

“MARKET SUPERVISOR/INSPECTOR” AND “PUBLIC
MORAL OFFICER” AS TRANSLATIONS OF THE
TERM MUHTASIB: AN EVALUATION OF THEIR
APPROPRIATENESS

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1. Introduction

Ḥisbah and *muhtasib* are Arabic terms. They generally appear in literary works written in English in transliterated form (as appeared in the preceding sentence), or in translated form. Transliterated forms are found, for instance, in the article on *ḥisbah* in *Encyclopedia of Islam*.¹ R.P. Buckley, the author of the most comprehensive article on *ḥisbah*, does not use translation of the term *muhtasib*,² although the title of his English translation of al-Shayzārī’s *Kitāb Nihāyat al-Rutbah fī Ṭalab al-Ḥisbah* is *The book of Islamic Market Inspector*.³ On the other hand, translated forms are found, for example, in *The Ordinances of Government* – an English translation of al-Māwardī’s masterpiece *al-Aḥkām al-Suṭāniyyah wa al-Wilāyāt al-Dīniyya*. The last chapter of this translated book is On the Market Supervisor’s Office. In this chapter, the term *ḥisbah* has been translated as “public morals office” and “market supervision,” and *muhtasib* as “public morals officer” and “market supervisor.”⁴ Another English term used for *muhtasib* is “market inspector” which can be found, for example, in *Trade and Traders in the Medieval Muslim Spain*.⁵

¹ See, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, “Ḥisba.”

² R.P. Buckley, “The Muhtasib,” *Arabica Revue D’études Arabes*, vol. 39, no. 1 (March 1992). In this article, the author invariably uses transliterated form with one exception in page 83 where he uses the translated term “market inspector.”

³ R.P. Buckley, *The book of Islamic market inspector*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *The Ordinances of Government*, trans. Wafā H. Wahba (Reading: Garnet Publishing Ltd., 1996).

⁵ O.R. Constable, *Trade and traders in the Medieval Muslim Spain – the Commercial Realignment of the Iberian Peninsula 900-1500*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The term “market inspector” can also be

Historically, *ḥisbah* was a one-word expression for the Quranic principle of “commanding right and forbidding wrong.” The discharge of such a sacred duty (ordering good and forbidding evil) since the establishment of the Islamic governance at Medina gradually assumed institutional form, which was for the first time termed *al-Ḥisbah* during the early years of Abbasid Caliphate.⁶ It is widely known that the maintenance of public morality and supervision of markets were entrusted with *al-Ḥisbah* – an institution of government administration in Islamic civilization. The person-in-charge of *al-Ḥisbah* was known as *al-muḥtasib*.⁷ He had a vast area of jurisdiction, which covered a wide array of functions, including facilitation of worshipping, management of town services, and supervision of trade, crafts and professions. The function mentioned last practically outweighed the others.⁸

The summarized information provided in the preceding paragraph may create an impression that the translation of the term *muḥtasib* as “market supervisor/inspector”⁹ and “public morals officer” is quite relevant and meaningful, as they apparently reflect the general functional objectives of *ḥisbah*: supervision of public morals and markets. However, a thorough consideration of the nature and scope of the *muḥtasib*’s duties and responsibilities may question the validity of such a translation. This paper attempts to evaluate the appropriateness of the two terms used as translation of “*muḥtasib*” in relation to its relevance and adequacy. For the term “market supervisor,” the evaluation will be carried out in reference to broader functional areas of the *muḥtasib*. And the nature and scope of his job will be the main frame of reference for assessing appropriateness of the term “public moral officer” as a translation of “*muḥtasib*” *vis-à-vis* supervision in economic domain.

found in Carl F. Petry’s *Protectors or praetorians? The last Mamluk sultans and Egypt’s waning as a great power*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994) and Adam Sabra’s *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam – Mamluk Egypt, 1250-1517*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶ Buckley, *The Muhtasib*... 65.

⁷ *Encyclopedia of Islam* (2), “Ḥisba.”

⁸ Sabri Orman, “Sources of the History of Islamic Economic Thought,” *Al-Shajarah*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1998): 2.

⁹ Henceforth, only “market supervisor” is used.