7.

Muslim Attitudes Toward the State: An Impressionist Sketch

A perceptive British diplomat whose long service in the Middle East began early in this century captured the cultural counterpart to the Muslim theological tradition of political quietism in writing:

> The Egyptian man in the street is very quick to recognize the facts of power; he does not have to be blown out of cannons, or even harshly treated to conform. He will support long years of humiliation and, indeed, of ill treatment, buoyed by the golden certainty that somewhere along the road lies a banana-skin on which the object of his dislike is bound one day to put his heel.[1]

Another evocative illustration comes from the great Egyptian nationalist leader, Sa'd Zaghlul (1857–1927), who in a public speech before a huge crowd expressed the hope that the day would come when the Egyptian ceased regarding government the way the bird views the hunter.

The sense of impotence before authority is also well expressed in the story of village notables who had decided to send a delegation to the Ottoman capital requesting the removal of an oppressive governor. When the governor got wind of the plan, he summoned the group to his house, took them to an inner room, pointed out a chest and told them to open it. It was almost filled with coins and precious metals. The governor then said, "When I arrived in this province I brought with me that trunk empty. Now it is almost full. My successor will arrive with his empty trunk." The notables canceled their plans to protest.[2]

Equally, the visual evidence of traditional Muslim residential architecture, which offers the outside world windowless walls at street level, shuttered windows above, and entrances that provide no view of the living quarters within, attests to a turning of one's back to the public world. That such architecture shelters a family—and especially the women—from the curious eyes of outsiders is clearly an important consideration, but it should not be overlooked that such "introverted" architecture serves as well to obscure from the state one's wealth and one's lifestyle.[3]

Lest the image conveyed here appear too much the outsider's view with all the distortions and prejudices that suggests, note the following charge from an important contemporary Arab nationalist:

> The truth of the matter is that we (Arabs) have inherited from the past a feeling that the state is separated from us; that it is imposed upon us; and that we have no influence upon it or interest in it. . . . The simple individual in our Arab society feels that the state is a powerful and distant thing and that he must accept its rulings without hesitation, pay taxes without argument, and not ask anything in return . . . that he has a duty toward it, but no rights forthcoming from it.[4]

Or consider the following:

> Once I tried to find out the meaning of a chant which I had so often shouted in my childhood, whenever I saw an airplane in the sky: "Oh, Almighty God, may disaster take the English" (Ya Azeez, Ya Azeez, Dahiya takhud al-Ingleez). Later, I came to know that that phrase had come down to us from the days of the Mamluks. Our forebears of that day had not used it against the English, but they used a similar one against the Turk: "Oh God, the Self-Revealing, Annihilate the Turk"' (Ya Rabb, Ya Mutajelle, Ahlik al-'Uthmanli). My use of it was but an adaptation of an old form to express a new feeling. The underlying constant continued the same, never changing. Only the name of the oppressor was different.[5]

These words appear in Nasser's *Philosophy of the Revolution*.

The sense that the state was a remote, even alien, body of men best kept at arm's length could easily shade into an adversary relationship. This was most marked among tribesmen remote from the urban-dominated political centers. For example, a French observer of mid-nineteenth-century Tunisia found it odd that tribesmen in that remote area close to the Algerian border unfailingly had a battle with the annual Tunisian tax collectors (who always

came as a military expedition). He asked the tribal shaykh why he did not simply pay taxes without a fight. "It is true, the shaykh responded, "that the sum is not much and the kahiya (regional military commander) is a decent man who does not demand too much from us. Still, if we pay without difficulty one year, he may well be tempted to increase the levy the following year. In any case, it would be shameful for mountaineers to pay at the first demand."[6]

Later, French officers serving in Moroccan tribal areas during the days of the French protectorate dubbed the similar ritualized combat there *baroud d'honneur*. Baroud is the Arabic for gunpowder, and by extension the word came to mean any test of arms, especially a skirmish or small battle.

The age-old contest between periphery and center, between the remote hinterland where the ruler's writ ran only intermittently when his troops were physically present on the one hand and the imperial urban center on the other, was perceived by the eminent Muslim thinker Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) and made the basis of his celebrated philosophy of history.

Ibn Khaldun, it might well be countered, wrote a very long time ago, and efforts to evoke his authority may well tell us more about the ahistorical approach of Western scholars to Muslim history than the dynamics of today's Muslim politics. One is well advised to be on guard against the tenacious tendency of scholars interpreting Islamic history to telescope centuries in an implicit assumption that nothing much changes in the Muslim world. In this case of center-periphery relations, however, well-documented examples of the process so compellingly described by Ibn Khaldun centuries ago are to be found as late as the last century, with echoes of the same geopolitical dynamic even later in time.

The rise of the Wahhabi state first in the eighteenth century and then again under the leadership of the legendary Ibn Saud (creating today's Saudi Arabia) in this century clearly fits the center-periphery thesis. Nor should this and other examples occasion surprise. The geographical constant of urban centers dominating their immediately accessible sedentary agricultural hinterland (the necessary core of states or empires) but surrounded by a vast, elusive human flux of nomads, transhumants, and mountaineers has shaped history in this part of the world since many centuries before Islam and right down to modern times. The resulting political pattern is one of limited government controlling the cities and the sedentary rural areas but more nearly monitoring than actually ruling the remaining countryside.

Modern technology, which greatly increases the potential for states to control even the most remote and forbidding terrain, is modifying this millennial interaction of center and periphery. Still, political patterns with such

deep historical roots and based on geographical reality, not all of which technology can change, continue to play a role in shaping developments stimulated by intrusive new forces.

The extent to which this wary attitude toward government pervaded society is illustrated in the oft-cited passage from the work of the Egyptian historian al-Jabarti (1754–1834):

> If the peasants were administered by a compassionate tax farmer, they despised him and his agents, delayed payments of his taxes, called him by feminine names, and hoped for the ending of his tax farm and the appointment of some tyrant without fear of God or mercy for them so as to gain by that means their private ends by the alighting of his violence upon some of their number. Likewise also their shaykhs, if the tax farmer were not an oppressor, were not able in their turn to oppress their peasants, for they gained no profit except when the tax farmer demanded excesses and fines.[7]

Al-Jabarti, although an authentic voice from within Muslim culture, does perhaps exaggerate by unconsciously reflecting the deep-seated urban bias against the countryside and the peasantry, but even this possible exaggeration is additional evidence of the gap separating those close to the culture and politics of the cities from the masses in the countryside.

Here is a more recent perspective as seen from the Syrian countryside:

> In the eyes of the peasants, the government was an evil, encroaching force and its revenue ill gotten. The 'uqqal or Druze sages believed that "the possessions of rulers and emirs are haram (unlawful)." They, therefore, did not "partake of their food or the food of their servants." Alawi Shaykhs shared the same belief. "In my entire life," said Shaykh Ali Salman, the father of Shaykh Salih al-'Ali, the leader of the Alawi upheaval of 1918–1921, "I have not broken bread with a government official for fear that he may have done an injustice to a human being."[8]

The cynicism, based on limited contact between center and periphery, between governors and governed, is also brought out in an incident related by the Tunisian historian Ahmad ibn Abi Diyaf (Bin Diyaf, 1802–1874) of a qadi at the capital who insisted that the people in a certain province were protesting not because the taxes were too high but because the qaids (provincial governors) were extorting additional levies that they then pocketed. The qadi maintained that he could administer the province according to existing tax rates and, in the process, please both the ruling bey and the

people. The bey accepted his offer, but after a few years the qadi insisted on resigning even though the province had been restored to prosperity and peace. The qadi, however, had become the target of jibes from other ulama and certain officials. Moreover, the provincial recipients of this good administration had come forward with the following doggerel:

> You are taking a lot of money
> A qadi in the morning and a qaid in the evening.[9]

These stories suggest a comparison with Gogol's *The Inspector General* satirizing the corruption of Russian officialdom while setting out in dramatic fashion the sharp contrast between city and countryside.

This is, moreover, in line with a common theme of traditional bureaucratic empire with its sharp separation between the rulers and the ruled. There is, in short, nothing exclusively "Islamic" about this Muslim attitude toward politics any more than the politics of feudalism or of imperial Russia was distinctly "Christian." It is the political legacy of Muslims, not the theology of Islam, that is under consideration.

The durable pattern presented here as characterizing the traditional Muslim approach to politics is, of course, what Max Weber would call an "ideal type," or a way of generalizing the common features of a much more blurred empirical reality. The traditional Muslim political arrangement schematized as an ideal type was composed of the following:

1. Bureaucratic empire
2. A state apparatus setting out for itself quite limited goals confined essentially to self-maintenance, preservation of public order, and defense.
3. A distinct separation of state and society, both ideologically and institutionally.
4. A pervasive attitude of political pessimism among both rulers and ruled.

This ideal type never existed in pure form (any more than feudalism did). The reality of politics and of attitudes toward politics within the vast Muslim world in premodern times did, however, veer toward this ideal type.

More precisely, the separation between state and society was never absolute (which would be a logical absurdity). There were mediators between governors and governed such as ulama, urban notables, and tribal shaykhs. Moreover, the precise balance of relations between governors and

governed, and the role of different mediators between the two, varied over time and place.

Nor was entry into the ruling elite ever quite so regulated and controlled as the ideal type would presuppose. For example, the pioneering study of Ottoman government by A. H. Lybyer is now seen as a classic example of distorted schematization.[10] Lybyer interpreted Ottoman government at its peak of power in the mid-sixteenth century as made up of

1. A "ruling institution" conscripted from periodic levies of Christian youth (the *devshirme*) who broke all ties with family, became legally "slaves of the sultan," received elaborate schooling, and then moved up the military-administrative hierarchy as a distinctive, closed political elite.
2. A "Muslim institution" made up of free-born Muslims who pursued the long schooling leading to ulama status, thereafter becoming qadis and muftis in the Ottoman Empire, serving also as an institutional check on the "ruling institution."

Later research has demonstrated no such neat distinction existed. The ulama were much more integrated into the state administrative system (more than in any previous Muslim bureaucratic empire), there was no clear distinction between "ruling" and "Muslim" institutions, and recruitment into the political class came from a variety of sources.[11]

Similar revisions would be required for a fully adequate presentation of, for example, Mamluk rule in Egypt and Syria, the Moghul Empire in India, or the Safavids in Iran, not to mention the earlier Islamic empires. Moreover, local power elites and virtually autonomous political systems always existed on the fringes of imperial systems. Indeed, this was totally consistent with the classic model of premodern bureaucratic empire. The genius of such long-lived, wideranging empires as the Ottoman or Moghul lay in their political realism and cost effectiveness. Rebels against central authority were not immediately brought to heel, if that proved too expensive. No "search and destroy" mentality governed their military doctrine. Central government saved its resources by awaiting a propitious time when rebel areas could be brought back into the system without undue cost in manpower or money.

The contrast between the politics of traditional bureaucratic empire (Muslim or other) and modern nation-state politics is crisply illustrated in the observations of a singularly perceptive member of the administration in the early years of French rule in Algeria. He realized how the political sys-

tem of Ottoman Algeria was based on quite limited military force coupled with control of the nodal points of transportation and commerce:

> How many times after having stood up to or even defeated the troops of the bey, have these populations necessarily tributary to the interior markets been obliged to ask pardon and accept the harshest conditions. This state of affairs makes it understandable why the major effort of the Turks was always to achieve a vigorous organization of the agricultural tribes and the intelligent location of the makhzan around the great market areas and the major routes.[12]

The difference between such traditional imperial politics and that of modern concepts of state and warfare is personified in Marshal Bugeaud (1784–1849), the veteran of Napoleon's campaigns who later led the brutal French conquest of Algeria. Bugead stated his modus operandi as follows:

> In Europe we do not just wage war against armies. We wage war against interests. When we have beaten the belligerent armies we seize the centers of population, of commerce, of industry, the customs, the archives, and soon these interests are forced to capitulate. There is only one interest to be seized in Algeria, the agricultural interest. It is more difficult to seize than others for there are neither villages nor farms. I have thought about this for a long time, awake and sleeping. Well, I have not been able to discover any other means of dominating the country than seizing this interest.[13]

This contrast between the military strategy of Ottoman Algeria and French Algeria clarifies what is intended in speaking of "ideal types." Ottoman Algeria often employed force, and very harsh force at that. French Algeria was not simply unrelieved brute military power crushing all native resistance. Many tribal chieftains were actually co-opted into the system. Even so, the contrast, in general, holds, distinguishing a premodern system based on benign neglect, or often malign neglect, but relative neglect in any case from a modern nation-state concept that posits a more complete state penetration into society.[14]

This chapter has introduced a number of characteristics of politics in Islam as compared and contrasted with Judaism and Christianity. In the process we

have noted more than once that many of these distinguishing features cannot properly be attributed to Islam, as such, but to the overall cluster of elements in the historical and cultural legacy of Muslims.

Just as feudalism cannot be seen as derived from Christian theology, so too the tradition of bureaucratic empire does not follow from the tenets of Islam. Yet, feudalism helped to shape the existing political traditions of much of the Christian world. The same can be said for the continuing influence of the bureaucratic empire approach to politics in the Muslim world.

We can do justice to our subject of Islam and politics only by avoiding the two methodological extremes of 1. reducing all actions of Muslims to a presumed Islamic stimulus or 2. assuming that the Islamic religious and cultural legacy has little influence on the political thought of modern Muslims. In the process, it is essential to accept that Paul Bowles's fictional protagonist knew he was wrong when he mused that Muslims are "far, far away from us. We haven't an inkling of what motivates them."