

Muslims' Role in Food Security

BY DR MUHAMMAD HANIFF HASSAN



On 3 February 2024, the Office of Mufti of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) announced a new *fatwa* (ruling) on the halal status of cultivated meat during the Conference on Fatwa in Contemporary Societies.¹ The *fatwa* is significant, as an Islamic response to

Singapore's contemporary challenges, and also for its impact and contribution to the larger and important national issue of food security.

This article seeks to introduce the idea of food security to Muslims, explore its roots

in Islamic tradition and how Muslims can play part in it, beyond the recent *fatwa*.

Food security and its relevance in Islam hold great importance in view of its implications to national security and public interest. Nevertheless, food

¹ Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (2024), *Fatwa on Cultivated Meat*, 3 February, at <https://www.muis.gov.sg/Media/Media-Releases/2024/2/3-Feb-24-Fatwa-on-Cultivated-Meat> (accessed on 8 February 2024); Justin Ong (2024), "Singapore Muslims allowed to eat lab-grown meat if it's from halal animal cells, free from non-halal ingredients: Mufti", CNA, 3 February, at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/muslims-singapore-lab-grown-meat-halal-animal-cells-mufti-4096896> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

security is still a new and emerging study among academicians today. Discussions among local *asatizah* are rare and limited. This article hopes to raise awareness and interest on the topic among *asatizah* specifically and Muslims generally.

INTRODUCING FOOD SECURITY

Food security is a situation, “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”² Food security arises from an expansion of the traditional national security concept; where military and defence power are no longer the only pillars around national security.

Incorporating food security into national security guarantees sufficient food supply for the population to live healthily and comfortably. This in turn ensures that all key functions of the state – social, economic, defence – can run optimally. Food security enhances self-reliance. Heavy dependency on food imports opens the state to vulnerabilities and risks such as supply chain disruptions due to natural disaster, conflicts, safety and health issues, economic constraints, boycott and others. When a state is over-reliant on foreign entities for its food supply, it creates an asymmetrical dynamic in securing its political and economic interests.³

SINGAPORE AND FOOD SECURITY

The Singapore Government regards food security as an existential threat to national security. There is a long history of documented diplomatic incidents stemming from food insecurity between Singapore and Malaysia. This includes the water supply agreements, the suspension of egg exports due to food safety issues, and the ban of chicken exports by Malaysian Government to meet their domestic demand during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

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The Government has also invested in innovative agricultural technology. Thus, R&D in these areas are encouraged and explored. For example, SFA supports Sustenir, a commercial entity, which operates vegetable farms to produce non-local seasonal products all year round in an urban setting. Sustenir currently produces 90 tonnes of crops annually for the domestic market.⁴ Recent new agrotech methods also show promising results. These include soilless farming through hydroponic technology, vertical farming systems to reduce land usage, and technology that recycles carbon dioxide and agricultural wastes to reduce pollution and contribute to better harvests.

The above initiatives cut across national policy and private sector investments, all in the name of food security.

THE QURAN AND FOOD SECURITY

Few Muslims are aware that the concept of food security has strong roots in the Quran. There are, at least, three ideas in the Quran that support the concept of food security.

Firstly, the Quran commands Muslims to pre-empt food crises through efficient management of their agricultural resources. Secondly, the Quran appoints Man as God’s vicegerents on earth whose tasks, among others, are to conserve the universe in accordance with God’s law of creations. Thirdly, the Quran denotes destructive unsustainable activities to God’s creations as a prohibited corruption.

Efficient management of agricultural resources

The Quran contains many verses that highlight the importance of proactive measures to pre-empt any disruption to

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the food supply through good planning and management of resources.

² World Food Summit (1996), *The World Bank*, at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update/what-is-food-security#:~:text=Based%20on%20the%201996%20World,an%20active%20and%20healthy%20life> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

³ Paul Teng (2013), “Food Security: What It Means for a Food-Importing Country”, *RSIS Commentary*, 4 December, at <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/2110-food-security-what-it-means-t/#.YzVZaHZByHs> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

⁴ Singapore Food Agency (2022), *Sustenir agriculture: Futuristic farming for SG’s food security*, at <https://www.sfa.gov.sg/fromSGtoSG/farms/farm/Detail/sustenir-agriculture> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

Key verses relating to this can be found in *Surah Yusuf* (The Holy Quran, 12:43-55) of the Quran, which contains the story of Prophet Yusuf a.s. who foretold the dream of an Egyptian king of the coming of great hardship affecting their harvest which can be mitigated by implementing certain measures. Prophet Yusuf a.s. offered himself to help in planning and managing the eventual crisis.

The verses contain lessons for Muslims on the importance of good management of food supply and formulating proactive strategies in pre-empting possible food crises. These verses convey that the government carries a greater responsibility on ensuring enough food for the safeguard the people's welfare. A government, represented by a benevolent leader, should be open to seek advice and service from external experts, represented by Prophet Yusuf a.s. It is incumbent on governments to build a framework⁵ for a robust and sustainable food supply⁶, where institutions have the capacity to plan, manage and respond to any expected or unexpected crisis.⁷

This is consistent with contemporary studies on the importance of building resilience within our institutions. Given the complexity of food security issues, it is crucial to strategise, develop capacity building and monitoring mechanisms, and also to involve a wide range of stakeholders across all levels of government.⁸

Role of khilafah (vicegerency)

The Quran asserts that the creations were made for the benefit of Mankind.⁹ Man is entrusted with the duty to protect these creations for them to last till the end of time. This duty is part of Man's role as God's vicegerent in this world.¹⁰

Although God's bounties to Man is infinite, in reality, no community possesses unlimited resources because it is God's will that His bounties are

scattered in unequal quantities all over this earth. The variation in the availability of natural resources such as plants, vegetation, water, oil, gas, coal, and so on, brings about a unique set of challenges for communities to thrive.

The wisdom behind this is to encourage interdependence, where communities cooperate with each other to meeting their respective needs in a mutually beneficial way. Those with rich agricultural resources can trade with others with abundant energy resources. While those rich with livestock animals in the hinterlands can collaborate with communities in coastal areas for a source of seafood. Through these interactions and exchanges, Man can be prosperous on earth, which according to Muslim scholars, is a vital role conferred to God's vicegerent.

It must be emphasised, however, that nature is not solely for the purpose of securing food for Man. It has bigger objectives beyond Man's basic needs. It is for the benefit of all creations too because the Quran stipulates the role of the Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) as a "mercy for all creatures" (The Holy Quran, 21:107).

It becomes the role of all responsible Muslims to continue Prophet Muhammad's (*pbuh*) duty after his death until the end of time. The Quranic verse that says, "and provided thereon means of livelihood for you [O men] as well as for all [living beings] whose sustenance does not depend on you" (The Holy Quran, 15:20).

The verse reminds Muslims that the wonderous biodiversity in nature are God's provision for all His creations which is consistent with the idea held by the scientific community that nature's biodiversity has bigger objectives than securing Man's interest.

Following the abovementioned verse, the Quran says, "For, no single thing exists

that does not have its source with Us; and nought do We bestow from on high unless it be in accordance with a measure well-defined" (The Holy Quran, 15:21). This verse stipulates the existence of perfect measurements in God's creations for them to have sustenance that is in complete harmony and balance with nature.

This verse implicitly highlights the importance of a scientific understanding on how to maintain a sustainable, harmonious and well-balanced use of our natural resources. Standards must be in place to regulate human activities to safeguard the fragile and complex ecosystems in our environment. Ongoing efforts by world leaders through various international conventions continue to address food insecurity due to environmental stressors.¹¹

Sustainability

The objectives of food security must be underpinned with an ethos of sustainability. The conservation of natural resources and environment is crucial in ensuring sustenance for future generations.

Sustainable initiatives are in line with the spirit of the Quran that warn Muslims against those whose hands cause destructions to land and sea.

"[Since they have become oblivious of God,] corruption has appeared on land and in the sea as an outcome of what men's hands have wrought: and so He will let them taste [the evil of] some of their doings, so that they might return [to the right path]" (The Holy Quran, 30:41).

The verse above categorises the human's destructive environmental impact as *fasad* (corruption) to be condemned by God. It is a command upon Man, being God's vicegerent on this earth, to carry the duty to protect and conserve God's creations for the benefits of all God's creations.¹²

⁵ International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) (2013), *Climate Resilience and Food Security A framework for planning and monitoring*, June, p. 1. ⁶ Food system is "is a complex web of activities involving the production, processing, transport, and consumption." See <https://www.futureoffood.ox.ac.uk/what-food-system> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

⁸ Folke C, J Colding, and F Berkes (2003), *Navigating social-ecological systems: building resilience for complexity and change*, Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, pp. 352-387. See also International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) (2013), *Climate Resilience and Food Security A framework for planning and monitoring*, June, p. 6.

⁹ See the Qur'an, 2:29, 14:32, 16:14, 22:65 and 31:20-21 as examples of verses on creations created for Man's benefits.

¹⁰ See Sahih Muslim, hadith no. 1955a, hadith no. 1957a; Sunan Abi Dawud, no. 4941.

¹¹ United Nation (no date), "UN Milestones", *Food Security and Nutrition – A Global Issue*, <https://research.un.org/en/foodsecurity/un-milestones> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

¹² A. Muhamad, A. H. Syiah, A. H., & M. Achour (2019), "Quranic Messages on Environmental Sustainability: An Expository Study of Its Relevance", *Al-Bayan: Journal of Qur'an and Hadith Studies*, Vol. 17, No.1, pp. 38-59.

In view of the consistent alignment between the normative aspects of food security and the messages in the Quran, Muslims are commanded to play their part and contribute to the issue. Muslims must not simply be a passive bystander to pressing global environmental issues affecting our food security.

Muslims should give thoughtful consideration to contribute to areas such as nature conservancy, promoting a sustainable lifestyle, and venturing into innovative agricultural practices such as urban farming.

The recent *fatwa* on cultivated meat should be recognised as an important contribution to the larger narrative on food security. However, more should and can be done. It must be regarded as our *fardu kifayah* (collective obligation).

ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIMS

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As Singaporean Muslims, we are uniquely positioned to take up the mantle of our *fardu kifayah*. Singapore's Muslim identity encourages and guides Muslims to be forward looking, adaptive and inclusive in their religious outlook, and to work with the government and civil society to strengthen social cohesion and promote active citizenship. These efforts have fostered Muslims who contribute to nation-building, becoming important nodes within the national grid.¹³ This is encapsulated in MUIS' vision for a distinct Singapore Muslim Identity called RICAP, an acronym that sums up five Islamic qualities – Resilience, Inclusivity, Contributiveness, Adaptiveness and Progressiveness.

Furthermore, Imam Al-Bukhari highlights the importance of Muslim's contribution in a chapter in his book, *Sahih Al-Bukhari Book of Agriculture and Cultivation*. He narrated a *hadith* from Anas (*may Allah be pleased with him*) in which the Prophet (*pbuh*) reportedly said, "There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him."¹⁴

Lastly, Muslims' contribution could also come in the form of showing gratitude to God for the bounties bestowed to them. Muslims can also show gratitude to God to be in a country with good foresight in managing food security for the sake of its citizens' welfare. ■

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¹³ Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (no date), *Communities of Success Initiatives*, at <https://www.muis.gov.sg/officeofthemufti/RPCS/About/Background> (accessed on 8 February 2024).

¹⁴ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, book 39, vol. 3, no 513, at https://www.iium.edu.my/deed/hadith/bukhari/039_sbt.html.