

The Civilizational Miracle of the Quran (Al-i'jaz Al-'Umrani)

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In the name of Allah, the Merciful Sovereign, the Merciful Forgiver بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

Summary

Amongst the miracles of the Quran—the signs that Allah made in it to prove its divine origin—is the miracle of founding a new civilization in unprecedented ways. This article reflects upon a new angle of the miraculous nature (i'jaz) of the Quran from two sides: The Civilizational Miracle of the Quran (Al-i'jaz Al-'Umrani). Focus is particularly on two of its dimensions: the 'Umrani of society/Ummah, and the 'Umrani of architecture.

Introduction

Allah Almighty says:

وإن كنتم في ريب مما نزلنا على عبدنا فأتوا بسورة من مثله وادعوا شهداءكم من دون الله إن كنتم صادقين (البقرة - 23)

And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down upon Our Servant, then produce a surah like it and call upon your witnesses other than Allah, if you should be truthful (Al-Baqarah 23)

This ayah—from the first few pages of the Quran—contains the first mention in the Quran of the miraculous nature (i'jaz) of the Quran, which is an ongoing challenge from the time of the Prophet's mission to produce something like it, whether it be the entire Quran, ten surahs, or even just one surah as this ayah states.

The term "surah" is a Quranic concept and should not be equated with "chapters" or "sections" as in human writings; rather, it is a collection of ayahs—another Quranic concept that are not "ayahs"—enclosed by meanings, hence named "surah." The expression here is "from its like" and not "like it" or "similar to it," meaning merely from the same genre of this speech, not necessarily identical to it.

The tradition (sunnah) of Allah sending a clear sign with each prophet that people cannot dispute has been consistent across all messages, and various forms of these signs come with the stories of the messengers. Since the Prophet ﷺ is the Seal of the Prophets, the divine tradition required that the miraculous sign remains valid until the Day of Resurrection, which is this great Quran.

In the Quran: "And they say, 'Why are not signs sent down to him from his Lord?' Say, 'The signs are only with Allah, and I am only a clear warner.' Is it not sufficient for them that We revealed to you the Book which is recited to them?" (Al-Anqabut 50-51). In the hadith the Prophet ﷺ said: "There has been no prophet among the prophets but was given miracles because of which people believed, but what I have been given is divine inspiration which Allah has revealed to me, so I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of the other prophets on the Day of Resurrection."¹

The terms "miracle" (mu'jizah) and "inimitability" (i'jaz) are human-made concepts although the root ('-j-z) is common in the Quran, as in: "And Allah is not to be caused failure (yu'jizahu) by anything in the heavens or on the earth" (Fatir 44). Nothing can cause Allah to fail, but humans will fail if they try to replicate the signs of the messengers, including this Quranic challenge. Scholars, both past and present, have enumerated the various aspects of this inimitability that distinguish the Quran from all human speech. Traditionally, they have categorized these aspects into (1) linguistic inimitability, (2) informative inimitability, (3) scientific inimitability, (4) legislative inimitability, and psychological inimitability.

(1) Regarding the rhetorical inimitability (i'jaz bayani), this is the argument presented by most commentators on this ayah and similar ones, both ancient and contemporary. Some have detailed the various aspects of the Quran's eloquence, such

¹ From the hadith of Abu Huraira, Bukhari 7274, and Muslim 152.

as meaning, clarity, and rhetorical devices, along with their subcategories.² Anyone familiar with the Arabic language can clearly distinguish the unique composition of this speech, both in its overall structure and in detail, from all other human speech, including that of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, despite his statement: "I have been given the concise yet comprehensive speech (jawami' al-kalim) and speech has been made concise for me."³ Nevertheless, the eloquence of the Quran is unparalleled, acknowledged by both believers and non-believers. Additionally, it was revealed over twenty-three years in a non-sequential order, yet each revelation fits perfectly into its respective place in the Quran, exhibiting a coherence beyond human capacity.

(2) Among the aspects of inimitability mentioned by commentators is the inimitability of information, both historical and future. This refers to the accuracy of the Quran's references to historical events that were unknown at the time of the Prophet ﷺ. Evidence for this grows as researchers uncover more about human history and the history of nations. Remarkably, this historical narration comes without specific dates, using terms like "before" and "after," presenting a concept of time with complexity and relativity unknown in human speech. Additionally, the Quran's accurate predictions about future events, which have always come true, further establish its inimitability.

(3) Many contemporary scholars have also explored what they term scientific inimitability.⁴ This refers to the precision of Quranic descriptions related to various aspects of creation in the universe. There is a distinction, however, between scientific theories and scientific facts, and the Arabic Quranic text is chosen with exceptional

² Examples of interpreters who focused on this type of miraculousness include: Al-Jahiz, Ibn Qutaybah, Al-Baqillani, Al-Zamakhshari, Al-Jurjani, Abu Al-Su'ud, and Al-Shawkani in the past, and Ibn Ashur, Muhammad Darwaz, Muhammad Abu Zahra, Sayyid Qutb, Al-Shaarawi, and Bint Al-Shati' more recently.

³ From the hadith of Muhammad Al-Baqir ibn Ali ibn Al-Husayn. Al-Sakhawi said about it in "Al-Maqasid Al-Hasanah" 161, Al-Ghazi in "Itqan Ma Yahsun" 1/168, and Al-Ajlouni in "Kashf Al-Khafa" 1/308: It is mursal but has supporting evidence in authentic sources.

⁴ These are important studies, although we differ on some details regarding the distinction between changing theories and what they considered "scientific facts," which are merely theories subject to correction. They fall into the second level of understanding the Quranic text as we have detailed. Refer to: "Tafsir Al-Jawahir" by Tantawi Al-Jawhari, "Tafsir Al-Manar" by Rashid Rida, and "Tafsir Al-Ayat Al-Kawniyyah fil Quran Al-Karim" by Zaghoul El-Naggar. Also refer to: Hind Shalaby, "Al-Tafsir Al-Ilmi lil Quran Al-Karim bayn al-Nazariyyat wa al-Tatbiq," Carthage: Matba'at Tunis, 1406 AH.

precision to accommodate evolving theories. This ongoing alignment with new scientific discoveries is a form of inimitability unknown even in the most advanced scientific books, which continuously evolve and correct themselves. Furthermore, the Quran is free from the numerous scientific errors that were prevalent and accepted in the era of its revelation, avoiding these errors without explicitly correcting them, simply by not falling into them.

(4) Some contemporary scholars have also written about what they term "legislative inimitability," referring to the superiority and nobility of Islamic law compared to other human-made laws, both ancient and modern. The ability of its principles to meet legislative needs for a righteous and balanced society is unmatched by any human effort, let alone that of a man who lived in the Arabian Peninsula fourteen hundred years ago, peace and blessings be upon him.

(5) Psychological inimitability: We can identify three different dimensions: responding to the innermost thoughts, miraculous healing power of the Quran, and the miraculous ease of memorizing and recalling the Quran:

(a) The miraculous nature of the Quran in responding to the innermost thoughts: There is no human book capable of interacting with the innermost thoughts of the human soul as the Quran does. Anyone who has had an intimate journey with this magnificent Book will attest to this fact. Many have embraced Islam, both in the past and in the present, because of this miracle. One of the earliest of these experiences in Islamic history is the story of the conversion of Umar ibn al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, who said about it: "I set out seeking the Messenger of Allah ﷺ before I embraced Islam and found him ahead of me at the Sacred Mosque [in Mecca]. I stood behind him as he began reciting Surah Al-Haaqqah. I was amazed at the composition of the Quran. I said, 'By Allah, this is poetry, as Quraysh say.' Then he recited, 'It is indeed the speech of an illustrious Messenger. It is not the speech of a poet. Little do you believe.' I said to myself, 'A soothsayer.' Then he recited, 'Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer. Little do you remember. It is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds,' until the end of the surah. At that point, Islam firmly took root in my heart".⁵

⁵ Narrated by Ahmad 107. Al-Haythami said in "Majma' Al-Zawa'id" 9/65: Its narrators are trustworthy, except that Shurayh ibn Ubayd did not meet Umar.

(b) The miraculous healing power of the Quran: This is another unique attribute of this noble book, whose experiences have been widely reported and which is not found in any human-made book, old or new. Allah says, "And We send down of the Quran that which is healing and mercy for the believers, but it does not increase the wrongdoers except in loss" (Al-Isra 17:82). The meaning of healing (shifa) here is general, encompassing cure from all kinds of diseases, including spiritual and physical ailments.

In the Hadith of Abu Said Al-Khudri (may Allah be pleased with him, he said:

"We were on a journey and camped when a servant girl came and said, 'The chief of this tribe has been stung by a scorpion, and our men are not present. Is there anyone among you who can recite ruqyah (healing by prayers)?' A man among us who we did not expect to be knowledgeable in ruqyah stood up and recited over him, and he was cured. The chief ordered thirty sheep to be given to him and milk to be provided for us. When he returned, we asked, 'Did you know how to recite ruqyah?' He said, 'No, I only recited the Mother of the Book (Al-Fatihah).' We said, 'Do not do anything further until we ask the Prophet ﷺ.' When we came to Medina, we mentioned this to the Prophet ﷺ, and he said, 'How did he know it is a ruqyah? Distribute the sheep and give me a share.'"⁶

In another hadith, the Prophet ﷺ said: "Say 'He is Allah, the One' (Al-Ikhlās) and the two protection surahs (Al-Falaq and An-Nas) in the morning and evening three times, and they will suffice you from everything."⁷ And there are other such narrations.

(c) The miraculous ease of memorizing and recalling the Quran, even for non-Arabs: Allah says, "And We have certainly made the Quran easy for remembrance, so is there any who will remember?" (Al-Qamar 17, 22, 32, 40). Furthermore, countless children of limited abilities in non-Arab environments devote themselves to the Quran, memorizing it entirely within a year or two without missing a letter. No other book, whether poetry or prose in any language, has this unique characteristic.

⁶ From the hadith of Abu Sa'id Al-Khudri, Bukhari 2276, Muslim 2201 in a summarized form, and Sahih Ibn Hibban 6113.

⁷ From the hadith of Abdullah ibn Khubayb. Al-Albani said in "Sahih Al-Jami'" 4406: Authentic, and in "Sahih Al-Targhib" 649: Hasan Sahih.

Civilizational Miracle in the ‘Umran of society/Ummah

From monotheism, all civilizational meanings branch out, which today are referred to by modern terms such as civilization, urbanity, and civility. However, these concepts—civilization, urbanity, and civility—were distorted with the invasion of Islamic lands by colonial campaigns, falsely labeled as "colonialism," along with orientalist, positivist, and secular concepts. This led to a deviation from the Qur'anic concept of monotheistic civilization, intended by Allah's words: "He has established you on earth" (Surah Hud, Ayah 61). This required a correction and renewal in the understanding of civilization, which is reflected in contemporary discourse under the name of Islamic civilization studies or the theory of Islamic urbanism.

Contemporary understanding of Fiqh al-‘Umran (the jurisprudence of civilization) has been greatly influenced by the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, particularly what he wrote in the introduction to his historical encyclopedia about civilization. Some modern scholars have gone as far as to claim that Ibn Khaldun is the true founder of "sociology" and not Durkheim or other Western philosophers. However, I do not agree with this view, as the perspective from which Ibn Khaldun viewed human societies is broader than what is now considered a specific academic field of "sociology". Therefore, he is not the founder of "sociology" but rather the founder of the "science of civilization" (‘Ilm al-‘Umran), which is broader, richer, and based on a different Quranic methodological, doctrinal, and value-based foundations compared to sociology. Such an apologetic view is akin to claiming that Abu Dhar (may Allah be pleased with him) was the founder of "socialism" or that Umar ibn al-Khattab (may Allah be pleased with him) was the founder of "democracy," and so on. These are clear methodological errors.

Ibn Khaldun divided the stages of civilization, or ‘Umran, into three temporal phases, which he called: the phase of nomadism, followed by the phase of nomadic civilization, and finally, the phase of urban civilization. However, Ibn Khaldun placed the state at the center of human society, linking the rise and fall of civilization or ‘Umran to the rise and fall of the state. For example, he wrote about the relationship between wildness and

governance, and the fragmentation of the Arabs compared to their unity under leadership, saying:

“The Arabs do not achieve dominion except through religious influence, whether it be prophecy, spiritual leadership, or a great effect of religion in general. The reason for this is that, due to their nomadic nature, they are the most difficult of nations to submit to one another, because of their harshness, pride, lofty aspirations, and competition for leadership, making it rare for their desires to align. However, when religion, whether through prophecy or spiritual leadership, provides them with an internal moral restraint, it removes their arrogance and competition, making it easy for them to submit and unite. When a prophet or saint is among them, encouraging them to fulfill the commands of Allah, their negative traits vanish, they adopt virtuous ones, and their unity is established to manifest the truth, allowing them to achieve dominion and rule.”

He also wrote, as another example:

“Know that the state passes through different phases and renewed circumstances, and those who lead it acquire certain characteristics during each phase that differ from those of other phases, because character is naturally shaped by the conditions of the time. The phases of the state, in general, do not exceed five stages:

1. The first phase is the phase of victory over rivals, overcoming opposition, and seizing dominion from the previous state.
2. The second phase is the phase of consolidating power, where the ruler monopolizes authority and suppresses any attempts by others to share or challenge that power.
3. The third phase is the phase of relaxation and enjoyment, during which the ruler focuses on reaping the fruits of dominion—accumulating wealth, building enduring legacies, and achieving fame. In this phase, efforts are devoted to taxation, regulating income and expenses, and constructing grand buildings and infrastructure. This phase marks the final stage of independent rule by the state's founders, as they establish their glory and leave a clear legacy for future generations.

4. The fourth phase is the phase of contentment and peace, where the ruler is satisfied with what his predecessors built, maintaining peaceful relations with rival kings and following in the footsteps of his forebears without deviation. He believes that straying from their path would lead to the destruction of his reign.
5. The fifth phase is the phase of extravagance and waste, where the ruler squanders the wealth accumulated by his predecessors on personal pleasures, indulgence, generosity towards his inner circle, and the company of corrupt companions.”

Thus, for Ibn Khaldun, the state was the primary unit of analysis for understanding the concept of civilization or ‘Umran.

In our contemporary era, several pioneers of modern Islamic thought have emerged, representing various schools with new interpretations on matters of ‘umran (civilization), progress, and urbanism, along with the associated concepts and their implications for the reality and future of our ummah. These thinkers, despite their different approaches, disagreed with the focus on the state as the central concept of ‘umran, civilization, and urbanism found in Ibn Khaldun's thought and those who inherited his ideas within Islamic thought. They aimed to shift this centrality from the state to the *ummah*. Among the most prominent of these thinkers, based on what I have come across, are: Malik Bennabi, Ismail al-Faruqi, Mona Abul-Fadl, Abdelwahab Elmessiri, Muhammad Imara, Abdelmajid al-Najjar, Ahmed al-Raysuni, Tarek al-Bishri, and Hiba Raouf.

I have chosen to quote from what Dr. Hiba Raouf has written, as one example, linking the oneness of Allah with the purpose of ‘umran, opening up a broad horizon for renewal in shifting the understanding of ‘umran from the state to the ummah:

Dr. Hiba Raouf, in her article titled "In the Beginning was the Ummah: Between Western Nationalism and the Islamic Ummah," writes:

"Today, the struggle revolves around the definition of the ummah—between the project of restoring the renaissance of the Islamic ummah and the dominance of the interests and elites of the nation-state, which protects the new colonialism, boasts of national

security while squandering it, and raises the slogans of patriotism while being the first to betray the very meaning of the homeland, conspiring with its enemies and violating the rights of the people in the name of the higher interests of the country. The goal of reviewing the state is not to destroy it on the heads of the oppressed. Rather, these reviews aim to revive its covenants and re-establish its foundations after it has become nothing but ruins, ensuring that its authority is both legitimate and humane. However, the ummah precedes the state, and this is why starting with it—both theoretically and practically—is crucial.

The issue is that political authority—the state—came as a secondary measure following the existence of the ummah, and political authority evolved from the concept of the caliphate during the days of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, giving rise to a state with institutions connected to various social classes with fixed interests during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods and later states. It is true that the state became a solid entity, exerting heavy influence over society, and gradually enjoyed autonomy, controlling all the strings of power in society and dominating it. However, the state always remained in need of justifying itself before society. Despite its importance, the priority in Islamic society always belonged to the community / ummah and its historical objectives.

The political project in Islam is the formation of the community / ummah, as it is the only framework in which the individual can fully practice the rituals of the religion. It is the only space in which the religion can be realized, as it cannot be achieved outside the social community."

She further discusses the relationship between architecture and 'umran:

"The built environment shaped the worldview of the jurist, the writer, and the historian regarding authority, space, and place, reflecting the prevailing human perspectives, the doctrine of Tawheed (the Oneness of Allah), and the resulting concepts of rights, community, benefit, and stewardship (istikhlaf). As architecture transformed and modern cities were shaped to serve capitalism, it became essential to question the

forms and challenges of applying Sharia to a transforming civilization whose architecture could be described, at best, as 'false'—its appearance not reflecting the values of its inhabitants but rather challenging them. In harsher terms, it could be described as architecture 'against Sharia,' paralyzing it, regulating it, and killing it by opposing the idea of the ummah or organic community, the idea of custom ('urf), and the spaces of popular authority, religious interaction, and solidarity-based local cultural rituals."

She adds:

"The new cities promised liberation from rural society, the new markets promised liberation from poverty, and the modern nation-state promised political security. None of these promises were fulfilled—or, to be more precise, they were fulfilled for a limited elite and specific groups, but the price paid was enormous."

Under the title "Restoring a Holistic Vision and Harmonizing the Paths," Dr. Hiba Raouf writes:

"We can classify the approaches in Islamic heritage texts regarding the understanding of the elements of 'human society' into five schools:

1. **The Philosophical School**, whose aim is to achieve happiness for mankind. Many philosophers spoke about this, such as Al-Farabi when he discussed 'civil science,' which combined society, ethics, and politics, and stated that the purpose or goal of this science is to achieve happiness in both worlds (this life and the hereafter).

2. **The School that viewed the sciences of society or 'umran* (civilization) as a means to realize the objectives of Sharia**, aiming to build an ethical society. This school believed that the foundation of this society is the purification of the soul. An example of this is Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's statement that 'religion is the foundation, and the sultan is its guardian.'

3. ****The School that considered *'umran* in its institutional and administrative structure****, focusing on 'how' this civilization should be managed, i.e., the policies of people and authority. Al-Mawardi, for instance, wrote about the rules of governance (*al-ahkam al-sultaniyya*) and elaborated on how to manage the different aspects of governance and the structure of the Islamic state.

4. ****The Jurisprudential School****, which was mainly concerned with the details of human civilization in its worship-related, communicative, transactional, interactive, and confrontational aspects, and related sciences that focused on the relationship between reason and revelation.

5. ****The Social and Historical School****, one of its most prominent figures being Ibn Khaldun, who spoke about urbanization, human interaction, wildness, nomadism, civilization, and tribalism. He also addressed *'umran* in its paths, schools, forms, and transformations."

Then, under the question "What are the objectives of human society as we perceive them in our Islamic vision, which we can present to the world as principles for dialogue and engagement?" Dr. Hiba Raouf writes:

"We find that these objectives, if we aim to summarize them, are encapsulated in what the jurists identified as the **Maqasid al-Shariah** (objectives of Islamic law). Even in societies that do not adopt the legal perspective or the divine revelation's view of humanity and its role in this universe, we find that they seek to fulfill the same objectives developed by the jurists: preserving religion, preserving life, preserving the mind, and preserving wealth.

I believe there are several elements that can assist us in constructing this concept and mapping out its meaning: the element of balance, the element of understanding human nature, the dimension of space, the element of time, and the dimension of *‘umran* (civilization), as it relates to space and geography but in a more intricate way—meaning the construction of relationships and institutions through which these relationships are managed.

The dimension of the universe: We have largely neglected the connection between the objectives of the Shariah and the objectives of *‘umran* and the observation of the universe. We are responsible for the surrounding universe, and the nations mentioned in the Quran are similar to us, yet we rarely consider or care about them. Historically, our civilization took great care to establish endowments for animals and birds within the Islamic city, considering the safety and well-being of these creatures as indicators of the level of Islamic civilization.”

Civilizational Miracle in the ‘Umran of architecture