Islamic Alternatives for the Concept of Civilization

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The concept of civilization is questionable. It was conceived in the 18th century. As part of the fast-developing Enlightenment thought, civilization was understood as a sign of man's evolution from the stages of rudeness and barbarism to the stages of refinement and sophistication.

As Adam Ferguson (d. 1816), a Scottish philosopher and historian of the Scottish Enlightenment, wrote in his seminal book "the History of Civil Society" (1767): "Not only the individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization."

By the way, Adam Ferguson was the first who used in English the term "civilization". In French, it was Victor de Riquety Marquis de Mirabeau (d. 1789), a French economist and a leading figure of the French Enlightenment.

"Civilization" was a Western construct. It was created in the milieus of Western colonization and imperialism and was used for their justification and consolidation. It was imposed as such on the rest of the world, including the Muslim world. In the course of the past two centuries, the Muslim mind had to grapple with the concept and its monolithic mould, producing mixed results.

Additionally - and as painfully - civilization was an embodiment of the Western worldview(s) and its moral principles and values, which however are deeply rooted in the de-sacralisation of existence at large. If the Western mind from the Renaissance and the

Enlightenment era was at war with God and Heaven, so was its civilization.

As much paradoxically as expectedly, civilization has often come to be closely connected with conflicts, conquests and dominance. Since the term was coined, about two-and-a-half centuries ago, many horrible things have been committed in the name of civilization. There were yet times when the modern "civilized" man behaved like the most primitive and most savage being the planet earth has ever known. He still does.

Islam and civilization

Inasmuch as the revealed message of Islam emphasizes that "the noblest and most honourable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous (god-fearing and pious) of you" (al-Hujurat, 13); that "Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather He looks at your hearts and actions" (Sahih Muslim); that "the life of this world is but amusement and diversion and adornment and boasting to one another and competition in increase of wealth and children" (al-Hadid, 20); that "the things that endure, good deeds, are best in the sight of your Lord, as rewards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes" (al-Kahf, 46); and that "the life of this world is nothing but a provision of vanities (goods and chattels of deception)" (Alu 'Imran, 185) – civilization in Islam should exemplify those principles, both in theory and practice.

Its ideals and the exigencies of life should forge a resilient and mutually harmonizing partnership. In Islam, civilization (all-inclusive progress, refinement, civility, success and happiness) is tantamount to life, and *vice versa*.

The ultimate aim of civilization is to produce upright, good, content, dynamic, enlightened, creative and forward-looking individuals. The order that such people will establish on earth will be a microcosm of a higher existential order of things, meanings and experiences for which they live and whence they derive inspiration and direction.

Surely, civilization is about people, not things; about spirit, not matter; and about the permanence, rather than transience, of life. It is about the truth and certitude, not about falsehood and scepticism.

However, as expected, Islam addresses differently all the positives that are entailed in the concept of civilization, elevating them yet further. It developed its own ideas and vocabulary. These two potential Islamic substitutes for the term "civilization" stand out: *'umran* and *hayah tayyibah*.

'Umran

'Umran is the strongest candidate. It in fact could be translated as civilization in its Islamic universal meaning and application. *'Umran* is derived from the Qur'anic word *ista'mara*, which expresses the object of man's creation and his *raison d'etre*.

Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) uses *'umran* exactly in that sense. He speaks about "civilization" *per se*, but roughly three and a half centuries before the word "civilization" was even created. Hence, Muslims should have continued using *'umran* in Arabic throughout, and should have later anglicized, Latinized, Germanized, Gallicised (Frenchified), etc., it – that is to say, universalized it – and should have carried on applying it as such the whole time.

'*Umran* is much more comprehensive than *hadarah* and *tamaddun*. It is as much a total phenomenon, almost a proper noun, as a definite noumenon (to borrow Emanuel Kant's expression). It is practically an absolute and unmodified concept. While *hadarah* and *tamaddun*, on the other hand, are mere conditions, coupled with descriptions, of '*umran*. As if their existence is contingent, depending on '*umran*.

In Ibn Khaldun's thought, therefore, *hadarah* and *tamaddun* mean no more than "city-living and sedentary lifestyle", as a dimension and character of '*umran*. In addition, one of Ibn Khaldun's foremost conclusions is that the qualities of *hadarah* and *taraf* (luxury) are the natural destinations of '*umran* and its organic evolutionary trajectory. They spell its rapid decline and ensuing collapse, after which it cries out for renewal.

Hence, Ibn Khaldun articulates such expressions as *hadarah al-'umran* (the city-dwelling, urbanism and sedentism of '*umran*) and *al-'umran al-hadari* ('*umran* described in terms of city-dwelling, urbanism and sedentism).

However, it must be borne in mind that to Ibn Khaldun, and according to the totality of his philosophy of '*umran*, if there is *al-'umran al-hadari*, there is also *al-'umran al-badawi* ('*umran* described in terms of villages, desert and nomad lifestyles). The latter is the embryonic form of the former. It denotes the elementary index of '*umran* in general.

Put another way, if there is '*umran* (civilization) of cities, towns and other forms of human settlements, there is also '*umran* (civilization) of desert – or Bedouin civilization – "as found in outlying regions and mountains, in hamlets near suitable pastures in waste regions, and on the fringes of sandy deserts."

All this shows that neither *hadarah* nor *tamaddun* is suitable to exemplify all the meanings and values enclosed in the Islamic vision of civilization. *'Umran* is the closest to fit the bill. Hence, "Islamic civilization" should be "Islamic 'umran", *al-'umran al-islamiyy* in Arabic.

Ibn Khaldun's science of *'umran*

As a small detour, on account of Ibn Khaldun's visionary disposition, his science of *'umran* - as he explicitly calls it at the beginning of his "Muqaddimah" - is not just a system of sociology. Rather, the same stands as a general framework for theoretical as well as applied science of human society and its civilization (*'umran*).

Ibn Khaldun's methods were based on pragmatism. He was not an idealist. He studied *'umran* and its eternal laws the way they are, nothing more and nothing less. His historical, naturalistic and inductive modes of argumentation prevented him from falling into rampant anti-intellectual traps. He deliberately avoided "political utopianism". In a way, he was an empiricist.

As far as *'umran* is concerned, Ibn Khaldun's realism and practicality obliged him not to dwell extensively on abstract and ideal models. He did not really care to evaluate the events, people and outcomes in relation to what and who was more, and what and who was less, Islamic. As if he left judgments to God. That might be a reason why his book sections end with such emphatic declarations as, for example, "God gives success and guidance", "God knows better", "God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it", "this is how God proceeds with His creatures", etc.

But he gave frequent hints as to what "Islamic *'umran* (civilization)" and other forms of the same could be. For instance, when speaking

about human 'umran (civilization) as a whole, requiring political leadership for its organization, he clearly differentiates between the model based upon the religious law which is divinely revealed by God, and the model that is based solely upon rational politics.

In the first scenario, people are obliged to submit to the divine revealed law "in view of their belief in reward and punishment in the other world, (things that were indicated) by the person who brought them (their religious law)." In the second scenario, people are obliged to submit to the human-made law "in view of the reward they expect from the ruler after he has become acquainted with what is good for them."

Ibn Khaldun then proceeded to affirm in most unequivocal terms: "The first (type of rule) is useful for this world and for the other world, because the lawgiver (Almighty God) knows the ultimate interest of the people and is concerned with the salvation of man in the other world. The second (secular type of rule) is useful only for this world."

'Umran as a state of mind and soul

Islamic 'umran (civilization) is a state of mind and soul, subtly woven into a pattern made up of time and space dynamics. A complex and all-embracing whole is thus created. Neither pole can aptly operate, nor achieve its potential, on its own. That is why the Qur'anic notion of isti'mar (the natural goal of which is 'umran) is preceded by the commandment of 'ibadah (worshipping God alone) and the affirmation of God's Oneness (tawhid) (Hud, 61).

In order to bring the matters of 'umran (inhabiting, developing, enjoying and sustaining the earth) close to man's heart, man is then in the same Qur'anic verse reminded that he too was created from

earth. Tacitly man is reminded that he was created as God's vicegerent, or viceroy, on earth and as the earth's guardian. Which means that people's 'umran is them and they are their 'umran. A good 'umran benefits only them, whereas a bad 'umran affects nobody else but them. 'Umran is an unmistaken testament of people's earthly success or failure.

Considering the inborn nature of man and the constant, in consort with turbulent, fluctuations of life, man is destined to oscillate between civilizational rises and falls, and between victories and defeats. But he should learn his lessons and should always come back stronger and more determined. What matters most, under all circumstances, is the state of his mind and soul; it is his character and integrity. That being so, in the same Qur'anic verse, having made mention of *isti'mar* (*'umran*), God reminds people to repeatedly ask forgiveness of Him and to turn to Him in repentance, for He is "always near, ready to answer" (Hud, 61). Without the divine guidance on-board, there can be no totally good and progressive civilization (*'umran*).

The inadequacy of the terms *hadarah* and *tamaddun*

Habitually, civilization was rendered in Arabic as *hadarah* and, to a lesser extent, *tamaddun*. Islamic civilization was called *hadarah islamiyyah* and *tamaddun islamiyy*.

Both *hadarah* and *tamaddun* indicate city-dwelling, urbanism, sedentism and sedentary lifestyles only, as opposed to villages, desert and nomad lifestyles. The words clearly demonstrate the influences of the philosophy underpinning the concept of Western civilization over the philosophy that was developed in connection with the belated development of the concept of Islamic civilization.

The two given Arabic designations were inadequate for the ways Islam sees and deals with the things that concern civilization. They were inadequate because they literally translated, and adopted, the correspondingly inadequate Western concept. They were relative and qualified, whereas civilization is universal and all-encompassing.

The root word of "civilisation" were the Latin words *civitas* and *civis*, which mean "city" and "citizen" respectively. Accordingly, city was always the essence and, at the same time, receptacle of Western civilisation. Urbanisation and wide-ranging physical development were its main features. They were its chi. Moreover, in furtherance of civilization, advanced cities were favoured over the other forms of settlements. Living in cities was equated with being civilised, sophisticated and even cultured. Living elsewhere was less so.

Evidently, inherent in civilization were tendencies and practices of discrimination. Even though at first sight it was concerning just geographical places – that is, the physical milieus and loci of people's lives and functions – discrimination often spilled over into the ambits of people's very lives and their overall wellbeing. Taking into consideration its origins, purpose and goals, it was rarely a case that civilization produced a good without generating any side effects in the process.

Hayah tayyibah

Islamic 'umran (civilization) could also be called *hayah tayyibah*. The feminine word *tayyibah* (its masculine version is *tayyib*) is derived from the Arabic verb *taba/yatibu*, which means to be "good", "pure" and "upright". Related to the verb are the noun *tibah*, which means "goodness", "purity" and "righteousness", and the adjective *tayyib*, which means "good", "pure" and "righteous".

God says in the Qur'an; "Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer, We will surely cause him to live a good and happy life (*hayah tayyibah*), and We will surely give them their reward (n the Hereafter) according to the best of what they used to do" (al-Nahl, 97).

By *hayah tayyibah* it is meant a life full of appropriate meaning, value, respect, purity, goodness, contentment, ease, facility, lawful provisions, God's blessings and His pleasure. By its very nature, this type of life is a precursor to *hayah tayyibah* in the Hereafter.

It goes without saying that *hayah tayyibah* can be the desired condition of 'umran (civilization) and also its equivalent, both conceptually with regard to semantics and practically. It can be both a means and an end. It can be an alternative word for "Islamic civilization".

Whatever the case may be, it must be mentioned that in Islam, the word *tayyib* is very comprehensive and profound. It signifies a world of its own, so to speak.

To begin with, the Qur'an calls a good, clean and productive land *al-balad al-tayyib*. It yields rich produce by the permission of God at all times (al-A'raf, 58). In a similar way, all things, occurrences, dealings, environments, as well as persons, that are *tayyib* (good, clean and productive) can only lead to and generate more *tayyib*.

Tayyib is an antidote to depravity and all sorts of impurity. It incessantly breeds only more *tayyib*, just as "barren soil (land, life systems and milieus) yields nothing but poor produce (or it springs up hardly anything useful)" (al-A'raf, 58).

Moreover, behind everything that happens in the heavens and on the earth stands Almighty God who is *Tayyib* (the Good, the Pure, the Kind and the Source as well as Bestower of all goodness, wholesomeness and purity) and who accepts only that which is *tayyib* (good and pure) in deed, saying and thought.

God likewise blesses people with good provision, making only the good, pure and beneficial things lawful (*tayyibat*), and prohibiting the bad ones whether in food, drinks, deeds, manners and beliefs.

This leads to the creation of good, pure and virtuous men (*tayyibun*) and women (*tayyibat*) who are bent but on living good, pure and virtuous lives. They do things that are good (*tayyib*), shunning the bad or evil ones (*khabith*). They heed the words of their Creator: "Not equal are things that are bad (*khabith*) and things that are good (*tayyib*) even though the abundance of the bad may dazzle you. So be mindful of Allah, O people of reason, so you may be successful" (al-Ma'idah, 100).

In addition, God supports good and pure men and women (*tayyibun* and *tayyibat*) with the good, authentic and firm word of faith (*kalimah tayyibah*). The word is compared to "a good tree (*shajarah tayyibah*), firmly rooted, reaching out with its branches towards the sky" (Ibrahim, 24, 27). Those men and women will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment with Paradise and its goodly and splendid mansions (*masakin tayyibah*) (al-Saff, 12).

All this can only take place in a context that is infused with an amalgamation of the heavenly and earthly goodness, virtue and integrity. That context with its people and their productive ways of living becomes a quintessence of everything good and positive. It becomes a pure, good and happy land whose soul and individuality are

its 'umran (civilization). That land is described as *tayyib* and the life in it as *tayyib* too. Its 'umran oozes the same mood, and hence can be characterized only as *tayyib* as well.

No wonder that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) called Madinah - the first Islamic city where the first and most exemplary Islamic 'umran (civilization) was realized - *Taybah* or *Tayyibah*. In doing so, the Prophet (pbuh) wanted to teach people essential lessons concerning the actual meaning and scope of good life and what its development, orientation and refinement penchants ought to be.

The Prophet (pbuh) called Madinah *Tabah* as well, whose meaning is similar to that of *Taybah* and *Tayyibah*. Apart from what has been said beforehand, the Prophet (pbuh) named Madinah *taybah* and *tabah* perhaps by analogy with the Qur'anic reference to the successful and prosperous homeland of Sheba which was called *baldah tayyibah* (a land most goodly, pure and happy) (Saba', 15).