What Does Make a City Islamic?

Şevket YILDIZ, Ph.D.
Faculty of Theology
Department of History of Islam and Islamic Arts
Uludag University
Turkey
E-mail: syildiz75@hotmail.com

Abstract

Since 19th century, urban historiography has become common as a discipline and gained importance; as a result, several urban theories have emerged. These theories are mainly based on observations on western cities born after the Age of Enlightenment. Besides, such theories, which are constituted on modern paradigms, have developed certain frameworks deemed available for cities that have emerged in earlier ages and different civilizations. Within the studies of urban history, the Islamic cities have been treated within this perspective, and several approaches have been exposed. However, the modern western urban typologies have had difficulties for forming appropriate and satisfactory frameworks for Islamic cities. Therefore, Islamic cities have to be re-observed taking their characteristics into account, and certain classifications suitable for those cities have to be developed.

The ability to comprehend modern western cities emerging in the wake of Industrial Revolution and to define them by exposing their similarities and differences with the ones in earlier periods of history, has been the driving force for urban historiography. In 19th century, different classifications and typologies have been developed regarding the cities set up within history. As we get closer to 21st century, modern cities have become great and complex structures. The fast and excessive growth has brought along many new problems. In this period, studies on problems of modern cities and their solutions, in accordance with the new situation, have become a driving force for urban historiography, and the latter has made a notable progress in this way.[1]

Today, many enormous metropolises we come upon in many countries have increased the importance of urban history studies; whereas the new structuring and lifestyles in them have made different and more improved urban typologies obligatory. On the other hand, due to complex structure of today's cities – due to their physical and metaphysical problems –, the studies on the cities within history have become even more important. It is considered that certain examples experienced in the past may provide an important expansion for cities of today.[2] Civilization, culture and city are three concepts that cannot be separated, and each recalls another. One of their several common traits is that neither of the three has a common definition. Extensiveness and diversity of the field the abovementioned concepts embrace makes it difficult to define them.[3] In the same way, during the modern era, since the civilization concept is rather understood as technical background and development of history of humanity, the cities where the civilization emerged were rather measured by their physical elements. According to this point of view, the physical structure of a city has become decisive for its place and position regarding civilization.

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[1] As an overview of the problems regarding modern cities, see Michael Aiken; Kenneth Newton; Roger Friedland; Guido Martinotti; "Urban Systems Theory and Urban Policy: A Four-Nation Comparison", *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 3. (Jul., 1987), pp. 341-358; Edward L. Glaeser and David C. Mare, "Cities and Skills", *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 19, No. 2. (Apr., 2001), pp. 316-342; Michael H. Ebner, "Urban History: Retrospect and Prospect", *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 68, No. 1. (Jun., 1981), pp. 69-84.

[2] For an introduction about urban historiography and urban theories, the following can be browsed: Yunus Uğur, "Şehir Tarihi ve Türkiye'de Şehir Tarihçiliği: Yaklaşımlar, Konular ve Kaynaklar", *Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi*, Vol: 3, Issue: 6, 2005, pp. 9-26.

[3] Certain writers such as Parvez Manzoor indicate that today, as the world has become an altogether community, the usage of concepts like city and civilization is defective and inconvenient; thus, they claim that in Islamic literature, it shall be more appropriate to use the word "ummah" instead of the abovementioned. Their main ground is that the concepts of civilization and city are stable and dull, whereas the ummah notion is unstable and available for changes. In this respect, they defend that the first denomination recalls distinction between me and the other, thus the hostility; whereas the second one evokes unity and togetherness. See. Parvez Manzoor, "İnsan şehri-İman şehri", *Habitat II*, Istanbul 1997, vol. I, pp. 64-77. Here, the interesting point is that the meaning attributed to concepts of city and civilization is rather related with western cities. However, the mistake by many urban historians is repeated; and the definitions about western cities have been generalized. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned arguments remain feeble, since the physical structure of Islamic cities is always open to changes and displays different architectural characteristics. For detailed information about this attribute of Islamic cities, see Muhammad Ghazali, "Kültürel Metropol Olarak İslâm Şehri", *Habitat II*, Istanbul 1997, vol. I, pp. 99-103.

On the other hand, as a result of this approach, the cities have been defined considering their physical structure and changes on such structure; therefore, even if the habitants have changed, it was deemed unnecessary to talk about a new city.[4] Just like the fact that after enlightenment, the civilization concepts have been treated generally in a techno-centric sense, accordingly, the cities were analyzed physically and in an urban centric way. As a result, while the studies on urban history were initially a topic for architecture, within time, they have become a sociological subject too. By this way, during analysis of a city in classic approach, the physical characteristics (such as settlements, buildings, etc.) have been used as a base; whereas, in the early 21st century, the people living in the city have come to forefront and the efforts for society-oriented explanations have become more common. Nevertheless, since the sociological urban history studies ground on modern social typologies, they are not explanatory enough for the cities that have emerged in earlier ages and within different civilizations.[5] Due to its secular content, the concept of community, which can seem partially illuminating for earlier periods, is far from being a satisfactory and extensive explanation manner for interpretations on religious societies, and especially on Islamic society. In this case, it becomes a necessity to develop certain new methodological approaches in order to reveal Islamic cities.[6]

Can the Islamic city be a common concept that points out a certain urban type via its characteristics? How many of the cities within Islamic world can be included in this content? It is possible to divide the views on these questions in three sections. According to the first, in the cities they have set up or conquered, Muslims have substantially maintained ancient urban traditions and did not bring on anything new. Defenders of this approach argue that the ancient cities have remained all the same or even with slightest changes, and that even though now a Muslim society lives in such cities, they have not established a type of their own.[7] As a matter of fact, many western researches, who have observed Islamic cities, have supported this view by mounting the main schema of these cities on Ancient Greek and Roman urban structuring. E. Wirth, A. Hourani and Von Grunebaum are among the supporters of this approach. On the issue, Hourani and Grunebaum affirm that Islamic cities are completely like other medieval cities, whereas Wirth claims that the only difference between Islamic cities and oriental cities is the permanent market place ("çarşı").

According to the second view, the Islamic cities form a genuine urban type thanks to their own characteristics; thus, they are easily distinguished from others. Islamic cities generally follow ancient cities in terms of main structure and plan; nonetheless, they bear certain genuine characteristics such as mosques that replace temples. Therefore, we can talk about an Islamic city. As a matter of fact, several western authors and most Muslim writers prefer this approach.[8] Both of the abovementioned views principally benefit from a common methodology and perspective. Accordingly, the cities are assessed with regard to their physical traits and architectural structure. Nevertheless, these approaches differ from each other on the point whether the differences within physical structure actually form a new urban type.[9]

In this respect, it is possible to say that the Islamic cities generally adopt in physical terms the structuring of ancient cities without any change, or maintain them with some slight changes.[10] Nevertheless, the political, social, cultural and economical structure of the cities where Muslims habit has changed completely and it has wrapped itself up in colors of Muslim society. In other words, even though Islamic cities appropriated and adopted many traits arising from the sources of past civilizations, the relevant traits have gained a different and new identity within these cities. That is why, Islamic cities display a model union totally different from others.[11] Therefore, during an analysis on Islamic cities, it will be a more convenient to take Islamic society, and its faiths and opinions into account.

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[4] Favro, Diane, "Meaning and Experience: Urban History from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period", *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Architectural History 1999/2000. (Sep., 1999), pp. 364-373.

[5] For a criticism on sociological urban history studies, see John I. Gilderbloom, "Is Urban Sociology Dying?", *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Textbooks (Oct., 1988), pp. 443-447.

[6] There are several recent studies on the matter though they are not numerous enough. For recent studies on Islamic cities see Zeynep, Çelik, "New Approaches to the "Non-Western" City", *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 58, No. 3, Architectural History 1999/2000. (Sep., 1999), pp. 374-381.

[7] As a person who accepts only the post-Enlightenment Western cities as true cities, Weber's studies on western cities, and his interpretation on other cities in history following these studies have gained much admission. For detailed information see. Max Weber, "Batı Şehri", (tra. Fırat Oruç), *Şehir ve Cemiyet,* (edit. Ahmet Doğan), İz Yayıncılık, Istanbul 2000, pp. 131-167.

[8] Can, Yılmaz, *İslâm Şehirlerinin Fiziki Yapısı (H.I-III/M.VII-IX),* Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, Ankara 1995, pp. 29-30.

[9] For western approaches on Islamic cities, see Susan Landay, "The Ecology of İslâmic Cities: The Case for the Ethnocity", *Economic Geography*, Vol. 47, Supplement: Comparative Factorial Ecology. (Jun., 1971), pp. 303-313; Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The İslâmic City--Historic Myth, İslâmic Essence, and Contemporary Relevance", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2. (May, 1987), pp. 155-176.

[10] For physical structures of ancient cities, see Wycherley, *ibid*, pp. 5-14; Can, *ibid*, pp. 9-19. Besides, for detailed information on common and distinct aspects of Islamic cities with others, see Naci, *ibid*, pp. 11-147.

[11] Ghazali, Muhammad, "Kültürel Metropol Olarak İslâm Şehri", *Habitat II,* vol. I, pp. 101-102.

In this sense, Islamic cities constitute a type on their own in face of others, and differ from them with respect to fundamental characteristics. However, this difference is not about physical attributes but in terms of differentiation of urban society. In his article about Islamic cities, Mustafa Demirci points out this question as follows: "It shall not be a satisfactory approach to try to comprehend Islamic cities by concentrating on corporeal bodies or establishments, since the relations established within them have been built not on corporal institutions, but on humanly connections between individuals. Therefore, in order to comprehend Islamic cities, one should lay stress on what kind of a culture, social decorum and life the people, who have provided a real vivacity and identity to the physical plan and architectural works, have developed around these buildings, rather than such plans and works themselves.[12]

The main feature that separates Islamic cities from others is the existence of a Muslim society in there. At the heart of Muslim society, lies the faith of tawhid (oneness) and this is the main principle on which Islamic city is based, just like Muslim society. This common identity formed by Muslim society – whether it is called "Islamic community", "Islamic ummah" or "Islamic culture" – is the decisive and fundamental characteristic of Islamic cities.[13] Besides, the tawhid conception is found in every attribute – such as physical, political, economical, social and cultural traits – of Islamic city both transcendently and immanently. Therefore, the aforementioned characteristic of Muslim society provides that Islamic city constitutes an entity with all its aspects, and that these cities form a common type.

Both the physical and the spiritual aspects of Islamic cities are directed to the mosque/masjid in the center (Câmii Kebir: "The Great Mosque"). However, in an Islamic city, it is inappropriate regarding both dogmas and practice to comprehend and define the masjid as a place with only spiritual attribute. As a matter of fact, in Muslim society, spirituality and earthliness are two domains neither independent nor separate from each other. This fact has also influenced the structure of Islamic city. Therefore, it is possible to indicate that in Islamic cities, the mosque is a place that unifies and keeps together both spiritual and earthly functions.[14] The nesting of spirituality and earthliness within Muslim society can be clearly observed with respect to formation of Islamic cities. Palace, madrasah and permanent market places (çarşı) are next to the mosque, mostly adjacent, and form a common building called complex (külliye).[15]

As the distinction between the sacred and the profane[16] within pagan cultures bears no correspondent within Islamic thought, contrary to ancient cities, it is impossible to talk about distinct holy and secular places in Islamic city.[17] As Muhammad Ghazali indicates, Islamic cities do not bear a sacred character. The city is merely an instrument in order to meet the spiritual and earthly requirements of Muslim society.[18] In Islamic thought, the world is completely temporary/evanescent and unstable. Nevertheless, beyond all the temporary forms and images of the world – or of the city – there is a spirit always permanent. This is the Tawhid conception that emphasizes both a numerical oneness and the unity of multitude. According to Islamic thought, the universe is accepted as one of three verses (the book, the man, the universe) by Allah. But the universe, the earth, the cities etc. are merely the signs that remind and take the person to Allah; that is, they do not represent the truth, the reality and the divinity in itself. Accordingly, in Islamic thought, the "heart" ("kalb") is a piece of flesh in the body; at the same time it represents the soul, and becomes a passage point to the soul. In the same way, the mosque in an Islamic city is the gate to meet and direct towards Allah in "macrocosm". In other words, in an Islamic city, the mosque is a cipher for transition from supernatural to natural, and from material to meaning. Therefore, the mosque in the Islamic city is not a shrine out of the city to determine and to dominate it; instead, the mosque is an extension and a piece of city and nature.[19]

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[12] Demîrci, Mustafa, "İslâm'da Şehir ve Şehrin Sosyal Dinamikleri", *İSTEM*, year: 1, issue: 2, 2003, (129-146), p. 129.

[13] Accordingly, Michon indicates that "the most explicit characteristic of Islamic city is that it is a combination of the effort by each individual to surrender to Allah, and of the community that helps him for this effort". See Jean Louis Michon, *Dînî Kurumlar*, p. 18.

[14] Ghazali, *ibid*, p. 102.

[15] Sâlim, *Kurtuba*, vol. I, p. 32.

[16] Sharpe, Eric J., *Dinler Tarihinde 50 Anahtar Kavram*, (Tra. Ahmet Güç), Arasta Yayınları, Bursa 2000, pp. 51-53.

[17] Regarding ancient cities and sacred space; see Fernand Schwarz, *Kadim Bilgeliğin Yeniden Keşfî*, (Tra. Ayşe Meral Aslan), İnsan Yayınları, Istanbul 1997, pp. 308-313.

[18] Ghazali, *ibid*, p. 102.

[19] Nasr, Seyyid Hüseyin, *İslâm Sanatı ve Maneviyatı*, (Tra. Ahmet Demîrhan), İnsan yy, Istanbul, 1992, pp. 49-50. On the matter, Eric Sharpe defends that for church, synagogue and mosque, the expression "House of Community" ("Domus Ecclesiae") shall be more appropriate rather than "House of God" ("Domus Dei"). See Sharpe, *ibid*, p. 52.