

## GUST CSD Policy Brief

# Rethinking Generosity and Food Waste in Arab Hospitality

Author: Prof. Omar Moufakkir

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### About the author:

- Dr. Omar Moufakkir is a Full Professor of Marketing at Gulf University for Science and Technology. His interdisciplinary research explores the sociology of tourism, hospitality, and consumer culture, with a focus on ethical responsibility in business. He has published extensively and brings a global perspective shaped by academic roles across Europe, North America, and the Middle East. His work increasingly informs policy discussions on ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility in tourism and hospitality.

### Keywords:

Arab Hospitality, Food Waste Paradox, Plate Waste, Religious Influence on Consumption, Sustainable Hospitality Practices

### SDGs:

11, 12, 13

### Highlights:

- Investigates the paradox between Islamic teachings against waste and cultural practices that promote food waste in Muslim-majority societies.
- Reveals how *karam* (hospitality) norms, while culturally cherished, inadvertently contribute to plate waste.
- Proposes a faith-driven reinterpretation of generosity aligned with sustainability and environmental ethics.
- Demonstrates that Islamic environmental principles, as reflected in over 600 Qur'anic verses, provide a strong religious foundation for combating food waste.
- Advocates for culturally sensitive solutions that bridge tradition, religion, and global sustainability goals.

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## Background

In many Arab societies, food is central to expressions of hospitality, generosity, and religious identity. However, this cultural richness often comes with unintended environmental consequences. Despite Islamic teachings explicitly condemning wastefulness, social expectations surrounding lavish food provision continue to drive excessive plate waste in homes and hospitality settings alike (Abiad and Meho, 2018; El Bilali and Ben Hassen, 2020; UNEP, 2021; Tutundjian and Maroun, 2023).

## Overview of the Study

Moufakkir (2025) explores the paradox of food waste in Muslim-majority societies, where Islamic teachings explicitly condemn wastefulness, yet cultural ideals of hospitality (karam) inadvertently perpetuate it. Drawing on qualitative interviews and grounded in Islamic ethical frameworks, the paper calls for a cultural reinterpretation of generosity: one that harmonizes sustainability with religious and social values, rather than undermining them.

Environmental stewardship is deeply embedded in Islamic teachings. A content analysis conducted by Helfaya et al. (2018) found that 675 verses across 84 chapters in the Qur'an directly relate to the protection and preservation of the natural world, highlighting a strong religious basis for environmental responsibility. This study arises from a simple yet puzzling research question: Why is plate waste so prevalent in Arab Muslim societies despite Islam's clear prohibition against wanton waste? In addressing this question, Moufakkir (2025) argues that beyond policy and corporate interventions, the Islamic view of environmentalism offers a culturally rooted and morally compelling pathway to

promote more responsible attitudes toward food and environmental resources. This paradox of widespread food waste can be better understood by examining the cultural, religious, and psychological dynamics that shape behavior. The study highlights and unpacks the complex interplay between cultural obligation, moral rationalization, and the religious minimization of guilt, all deeply embedded in the cultural expectations surrounding hospitality.

## Key Findings

- There is a cultural disconnect between Islamic values (against waste) and social performance of generosity.
- Guests and hosts alike feel pressure to maintain appearances, even if it leads to avoidable food waste.
- A sustainability-oriented reinterpretation of "Karam" can help bridge ethical values and environmental responsibility.
- Many participants expressed a personal sense of moral responsibility and a genuine willingness to reduce food waste, indicating that public awareness and conscientiousness are already present and can be harnessed for sustainable change.

## Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Moufakkir (2025)'s study contributes meaningfully to global efforts under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by linking culturally rooted practices to sustainability action:

- **SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities**  
Through the concept of "Green Karam," the research promotes socially inclusive and environmentally responsible hospitality practices that can be embedded in urban food systems, community events, and hospitality services.

- **SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production**  
By addressing food waste prevention at its cultural and behavioral root, the study supports Target 12.3, which aims to halve global food waste by 2030. It reframes excess as avoidable rather than virtuous, offering culturally relevant solutions grounded in Islamic values.
- **SDG 13: Climate Action**  
By targeting upstream food waste, often overlooked in favor of redistribution, the study contributes to reducing the carbon footprint associated with overproduction, overconsumption, and food disposal.

In highlighting the synergy between tradition and sustainability, the study encourages faith-driven environmental stewardship as a viable, culturally sensitive path to meeting global sustainability targets. Islamic principles, such as *khalifa* (stewardship) and *ihsān* (excellence in conduct), emphasize moderation, gratitude, and the ethical use of resources, including food, which align closely with contemporary sustainability goals (Gade, 2019). Addressing food waste, in particular, becomes not merely a matter of efficiency, but a moral and spiritual obligation rooted in Islamic teachings that condemn excess and advocate respect for divine blessings. Recognizing this intersection, global organizations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have emphasized the critical role that religious frameworks can play in advancing environmental responsibility across culturally diverse societies (UNEP, 2014). Rather than viewing sustainability as a foreign or imposed agenda, framing food waste reduction within religious traditions enables a more resonant, grassroots engagement, empowering communities to see environmental care as both a moral duty and a form of spiritual practice. This approach offers a compelling model for

culturally sensitive sustainability initiatives, especially in regions where religious values are deeply woven into everyday life.

### **Policy Implications**

The study highlights the need for public education campaigns, religious discourse, and hospitality industry training programs that promote responsible food practices. By aligning cultural values with sustainability principles, Arab societies can take important steps toward reducing food waste at both household and institutional levels. While most sustainability efforts in food waste management focus on reduction and redistribution, this study emphasizes the importance of \*prevention\* as a culturally and ethically aligned strategy. By redefining generosity through the concept of 'Green Karam', a form of hospitality rooted in care, consciousness, and ecological responsibility, hosts can demonstrate abundance without excess.

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