



‘SUNNATULLAH’ IN THE HOLY QUR’AN AS A FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLE OF TAWHIDIC EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This article investigates concept of ‘*Sunnatullah*’ in the holy Qur’an as a basic principle of Islamic theory of knowledge. It defined as the immutable Divine pattern and law in the created world, which provides the rational premises for systematic inquiry. Generality and consistency are the basic characteristics of laws to produce the measurable knowledge. While modern science is yet to develop general theories to measure and predict future directions of social changes and historical events, the holy Qur’an persistently emphasizes that there are immutable patterns which govern both human and social domains. The holy Qur’an asserts that: "*every nation has its fixed term of life (Ajala), when their term is reached, they neither delayed a moment nor advanced.*" [Q. 4:34]¹. It is well known that fixed term of life is for living organisms, but how a nation has fixed term of life? This problematic question poses further other critical questions about nature of laws which govern life of nations, civilizations, social interactions, and historical events. In which way social and historical pattern are different from the natural laws; and how it can be measured? Adopting the analytical method of theoretical approach, this article attempted to address these questions. Concept of ‘Sunnatullah’ in the holy Qur’an, its types and basic characteristics are investigated. The article concluded that careful study of Sunnatullah in the holy Qur’an enables to uncover the basic principles of Tawhidic epistemology and provides an alternate to the secular epistemology which dominating the entire enterprise of the modern science. Sunnatullah in Qur’anic view introduces itself not only as epistemological principle that describes the physical world, but also as moral principle which governs social changes and historical events.

Keywords: Tawhidic epistemology, systematic enquiry, Divine patterns, historical events, Ibn Khaldun.

1. Introduction

‘Sunnatullah’ is a key concept and fundamental principle of Tawhidic epistemology (TE) in the holy Qur’an. It refers to the consistent and immutable

Divine laws and patterns operating throughout the universe and human history. Tawhidic epistemology is theory of knowledge which is based on oneness of God. It constitutes the Islamic framework for knowledge inquiry and truth interpretation. The holy Qur’an employs ‘Sunnatullah’ and other epistemological concepts to draw human attention to the dynamic processes of the natural world and

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to articulate the systematic method of inquiry, either through deductive reasoning or based on careful observation of the systematic processes of nature, mechanisms of social change, and interactive patterns of human history. These elements establish the foundation for the proper method of inquiry which enables mankind to theorize, predict, control and make change. It also, enables to draw conclusions from historical events, patterns of human civilization, and modes of social interactions for efficient and effective management.

Epistemological concepts in the holy Qur'an are such as *Taqdir* (measuring) *Mīzān* (balance), *Āyah* (sign), *Hudā* (guidance), and *Sunnatullah* (divine law) which is a fundamental principle. Through these key concepts the holy Qur'an establishes foundations of systematic method of inquiry that is based on the Islamic theory of knowledge, known as Tawhidic epistemology, and sets its conceptual framework. The fundamental issues of (TE) are such as source and nature of human knowledge, method of inquiry, and the final objectives of knowledge inquiry. The analytical study of these concepts guides to develop the basic premises for systematic research on dynamic processes of the natural phenomena and the complex patterns of social phenomena.

In three basic parts, this article has investigated concept of '*Sunnatullah*' in the holy Qur'an as a fundamental concept of Tawhidic epistemology which provides the rational premises for systematic inquiry. Meaning of *Sunnatullah*, its basic categories, characteristics, and its contribution in Tawhidic epistemology and its conceptual framework are investigated. The qualitative method of analytical approach is adopted. The Qur'anic verses which are related to this fundamental concept of Tawhidic epistemology are collected and analyzed. Qur'anic verses, in Arabic, which related to the basic concepts of (TE) are attached as footnotes to guide

for further discussion and better understanding.

2. The conceptual framework of Tawhidic epistemology:

To establish foundations of Tawhidic epistemology, the holy Qur'an has employed various concept as principles, such as:

- *Taqdir*: principle of measured universe;
- *Mīzān*: principle of balanced universe;
- *Āyah*: principle of the universe as sign & proof of its Creator;
- *Hudā / Hidayyah*: principle of guided universe;
- *Sunnatullah*: principle of immutable Divine law in the universe.

These principles constitute the basics of Islamic theory of knowledge and its conceptual framework. It will be elaborated in a separate work. The main objective of the current article, however, is to investigate the concept of '*Sunnatullah*' in the holy Qur'an, as a fundamental principle of Tawhidic epistemology.

3. Sunnatullah

Besides the other concepts, the holy Qur'an uses the term '*Sunnatullah*' as a fundamental principle of Tawhidic epistemology. It stands for universal laws and patterns of God that govern the entire universe: natural, moral, and historical. It signifies a purposeful and orderly universe, and validates systematic inquiry of knowledge. Almighty Allah (swt) has created the cosmos, the earth, heavens and everything within and in between, in precise measures and balance (*Mīzān*); and guided it to fulfil specific purpose. He created everything with laws to function in systematic orders that perceptible to human reason for proper dealing with everything. Besides the natural laws, almighty Allah also has revealed moral guidance in form of commands and prohibitions (*Shari'ah*) to guide mankind to the right path which

achieves the purpose of human life. Hence, studying the natural phenomena and historical events is necessary for effective performance of human duty as a vicegerent of God on earth (*Khalifah*).

According to the holy Qur'an, all entities and events of the created world are acts of God and his commands (الخلق والأمر) [Q. 7:54]². The critical question, however, is how we can understand and predict events of the created world, which are free acts of God? To answer this key question, the holy Qur'an introduces '*Sunnatullah*' as a fundamental principle of Islamic theory of knowledge. It manifests the Divine will and the unchangeable law of God in His created world, revealing consistency of Allah's creative acts, which created everything in precise measures and guided it naturally and morally for specific purpose [Q. 20:50]³. It emphasizes that acts of God on His created world, as displayed by dynamic processes of the natural phenomena and patterns of human history, are systematic and purposeful. Thus, they are intelligible, predictable, and measurable by different tools of measurement, based on levels of their complexity.

However, the critical question that has been challenging the Islamic thought is that, if the unchangeable law of God '*Sunnatullah*' encompasses the entire created world, including the natural world, human and historical events, or it is just applicable to the natural laws which are easily detectable and quantitatively measurable? The answer according to the traditional Islamic thought is that, *Sunnatullah* stands only for laws which govern the human history and free acts of mankind as related to the revealed guidance, i.e., moral laws rather than the natural laws⁴. In fact, human and social sciences, such as psychology and sociology are more complex and less predictable; so how it can be described as 'immutable law of God' or '*Sunnatullah*'? This is the basic problem that this article aims to explore.

The major classifications of *Sunnatullah* and basic attempts to develop models for complex patterns of historical events, such as Ibn Khaldun's approach, will be highlighted.

3.1. Concept of *Sunnatullah* in the holy Qur'an

The Arabic phrase (سُنَّةُ اللَّهِ) is transliterated in English literature in different ways, especially in orientalist's works, such as *sunnat Allah*, *law of Allah*, *God's sunnah* and so on⁵. However, to avoid any confusion this article transliterates the phrase as '*Sunnatullah*' and translate it as law of God or pattern of God.

The Arabic word (سُنَّة) '*Sunnah*' and its derivatives occurred sixteen times in eleven verses of the holy Qur'an. It literally stands for everything that moves consistently and smoothly flows in certain direction⁶. Therefore, it comes in the sense of habit (عادة), biography (سيرة), and custom (بيد). As an act of man, it is a generally agreed method (مُتَّهَج) that regularly practiced as habit. The habituated method, either consistent with Divine guidance or not, should be authentic and idealistic to be followed by others⁷. Indeed, the *Sunnah* that God sets for Himself is certainly authoritative and idealistic in nature, so that it must be followed and applied.

The renowned commentator of the holy Qur'an, al-Tabari (d:310 H), defines *Sunnah* as an authentic example set it by a leader '*Imam*' and followed by others⁸. This authentic act constitutes what is known as 'civilizational act' which has general implications on society even though it was an act of an individual. This mode of acts, according to the holy Qur'an, are recorded in the book of the nation for accounting, either in this world or the Next [Q. 45:28]⁹, rather than books of the individuals [Q. 17: 13-14]¹⁰.

The term *Sunnah* in Islamic legal tradition is mainly used for method of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as an ideal

interpretation and application of Islamic teachings. It is Prophet's wisdom in applying the Divine revelation and turning it into practice by his sayings, acts and approvals. Sunnatullah, on the other hand, refers to Allah's wisdom in handling affairs of the created world. It reflects the consistent and immutable laws of God operating throughout the cosmos. Sunnatullah, in this general sense, describes the natural laws in the universe, which known in Islamic tradition as (*Sunan Kawniyyah*) (السنن الكونية). Sunnatullah, also has a moral and legal dimension as guidance revealed by Allah (swt) to lead mankind to the right course by his free choice. This type is known in Islamic tradition as (*Sunnan Shari'yyah*) (السنن الشرعية), which describes patterns of moral values and historical events.

The basic difference between Sunnatullah and Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ) is that Sunnatullah describes the natural laws as well as moral values and legal rules which govern the personal conducts and historical events; while Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ) is the ideal method of applying Islamic teachings, moral and legal. Some researchers described Sunnatullah as '*The Neglected Sunnah*'¹¹, because there is no considerable research in this key concept of the holy Qur'an, which provides fundamentals of Islamic theory of knowledge.

The holy Qur'an attributed the word 'Sunnah' and its derivatives¹² to three parties: first, Sunnah of prophets and messengers, especially Sunah of those who were before the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) [Q. 17:77]¹³. Second, Sunnah of ordinary people, either good habits [Q. 18:55]¹⁴, or bad habits, specially acts and conducts of those who denied the revealed guidance of God and His physical miracles [Q. 4:26]¹⁵. Third, Sunnah of God 'Sunnatullah' [Q. 33:62]¹⁶, [Q. 48:23]¹⁷, which is the issue of this article. In fact, all above types are Sunnatullah, but attributed to others

because it is a consequence and result of their acts, either good or bad. The common feature of 'Sunnah' in all these cases is that the act is being constant, authentic, and smooth. The main characteristic of Sunnatullah, as reaffirmed by the holy Qur'an, is unchangeable and immutable [Q. 35:43]¹⁸. From epistemological view point, Sunnatullah emphasizes:

- Existence of Divine patterns and natural laws governing the cosmos and universe as whole.
- Consistent and unchangeable patterns of God that guide the rise and decline of civilization.
- Predictable regularities that enable mankind to understand processes of the natural, human and social phenomena.
- Principles which describe the moral and legal consequences of human choices and acts.

Accordingly, Sunnatullah in Qur'anic view introduces itself not only as epistemological principle that governs physical world, but also as moral principle which guides for social change and historical events.

3.2. Types of Sunnatullah

Divisions of *Sunnatullah* can be based on various criteria and looked from different perspectives. According to its scope, *Sunnatullah* can be divided into general, which governs the whole universe, known as '*Sunnan Kawniyyah*', such as natural laws and gravitational force; and into specific, which governs only certain domains of the created world such as moral and legal rules, known as '*Sunan Shari'yyah*' which is applicable to free choices of mankind.

From another point of view, Sunnatullah can be divided based on time factor into two types: instant and flexible. The first type describes the relationship between cause and effect which gives its results and implications instantly without any delay whenever the necessary conditions are satisfied. Natural laws are mainly of this

type. For instance, water boils immediately whenever the heat temperature reaches certain degree without any delay. The other type is more flexible, as it delays to give more time for results to take place gradually. For example, destruction of corrupted nations and civilizations, may last several decades before it finally disintegrated. Results of violating moral values are mainly of this type. The most distinguishing character of this type is that it gives opportunity to human beings in order to recheck their practices to avoid disastrous consequences. Fortunately, most of the historical events, which mankind plays a crucial role in its formation are belong to the second type, while the natural laws which are immediate and strict are belong to the first.

The most relevant division of *Sunnatullah*, which encompasses all these dimensions, however, is that which based on complexity of the phenomenon, i.e., domain of study¹⁹. The holy Qur'an provides this mode of division in the following verse: (*We will show them Our signs (Ayat) on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth*) [Q. 41: 53]²⁰. This Qur'anic verse describes two fields of study need to be shown to human intellect: first is processes of the natural world, and second is human choices and acts which are more complex than the natural processes. Signs of God (Ayat) are His laws and patterns (Sunan), which are reflected by entities and events of His created world.

Accordingly, this Qur'anic verse divides *Sunnatullah* into two basic domains: first, *Sunnatullah* on horizons (*Aafaq*), which stands for processes of the natural world; and second, *Sunnatullah* in human domain (*Anfus*), which denotes free choices and acts of mankind which governed by moral and legal rules. The second category furthermore can be divided into two: personal and collective which is known as civilizational acts. *Sunnatullah* in the

natural phenomena termed by the holy Qur'an as '*Ayatul Aafaq*' known as *Sunan Kawniyyah* (cosmic signs) which includes the most general laws that govern the cosmic order, such as gravitation force and creation of everything in pairs and precise measures.

According to Qur'anic view, the historical patterns which known as '*Sunan Tarikhiyyah*' are more significant to draw lessons '*Ibar*' to guide mankind to the right course. This type will be the focus point in the second part of the proceeding discussion. The basic difference between the two types of *Sunnatullah* can be seen from three dimensions:

Firstly, patterns and laws which govern human acts are more complex and less predictable but more flexible to enable mankind to recheck and make change to his choices for different results. This means, it is *Sunnatullah* that God changes status of people whenever they change their choices and acts [Q. 13:11]²¹.

Secondly, laws governing the natural world are strict in their cause-and-effect relationship, but they are simple, predictable, and measurable. Thirdly, the Qur'an has employed two different terms to describe each domain. It mainly uses the term '*Sunnah*' for human domain, while it uses other terms such as '*Taskhir*' to describe the mechanical processes of the natural phenomena. [Q. 13: 11]²². However, *Sunnatullah* includes both the natural and human domains. While the modern science is yet to develop precise and predictable theories for complex patterns of human and social phenomena, the holy Qur'an persistently emphasizes that there are laws and pattern governing human choices and historical events, in the same manner of natural laws. Thus, analytical study of such Qur'anic verses is necessary to understand nature of laws in various domains of science and to develop measurement tools for predictable knowledge and better management.

Choices of mankind will be consistent with course of the universal motion of the universe (Sunan Kawniyyah) only when his acts are in accordance with moral values and legal rules provided by Divine revelation (Sunan Shari`ayyah) [Q.22:18]²³. Standards of this classification, initially, provide a relevant ground for the argument that universality of Divine laws does not necessarily means unity of the order in either domain: human or natural phenomena. In other words, characteristics of patterns that govern human history and civilization are not necessarily like laws which rule the natural phenomena.

3.2.1. Sunnatullah on the horizons: the cosmic order

According to the Qur`anic epistemology, scientific discoveries are possible since God has created the entire universe in precise measures, perfect balance, and systematic orders. Objects are formed from different components of atoms, nucleus, and molecules with great potential and capability for interaction and rearrangement. Things around us act the way they do because of the manner their molecules behave. Theologians and philosophers use this systemic making and unmaking process of the world as concrete evidence for the existence of the Creator. Scientists, on the other, hand take the systematic processes as primary premise for research method to explore the natural, human and social phenomena, where they see various examples of order, which reaffirm that the world is created with extremely delicate balances.

The holy Qur`an explicates this balance by several key concepts that reflect the existential of Divine systems in cosmic order, such as epistemological concepts briefed in the first section of this article and the term 'Itqan' 'perfection' where Allah says: (*The artistry of God Who disposes of all things in perfect order*) [Q.27:88]²⁴. This perfect order, which prevails throughout the

universe, leads human intellect to a basic question: Who is behind this magnificent design and order of the universe?

The materialistic view of the world explains the order and balance in the universe as natural and mechanical process. But, according to the new scientific discoveries²⁵ mere mechanical process cannot provide such perfect systems in the universe, otherwise it leads to chaos rather than order²⁶. The Islamic worldview, however, emphasizes that the perfect systems of the universe are due to the wisdom and knowledge of God Who created everything in a perfect manner and guided it naturally and morally to fulfill its purpose [Q. 20:50]²⁷.

Based on the Qur`anic verse which says: (*We will show them Our signs (Ayat) on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth*) [Q. 41: 53]²⁸, Muslim thinkers have explored the relationship between the outward manifestations and the essence of the world. For them, everything could serve as sign of God (*Ayah*). The holy Qur`an is repeatedly urging mankind, believers and disbeliever, to reflect and ponder God`s signs. By systematic processes, creatures prove existence of their Creator. These signs are not only on the horizons of the physical world, but also in human self and his ability to think about the existence of the Creator. The natural world is an open book in which those who have sound intellect can see and contemplate to recognize God`s signs and thus be guided by their reason to the Creator Himself²⁹. When the sensual and spiritual faculties, termed by the holy Qur`an as heart (Qalb), meet at the signs of God (*Ayat*) one will be able to understand the Divine wisdom and appreciate His creative power (Annemarie, Schmmel,1994).

The most critical epistemological question about the function of *Sunnatullah* in cosmic order is: how mankind can understand *Sunnatullah* in the context of natural laws

which are mainly based on cause-and-effect system? In other words, what is the relationship between Divine action and causation laws in the operating world? The holy Qur'an leaves the direct answer to this question to human intellect³⁰, however, it provides practical insights through the above epistemological principles, which lay the metaphysical foundations of Islamic theory of knowledge.

3.2.2 Sunnatullah within human self: the Qur'anic concept of history

Allah (swt) in the holy Qur'an says: (*We will show them Our signs (Ayat) on the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth*) [Q. 41: 53]³¹. These are the two domains of Sunnatullah: natural world and human domain at both personal and collective levels. Choices of nations, according to the holy Qur'an, are different from individual one. Choices of nations, according to Sunnatullah, have civilizational value which determines their rise and fall in accordance with certain historical facts. As it has been pointed above, *Sunnatullah* in human domain '*Sunanul Anfus*' can be understood in two compatible senses: *Sunnah* that governs individual choices and that which governs civilizations and historical events, known as *Sunnan Tarikhiyyah*. The main difference between the two, according to the contemporary Muslim sociologist (M. Baqir Sadr, 2011) is that implications of the individual choices and acts are only accountable for it personally in this world or the Next. However, a historic action will be recorded in the collective book of nations and its implications are extended to the whole nation. This kind of action does not necessarily come from the majority, it might be an individual act but still affects the whole nation, such as a decision of war or peace taken by president of the country.

The holy Qur'an has narrated this type of action through some historical events of

the past, such as the story of Fir'aun (Pharaoh), Haman, and Qarun (Korah) who led their nations to destruction. The first two, i.e. Fir'aun and Haman, led their peoples to destruction through political oppression, while Qarun led his nation to the same end through economic oppression. The story of Qarun has been reflected by the following Qur'anic verses [Q.28: 76-81]³². On the other hand, if majority of a nation or their leaders are good, such as *al-khulafa al-Rashudun* (the righteous caliphs), they will lead their nations to the success and good life both here and Hereafter.

However, beside individual responsibilities that are prescribed by the *Shari'ah* (revealed laws), the holy Qur'an also holds that plurality of community and prescribed unity of the whole as a single society has its own identity and its own responsibilities. According to modern sociologists, social science is concerned with study of human beings interacting with one another in terms of mutually accepted standards of conduct. Their interaction takes place in an environment which comprises, among other things, climate, material resources, population structure and physical possibilities of communication (Parsons, Talcott, 1991).

The Qur'anic concept of history is based on the historic action of community, which decides a specific term of life and death (*Ajal*) for every nation [Q.10: 49]³³. The renowned Muslim historian and sociologist 'Abdul al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun was the first and the foremost Islamic thinker to discuss clearly and explicitly laws govern the society other than the moral laws that governing the individual choices. He emphasized that society has a special reality featured by its own characteristics. In his famous introduction '*al-Muqaddimah*' or prolegomena to his great historical work '*Kitāb al-'Ibar*'³⁴ he discussed this theory in detail. According to him, there are general causes, whether moral or physical which operate in any civilization to bring

about its rise, development, and fall (Ibn Khaldun, 2004).

Ibn Khaldun has, spatially emphasized on his theory of '*Taraf*' which means decline of civilizations due to the luxurious habituations, as main cause of declining. In this theory, he explains that science, which is the main cause of human progress, develops only with prosperity and greatness of civilization. However, when nations are involved in luxury life styles brought about by prosperity of a civilization, they will habituate an easy life style which makes them averse to any intellectual or physical effort. Since all scientific activities require a prolonged acquisition of knowledge with great effort and hard work without immediate gain, it will be out of demand. Therefore, scientific inquiry could not survive in such a society that is dominated by the spirit of an easy gain. On the other hand, as civilization could not develop out of scientific activities, it is this deadlock that will be the first step to its decline and disintegration (Ibn Khaldun, 2004).

History as a discipline in human domain has three closely related concepts: *first*, history as knowledge of events and circumstances of bygone people in relation to the present conditions. Biographies, records of events, and all such chronicles compiled by various nations come under this category. History in this sense is the narration of events related to the past not present, and it is a traditional history (*Tarikh Naqly*) not knowledge of general laws (Mutahhari, Murtada, 1997).

Second, history as knowledge of laws that appear to govern life of bygone nations obtained through investigation and analysis of past events, or study of past society in a static status. History in this sense collaborates with the first meaning and takes it as subject matter of study and analysis. The difference between the two is as follows: the relationship of the first concept of history to the second is just like data collected by a natural scientist in a

laboratory for analysis and an investigation to discover certain general laws and causal relations. A historian, in this analytical endeavor, wishes to uncover the true nature of historical events and their causal relationships and to discover universal laws applicable to all similar events. The difference in the task of a natural scientist and historian in this sense, however, is that law of nature is simple and strict. Therefore, investigation, analysis, and results of the scientists are empirical and verifiable. Meanwhile, the historian works in human domain where the laws are more complex and more flexible, as far as time is concerned, but less predictable. In addition, the subject matter which a historian deals with belongs to the past that does not exist in the present. Therefore, analysis and judgments of historians are rational and logical, not based upon empirical and external evidence (Mutahhari, Murtada, 1997).

Third history as knowledge of gradual changes and transformations that lead human societies from one stage to another, or study of societies in status of motion and change. This is the case of philosophy of history, which deals with laws that govern transformations and changes in the human community. In other words, history in this sense concerns with the past, the present, and the future. It attempts to predict the future status of the society based on patterns. Thus, it is not only knowledge of the existence of a society at a particular static stage, but also knowledge of evolutionary movements of societies. Although both the second and the third concepts of history are concerned with general laws, the difference between the two, however, can be seen in the last point, i.e., the third concept is concerned with evolutionary movements of societies (Mutahhari, Murtada, 1997).

The Qur`anic concept of history, therefore, is discovery of patterns that governing the great events of history and

human society which originated in the past and continue to flow toward the future. This concept is termed by the holy Qur'an as '*Ibrah*' to denote lessons should be drawn from the past events for the present and future. In relation to this, modern sociologists observe that the functional categories of social systems are those features in terms of which systematically ordered modes of adjustment operate in the changing relations between a given set of patterns of institutionally established structure in the system and a given set of properties of the relevant environing systems (Parsons, Talcott, 1991). They further explain that the most common model on which this relationship has been based is that of the behaving organism. From this point of view, the functional problem is that of analyzing the mechanisms which make orderly response to environmental conditions possible (Parsons, Talcott, 1991).

3.3. Characteristics of *Sunnatullah*

Generality, predictability, and universality are the main characteristics of law (Carnap Rudolf, 1996). Hence, *Sunnatullah* and its characters should be determined based on the above divisions: into natural and human domains. Natural laws are strict and predictable, while social and historical pattern are flexible and hardly predictable. When we examine *Sunnatullah* from these two dimensions as law that governs the natural world and human societies, it is featured by two main characteristics: generality and flexibility as well in human domain

3.3.1. Generality

Generality gives the term '*law*' its very sense. Law has no meaning without being general to cover all similar cases in similar conditions. *Sunnatullah*, in this sense is general and governs the entire natural phenomena and human history without any exception. In the field of history and civilization, it means that if the earlier

civilizations were destroyed due to their oppression, it is also no exception for any other nation across human history to avoid the same fate if the main characteristic of their civilization is oppression. On the other hand, if Islamic civilization was successfully extended to the entire globe due to its justice and fair treatment of people, Muslims would be leaders of the world again if they characterized by these features.

Shaikhul Islam Ibn Taymiyyah defines *Sunnatullah* as "God's custom, which judges in similar cases with the same rule, and with different rules in different cases" then comments on the Qur'anic verse, which says: (*Such is the law of God (Sunnatullah), which has taken course aforesaid, you will not find any change for the law of God*) [Q.48:23]³⁵, as follows: "If Muslims at *Badr* (the first battle in Islam) succeeded the war against their enemy, due to certain characters, then they are eligible to succeed the war again as far as they featured by the same characters. But, at battle of *Uhud* and *Hunain*, where Muslims were no more featured by the same characters, they most lost the war for their enemy" (Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu' al-Fatawi*, Vol 1). He meant by this explanation that, at least one or more of three conditions assigned by the holy Qur'an to gain the war was missed by Muslim in *Uhud* and *Hunain*:

- i. True believe in God and obedience to the Prophet (ﷺ), or to the leader's guidance at the warfare;
- ii. Technology of weapons, which equivalent to that of the enemy; or not much less than it; and
- iii. To be patient at warfare and avoiding technical mistakes.

The holy Qur'an invites people to learn from the great events of history and to turn the success or failure, progress or decline, into lessons for future.

3.3.2.-Flexibility

Flexibility of law means its implications do not instantly take place, as the case in natural laws. Destruction of corrupted nations even though cannot be avoided for long term; it is not immediate. Oppressors and wicked people are not called immediately to the account for their oppressions. The holy Qur'an though attributes laws, life and death to the community, but it also explicitly recognizes the possibility of violating these laws by individuals or some groups. Such challenge to the historic laws is only for short term. The holy Qur'an says: *(do not think that Allah is oblivious about the deeds of those oppressors, He but give them time and delay them to a horrible day)* [Q.14:42]³⁶. Also, the holy Qur'an makes it clear that historical changes do not occur suddenly; rather, there is a slow accumulation of causes, which results in a big change only after a considerably long period of time. In the Qur'anic terminology, a day in the Divine account is equal to one thousand years as human count [Q. 22:47]³⁷, which is another way of saying that God's scale of computation and measurement is different from that of man (Mazheruddin, Siddiqi, 1984).

3.3.3. Time factor and gradual process of moral laws

People are generally expecting immediate results for what they do, but God has fixed period of time for everything to rise, development and decline, slow and steady either way. This phenomenon is observable in life of every living creature. Everything has a fixed period of time (*Ajal*), as termed by the holy Qur'an, and it varies with every object of creation. This process of steady movement is evidently intended in its application to human life to help him pause and reflect at every stage to adjust himself with the laws operating in such orderly procedures. (Mazheruddin, Siddiqi, 1984).

The provision of this opportunity for correction is a provision of grace of God as the holy Qur'an says: *(Your Lord is most forgiving full of mercy, if He to account them instantly for what they earn then surely, He would have Punished them immediately, but they have their appointed time beyond which they will find no refuge)* [Q. 18:58]³⁸. In addition, the holy Qur'an says: *(If God should chastise men according to their earnings, He would have not leave any creature on earth, but for an appointed term do He respite them, and when their time comes, then verily God is responsible on His servants)* [Q. 35:45]³⁹. It means, if this provision is absent from human life, none would have profited by life; and every single slip would have ruin the nation. (Abul Kalam Azad, 1958).

As explained by Mawlana Abul Kalam (1958), this process applies equally to the upward and downward phenomenon of human life. In the upward trend, it allows time for easy gathering and perfection from stage to stage, while the downward edge allows time for correction. Allah (swt) says: *(For both, the good and the bad people do We prolong the gifts of the Lord; for not to any shall the gifts of the Lord be denied)* [Q. 17:21]⁴⁰. If man desires to profit by latitude furnished by this process, he could, in proper time make amends for every mishap of his life upward. On the other hand, if he misses the opportunities so afforded, he could steadily go down till the inevitable decree implicit in his behavior and overtakes him where Allah says: *(And when their time comes, they shall not delay or advance it an hour)* [Q.16:61]⁴¹. (Abul Kalam Azad, 1958).

The holy Qur'an emphasizes that every action in life takes its own time to produce its result. For everything, there is a measure of time as Allah says: *(But if they turn their backs, say: I have warned you alike; but I know not whether that with which you are threatened be nigh or distant)* [Q.21:109]⁴². The holy Qur'an requests not to apply our

concepts of time to everything in life. Laws governing the natural phenomenon and other living organisms are not applicable to society. In other words, the analytical method of mechanistic view is not suitable to explain social phenomena and historical events.

4. Conclusion

Mankind needs to understand the world and interpret its events for various purposes, including:

- to answer the fundamental questions⁴³ and give meaning to his life;
- to understand, predict, and control for better management of the resources;
- to deal with things in a proper manner and place them in their proper places within systems of being;
- to manage his life and community efficiently and effectively.

Aiming to satisfy these needs, mankind has been endeavouring across the history to interpret the world and uncover the truth based on the three basic approaches: philosophical, religious and scientific. Philosophy interprets the world based on mere reason, while religious approach is based on Divine revelation, and the scientific interpretation is based on observation and experiment. Tawhidic epistemology (TE), guided by Divine revelation, integrates the three approaches.

The basic epistemological questions are mainly about source of knowledge and method of systematic inquiry. Among other concepts, the holy Qur'an introduces Sunnatullah as a fundamental principle of Tawhidic epistemology to answer questions of systematic inquiry. Sunnatullah, stands for the consistent and immutable laws and patterns of God which operate throughout the universe and human history. As a fundamental principle of Tawhidic epistemology, Sunnatullah provides rational premises and metaphysical foundations for systematic inquiry and emphasizes that:

- There is purpose in creation of everything in the balanced universe.
- Divine patterns in physical world and human history are systematic, understandable, immutable and unchangeable;
- Human history is not mere sequence of events, but source of systematic knowledge which provides lessons for learning ('Ibar).
- Sunnatullah introduces itself not only as an epistemological principle but also as moral guidance for social changes and historical events;
- Scientific inquiry as guided by Sunnatullah for Divine purpose is an important form of 'ibādah' (worship).

Findings of this article emphasizes that more study is needed on epistemological concepts of the holy Qur'an to establish foundations of Islamic theory of knowledge. Although the holy Qur'an persistently introduced Sunnatullah as key principle of Tawhidic epistemology in more than ten verses, unfortunately there is no proper research on this important concept. The main cause of this problem might be the fact that Sunnatullah and other epistemological concepts were discussed by Muslim theologians in the context of metaphysical issues rather than epistemology. This article attempted to remove this confusion and introduced Sunnatullah as a key epistemological principle for Islamic theory of knowledge. This may provide an alternative to the secular epistemology which is dominating the entire enterprise of modern science.

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Footnote:

- 1 ﴿وَلِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلٌ ۖ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ لَا يَسْتَأْخِرُونَ سَاعَةً ۖ وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ﴾ (34) ﴿ (سورة الأعراف)
- 2 ﴿وَالشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ وَالنُّجُومُ مُسَخَّرَاتٌ بِأَمْرِهِ ۗ أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ ۗ تَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ رَبُّ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾ (54) ﴿ (سورة الأعراف)
- 3 ﴿قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَى كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى﴾ (50) ﴿ (سورة طه)
- 4 This view, was clearly expressed by Shaikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah in his monograph 'Sunnatullah'.
- 5 See for example: Joseph Schacht (1964), M.M. Bravmann (1972), Michael G. Morony (1984) and Rosalind W. Gwynne (1993).
- 6 Ibn Faris Ahmad, *Mu`jam Maqais al-Lugha*, index (Sunnah).
- 7 Al-Asfahany, al-Raghib, *al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Qur`an*, index (Sunnah).
- 8 Al-Imam Al-Tabari, Abu Ja`far Muhammad Ibn Jarir, *Jami` al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur`an*, his comment on Qur`anic verse 137 of Surat Al-Imarn (Q.3:137).
- جامع البيان عن تأويل آي القرآن: أبو جعفر محمد بن جرير الطبري (٢٢٤ - ٣١٠ هـ)
- 9 ﴿وَوَرَىٰ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ جَائِيَةً ۗ كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا الْيَوْمَ تُحْزَنُونَ ۗ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ﴾ (28) ﴿ (سورة الجاثية)
- 10 ﴿وَكُلِّ إِنسَانٍ أَلزَمْنَاهُ طَائِرَهُ فِي عُنُقِهِ ۗ وَنُخْرِجُ لَهُ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ كِتَابًا يَلْقَاهُ مَنشُورًا﴾ (13) ﴿ أَفَرَأَىٰ كِتَابَكَ كَفَىٰ بِنَفْسِكَ الْيَوْمَ عَلَيْكَ حَسِيبًا﴾ (14) ﴿ (سورة الإسراء)
- 11 Gwynne, Rosalind W. (1993). *The Neglected Sunnah*. The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, Vol. 10, No 4.
- 12 The term (سنة) and its derivatives in the holy Qur`an are occurred as following:
- (سنن، سنتنا، سنة الله، سنة الأولين، سنن الذين من قبلكم، سنة من قد أرسلنا قبلك من رسلنا).
- 13 ﴿سُنَّةٌ مِّن قَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِن رُّسُلِنَا ۖ وَلَا تَجِدُ لِسُنَّتِنَا تَحْوِيلًا﴾ (77) ﴿ (سورة الإسراء)
- 14 ﴿يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذَيِّبَ لَكُمْ وَيُهْدِيَكُمْ سُنَنَ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَيَتُوبَ عَلَيْكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾ (26) ﴿ (سورة النساء)
- 15 ﴿وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَن يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّهُمْ ۗ إِلَّا أَن تَأْتِيَهُمْ سُنَّةٌ أُولَٰئِكَ أَوَّلِينَ أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ قُبُلًا﴾ (55) ﴿ (سورة الكهف)
- 16 ﴿سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ فِي الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا﴾ (62) ﴿ (سورة الأحزاب)،
- 17 ﴿سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلُ ۖ وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا﴾ (23) ﴿ (سورة الفتح)
- 18 ﴿فَهَلْ يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَّا سُنَّتَ الْأُولِينَ ۗ فَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا ۖ وَلَن تَجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَحْوِيلًا﴾ (43) ﴿ (سورة فاطر)
- 19 Field of study is complex if it is hard to obtain a measurable knowledge or hard to predict.
- 20 ﴿سُنِّيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَّبِعَنَّهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ﴾ (53) ﴿ (سورة فصلت)
- 21 ﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّىٰ يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنفُسِهِمْ﴾ (11) ﴿ (سورة الرعد)
- 22 ﴿اللَّهُ الَّذِي خَلَقَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَأَنْزَلَ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَاءً فَأَخْرَجَ بِهِ مِنَ الثَّمَرَاتِ رِزْقًا لَّكُمْ ۖ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْفُلْكَ لِتَجْرِيَ فِي الْبَحْرِ بِأَمْرِهِ ۖ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الْأَنْهَارَ﴾ (32) ﴿ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ دَائِبِينَ ۖ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ﴾ (33) ﴿ (سورة إبراهيم)
- 23 ﴿أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَسْجُدُ لَهُ مَن فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَن فِي الْأَرْضِ وَالشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ وَالنُّجُومُ وَالْجِبَالُ وَالشَّجَرُ وَالْدَّوَابُّ وَكَثِيرٌ مِّنَ النَّاسِ ۖ وَكَثِيرٌ حَقَّ عَلَيْهِ الْعَذَابُ ۗ وَمَن يُهِنِ اللَّهُ فَمَا لَهُ مِن مُّكْرِمٍ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ﴾ (18) ﴿ (سورة الحج)
- 24 ﴿صُنِعَ اللَّهُ الَّذِي أَنْفَعُ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ ۗ إِنَّهُ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَفْعَلُونَ﴾ (88) ﴿ (سورة النمل)
- 25 For instance, the Second Law of Thermodynamics (entropy).
- 26 Scientists hold that although a simple order can take place due to an open energy, the complex and organized systems, such as that in the universe, never be a result of natural processes. See, for instance a distinction between order and organized system "Thermodynamics Falsifies Evolution", <http://www.islamonline.net/english/Contemporary/2002/12/Article02.shtml>
- 27 ﴿قَالَ رَبُّنَا الَّذِي أَعْطَىٰ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلْقَهُ ثُمَّ هَدَى﴾ (50) ﴿ (سورة طه)
- 28 ﴿سُنِّيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَّبِعَنَّهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ﴾ (53) ﴿ (سورة فصلت)

29 ﴿وَأَقْدَرْنَا لِحَبْلِهِمْ كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الْجِنِّ وَالْإِنْسِ ۗ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَهُمْ أَدَانٌ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلَّ هُمْ أَضْلَىٰ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْعَافِلُونَ (179)﴾ (سورة الأعراف)

30 According to some theologians, in addition to the initial creation, Divine action in cosmic order can be understood as following: 1. God acts directly in every event to sustain the existence of each entity that has a part in it. 2. God can act directly to determine various events which occur on the finite level, that Quantum-level intervention 3. God acts indirectly through causal chains that extend from God's initiating direct actions.' (Amplification of effects at quantum level.) 4. God acts indirectly and through the free acts of persons whose choices have been shaped by the rest of God's activity in the world. 5. God can also act directly to bring about events that exceed the natural powers of creatures, events which not only are undetermined on the finite level, but which also fall outside the prevailing patterns and regular structures of the natural order, which are known as (*Mu'jizat*) or Miracles. See, for instance, al-Raghib al-Isfahani, *Tafsail al-Nash'atayn*; Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut Attahafut*, and compare their views to that of Thomas Tracy at: <http://.meta-library.net/bio/tracy-body.html>, and John Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*".

31 ﴿سُرِّيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْأَقَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ (53)﴾ (سورة فصلت)

32 ﴿إِنَّ قَارُونَ كَانَ مِن قَوْمِ مَوْسَىٰ فَبَغَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ ۖ وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْكُنُوزِ مَا إِنَّ مَفَاتِحَهُ لَتَنُوءُ بِالْعُصْبَةِ أُولَىٰ الْقُوَّةِ إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ قَوْمُهُ لَا تَفْرَحْ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْفَرِحِينَ (76) وَاتَّبَعَ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ ۖ وَلَا تَنسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَأَحْسِنَ ۗ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۖ وَلَا تَبْغِ الْفَسَادَ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ (77) قَالَ إِنَّمَا أُوتِيتُهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ عِنْدِي ۗ أَوَلَمْ يَعْلَم أَنَّ اللَّهَ قَدْ أَهْلَكَ مِن قَبْلِهِ مِنَ الْقُرُونِ مَنْ هُوَ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُ قُوَّةً وَأَكْثَرَ جَمْعًا ۗ وَلَا يُسْأَلُ عَن دُونِهِمُ الْمُجْرِمُونَ (78)﴾ (سورة القصص)

33 ﴿لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ أَجَلٌ ۗ إِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ فَلَا يَسْتَأْخِرُونَ سَاعَةً ۖ وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ (49)﴾ (سورة يونس)

34 The full title of the book in Arabic is:

"كتاب العبر وديوان المبتدأ والخبر في أيام العرب والعجم والبربر ومن عاصرهم من ذوي السلطان الأكبر"، المؤلف: عبد الرحمن بن خلدون (٧٣٢ - ٨٠٨ هـ)

35 ﴿سُنَّةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي قَدْ خَلَتْ مِن قَبْلِ ۖ وَلَن نَّجِدَ لِسُنَّةِ اللَّهِ تَبْدِيلًا (23)﴾ (سورة الفتح)

36 ﴿وَلَا تُحْسِبَنَّ اللَّهُ عَافِيًا عَمَّا يَعْمَلُ الظَّالِمُونَ ۗ إِنَّمَا يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ تَشْخَصُ فِيهِ الْأُنثَاءُ (42)﴾ (سورة إبراهيم)

37 ﴿وَيَسْتَعْجِلُونَكَ بِالْعَذَابِ وَلَن يُخْلِفَ اللَّهُ وَعْدَهُ ۗ وَإِن يَوْمًا عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ كَأَلْفِ سَنَةٍ بِمَا تُعَدُّونَ (47)﴾ (سورة الحج)

38 ﴿وَرَبُّكَ الْعَفُورُ ذُو الرَّحْمَةِ ۖ لَوْ يُؤَاخِذُهُمْ بِمَا كَسَبُوا لَعَجَّلَ لَهُمُ الْعَذَابَ ۗ بَل لَّهُم مَّوْعِدٌ لَّن يَجِدُوا مِن دُونِهِ مَوْثِقًا (58)﴾ (سورة الكهف)

39 ﴿وَلَوْ يُؤَاخِذُ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ بِمَا كَسَبُوا مَا تَرَكَ عَلَىٰ ظَهْرِهَا مِن دَابَّةٍ وَلَكِن يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۖ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِعِبَادِهِ بَصِيرًا (45)﴾ (سورة الفاطر)

40 ﴿كُلًّا نَّمُدُّهُ هُوًّا ۗ وَهُوَ لَآءٍ مِّنْ عَطَاءِ رَبِّكَ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ عَطَاءُ رَبِّكَ مَحْظُورًا (20) انظر كيف فصلنا بعضهم على بعضٍ ولأخرة أكبر درجاتٍ وأكثرُ نُضيبًا (21)﴾ (سورة الإسراء)

41 ﴿وَلَوْ يُؤَاخِذُ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ بِظُلْمِهِم مَّا تَرَكَ عَلَيْهَا مِن دَابَّةٍ وَلَكِن يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۖ فَإِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهُمْ لَا يَسْتَأْخِرُونَ سَاعَةً ۖ وَلَا يَسْتَقْدِمُونَ (61)﴾ (سورة النحل)

42 ﴿فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَعَلْنَا آذَنُكُمْ عَلَىٰ سَوَاءٍ ۖ وَإِنِ أَدْرِي أَقْرَبُ أَمْ بَعِيدٌ مَّا تُوعَدُونَ (109)﴾ (سورة الأنبياء)

43 Fundamental questions, also known as ultimate or philosophical questions, are summarized in three basic questions which are: a) the ontological question about origin of universe and life (from where we come?); b) the question about purpose of life (why we are here?); and c) the basic question about the final destination or final fate (where we are going?)