Political Science in the Legacy of Classical Islamic Literature

In my own limited knowledge, I know of no specialized studies in our classical legacy that could be described today as political thought, or as treatises on political systems, international relations, systems of government, the history of diplomacy, political development, methods of political analysis, political theory, political planning, or any of the other categories currently studied as a part of contemporary knowledge.

Nonetheless, many of the issues raised in these subjects were treated in the classical legacy through the medium of fiqh (laws of Islam), which, in its long history, touched upon many of the subjects studied today in the social sciences. Likewise, many of the questions dealt with in political science were addressed by the early scholars of Islam within the framework of the classical fiqh *al-aḥkām al-sunniyyah* (the precepts of power). Perhaps Ibn Taymiyyah's *Al-Siyāsah al-Sharʿiyyah*, was one of the most distinctive efforts in this direction, as well as al-Khatīb al-Iskāfi's *Luṭf al-Tadbīr*, which also dealt with certain issues that remain relevant today. Similar to such works are *Sulūk al-Mālik fī Tadbīr al-Mamālik, Badāʾiʿ al-Silk*, and others.

These works show that the meaning of politics to the Muslim mind, and, as envisioned by Islam, involves making arrangements for humanity in accordance with the values prescribed by Allah, to realize His purposes in creation and to fulfill the trust of vicegerency, the duties of civilization, and the responsibility of the Ummah to act as a witness to humanity in its capacity as the "middlemost nation."

"Making arrangements" includes reading the past and learning its lessons, as well as interpreting, understanding, and analyzing the present in the light of those lessons. Other elements include planning for the future and benefiting from all scientific knowledge that clarifies the particularities of the present. In such an endeavor, a certain kind of penetrating, striving intellect is necessary. This particular kind of genius and ability is what the *fuqahā'* called *fiqh al-nafs* (inherent religious/legal acumen), an attribute of someone for whom understanding and analytical capacity have become second nature.

CHALLENGES FACING
MUSLIM SCHOLARS

Significant challenges confront Muslim scholars of political science. Two fundamental issues often prevent the development of a comprehensive and objective view of matters. First, these scholars have an inherent difficulty in separating the political aspect from other scholarly aspects (e.g., the sources of Islam [the Qur'an and Sunnah], the source-methodology employed to interpret these texts, or the comprehensiveness of fiqh legislation). It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to place well-defined divisions among these aspects as is done today with the social sciences.

This point was made all the more obvious by the recent experiences of certain Islamic universities that have newly established departments of *al-siyāsah al-sharʿiyyah* (the science of Shariʿah-based principles and conduct of government). They have had a very difficult time presenting material on political science in the Islamic tradition in a methodical manner befitting the educational and academic purposes for which they were established. Indeed, such factors as the models of application from Islamic history, the variety of experience in terms of how closely (or otherwise) these models approximated the stated Islamic ideal, the traditional scholars' different positions vis-à-vis such models all give credence to the statement that Islamic culture and learning are bereft of a science of Islamic political thought.

Second, this intellectual void forced the imposition, by default, of the West's political perspective and experience as authoritative sources in the field of Islamic political science. Yet this political perspective is based on values that, when applied by Muslim scholars, actually impede their understanding of the Islamic political system. In addition, those values are unsuitable agents for change or development in an Islamic context. Among the most prominent values espoused by western thought, and those that obstruct an understanding of the proper Islamic perspective, are the following:

- Islam is a religion like any other, and therefore it should not differ in any significant way from the Christianity of the Middle Ages in Europe, in the sense that the church was duty-bound to stand in the way of progress. From this perspective, human development and progress only became possible after the split between church and state. After a long and bitter struggle, the West emerged triumphant over the church and all that it represented. Thus, it is inconceivable that a Westerner could imagine a link between knowledge and religion, to say nothing of accepting the concept of basing the humanities and social sciences on religion or giving them a religious perspective.

- Islam is a religion, and religion, which relies solely on revelation, relegates reason and empirical knowledge to marginal roles. Proponents of such a view consider it absurd to suggest that a social science could be based on religion, particularly a discipline like political science, which gives weight to human experience and empirical knowledge.

- The sources of religion, which are based on revelation, are thus subject to interpretation primarily by means of the language in which the religion was revealed. Therefore, determining its truths is said to depend entirely on that language.

- The sources of religion are historical, in the sense that they are linked with the events of a particular time. According to this view, the historicity of those sources stands between any serious academic work produced within the framework of that religion and, furthermore, negates any attempt at generalization.

These misconceptions demand that contemporary Muslim political scientists, today more than ever, mobilize all available resources to pursue the introduction of a revolution of thought in the Ummah and establish sound academic foundations for an Islamic science of Shariʿah-based principles and conduct of government. In this way, Muslims may regain their identity and be encouraged to work for the Ummah's regeneration as an influential international power capable of wresting the reins of leadership from the forces of evil and from self-assumed superiority on Earth.

STEPS ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps the proper beginning for those Muslim political scientists who are aware of the truths expressed above would be a comparative study of some of the topics listed below:

- *Tawḥīd*, the absolute Oneness of Allah (SWT) as Divine Entity and Lord (*Rabb*).

- The absolute sovereignty of Allah and exclusiveness of revelation (*waḥy*) as the source of legislation.

- Revelation and the universe as sources of knowledge.

- Reason, the senses, and experiment as means of attaining knowledge.

- Unity in the Ummah and the uniqueness in its character and meaning.

- The concept of vicegerency (*khilāfah*), the dignity of humanity and that which distinguishes humanity from the rest of creation.

- Affliction and its repulsion.

- The permanence of the source of values.

- The oneness of ultimate truth and reality.

- *Taskhīr*, in the sense of utilization rather than exploitation.

When we consider these principles, it is hard to perceive any real resemblance between them and those upon which other civilizations are based.

As a second step, these Muslim scholars should work on presenting a complete conception or design, based on the principles indicated above, of how Muslims may practice politics in the contemporary world; how politics are linked to Shariʿah obligations; and how present-day political practices and institutions may be considered Islamic, or at least capable of substantiating Islamic objectives; and in such areas as individual political expression, *shūrā*, and enjoining the good and prohibiting the evil. They must also answer the question of how to implement truly Islamic alternatives in current political configurations.

Islamic civilization produced various examples of polity that approximated, in some cases, the ideas of justice and good government and, in others, the worst forms of oppression, injustice, and tyranny. Certain scholars of fiqh were lenient in their acceptance of the latter circumstances, while others adopted positions of suitably steadfast opposition, struggled against the rulers' tyranny, and maintained the integrity of Islamic values and the lucidity of Islam's purpose. However, this history has not left us with an integral understanding of those questions considered to be of contemporary importance. Among these are the following:

What is the true nature of *shūrā*? How is the principle to be expressed, and how may it be participated in? What sort of institutions need to be

established in order to realize *shūrā*? How is the Ummah to be prepared to make use of *shūrā*? How are the circumstances of the Ummah's history to be analyzed in order that lessons may be drawn from it? What is to be the effect of fiqh on Islamic political thought, practice, and institutions? How is the Ummah to be involved practically in the political process? What are the means of bringing the Ummah to a state of political competence? What kind of institutions are needed for such an undertaking? What guarantees can contemporary scholars of political science glean from the teachings of Islam, which could be presented at a legislative and institutional level, about preventing a ruler from abusing his/her office and toying with the Ummah's rights? What guarantees and fundamental concepts can be presented to the non-Muslim minorities living in Islamic states? How can they participate in the politics and government of a clearly Muslim-majority state?

During the nineteenth century, several serious attempts were made to establish Islamic states within the traditional Muslim homeland. Yet, many of these failed because, among other reasons, Islamic political thought could not meet the contemporary Islamic state's fundamental conceptual needs. In addition, the Muslim thinkers of that time could not present a contemporary Islamic fiqh of government and politics that could serve as a base for establishing a sound and distinct Islamic policy.

Still, through the medium of various Islamic movements, Muslims, as a people, have exhibited their ability to spur the Ummah on to achieve its goals and to engender within it the spirit of jihad so that it is willing to make the greatest of sacrifices. There are many examples of this, but perhaps the most obvious are the jihad in Afghanistan and the intifada in Palestine. But in spite of this ability, the Muslim mind still cannot capitalize on these advances and put them to good use. The revolutions in the Islamic world are the best example of this phenomenon. Political scientists and scholars of fiqh, despite the differences in their disciplines, are clearly in the best position to suggest solutions to these problems.

The fiqh of politics and government, which is needed by the Ummah at present, must turn to the goals and purposes of Islam, its general principles, and its precepts. In this way, a complete system of political thought may be developed, one that can interact with contemporary realities in order to realize Islam's greater purposes. In this endeavor, all theories must be derived from the basis of accepted Shariʿah source-evidence, while drawing upon humanity's historical and contemporary experience.

The necessary source-evidence for contemporary Muslim scholars involved in this endeavor will, of course, begin with the Qur'an and the

Sunnah, ijma᷾ (consensus of the scholarly community), and *qiyās* (analogical reasoning). Beyond these four sources, there are other less known, but certainly valuable, sources of Islamic law: *maṣlaḥah mursalah* (the greater good), *istiṣḥāb* (assessment of circumstances), *barā'ah* (legal license), *ᶜādah* (custom), *aᶜrāf* (legal convention), *istiqrā'* (induction), *istidlāl* (deduction), *istiḥsān* (legal preference), *sad ad-dharā'iᶜ* (obstruction of pretexts), and *akhdh bi al-akhaff* (acceptance of the least imposing).

Muslim scholars who study these additional methods will soon realize that there is a great scope and suitable benefit for exercising the intellect in establishing the fiqh of government and politics.