – that is, in Islam and as if there was no separation from one aspect of Allah Ta’ala’s creation and the rest of the natural order. The problem now is that Muslims live mostly outside the precepts of the Sharia and in doing so have lost the understanding of their relationship with nature. We now have to look for and recognize those aspects in the Sharia, which specifically regulate our behavior in relation to the environment and contrive an ism that in previous times would have been superfluous.

## The Ethical Foundations of the Qur’an

If the Sharia can be described as a vast carpet with intricate patterns woven into it, what we are doing here is to borrow some of these patterns from the complex weave of the carpet and make sense out of them. The primary element of the Sharia is The Qur’an. It is the font of all knowledge in Islam and its precepts could be likened to the core of each pattern in this carpet.

We may begin by examining some of these patterns, which amount to basic principles and which may collectively be seen as providing the basis for Islamic conservation practice. They are :

Tawhid which embodies the principle of unity of the Creator and His creation and is the basis of the holistic approach which is intrinsically Islamic

Fitra which imparts an understanding of the creation principle and locates the human species firmly in it

Mizan which recognizes the principle that every aspect of creation holds together because it is in a state of balance

Khalifa which identifies the responsibility principle and the role of the human in the grand pattern of creation

### Tawhid – The Unity Principle

Tawhid is the foundation of Din al Islam (The Way of Islam). It has three aspects and for our purposes we are looking at just one of these, which is Tawhid ar Rububiyyah (the unity of Lordship). This requires us to believe that there is only one Creator and that is Allah the Lord of all creation. (The other two are Tawhid al Uluhiyya – to believe that none is worthy of worship except Allah and Tawhid al Asma was Sifat – to believe that the names and attributes of Allah are uniquely His alone). Understanding Tawhid ar Rububiyyah leads us to the recognition that Al Khaliq (the Creator) is one and khalq (creation) is a unified whole. Its essence is contained in the shahada (declaration), the first pillar of Islam, which every Muslim accepts and is a constant reminder of Faith. It is la ilaha illal lah (there is no God but God) and it affirms the unity of the Creator from which everything else flows. The second part of the shahada is Muhammadur Rasulullah (Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah) whose example we follow. The Sharia evolved from The Qur'an and the sunnah (practice) of the Prophet as he interpreted the revelations.

Knowing the Creator is the first step to understanding His creation and the very familiar Sura Al-Ikhlās (the chapter on Sincerity) lays down the basis of this understanding –

Say: “He is Allah, Absolute Oneness,  
Allah, the Everlasting Sustainer of us all.  
He has not given birth and was not born  
And no one is comparable to Him” (112:1-4)

This is an affirmation of ahad, that is, the oneness of the Creator and the unity of all creation of which the human race is very much a part. The Qur'an further illuminates Tawhid in the context of khalq under the following themes:

Rab Al Alamin (The Lord of All Creation) – there is only one real power  
“Praise be to Allah, the Lord of all the worlds” (1: 1).

Al Khaliq (The Creator) – everything that exists was brought into being by Allah  
“He is Allah – the Creator, the Maker, the Giver of Form.  
To Him belong the most beautiful names.  
Everything in the heavens and the earth glorifies Him.  
He is the Almighty the All-Wise” (59: 24).

And -

“He who originates creation and regenerates it  
and provides for you from out of heaven and earth” (27: 66).

Al Muhit (The Encompasser) - this is the bedrock of the holistic approach in Islam as it affirms the interconnectedness of the natural world

“What is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Allah.  
Allah encompasses all things” (4: 125).

### Fitrah– The Creation Principle

The fitrah principle describes the origination of the human species within the bosom of the natural world. It is a profound reminder of our place in the natural order. Fitrah has been described as the natural state. Some translators of The Qur'an call it the natural pattern, others the original state or pattern and yet others describe it simply as nature. Some scholars describe fitrah as the pure state or the state of infinite goodness and point to the possibility that everything in creation has a potential for goodness, the conscious expression of which rests uniquely with human kind. It is commonly held that the real meaning of The Qur'an in Arabic is untranslatable into any other language but we may conclude that fitrah denotes the original and natural state of purity, which applies to all of creation including the human in its new born state. The term fitrah is a noun derived from the root F T R and occurs once in The Qur'an. It appears in its verb form, fatarah, fourteen times. The key verse in The Qur'an in which both the noun and the verb form occur is in Surah Rum (The verse on the Romans)

Set yourself firmly towards the Deen [the way, the life transaction],

As a pure natural believer,  
Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind.  
There is no changing Allah's creation.  
That is the true Deen –  
But most people do not know it – (30:29).

The part of this verse that concerns us here is the one that reads “Allah's natural pattern on which He made mankind.” Abdalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, the translators of The Qur'an used in this essay, render fitrah as natural pattern and fatarah as made. Here is how two other translators see it: Yusuf Ali: “The nature in which Allah has made mankind.” Fitrah is translated here as nature and fatarah as made; Arberrey: “Allah's original in which He originated mankind.” Fitrah is translated here as original and fatarah as originated.

As the translators grapple to convey the meaning of this verse, there is simplicity inherent in this message that conveys two things to us. The first is a sense of where we belong in the pattern of Allah Ta'ala's creation. The human race was originated, indeed like all other sentient beings, in the bosom of creation Allah Ta'ala originated. Humankind was made part of a vast natural pattern, which cannot be changed. Secondly, it could be said that taken together with the rest of the verses in The Qur'an on creation this lays down the foundation for the deep ecological principles inherent in Din al Islam. An appreciation of this should lead us to addressing the environmental concerns of today at its root. The Qur'an comprehensively defines our place and our relationships within this pattern as the following verse further demonstrates –

The creation of the heavens and the earth  
is far greater than the creation of mankind.  
But most of mankind do not know it (40: 56).

Muslims start every one of their five daily prayers with this verse acknowledging the Creator –

. . . I have turned my face to Him  
Who brought the heavens and earth into being [fatarah]  
A pure natural believer.  
I am not one of the mushrikun [Mushrikun plural of Mushrik – one who ascribes divinity to any thing other than Allah] (6:80).

### Mizan – The Balance Principle

Mizan is the principle of the middle path. The natural world, which we are a part of, is held together because it is in mizan, a state of dynamic balance. This is another way of saying that the natural order works because it is in submission to the Creator. It is Muslim in the original,

primordial sense. In one of its most eloquent and popular passages, the Qur'an describes creation thus –

The All Merciful taught The Qur'an.  
He created man and taught him clear expression.  
The sun and the moon both run with precision.  
The stars [The word najm in the Qur'an is translated sometimes as herbs or shrubs] and the trees all bow down in prostration.  
He created heaven and established the balance,  
So that you would not transgress the balance.  
Give just weight – do not skimp in the balance  
He laid out the earth for all living creatures.  
In it are fruit and date palm with covered spathes,  
and grains on leafy stems and fragrant herbs.  
So which of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (55: 1-11)

The introductory verses of this surah (chapter) remind us of the unique nature of the human species in creation. Our intelligence, the ability make sense of our surroundings, the ability to express our intentions clearly, is what differentiates us from every other sentient being in the universe. Allah Ta'ala has given us the gift of intellect with reasoning powers that can distinguish right from wrong, good from bad, honesty from dishonesty, conservation from destruction, moderation from greed, purity from pollution and so on.

The sun and the moon, the two objects in the cosmos most closely associated with us have exacting functions. The stars and the trees bow down in prostration. For the Muslim these verses go beyond the metaphor to the realms of the real. Everything in the universe is in sujud (prostration), that is in Islam (submission), and that is how the universe remains in mizan (balance). Everything we see around us works because it is in submission to the will of the Creator as these verses further explain –

Do they not see the things Allah has created,  
Casting their shadows to the right and to the left,  
Prostrating themselves before Allah in complete humility?

Everything in the heavens and every creature on the earth  
Prostrates to Allah, as do the angels.  
They are not puffed up with pride (16:48-49).

The humbling fact is that we can only look at existence and recognize it in this way because everything is held together for us. However and paradoxically, we are the only sentient beings in

creation who can through the very gift of reasoning chose not to prostrate and destroy everything around us by our presumed cleverness.

He created man from a drop of sperm  
and yet he is an open challenger (16:4).

As Allah Ta'ala has laid down the earth for all living creatures our responsibility lies not in denying His blessings through acts of folly that destroy the environment, but in actively recognizing the order that is around us both for the sake of ourselves and the rest natural world.

### Khalifa – The Responsibility Principle

This principle establishes our role as the guardians of the natural world. The human race has a special place in Allah Ta'ala's scheme. Having given us the gift of intelligence He has appointed us as His Khalifa (vicegerent) or His representative on earth. We are thus required to act as protectors of the environment Allah T'ala has placed us in.

It is He who appointed you khalifs on the earth  
And raised some of you above others in rank  
So He could test you regarding what He has given you.  
Your Lord is swift in retribution;  
And He is Ever-Forgiving, Most Merciful (6:165).

Although we are equal partners with the rest of the natural world, we have added responsibilities by virtue of the powers of reasoning the Creator has given us. These responsibilities as The Qur'an points out are to uphold what is right –

Let there be a community among you who call to the good,  
And enjoin the right and forbid the wrong.  
They are the ones who have success (3:104).

And in doing so show no favors –

“You who have iman [faith] Be upholders of justice,  
Bearing witness for Allah alone,  
Even against yourselves or your parents and relatives.  
Whether they are rich or poor, Allah is well able to look after them.  
Do not follow your own desires and deviate from the truth.  
If you twist and turn away, Allah is aware of what you do (4:134).

And compete in doing good –

. . . Had Allah willed, He would have made you a single community,  
but He wanted to test you regarding what has come to you.  
So compete with each other in doing good . . . (5:48).

Everything we see around us is Allah Ta'ala's n'ihma (gift) to us. It is however a gift with conditions and the earth is a testing ground for us. The tests are a measure of our ehsan (acts of worship) in its broadest sense. That is living in a way that is pleasing to Allah, striving in everything we do to maintain the harmony of our inner and outer environments.

Will the reward for doing good be anything other than good?  
So which of your Lord's blessings do you both deny? (55:59-60)

As Khalifa, we are trustees of Allah T'ala's creation –

We offered the trust to the heavens, the earth and the mountains  
But they refused to take it on and shrank from it.  
But man took it on.  
He is indeed wrongdoing and ignorant (33:72).

The Qur'an expresses this responsibility in this form because of its enormity and our wrongdoing takes many forms –

. . . Eat of their fruits when they bear fruit  
And pay their due on the day of their harvest,  
And do not be profligate.  
He does not love the profligate (6:142).

And –

You who have iman [faith] Do not make haram [unlawful]  
The good things Allah has made halal [lawful] for you,  
And do not overstep the limits.  
Allah does not love people who overstep the limits (5:87).

There is however a way out of our conundrum –

Corruption has appeared in both land and sea  
Because of what peoples' own hands have brought about

so that they may taste something of what they have done  
so that hopefully they will turn back (30:40).

### **Institutions and accountability**

The Qur'an provides the moral foundation for human interaction with the natural world. As the Sharia evolved, it manifested itself into a range of rules and institutions, as an expression of life in all its manifestations embodying what is truly holistic. Taken as a whole as it was intended to be, caring for Planet Earth, our only home, was integrated within the framework of the Islamic value system. This was an everyday concern for the Muslim, as The Qur'an draws attention to in the verses, "We have not omitted anything from the Book" (6:39) and "He said 'Our Lord is He Who gives each thing its created form and then guides it'" (20:49).

What emerged was a three-fold process, which we may classify as legislative principles, institutions, and enforcement. The Qur'an laid down the basis from which the Sharia evolved, which in turn determined the nature of fiqh (the science of the application of the Sharia and the subsequent establishment of relevant institutions. The body of the Sharia allows us to deduce three general principles as follows –

The elements that compose the natural world are common property  
The right to benefit from natural resources is a right held in common  
There shall be no damage or infliction of damage bearing in mind future users

Muslim legalists have over the centuries worked out both principles and structures to give expression to this. These principles concern –

Individual rights  
Obligations and responsibilities individuals owe to the community  
Accountability  
Benefits accruing to users from renewable resources held in common  
Penalties for improper use of natural resources

Two of the most important institutions to emerge for this framework are the hima and the harim. The former lends itself to the setting up of a whole range of conservation zones, which may be established by a community or the state for the purposes of protecting land or species of flora and fauna. The latter permits the establishment of inviolable zones, not always but usually, for the protection of watercourses. People have a right in the Sharia to create such zones managed by themselves and where use is severely restricted.

Having identified the ethical base and institutions the third element that was needed to complete the picture was a system of accountability. From its earliest years the Islamic state established an agency known as the hisba, whose specific task it was to protect the people through promoting the establishment of good and forbidding wrongdoing (discussed earlier). A learned jurist (muhtasib) headed this agency, and he functioned like the chief inspector of weights and measures and chief public health officer rolled into one. He was also responsible among other similar duties for the proper functioning of the hima and harim zones and acted as what one may describe in today's parlance as an environmental inspector.

Muslims thus have a fully developed system of environmental protection in their hands but its implementation in the form described above would prove to be problematic in a context in which the secular paradigm is dominant and economic development receives the highest priority. The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) is conducting experiments in various parts of the world where compromises are being sought between state machinery and Sharia institutions to achieve the best possible conservation outcomes. The most advanced project in this sense, at the time of writing, is the Misali Island Marine Conservation Project located in Zanzibar, Tanzania. There is much to be drawn from the Sharia in extending and improving this knowledge base and it is an endeavor that Muslims should now undertake with increasing urgency.

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