

## Apprehending the Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyah

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### Abstract

*The pervasive worldview of Islam has not left any aspect of human society untouched and the polity is no exception to it. History bears witness that Islamic tradition has produced a number of axiomatic figures, who dealt with every aspect of human thought. The name Ibn Taymiyah is not unknown to those interested in Islam and Muslims, be they academicians, activists, thinkers, or others. Yet too often, little beyond the name and an obscure preconception of this man is known to people. So who was Ibn Taymiyah about whom such controversy persists eight centuries after his death? The twentieth century political discourse has repudiated the edifice of Islamic polity and presented, Ibn Taymiyah as the father of radical fundamentalism. The present paper will give the brief sketch of genesis of Islamic polity with special reference to the political thought of Ibn Taymiyah. It will also highlight his distinctive contribution in the discourse of Islamic political thought.*

### Introduction

The worldview of Islam is replete with a vibrant and dynamic organizational structure underlying a coherent socio-politico-economic system which places Islam at a higher pedestal in the emblem of ideologies. The contemporary contoured post-renaissance intellectual discourse reveals this fact that there is a dynamic paradigm shift from pre-modern metaphysical explanation of world to modern humanist interpretation of life which has altogether traversed the meaning of things from their own contextual episteme.

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The western discourse has limited and explained human society in their evolving contextual paradigms whereas Islam primarily focuses on a tripartite relation of God, Man and Universe around which all the offshoots find their consonance and guidance. Islam defines all its aspects whether it be politics, society, economics as part of a coherent worldview. While, in the western world human beings are turned as “experimental tools” for newly evolving ideologies of life which has degraded human essence and existence from a sacred creation to “mere subjects” of empiricism.

The continuation of Abrahamic faith from Judaism via Christianity has reached its zenith on civilizational platform and produced an all embracing just system established by Prophet Muhammad . Islam proclaims its universal authority in a verse of the Quran:

*"Today I have perfected your religion and have handed over to you my entire worldly goods. For you I established Islam as your religion" (The Koran V, 3)*

The basic premise of Islam revolves round the sovereignty of God, as a sole authority, claiming the right to be obeyed in all the spheres of life. Islam gives all-encompassing power to one Islamic agency in particular, the creator of heavens and earth i.e. Allah in particular who assumes the function and powers of all other agencies in the former pantheon. In a history of religious framework, this corresponds to what Max Weber has called the process of religious rationalization, that is, the absorption of many lesser beings by one universal, Supreme God. The thorough study of Islam i.e. Quran and Sunnah essentially based on its fundamental concept of the universe should be clearly kept in mind for its proper appreciation and right appraisal which in turn creates a basic effect on the understanding of Islam’s stance on polity. It is one of the established (*thawabit*) facts of *usul al-fiqh* that God is the creator and the sole sovereign; wherein all authority and obedience rests which substantially make human beings subject to the law of God. Although, the Quran was not designed to be a book of political thought, it included language and ideas that political thinkers adopted in their formulation of essential political concepts which resonates with Derridian saying that there is no meaning outside the text. Abd al-hakem Carney argues that “Islam as a dynamic worldview required more than a spiritual commitment and underpinning this requirement is the understanding that political leadership needs to be undertaken ‘pursuing justice through social cooperation and mutual assistance’”<sup>1</sup>

It is necessary to understand that the evolution of Islamic government or political system started from the organizational structure laid down by Muhammad at Medina. The

Saqifah Debate<sup>2</sup> that ensued to discuss who would lead the Muslim community after the Prophet's death brought to light several factors considered important for succession to the prophet's leadership. Thomas Naff has argued that the community of Prophet Muhammad, was considered to be a perfect application of the Kingdom of God on earth, and the study of history becomes a means by which that experience of utopia may inspire and guide future generations to evolve the same system based on equality and justice<sup>3</sup>.

A bitter struggle, political and theoretical, that has been rending the hearts and minds of Muslims for fourteen centuries has lost none of its fire even today. Quite the contrary, basically is the problem of theorization and implementation of a political narrative based on the sources of Islam. Some questions have become perennial in Islamic discourse due to their ubiquitous presence. What is the Islamic conception of power? Does Islam have a general theory of the state? A renewed clarity, whether Islam came with political guidelines for the 7th century Arab world at the time of revelation vis-à-vis is also still relevant for the contemporary Muslim world is essential for understanding the questions posed by the "Other"<sup>4</sup>.

Before taking this discussion further, it is incumbent to remember that what makes this golden age so ideal is that it was a time when separation between religious life and political life was (supposedly) unthinkable. This foundational prognosis developed Islamic political thought which tracks the differing positions Islam has occupied during its expansion over the course of fourteen centuries. It is equally important to recognize that politics is subsidiary to Islamic law and evolved within the dictates of juristic evolution. The reasons behind the evolution of Islamic political thought evolved with the development of different schools of Islamic jurisprudence. As Coulson, a legal historian said that the components of Islamic law became the basis for the comprehensive theory of political sovereignty. Apparently, the need for a comprehensive political theory did not present itself until the early eleventh century, by which time the Abbasid caliphs were facing strong competition from regional usurpers particularly in Egypt and even in Baghdad, their capital<sup>5</sup>. It was this challenge that gave rise to the theory of governments propounded by our scholars like Ibn Muqaffa, Imam Mawardi, Ibn Taymiya, Ghazali and al-Farabi.

### **Evolution of Theories**

The title "Islamic political thought or theory" should be understood as a euphemism only for the sake of convenience and as a shorthand description to signify diverse strains of political thought in medieval Islamic history. Political theories emerged as responses to

various challenges including the debate over the legitimacy of the caliphate, providing blueprint to sovereigns, guiding the political institution in certain directions, and elaborating an ideal political regime. All strains of thought followed a course of evolution in direct contact with the socio-political realities of their surroundings, and therefore not only rationalized the conceptualization of the political process but also contributed with novel particularities to political thought in response to specific challenges<sup>6</sup>. These challenges gave rise to the evolution of political theories which shaped the governments of 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim world. One among the important contributors was an eminent figure known in history as Shaykh al Islam Ibn Taymiyah. we will be discussing the broad outlines of Taymiyan political tradition and its implications in Muslim world.

### ***Ibn Taymiyya***

Regarded as a 14th century Islamist, Ibn Taymiyya was born in Harran, an old city within the Arabian Peninsula between Sham and Iraq (Al-Shams is an old name that represents the areas of Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon) in the year 1263<sup>7</sup>. Ibn Taymiyya became a professor of Islamic law, worked in Bagdad and was forced to flee to Damascus in Syria because of the Mongol invasion. His political ideology was very unpopular with political leaders at the time and he was imprisoned in both Syria and Egypt. Ideology as understood and applied in this context is defined as a set of ideas by which men explain and justify the ends and means of organized social action, with the aim of preserving or reconstructing a given reality. In totalitarian systems, for example, ideologies are powerful tools for the mobilization of the masses as well as sources of legitimacy - sources of the sense of mission of a leader or a ruling group. In this sense the ideology of political authority in Islam is more than merely a religion in the narrow sense of theological belief, private prayer and ritual worship. Rather it serves as a total way of life offering guidance for political, economic and social behavior<sup>8</sup>.

### **Political Thought of Ibn Taymiyah**

Medieval Islamic scholars were facing some harsh political questions like legitimacy to rule the Muslim world and the necessary pre-requisites for ruling the Muslim community which directed the attention of Imam Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyah to answer these questions of political and religious authority?

Ibn Taymiyah's political thought is generally derived from his books like, al-siyasah al-sharr'iya, minhaj al-sunnah and al-hisba fil Islam. In his al-siyasah al-sharr'iya Ibn

taymiyah devotes himself to bringing out the principles that should make possible the best management of the affairs of the city in terms of just policy and virtuous administration (*al-siyasa al-'adila wa'l wilaya al-saliha*). He laid the structure of his political worldview by pronouncing that authority (*al-sultan*) must aim to move closer to God. Here intention is crucial:

Thus if through the search for power and the acquisition of property people work and spend in ways that are in order to come closer to God, then yes, that behaving will be best for this world and the next. But if authority parts company with religion or religion without authority, then the condition of man is certainly corrupt. What distinguishes the pious from the impious is intention and good deeds<sup>9</sup>.

Ibn Taymiyah took up these questions already discussed in 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim world and drew up the whole theory of public administration taxation, defence, development of trade and the enforcement of penalties and punishments. Ibn Taymiyya forged a new genre altogether: *al-siyasa al-shar'iyya* – Islamic politics – which drew in an unprecedented way on the early Islamic model and scriptural resources to furnish a feasible model of substantive legitimacy (as opposed to legalistic or formal legitimacy) to both the rulers and their political activity on the basis of the Shari'a, and also provided Shari'a -based political advice and norms to such a political authority. Despite his remarkably straightforward use of Islamic “raw material” to offer political guidance, Ibn Taymiyya's political thought was sui generis. The phrase *al-siyasa al-shar'iyya*, despite its stunning simplicity, was unheard of, if not oxymoronic, during the classical age. . The title of his treatise i.e. *Siyasa Sharr'iyah* implies that he is concerned in the first place with the role of the divinely revealed law. While acknowledging the necessity of ‘political’ authority he recognizes the de facto power of the ruler of the day and the necessity of obedience to authority in the interests of the Shari'a and for the benefit of the community.

Ibn Taymiyya in his *Siyasah shariyah* placed God at the centre and kernel of all forms of political authority in Islam and in the society. He forbade the separation of state and religion. The state is, in his view, is created only at the service of religion. Ibn Taymiyyah argued that the legitimacy of political authority must be based on God's revelation in the Quran. In addition, the understanding of God must be based on the teachings of the Quran and the prophet. To describe God as He described himself in his book and as the Prophet described him in the Sunna. Second, the belief in the unity and sovereignty of Allah was to be the foundation of the political, social and moral systems propounded by the Prophets. The

basic principle of this theory is that human beings must, individually and collectively, surrender all rights of lordship, legislation and exercising authority over others.

Ibn Taimiyah, like most Islamic thinkers regarded the institution of government as indispensable. Describing the need for a state, he says: "It should be noted that to regulate the affairs of people is one of the most important requirements (*wajibat*) of the religion (*al-din*). He believed that the wellbeing of the sons of Adam cannot be accomplished except through a well-organized society (*ijtima'*) because they are in need of one another; and for such a society a ruler is indispensable"<sup>10</sup>.

He gives two reasons for regarding the state and leadership as a religious duty. First, the saying of the Prophet: 'If three persons set out on a journey, they should appoint one of them their leader.' Citing this hadith, he argues: 'If a leader is considered necessary on a journey - a temporary association of a few persons - it is an instruction to have it in all kinds of greater associations'<sup>11</sup>. He further argues that the duty of commanding good and forbidding evil cannot be completely discharged without power (*quwwah*) and authority (*imarah*). The same applies to all religious duties, like holy war (*jihad*), justice, establishment of pilgrimage and prayers, helping those who are wronged and meting out punishment in accordance with the legal penalties (*iqamah al-hudud*). Since all these tasks cannot be carried on without government and power, the institution of government and state is necessary from the religious point of view.

It is worth mentioning here that, on the same ground, some eminent Muslim scholars of the present age have strongly advocated the view that political power is a necessary means to enforce Islam fully in personal and social life. Al-Mawardi (991-1058), Abu Ya`la al-Farra' (990-1065), al-Ghazali (1031-1111), Ibn Jama'ah (1241-1333) and Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) have all emphasized the need for the state and its religious character. Al-Mawardi, Abu Ya`la and Ibn Khaldun distinguish between two types of government, based on reason (*'aqliyah*) and the higher form of government based on revealed law (*Shari`ah*). The first merely guards against mutual injustice, discord and anarchy, and strives for worldly well-being, while the second provides for the positive enforcement of law and justice in mutual confidence and fellowship; above all, it takes into account the well-being of the community in the Hereafter as well as in this world.

Ibn Taimiyah like Ghazali and Ibn Jam'aa believed that authority is preferable to anarchy. Although he asks Muslims not to obey orders contrary to the commandments of Allah and forbids them to cooperate with an unjust ruler, he does not advocate open rebellion

or encourage overthrowing him. He quotes the saying: 'Sixty years of an unjust imam (*ruler*) are better than one night without a sultan'.<sup>12</sup>

Ibn Taimiyah emphasizes that the necessary objective of those in authority (*wilayah*) is to improve the material and religious conditions of the people in preparation for the life to come. He expresses the need for close co-operation between those in authority and the people. By contrast, mercantilism is essentially amoral, as Hecksher explains: 'The mercantilists were amoral in a two-fold sense, both in their aims as also in the means for the attainment of their ends. This two-fold amorality arose from their widespread indifference towards mankind, both in its capacity as a reasoning animal, as also in its attitude towards the eternal'<sup>13</sup>. Mercantilist thinkers like Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Jean Bodin (1520-96) freed politics from all moral and ethical considerations and held the state accountable to no one. In Ibn Taimiyah's view, the authority exercised by the state is not absolute. It is a trust (*amanah*) from Allah, and it is to be exercised in accordance with the terms laid down in the Shari`ah.

The practical implication of Ibn Taymiyya's political ideology is a concept of balanced governance where authority is inferred out of revelation. His idea runs contrary to the demands of the fundamental principles of democracy. Both the ruler and the ruled are subject to the law of Allah, that no person, class or group, not even the entire population of the state as a whole, can lay claim to sovereignty as a whole. The doctrine of Ibn Taymiyya completely repudiates the idea of popular sovereignty, a system of governance where the selection of leaders and public officers and the making of laws is entirely left in the hands of the people. He laid claim only to the sovereignty of God and the viceroy of God on earth. It is what Mawdudi (and others) described as "theocracy" where the Muslim population represented by the viceroy who runs the state in accordance with the book of God and the practice of his Prophet.

In general terms, if the concept of legitimate political authority as proposed by Ibn Taymiyya has to be literally implemented, there are far-reaching consequences not just for Islamic countries, but more importantly for emerging democracies across the developing nations where Muslim populations are growing. The reason is that the foundation of democracy in modern times lies in the sovereignty of the people. In it, the absolute power of legislation rests in the hands of the people. If a particular piece of legislation is desired by the masses, however ill-conceived it may be from the religious and moral point of view, steps have to be taken to place it on the statute book. If, on the other hand, the people dislike any law and demand its abrogation, however just and rightful it might be, it has to be expunged forthwith. As a result, constituent assemblies, representative elections, parliamentary and

multi-party systems have all emerged to give people the right to choose and depose their leaders, make or abrogate laws through their representatives so as to ensure equal rights in all civil and political institutions. Scholars like Halim Rane, suggests that it is a system of governance based on the universal principles of social justice, as envisaged by the masses, rather than “crude appeals to the punitive aspects of sharia law or creating an Islamic state in the conventional modern sense”<sup>14</sup>.

## Conclusion

It is unfortunate that Ibn Taymiyah has been quoted severely out of context by different schools of thought which altogether tarnished his image in the world of academics. Yahya Michot, an authority on Ibn Taymiya believes that he was a pragmatist who carefully examined the ideals and realities of his time before he authorized any action or issued a legal decree to the contrary. To him, Ibn Taymiyyah was a multi-dimensional Islamic scholar and thinker, whose writing needs to be studied and explored in their totality if one is to understand and appreciate them fully. Much work remains to be done to understand the rationale behind some of Ibn Taymiyah’s toughest actions in relation to his commitment to a religion of the middle way. What is certain at this stage, however, is that the Taymiyyan political worldview has little in common with modern political Islam, with its westernized insistence on the necessity of a state which altogether popped up in different epistemological and historical paradigm which manifests itself in the form of indiscriminate use of violence, or recourse to terror. It can, in fact, be seen as an anti-extremist approach to societal self governance with a strong emphasis on ethics, both communitarian and individual, rather than on politics. It is equally important for all of us to dwell deep into our tradition and try to come up with a narrative which serves as a guiding principle to develop future strategies in different grasslands of thought for Muslim Ummah.

## Notes and References:

<sup>1</sup> Abd al-hakeem Carney, *The desacralisation of power in Islam*, p. 12

<sup>2</sup> *Saqifah* was the name of a roofed building used by a faction of the Banu Khazraj tribe known as the Banu Saqifa in Medina

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Naff , *Towards a Muslim theory of history*, 1981, pp. 22-25.

<sup>4</sup> Mahdi Mozafferi, *Authority in Islam from Muhammad to Khomeini*, 1897, New York, P.5

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Sonn, *Political authority in Classical Islamic Thought*, AJISS, p.6.

<sup>6</sup> Hayrettin Yucesoy, *Political Theory, Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, Yusuf Meri pp.628.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah* Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d, pp. 150-1 quoted by Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* p.123.

<sup>8</sup> Dunning, W. A., *A History of Political Theories*, Allahabad: Central Book Depot, 1966, pp. 200

<sup>9</sup> Abdel Wahab Bouhdiba, *Political Thought, Different aspects of Islamic Culture*, Vol 2, pp.284.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Taimiyah, *al-Siyasah al-Shar'iyah*, Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b, 1971, p. 184. quoted by Abdul Atheem Islahi, Ibn Taymiyyah on the need for a state, p.3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp.4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Heckscher, Eli F., *Mercantilism*, trans. by Shapiro. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962, Vol. 2, pp.285.

<sup>14</sup> Rane, Halim, *Emerging Trends in Islamists political thought, implications for Islam-West Relations*, National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies, Griffith University, Nathan, Australia, 2010, pp. 1.

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