The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought

By 'AbdulHamīd AbūSulaymān. (Islamization of Knowledge, series 3, no. 1). Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1987, 184 pp.

This book provides a remarkable reformist approach to Islam in general and to the Islamic theory of international relations in particular. The author begins by attributing the tragic condition of the modern Islamic world to its stagnation, brought about by the predominance of taqlid. Only with a resolution of the "time-place issue" (p. 4), a phrase that recurs throughout the book in relation to the necessity of distinguishing between what is permanent and what is a mere dated application in another time and place, does AbūSulaymān believe that "the badly needed original dynamic and realistic policies" (p. 4) can be found.

The author distinguishes between the Shari'ah and fiqh (writings of Islamic jurists), which he maintains has been inaccurately considered to be "law in itself and not a secondary source of Islamic law" (p. 4). The *siyar* (i.e., juristic writings related to international relations), AbūSulaymān argues, is not "an Islamic law among nations" that constitutes "a sort of unified classical legal code" (p. 7). He also criticizes some writers for overlooking the diversity of classical opinion, saying that Majid Khadduri in particular presented only the "strict position" of al Shāfi'ī while ignoring "the equally authoritative opinion of Abū Ḥanīfah" (p. 17).

AbūSulaymān insists that it is necessary to understand the Qur'an and the Sunnah "in the context of conditions at a time when the early Muslims were confronted by unceasing aggression and persecution" (p. 35) and criticizes the use of abrogation (*naskh*) to exclude a more tolerant outlook. It is necessary for today's Muslims, the author says, "to go back to the origins of Muslim thought . . . . and reexamine and reform their methods and approaches" (p. 49). The task of developing the required new methodology, he argues, must not be left to the ulama alone, because they "no longer represent the mainstream of Muslim intellectual and public involvement" and are not educated in "the changes . . . in the world today" (p. 76).

Characterizing "modern Muslim thought in the field of external affairs" — particularly an "aggressive attitude involved in the classically militant approach to jihad" in the case of "a people who are [now] weak and backward

intellectually, politically, and technologically — as irrelevant, AbūSulaymān nevertheless sees a need "to respond and accommodate" the modern world "within the general Muslim outlook" (p. 91). In order to provide the foundation for a new systematic approach, he reexamines the policies of the Prophet, particularly in relation to prisoners taken at Badr, the Banū Qurayzah, the Quraysh, and the People of the Book. Instead of constituting a model which must be followed under all circumstances and in all times, such events are explained in terms of the Prophet's "realism, with its wide margin of political maneuverability" (p. 98), thus putting classical Islamic rules relating to such matters as *riddah* and *jizyah* in a new light. As for *naskh,* AbūSulaymān is critical of the way it has historically been applied, arguing that the verses which were revealed later should not, except for a few "clear cases," be understood as abrogating previous revelations which had come in response to different circumstances. He also stresses the need to reexamine Qur'anic verses in relation to their context.

On the basis of such rethinking, AbūSulaymān proposes the development of "an Islamic ideological base or framework for a systematic empirical approach to the field of international relations" (p. 116). He identifies five basic principles: 1) *tawḥīd*, which calls for "freedom of destiny and self-determination" and "holy tolerance toward non-Muslims (p. 117); 2) justice, the specific content of which must "be decided" (p. 118); 3) peace, mutual support, and cooperation, allowing for new arrangements of a "federal or confederal or multinational political system for the Muslim world" (p. 121) rather than demanding the replication of the early Islamic unity which occurred under totally different circumstances; 4) jihad or self-exertion "in every effort and act, personal and collective, internal and external," not just in the narrow military sense (p. 123); and 5) respect and fulfillment of commitments.

In contrast to what he calls "the rigid legalistic attitudes of the traditionalists," he presents four basic Islamic values, which "promote moderation and self-restraint": 1) "no aggression (*'udwān*)"; 2) "no tyranny (*tughyān*)"; 3) "no corruption (*fasād*)"; and 4) "no excesses (*isrāf*)" (p. 126). The author contrasts his "dynamic framework" — moral principles that "set no rigid formulas for policy action" — with both what he considers the outdated classical approach and the usual modernist approach based on "imitation [taqlid] and piecing together [*talfīq*]," which he believes to lack mobilizing capacity (p. 129) as well as "originality and contingency" (p. 140).

AbūSulaymān has presented an unusually creative and systematic approach not only to the Islamic theory of international politics but also, more broadly, to Islamic jurisprudence. While the sympathetic critic might ask about the chances of having such a new methodology accepted and, in the absence of an ecclesiastical structure, about the procedures whereby any authoritative decision (a new *ijmā'*?) could be made (it seemingly is meant that each individual

should decide for himself or herself), AbūSulaymān's treatise has the virtue of presenting a clear idealistic vision of an Islamic theory of international relations divorced from its medieval epiphenomena (doctrines he would probably say do not need to be set aside by anybody since they were never integral to Islam anyway). But, while I may be raising a question that requires much further study, I believe that AbūSulaymān's major contribution is that of explicitly and systematically saying what the Islamic world generally has already tacitly accepted. I do not know to what exent the *siyar* is emphasized at such places as al Azhar today (and AbūSulaymān, of course, does not think that only the products of those institutions have the right to an opinion) or, assuming that concepts like that of a *dār al Islām* permanently at war with a *dār al ḥarb*, punctuated by truces of no more than ten years duration, actually are given any salience, whether they are seriously presented as principles which have to be applied today. But my impression is that Islamic movements, even including those of the revolutionary type, hardly think rigidly along classical lines. For example, revolutionary Iran, instead of restoring the concept of *ahl al dhimmah*, has given Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians representation in the parliament (whose very existence demonstrates an absence of slavish commitment to medieval political patterns) in proportion to their percentages of the total population of the country. And Islamic movements have invoked the concept of exertion (jihad) against colonialism, in places like Palestine and Afghanistan, and despotism (real or perceived), and not indiscriminately against the *dār al ḥarb*.

This book deserves to be widely disseminated and should be assigned in whole or in part in courses dealing with Islam and the modern world. A concise, article-length version that avoided the repetitiveness and occasional ambiguity of the book might help it to reach a wider audience.

The long introduction by al Shahid Dr. Ismāʿīl R. al Fārūqī was written, shortly before his assassination, in much the same spirit as the book itself. Presenting the West's failure in the area of world community and stressing the pressing need for a new international order, he argues that only Islam has such a legacy (p. xxiii). What he presents is a new kind of universalism — rejecting both the "terror" which Western hegemony has imposed on humanity (p. xiii) and, implicitly, much of the classical Islamic pattern as well — in which racial and ethnic divisions would be replaced by purely voluntary, equal *millah*s, including nonreligious ones (p. xxvi).

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