The Contemporary Islamic Governed State: A Reconceptualization

Joseph Kaminski
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Since its 2013 release, Wael Hallaq's *The Impossible State* has retained a central position in debates within the field of Islamic political thought. While Joseph Kaminski mostly agrees with Hallaq's central thesis that an Islamic state is a contradiction in terms (as a modern state is in its very constitution immoral and ergo non-Islamic), he aims in his *The Contemporary Islamic Governed State: A Reconceptualization* to shift the discussion away from government to governance. At the base of Kaminksi's call for an Islamic-governed state are the two most basic presuppositions of Rachid Ghannouchi's political thought: that while the supreme legislative authority belongs to the Sharia, political power belongs to the community, whose consultation is mandated. Therefore, focusing mostly on the second element, Kaminksi attempts in this book to explicate how contemporary Muslim states can productively engage with "elements constitutive of the modern nation-state while remaining within Islam's ontological and epistemic frameworks." The present historical moment, nine years after the Arab revolts to demand more democratic and accountable governance,

makes this the opportune time for such theorizing "to actually have legitimate real-time importance" (33).

In chapter two, Kaminski introduces the history of Islamic thought. The chapter's main argument is that intellectual curiosity, specifically engagement with the Greek tradition of philosophy, peaked at the height of Islamic civilization. As he says, "During the good times, scholarly writings tended to be more philosophical in the traditional sense of the word and less doctrinaire. Such writings were deeply curious about the intellectual continuities between Islam and the ancient Greeks" (32). The chapter introduces the Kalam tradition and its interaction with Greek philosophy in the work of al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd, before moving on to the more doctrinaire Ibn Taymiyyah and Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. While its account of Greek philosophy is helpful, given the Greek philosophy to come later in the book, the chapter's broad overview of Islamic history was not entirely necessary.

Chapter three illustrates how a contemporary Islamic governed state would be ontologically framed, insisting that it would not be framed in terms of liberalism and Enlightenment philosophy. This is because "Western liberal notions of culture, the individual, and human rights at a deep philosophical level—beyond just the content of these particular values, but rather at the existential and ontological foundations of where these values derive, in general, stand in contradistinction with an Islamic discourse…" (82). Islam forwards a very different conception of human innate nature and the human relationship (or lack thereof) with the creator. This results in very different conceptions of sovereignty, the social contract, and liberty (positive rather than negative) in Islamic political discourse. However, Kaminski argues, while Enlightenment thought may be incompatible with Islam on deep ontological levels, the same cannot be said about Greek philosophy. He draws attention to how the Greek and Islamic traditions have very similar notions of society, ethics, and the need for a state to encourage ethical behavior among its citizens. He closes the chapter by stating that one can conclude from Aristotle that "The constitution of a state ought to resonate with the long-held mores and values of its inhabitants" (99).

If Greek philosophy is compatible with Islamic discourse on certain philosophical levels, it is especially so with regards to leadership, the topic of chapter four. Greek and Islamic political philosophy agree that so "goes the leadership, so does the state, especially in the very beginning when the state is at its most fragile" (131). Kaminski artfully shows the similar

concerns Greek and Islamic philosophers had with regard to their leaders being moral agents who did not covet power and were uniquely qualified for the position. The discussion then comes to focus on Khomeini and the Islamic Republic, a transition not as abrupt as it might seem given Khomeini's strong influence from Neo-Platonic Philosophy. This focus makes for interesting reflections as Kaminski details Khomeini's thought and the critiques of the Islamic Republic by Ayatollah Montazeri, who was originally slated to become Supreme Leader after Khomeini. Kaminski concludes that the growing informal checks of hyper-communication and social networking mean that Muslim absolute rulers will increasingly have no choice but but to accept limits on their leadership.

A common political-theoretical assumption is that democracy is the most important element for a state's advancement. Kaminski starts chapter five by arguing against this notion. He invokes Grand Transition Theory, which posits that economic development unleashes such wide social transformations that predicting what doors it will open is near impossible. Rather than democracy leading to development, the reverse is most likely: policies that encourage development lead to stronger institutions which then produce greater electoral and civil rights. Kaminski then moves to bureaucracy, contrasting its historical importance in Muslim societies and the Qur'an's encouragement to keep written records with its current sorry state in the Muslim world. He concludes, "States in the Muslim world today need to immediately transform their largely patronage-based bureaucracies into ones that are competitive and meritocratic" (152). He specifically suggests incorporating new models of information systems to modernize these bureaucracies. Returning to the theme of democracy in the last section of the chapter, he writes that while the Muslim world urgently needs democracy, its liberal variant is incompatible with an Islamically-governed state (for the reasons stated in chapter three). However, the basic elements of democracy are certainly compatible with Islamic governance, leading Kaminski to conclude that "the entire concept of democracy must be freed from the oppressive grips of the West that feel they have the only authentic (i.e., liberal) understanding of a very complex philosophical approach to governance" (160).

Kaminski starts chapter six (on the importance of involving women in the political apparatus) with the usual starting point of the Qur'an's revolution in liberating women. This means that a modern Islamic governed state "must come to terms with the rights given to women in the Qur'ān and

make active efforts to include women in the political processes of the state" (171). He buttresses this point by providing studies and statistics that show a consistent correlation between attitudes towards women and authoritarianism, further highlighting the importance of women's education for the whole of society. Throughout most of the book, Kaminski shows how a specific topic or instrument of governance could be seen within an Islamic ontological and epistemological framework; that is less true of this chapter. Here instead he quotes a number of liberal or progressive Muslim figures, who (though they would certainly agree on this topic) would have different methodologies to determine what counts as "Islamic."

Chapter seven more robustly explores the philosophical framework of economic justice in Islam. Kaminski's main argument is that an Islamic-governed state cannot simply graft on a Western economic model, neither capitalism nor communism, "without taking into consideration a multitude of other factors unique not only to Islam, but also to that particular state" (200). Given the dismal economic situation and vast inequality of Muslim countries, he convincingly argues that Muslim states must enact large-scale economic development and reforms. In doing so, they must not let individual wealth take precedence over communal rights, for the "material gains of any economic system within an Islamic worldview are a means to a spiritual end and not the end, in of itself" (198). A survey of Islamic history shows the empirical effects of such principles of moderation and economic fairness. An Islamically governed state should enact its economic policies within this tradition.

While the first part of the book focuses on the philosophical foundations of a contemporary Islamic governed state, the second part makes sure it stays grounded. Here Kaminski offers case studies of four countries which all, to some degree, "have (or in the case of Egypt, recently had) strong Islamic political elements within their current political discourses" (23). The first of these case studies is Turkey, undeniably a growing regional and global player, which (granted the challenges it increasingly faces) demonstrates the importance of an autonomous foreign policy and of keeping the military out of domestic politics and economic growth. Kaminski then turns to the cautionary tale of Egypt, whose revolution was soon followed by a brutal counter-revolution led by the deep state. The case of Egypt also illustrates the need for Islamic-oriented parties to practice foresight and patience when they do hold power. The third case study, Tunisia's Ennahda Party, provides just such an example of how to pragmatically cooperate

with secular actors to foster a democratic environment. The last case study, Malaysia, presents the lessons of sustainable long-term economic growth while slowly moving away from interest-based banking systems.

In the conclusion, Kaminski turns to an image from the classic absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, whose two main characters spend its entirety waiting for the mysterious savior. However, Muslims cannot idly wait for their Mahdi. Rather, they must (as in the title of the conclusion) "create a new discourse," a mandate inflected by Richard Rorty's memorable quote on what makes for interesting philosophy: "Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which promises great things." Kaminski's book continues the conversation started by Hallaq's *Impossible State* by instead showing what *is* possible in Islamic states. Notwithstanding some historical generalizations and hasty organization within chapters, Kaminski successfully demonstrates that "The secular nature of the liberal West does not mean all institutions or discursive methods that are by-products of Western thought somehow, ipso facto, must be amoral and/or immoral" (294). The end product is a fascinating dialogue between Greek, Islamic, and Enlightenment political philosophy and the nuts-and-bolts of contemporary governance. Any future work in Islamic political thought will have to take it seriously.

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