

*Book Review*

## Fī Maṣādir al Turāth al Siyāsī al Islāmī

*By Naṣr Muḥammad ‘Ārif. (Arabic). Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1994, 237pp.*

This is perhaps one of the most useful books I have come across in recent years. In an age when almost every Middle East or Islamic studies specialist is obsessed with “political Islam” or “radical or fundamentalist Islam,” and when the western mass media and below-average media specialists on the Muslim world try to explain “the rage of Islam” to their audience, this book is a forceful reminder that the political language of contemporary Islamic revivalism is grounded in a historically established and rich Islamic (political) tradition. It also reminds us that in order to do justice to the political principles of the modern Islamic movement, both the academics and the media specialists must familiarize themselves with this rich and historically constructed tradition.

The author’s primary intention is to document and discuss the main sources (i.e., writings) of Islamic political thought from the first centuries to the present. To ‘Ārif, the Islamic theory of knowledge and practice, which is based on the Qur’an and the Sunnah, has worked as a catalyst that enabled the Muslim mind to construct a unique political theory that takes into account changing sociopolitical and historical conditions. As a result, “political thought” has always formed the crux of Islamic thinking in general and has never been divorced from the unique evolution and progress of Islamic civilization. What this means, in effect, is that for a modern scholar to carry out research, let us say, on the concept of jihad in Islam, he/she must trace the concept to its earlier sources and study it in its epistemological and historical evolutions. Concepts do change, depending on

the circumstances in which they are used, who uses them, and for what purpose they are used.

Of the 307 major sources in Islamic political thought that are documented by 'Ārif, only a fraction are used and only a few selected Muslim political thinkers are discussed. He argues that such books as 'Alī 'Abd al Rāziq's *al Islām wa Uṣūl al Ḥukm* (Islam and the Principles of Government), and Muḥammad Khalaf Allāh's *Dirāsāt fi al Nuzum wa al Tash-rī'āt al Islāmīyah* (Studies in Islamic Systems and Legislations), which have created major controversies in modern Arab thought for advocating the notion that Islam is silent on the question of government in general and on the issue of power in particular, have lent the various sources of Islamic political thought a deaf ear. This neglect, first of all, is indicative of the poverty of "liberal scholarship" in the domain of Islam and politics and, second of all, is a biased ideological position that revolves around the concerns of the present only.

The author also reveals that those who venture into the rich domain of Islamic political theory use a few writings of a selected number of such Islamic thinkers as al Mawurdī, al Ghazālī, Ibn Tamīyah, and Ibn Khal-dūn. 'Ārif finds the following methodological errors in many of the modern writings on Islam and politics:

1) the Europeanization of political thought. Many scholars take for granted the primacy of European and western political theory in general, beginning with the Greek and Roman traditions, and neglect to discuss in any significant fashion the political evolution of other civilizations and nations;

2) imposing European, especially Christian, political criteria and concepts on Islamic societies. In the words of the author, the collective "Arab academic mentality, since the middle of the nineteenth century, has measured itself against the lenses of the [European] other," (p. 72) to the extent that some contemporary Arab philosophers, such as 'Abd al Raḥmān Badawī and Ibrāhīm Madkūr, who follow in the footsteps of the French orientalist Ernest Renan, consider Islamic political philosophy to be purely Greek in conception and even evolution;

3) reducing the overall intellectual formation of Islamic political philosophy to the product of a few intellectual giants and thereby neglecting the objective social, political, historical, and epistemological conditions and contexts that might have given rise to a multidimensional Islamic political theory; and finally

4) many modern scholars have never been able to go beyond the linguistic jargon of Islamic political theory, the natural result of which is an absurd neglect of the essential meanings that one might derive from the various Islamic political languages. The above methodological errors have justified the statement of even the best-intentioned modern Muslim thinkers and scholars that both the Muslim mind and Islamic political thought are experiencing a crisis.

After a thorough diagnosis of several methodological problems concerning Islamic political thought, the author begins (in chapter three) to identify the key concepts and ideas with which a scholar must be familiar before discussing the Islamic political tradition. 'Ārif warns the reader that, as modern scholars, we have no right to impose our standards and intellectual positions on historical facts. We must endeavor, instead, "to grasp the methodology that guided Muslims throughout history to deal with their political condition, and this is sufficient to lead us to recognize the nature of Islamic political science and its content as measured against its historical progress" (p. 79). In other words, we are invited to ponder the relationship between (political) thought and (social) reality. The author notes that, as an authentic Islamic discipline, "political science, or political thinking in Islam, differed a great deal from the rest of the Islamic disciplines for the mere fact that the intention of the practitioner of this discipline was not to preserve it per se, as had been the case in most other Islamic disciplines, but to improve the conditions [of Muslims], to lead people to righteousness, and to move them away from corruption" (p. 81-82). In a sense, the discipline of Islamic political thought was progressive in nature and had to be flexible enough to accommodate the changing conditions facing Muslims.

Due to the unique epistemological nature of Islamic political thought, its historical evolution, and the complex conditions it had to face, it is by definition "an Islamic science" that must be studied from within. In other words, one must study its key terms, concepts, systems, and points of view in order to comprehend it. Such terms as *rā'iyah* (subjects), state, and caliphate must be understood against their epistemological contexts. The author contends that, with the beginning of modernization and the progressive westernization of many Muslim countries starting with the middle of the nineteenth century, the discourse of Islamic political science has been in retreat and, consequently, a revival of this discourse is needed at the academic level, to say the least.

In order to achieve this theoretical revival, contemporary scholars, especially Muslim scholars, must utilize a variety of direct and indirect sources to resurrect Islamic political theory. Various Islamic writings, in terms of Qur'anic exegeses, hadith commentaries, *fiqh* methodologies, historical writings, and others are indispensable to our understanding of the direct Islamic writings in the field of political science. 'Ārif enumerates 105 printed books in Islamic political thought from the second Islamic century up to the early part of the twentieth century. What is interesting about these sources is that they cover different historical eras and reflect scholarly Islamic thought on different political conditions. This is a significant breakthrough in view of the fact that any monolithic theorization on Islam and politics, for example the assertion that prominent Muslim thinkers have always supported despotic Islamic rulers because the rulers safeguard the public interest, is deemed untrue and reductionist.

To conclude, this is a highly useful source for any scholar who is interested in the history of Islamic political thought, Islam and politics, and contemporary Islamic movements and their political expressions.

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