

Justice and the Just Ruler in the Islamic Mirror of Princes

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Abstract

This article aims to understand the main characteristics of the concept of justice in the works of *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* (Islamic advice literature). First, the article explores the modernist critique of the classical understanding of justice, which claims a preponderance of tyranny in pre-modern Muslim political

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thought. Modernist critics argue that pre-modern Muslim political thought lacked a proper definition of justice, and simply aimed to legitimize the authoritarian status-quo. Second, the article will analyze the primary sources in *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature to understand of how it conceptualized good governance and justice. The article aims to liberate the study of classical Islamic sources from the modernist lens of analysis so it can be understood on its own terms. This article argues that the *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature is misunderstood and many political and ethical principles are missed due to unsound approaches. The article seeks to show that *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* not only gave a clear definition of justice, but also integrated it into a broader conceptual system of political definitions that was meant to be a practical guide to good governance.

Keywords: *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, Islamic advice literature, justice, balance, absolute rule, parables.

Introduction

The Islamic political tradition is full of concepts that have consistently appeared throughout Islamic history. However, modernism has caused considerable confusion when it comes to understanding said concepts.

Al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah is also interchangeable with *Ādāb al-Mulūk*. In general, these two terms are used to denote the Islamic political literature that is roughly equivalent to the European “mirror for princes.” Though there are differences in understanding and religious backgrounds, both were concerned with proposing ethical/practical advice to ruling figures to achieve political success. Therefore, the *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* and European Mirror for Princes are comparable in terms of their end goals. However, it is crucial to note that this is not an exact equivalence. Most importantly, the terms Adab/Mirrors are used interchangeably for the sake of convenience and due to their overarching nature of rendering practical advice to the ruler. This means two things, using the term “mirrors” only reflects the most general commonalities and not complete comparability. In addition, the article recognizes that Adab literature is heavily immersed in Islamic law, thought and ethics. Consequently, showing care for political success is a combination of religious and political considerations.

Justice is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, becoming a victim of the anachronistic interpretation of the Islamic political tradition. The *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature has been heavily criticized by some modernist Arab critics as merely a tool for power that elites used to legitimize their rule. Not only that, but modernist critics saw this literature as part of a focused effort to instrumentalize Islam for political ends. In this perspective, works on political ethics were masks that covered up the unjust, unethical reality that was Muslim political practice, which allowed tyrannical rule to persist.¹ However, a close reading of the primary sources shows that the pre-modern *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature views justice as a law of nature that political life was obliged to follow. To not follow this law of nature would be to risk society falling into chaos. The article aims to contextualize the definition of justice within the Adab literature and how it was understood. This contextualization will then allow us to understand Islamic political thought on its own terms, rather than solely through the eyes of its modernist critics.

It is important to note that since this article is concerned with *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, other branches of Islamic political thought are beyond the scope of inquiry.² The basic method here will be to use the primary sources as the main references, and analyze how justice is conceptualized in these works in order to discern patterns. It will specifically focus on the parables and stories in these primary sources because they are the main narrative tools found in this genre of literature. *Al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* used parables and quotations as a practical tool to teach Muslim rulers important lessons about good governance.³ These teachings illustrated the need to cultivate Muslim political culture on its own terms and beliefs while balancing it with real world socio-political needs. *Ādāb* works relate justice to divine action as well as the material prosperity of the state and the efforts to achieve it, and clearly define justice as the maintenance of a balance between these interrelated elements.⁴ The ideal is that a political ethics rooted in the social reality should regulate group action in the political realm in tandem with Islamic teachings. Understanding this point will clarify that justice was conceptualized as

a form of balance, and highlight an element of Islamic political thought that critics tend to overlook.

Modernist Justice and *Ādāb al-Mulūk* Literature

Justice is a prominent concept in classical Islamic political thought, based on the belief that it as a religious value commanded by Allah and the Prophet. However, modernist critics argue that the principle of justice in classical Islamic thought remained a religious teaching with little to no manifestation in reality. Modernist critics see historical reality in the Muslim world as a vicious cycle of injustice and little more than a “cover-up operation” by jurists and scholars to preserve doctrinal integrity. To illustrate these points, Ibrahim Boutchich argues that justice has taken on a primarily worldly form, with Islam becoming a tool for political convenience and the longevity of the state as a result. As Boutchich writes, “Indeed the Sultanic authors did not care at all for... producing an epistemological theory of justice as much as they cared for utilizing texts about justice in order to legitimize the ruling power, and to defend the continuity of the state and ensure its stability.”⁵ According to Boutchich’s logic, the principle of justice was defined in the rulings of courts by authorities that sought to confine its meaning to suit their own interests. From this perspective, the idea of justice was a heavily mutilated concept in practice since it was tailored to fit the rulers while disregarding the interests of their subjects.⁶ Within this framework, justice depended solely on the ruler’s personal traits of compassion and mercy and was never concerned with building an organic society that truly institutionalized justice. According to this critique, *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* works that dealt with justice attempted to give an image of prosperity and fairness as concomitant with political power but without giving any clear explanation of how that was the case. From this perspective, the *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature only provides a sparkling image with no real substance, while also failing to provide a solution for the contradiction between justice and the absolute rule of a monarch. Boutchich argues that the reason for this problem was the “Asiatic mode of production.”⁷ That is, the various populations residing in the Islamic world depended

on tightly controlled agriculture to sustain itself. This socio-political order became, under the control of an autocratic central authority, a government that treated its people like slaves. The eastern peoples - as Boutchich calls them - have become accustomed to this status quo, which this led to them succumbing to their own bondage. Revering tyrants and praising their exploits became second nature, and gave birth to the milieu that later would produce *al-Ādāb al-Sultānīyah*.

Boutchich regards his approach as validated by Islamic history in the post-Rashidun period. The new reality, starting from the Umayyads and continuing afterwards, made the *bay'ah* (the oath of allegiance) into an act of forcefully imposing government instead of seeking consent from the governed.⁸ Thus, political life in Islamic historical experience was a tyranny built on coercion, which is the opposite of the popular consent found in the principle of the social contract and personal freedoms found in the works of Rousseau.⁹ For Boutchich, authors of the Adab writings successfully mixed several concepts by taking a utilitarian approach that allowed justice to be repurposed into the service of the ruling authority. The image of the ruler who sits far above his subjects made him unaccountable for any injustice, and religion was a way to ensure the ruler was above the law, and his interpretation of justice beyond question.¹⁰ Consequently, this means that justice was not based on a contract between the ruler and the ruled, nor was it based on consent, but rather on power and force. The Adab authors who called upon the ruler to be just and moderate in his rule, therefore, created a contradiction in the very concept of justice. For how can power ever be just if it is in the hands of one man?

According to modernist critics, another contradiction found in the *al-Ādāb al-Sultānīyah* literature are the references to the equality between people of both high and low rank in society. Yet, these same works are rife with casteism, as in they clearly divide society into different ranks and prescribe different attitudes towards each class. In the end, justice becomes identified with the figure of the sultan who is beyond reproach, thereby marginalizing the people who have no role in dictating rules. Under these circumstances, Boutchich argued, justice became a tool in the hands of illegitimate rulers who were supported by

a utilitarian class of intellectuals. The *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature imposes obedience as a foundation of justice through a combination of fear and limited compassion, while also denying any possibility of political participation.¹¹ Boutchich concluded that the Adab authors realized that there was no way to change the tyrannical status quo, as the Muslim ummah had historically failed in all its attempts to establish real justice. As a result, the Muslims had essentially resigned themselves to be servants of the ruler.¹² This approach to the Adab works is based on the perception that Muslim political practice is based on absolutism and unrestricted power, directing the state's energy to maintaining its survival as the main objective.¹³

From this perspective, the Muslim state becomes an agent of injustice by maintaining its existence through force and the absolute control over the populace. The moment its power becomes established is the moment that tyranny and injustice take hold, and this is justified by religious rhetoric to maintain the desired status quo. The advice literature justifies injustice and absolutism as the basis for conceiving of the state in both thought and action.¹⁴ In this reality, Adab literature was a main tool of defining political authority as the use of unrestricted force and coercion to achieve survival for the political order. Ethical principles such as justice were tailored to fit the needs of the ruler. This need led to the positioning of the ruler as someone above ethical principles, and gradually elevating him to the level of something like a deity, who was free to do what he wished at any time and who was owed unconditional obedience.¹⁵ Ethical reasoning and references to the principles of justice are not genuine or realistic, according to the critics of advice literature. The reality was that justice was a fantastical principle promoted in *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, but immediately demolished by the reality of an absolutist ruler. Ethical principles supported by the Adab literature were only a tool to excuse the reality of political authority, while also justifying the inherent injustice of the ruling authorities.¹⁶ This approach did not only entail the separation of the religious from the political, but in fact brought make them both under the complete control of an individual ruler.¹⁷

The outcome of this dynamic is a vision of justice as arbitrary, which is illustrated by the place that the common people have in this political

structure. Upon reading the Adab literature, one finds that the people are depicted as a lost and formless mass in need of guidance. Their existence was one of being helpless before the power of the ruler's authority, who is obliged to act with sternness to quell their cravings and appetites. Under these circumstances, some critics pointed to the idea that the ruler and his tailored justice are necessary. If there is a transgression by the ruler it is the result of the people's own imperfections and corruption.¹⁸ The instrumentalization of justice here is not just to portray the ruler as a man of compassion and mercy, but also to establish his rank as a master, and the people as slaves who must obey in order to receive his justice. The critics of the *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature see it as painting the essential nature of mankind as evil and corrupt. Thus, the presence of political authority is to quell the evil that comes from uncontrolled human activity, as the stability of the political order depends upon the degree of restrictions that are placed on the people.¹⁹ The division between the ruler and the ruled is not in the sphere of power alone, but also extends into ethics. Since the ruler is one who is responsible for restricting the passions of the people, he also has an exclusive monopoly over good ethics and is the ultimate judge of good character.²⁰ The general population are simply a rabble, who know nothing and are in need of constant control and guidance by the ruler.

Justice and Injustice

The principle of justice is present across the corpus of the Muslim political tradition. It is deemed as the pillar that upholds the order of the heavens and the earth, as well as a principle whose centrality is agreed upon by almost all authors.²¹ Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d.1038) describes justice as the center of political life, the greatest virtue and a bringer of great benefits.²² The ideal of justice was of such centrality to classical Islamic political thought that Ibn al-Ḥaddād devotes an entire work to dedicated to the concept, (d. c.1275) *al-Ĵawhar al-Nafīs fī Siyāsat al-Ra'īs* (*The Precious Gem on The Governance of the Leader*). *Al-Ĵawhar al-Nafīs* defines justice as balance, one that brings order to the world and an indispensable asset to the state as if it were a law of nature. Ibn al-Ḥaddād

considers politics to be the governing of the affairs of faith and the world in order to improve the soul and civilization. Both of these objectives are based on justice, understood as a balance that prevents excessiveness that would bring about a state of injustice. If one ruins his soul, then he transgresses against himself and one who ruins the world transgresses against others, meaning that he is committing injustice. Such is the nature of governance and the essential presence of a balance that brings prosperity.²³ Ibn al-Azraq (d. 1491) affirms the same principle using the oft-quoted “circle of justice.”²⁴

“The world is an orchard and the state is its fence, the state is an authority by which people live, the Sunnah is a rule governed by authority, authority is an order upheld by soldiers, soldiers are supporters upheld by wealth, wealth is sustenance cultivated by the people, the people are servants encompassed by justice, justice is sought after and with it is the ordering of the world, the world is an orchard and the state is its fence.”²⁵

Al-Ghazālī (d.1111) put the responsibility for just rule on the ruler’s shoulders, promising that their memory and achievements would be well preserved as a result of their good actions.²⁶ It becomes apparent then that personal investment on part of the rulers in the wellbeing of their people is an integral part of politics. As for the further benefits for the Muslim ruler himself, al-Tha’alibī affirms that justice makes a ruler’s reign last, and grants him divine favor, as well as obedience and loyalty from the regions under his control.²⁷ Furthermore, the presence of a just polity is a sign of sound reason and the triumph of wisdom over selfishness. Rulers who compete to perform justice and avoid tyranny last longer and witness more prosperity. In addition, the presence of the just ruler turns the people’s forced loyalty and into a genuine love.²⁸

The significance of justice here comes from appreciating the manner in which it is described as the pillar that upholds the affairs of the world and the Islamic faith. Justice is deemed as the main reason behind the betterment of all creation. It binds them with comradery, makes them well spoken, brings unity and equity, ensures success, and prevents strife and fatal differences.²⁹ Injustice, on the other hand, is seen as a force of chaos and one of the main reasons for instability and state failure. It is

the victory of selfish shortsightedness over wisdom and the bringer of society's unraveling, which leads to the destruction of states and rulers alike.³⁰ Injustice includes depriving of people of their rights and the misuse of authority by the ruler, showing an extreme lack of a guiding moral compass. Al-Ghazālī explains this state of affairs by dividing injustice into two categories. One is the mistreatment of the people by the ruler, and the strong and wealthy abusing the weak and poor. The second type is injustice of the self, as sins are considered to be a high form of committing injustice against one's own self.³¹

If the ruler as an individual is willing to commit injustice against himself then it will be easier to do the same against others. This principle persists for all who hold a position of authority. The consequences of injustice are dire, bringing tribulations and all sorts of hardships without respite. The ruler that presides over this state of affairs ought to become an example for others, a failure in the art of statecraft in all respects. Al-Tha'ālibī asserts that the people will not fight for such a leader, and will be defeated by opponents who govern more justly even with less resources and manpower. In addition, an unjust government will be deprived of longevity, and will continually lack the resources and loyalty it needs. Finally, that political order and its rulers will only be remembered for their hideous conduct by later peoples.³²

Classical authors' description of justice and injustice should be understood on its own terms. The modernist critique misses the meaning behind the exposition of justice in the fashion described above. Equality is not the underlying principle of justice. Rather justice is equity and balance, based on the consideration of different kinds of people and their various needs on the part of the ruling authority. Ibn Raḍwān (d. 1381) defines it as such, "Justice is a noun meaning equity and preventing transgression, having sound scaling, upright measuring, a noun that encompasses all traits of honor and attributes of generosity."³³

Ibn Raḍwān divides justice in a fashion similar to al-Ghazālī's division of injustice. The first kind of justice is the one concerned with authority and holders of power. The second relates to how one assesses oneself and one's relationship with Allah, and finally justice refers to the relations between an individual and the others around him.³⁴ The Adab literature's

perspective views justice as a part of a greater whole concerned with the wellbeing of the believers in this world and the hereafter. The definition of justice and injustice based on equity and relations between the self, the other and Allah puts into perspective the role of ethics as a guiding map of conduct on the road of competent governance.³⁵ Adab works depict the socio-political order as one based on balance and careful consideration on the part of all actors, each according to his own place, capabilities and responsibility. This includes the ruler. The assertion that only coercion was considered as means of governing shows a lack of understanding. It is a judgment of the socio-political body in the premodern Muslim world that is made according to enlightenment-era social contract theory, and is not useful for understanding classical Muslim thought.

The Just and Unjust Sultan

To maintain the integrity of the Muslim state and the safety of the community, the ruler must maintain balance in all state affairs. This means that justice is the underlying framework for political authority to govern. For this to occur, Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī (d.1127) instructs the ruler that the people are not to be seen as a source of wealth, capital, and servants. Rather, they should be seen as if they were members of his household and brothers, who secure the community as loyal soldiers and supporters.³⁶ If this balance is achieved, then loyalty and social cohesion will follow. Therefore, the most effective way to better the socio-political body is justice. Governance and political authority are explained in the mirror for princes literature in terms of having personal investment in the wellbeing of society. All social groups are interdependent, just as the betterment of the soul is inseparably linked to the betterment of the world around it. The rules stipulated through political ethics combine worldly concerns with piety and spiritual wellbeing. The wellbeing of the ruler's soul and his piety are directly linked to the wellbeing of the people and just governance. This links legitimate rule and good governance.³⁷ The Adab literature sets expectations for what good governance should be, by emphasizing the need for justice and the real threats of not abiding by proper political ethics.

A competent ruler is mentioned as a cause of justice since he has the direct authority to direct sound policies, and also to employ officials of a high caliber. If both the ruler, the society and the elites are invested in balancing between needs and objectives with general well-being, then loyalty is guaranteed. The ruler has to lead this effort by using the best methods and following ethical principles to remain connected with his people. Nizām al-Mulk advises the Muslim ruler to be attentive to his subjects' needs, and to dedicate two days a week in order to receive grievances and help whoever was in need.³⁸ The personal investment in justice on the part of the ruling authority relates to al-Ṭurṭūshī's advice regarding filling the ranks of the court with people of knowledge, wisdom, sound opinion, honor and dignified backgrounds.³⁹ Therefore, rather than simply masking tyrannical rule, it is clear that Adab works view justice as necessary for wise administration as a whole.

Al-Ṭurṭūshī considers justice as a value worthy in itself, and not just a tool of utilitarian politics. The moral arguments and rhetoric present in the Adab literature deal with justice and all ethically positive principles as if they are laws in the world of politics ordained by Allah. An unjust ruler is an aberration that merits a reaction akin to a natural phenomenon, being a bad ruler kills the state just as illness kills the body. Al-Ṭurṭūshī illustrates this view by quoting a parable of the unjust ruler, describing him as a thorn in a foot that the afflicted seeks to pull out by all means.⁴⁰ Justice is not used as a utilitarian excuse here, but as a principle that covers all forms of sound governance under the primary objective of securing worldly and heavenly prosperity. If the principle of justice is utilitarian then it would have been up to the powers that be to define it at their discretion. Instead, the Adab works continually warn the ruler not to use coercion and not to simply do as they please without deliberation or council.

Furthermore, Abū Bakr Al-Murādī (d.1096) cautions against utilitarianism by warning the ruler against empowering his armies by weakening his civilian population and vice versa. To do so would be to throw the natural order out of balance by transgressing and ignoring essential needs.⁴¹ Therefore, rather than a utilitarian argument excusing whatever is necessary to defeat one's opponents, al-Murādī insists upon

maintaining a balance even when it comes to the military. Justice, then, cannot be defined by actions that prefer certain groups or factions over others to acquire an advantage. Rather, justice is the taking into consideration of the balancing of needs when making decisions.

Within this framework, justice is both an objective in its own right, and a way to reach higher levels of prosperity. Advice literature prizes justice as the cardinal virtue upon which good political practice is based.⁴² Al-Murādī describes the just authority as one that has four benefits, bountifulness, praiseworthiness, triumph and longevity. Justice is the quality of moderation in all affairs, which makes it the cardinal virtue by which greater benefits are attained. Al-Murādī argues this by asserting that this state of affairs needs little effort to ensure loyalty or maintain order.⁴³ In essence, justice does not simply provide balanced governance as a part of the objective of ensuring general well-being. It is also a way to govern effectively as well as ensure the future success of the Muslim state. The Adab literature denied the idea of a ruler governing as he pleases, as the ruler is to abide by the rules of Islam and make decisions with great care.⁴⁴ The various authors in the Adab literature describe justice as the pillar of the heavens and earth. It is a law that Allah has enforced on creation, while the warnings of the damage done to the spirits of those in authority who act unjustly further points to a link between divine action and justice.⁴⁵

Narration as a moralizing method

Al-Ādāb al-Sultānīyah was fundamentally concerned with the practical, rather than the laying out of a detailed theoretical framework. What was crucial, then, was to propose concepts and relate them to parables that explain what is practical, and there was no interest in laying out a political theory as such. Parables played a central role in delivering the message to the ruler in question, to drive home desired principles. These works did not view reason as the only trustworthy source of knowledge, but rather viewed revelation, sense perception, and also histories and reports as equally important sources of knowledge. Consequently, the use of parables to transmit knowledge is a feature of historical reports

and also Islamic teachings. The *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* literature engaged the authorities in a manner that went beyond reasoned arguments, since reason cannot instill ethics or morality on its own. A principle like justice cannot be taught by reason's dependence on utilitarian logic, which is limited by human shortcomings. Depending solely on reason defeats the purpose of *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* that positioned ethics as values to be sought on their own terms and because of their relations to the divine, not for worldly benefits alone.

Al-Māwardī (d. 1058), an example of an author who uses historical reports, warns that the necessity of obedience to a ruler cannot co-exist with injustice, as obedience is dependent on justice and wise governance. To illustrate this point, he quotes a teaching by the Sassanid Emperor Ardashir.

If a king turns away from justice, the subjects will abandon obedience "to the king."⁴⁶

A similar claim is found in the advice Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn (d. 822) gave to his son Abdullah Ibn Ṭāhir (d. 844) after becoming a governor under the Caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 813-833).⁴⁷ The letter reiterates the centrality of just rule and equates it to political competence.⁴⁸

And avoid evil desires and transgressions, turn away your thoughts from them, and show your innocence of these [two things] to your subjects. Govern with justice, stand among them with truth and knowledge that leads you to the path of guidance.⁴⁹

Considering these principles, parables play the role of transmitting knowledge and teachings to rulers, and are used in great quantities in Adab literature. The stories follow a similar format, and they all echo each other. They use well-known figures such as Ardeshir, Alexander the Great and others rulers from pre-Islamic times, as well as Caliphs and other Muslim rulers as well. One story shows Alexander the Great questioning wise men in India about the seeming lack of laws in their land. They answered:

Because we hand out justice from ourselves and because of the just rule of our kings over us.

He asked them which is better, courage or justice? To which they answered:

If justice is utilized, then courage is no longer necessary.⁵⁰

Another parable is given in the example of Emperor Shapur (r. 240-270) in which he expresses his ideas of governance to his successor.

The regulation of revenue and its fulfillment coming with cultivating the land and the increase of its yield. The goal of achieving this and more is only through the betterment of its people, upholding justice among them, showing leniency towards them, aiding them in their striving [towards cultivating the land], incentivizing them by improving their livelihood and alleviating any difficulties in regard to their needs.⁵¹

A number of parables are sourced from Islamic history as well, demonstrating an effort to link the Muslim polity with wise governance and successful political establishment. Ibn Nubātah al-Miṣrī (d. 1366), narrates a story mentioning the Abbasid Caliph al-Muhtadī's (r. 869-870) attitude towards one of his subjects' complaints. Ibn Nubātah narrates that a Palestinian came to complain about the injustices that were inflicted upon him. While the culprit is not mentioned, it is safe to say that it was likely one of the Caliph's officials. Otherwise, the man would not have sought an audience with the Caliph in the first place. Eventually, the man's problems are solved, leading to the former fainting out of happiness and remaining under al-Muhtadī's care until he awoke. The Palestinian man commented:

I did not expect to live until I saw justice served, the happiness that came over me took my breath away.

To which, al-Muhtadī responded,

It was essential to serve you with justice when you were still in your country, and if it was not so then I will pay you your travel expenses. He [i.e., the Caliph] had given the man 20 dinars previously, but he ordered another 50 dinars to be given and asked him for forgiveness regarding his predicament.⁵²

The last narration given by Ibn al-Rabī' is a piece of advice given by a king to his successor as a reminder of the judgment in the hereafter. It also emphasizes the ephemeral nature of the world.

Do not be worried of the world, for nothing will be unless by Allah's predestination. And do not regard it as essential for it did not remain in the hands of those before you. And do not refuse it either despite of that, for heaven is not earned except by it [i.e., the world].⁵³

The fact that Ibn al-Rabī' includes this narration teaching about the ephemeral nature of the world demonstrates that Adab writers viewed justice as part of a larger framework that aimed at success not just in this world, but the next. Al-Ṭurṭūshī also quotes a series of hadiths and Qur'anic verses that show the connection between the immanent world and divine action.

Whenever We intend to destroy a society, We command its elite (to obey Allah) but they act rebelliously in it. So, the decree (of punishment) is justified, and We destroy it utterly, (Qur'an, 17:16).⁵⁴

He continues soon after by quoting a hadith as follows.

Indeed, the lizards starve to death from the sins of the son of Adam.⁵⁵

The Qur'anic verse is used here as a warning of divine retribution against transgressions. The elites are commanded to do good, but rebelled and are subsequently destroyed.⁵⁶ The hadith, by contrast, describes the effects of injustice on the world, and how the actions of those in power

can have repercussions for all creation. The parables from Hadith and Qur'an quoted by al-Ṭurṭūshī were used to evoke certitude in the heart of the rulers of the consequences of evil actions, and remind them that Allah will not let them be forgotten. The parables use the same division of justice mentioned by Ibn Raḍwān, that committing injustice against the self and others is also contravening divine command.⁵⁷ This ultimately leads to Allah causing a general socio-political failure of the state as the consequence of harmful political action.

Parables found in the Islamic tradition affirm the principle of justice in a way that delivers the necessary information without going over detailed theoretical concepts. The critics who attack the use of parables in the Adab literature have limited themselves to relying solely on the concept of popular sovereignty found in modern Western thought. Moreover, these critics fail to understand the approach taken by writers in classical political thought, and their discussions of ethical principles and divine action were not a conspiracy to support unjust rulers. Rather, they reflected a cosmology that departs from an anthropocentric materialism, and places Allah as the only true causal agent in the world. Humanity struggles to achieve favorable outcomes by acting in a proper way, with justice being the main political virtue to bring divine favor. Consequently, advice literature offers a political vision that seeks a holistic perspective toward political action on the level of both the individual and the levels in order to relate political action to divine action and, subsequently, ethical principles. The modernist criticism of advice literature is thus both anachronistic and Euro-centric. Modernist critics judge the concept of justice in the Islamic tradition by the parameters of the modern ideals of equality and liberal democracy. This does a damaging disservice to the Islamic political tradition. These critics assume that the political tradition had been able to articulate a real vision of justice until colonialism came and taught the Muslim world its true meaning.

Conclusion

Criticisms of the conceptualization of justice in the advice literature from the Muslim world have focused on several key issues. Most prominently,

they argue that there was no clear approach to the principle from an epistemological perspective, and no intellectual foundations were laid that would enable the formulation of a robust definition of justice. Moreover, the critics accused the authors of advice literature as being little more than propagandists, who justified an unjust reality to preserve the ruling powers of the day. The ruler, so the critics claimed, was made into an untouchable and infallible man who governed absolutely. The authors of the advice literature then appear as mere Machiavellian tricksters, who only depict the ruler as a compassionate and just administrator while excusing his arbitrariness and condemning the empty nature of justice as conceptualized in the Islamic tradition. The result of this approach is a misunderstanding of the notion of justice in advice literature, and also how the Islamic tradition approached political concepts in general.

These criticisms do not engage with the subject matter on its own terms, but rather from a modernist perspective. This renders the critiques anachronistic for they are unable to understand the logic of mirrorists, how they engaged with political reality, nor how they proposed ideas. Advice literature was never concerned with detailing and theorizing underlying concepts of the state. Rather, they were more concerned with reality as it was and sought to make it better.⁵⁸ The goal, then, was not to detail concrete state mechanisms to depose an unfit ruler and hold them to account, but rather to offer ethical teachings that political life could depend upon. The ruler was a central figure in this vision. As shown throughout the article, this ethical approach did not only warn the unjust ruler of the threat of being deposed, but warned that the entire state would face annihilation. More importantly, the modernist critics did not register that Allah is the central actor in the classical worldview, not the ruler, or anyone else for that matter. Presenting this view as a justification for theocratic rule is simply wrong, for it ignores the political theology and the cosmology upon which it was based. An approach unburdened by modernist premises is crucial to understanding different political traditions from earlier historical eras.

Endnotes

- 1 For more details on these modernist critiques see Fadi Zatari and Omar Fili, "The Image of Sulṭān in Islamic Mirror of Princes," *darulfunun ilahiyat* 33, no. 2 (2022): 463-479.
- 2 Although no one division of Islamic political thought into sub-literature can be considered authoritative, Makram Abbas' division is one of the most well-known and comprehensive categorizations. He divides Islamic political thought into three major branches. The first is *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* which is the concern of this article. Second is *al-Siyāsah al-shar'īyah* that concerned itself with the theory of government and political concepts. Lastly is the Muslim philosophers, who engaged with political thought using Hellenic influenced ideals. For the details of this division, see Makram Abbas, *Al-Islām wa-al-Siyāsīyah fī al-'aṣr al-Waṣīf*, [Islam and politics in the classical age]. Trans. Mohamed Haj Salem. Beirut: Nohoudh Center for Studies and Publications, 2020.
- 3 The dependence on parables and stories is a fundamental difference between Adab and the other genres of Islamic political thought. For example, it radically differs from the abstract and conceptual approach of *al-Siyāsah al-shar'īyah*. For a work that illustrates this, see Al-Juwaynī. *Ghiyāth al-Umam fī altyāth al-zulam* [The Aid of Nations in the Surrounding Darkness]. Beirut, Dar al-Minhaj, 2014.
- 4 The focus on the ethical as well as the practical separates Adab from the Hellenic-influenced Philosophers. The Philosophers sought to have ideal governance under a perfect ruler, not so much wanting to deal with the political reality as it was. For more, see Al-Fārābī, Abū Naṣr. *Kitāb Ārā' ahl al-Madīnah al-fāḍilah* [The Book of Opinions on the People of the Virtuous City]. Cairo, Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, 2016.
- 5 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* [Discourse of Justice in the Sultanic Books of Governance]. Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15.
- 6 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 18
- 7 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 26.
- 8 The Umayyads were the first dynasty to rule over the Muslim world after the first phase of the conquests. They ruled from 661 C.E until they were overthrown by the Abbasids in 750 C.E
- 9 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 28
- 10 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 40, 47.
- 11 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 68.
- 12 Boutchich, I. *Khaṭṭāb al-'adālah fī al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 69.

- 13 Such criticisms can be found in claims that authors of *al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* fully supported unrestricted rule. This assumption takes different forms but is an underlying one in almost all criticisms. For an example of this, see Aljumaiaan, M. Monarchism in al-Ṭurṭūshī's *Sirāj al-Mulūk* (The Lamp of Kings). Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.
- 14 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah* [On Tyranny, a study on Islamic Heritage]. Beirut, al-Maaref Forum, 174.
- 15 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 179, 180.
- 16 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 251.
- 17 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 253.
- 18 Al-'Allām, Izz al-Dīn. *Al-Ādāb al-sulṭānīyah dirāṣah fī Binyat wa thawābit al-khiṭāb al-siyāsī* [The Mirror of Sulṭāns: a Study in the Structure and Principles of Political Writing]. Kuwait, 'Ālam al-Ma'rīfah, 188.
- 19 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 116.
- 20 Abdullatif, Kamal. *Fī Tashrīḥ uṣūl al-istibdād: qirā'ah fī Niẓām al-Ādāb al-Sulṭānīyah*, 118.
- 21 For more works on Islamic political thought and ethics, see Yılmaz, Hüseyin. "Books on Ethics and Politics: The Art of Governing the Self and Others at the Ottoman Court." In *Treasures of Knowledge: An Inventory of the Ottoman Palace Library (1502/3-1503/4)*, (2 vols), pp. 509-526. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- 22 Abū Maṣṣūr Al-Tha'ālībī, *Adāb al-mulūk* [The Ethics of Kings], edit. Jalil al-'Aṭīyah. Beirut, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2005, 89.
- 23 al-Ḥaddād, *al-Ḥawārī al-Nafīs fī Siyāsat al-Ra'īs* [The Precious Gem on The Governance of the Leader], ed. Raḍwān al-Sayyid. Beirut, Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 1983, 61-62.
- 24 For a discussion on the circle of Justice, see London, Jennifer. "Circle of Justice." *History of Political Thought* 32, no. 3 (2011): 425-447. And for a study on its practical effects, see Darling, Linda T. "Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise": Middle Eastern Advice for Indian Muslim Rulers." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 22, no. 1 (2002): 3-19.
- 25 Ibn al-Azraq, Abū 'Abd Allāh. *Badā'ī al-silk fī Ṭabā'ī al-mulk* [Marvel of State conduct, and the nature of authority]. ed. 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2008, 202. On the illustration of the role of justice regarding balancing different social classes, see Black, Antony. *History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011, 116.

- 26 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Naṣīhat al-Mulūk* [The Spilled Gold Dust in the Advice of Kings], Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1988, 46.
- 27 Abū Maṣṣūr Al-Thaʿālibī, *Adāb al-mulūk* [The Ethics of Kings], edit. Jalīl al-ʿAṭīyah. Beirut, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2005, 90.
- 28 Ibn al-Azraq, Abū ʿAbd Allāh. *Badāʾi al-silk fī Ṭabāʾi al-mulk* [Marvel of State conduct, and the nature of authority]. ed. ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2008, 204.
- 29 Ibn Radwan. *al-Shuhub al-lāmi ah fī al-siyāsah al-nāfi ah* [The Glittering Stars in Beneficial Politics]. ed. ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2007, 83.
- 30 The ruler bears a great deal of responsibility for the political failure of the state. For more on this, see Zatari, Fadi, and Fili, Omar. “Governance As a Delicate Balance: On the Concept of Luṭf in Islamic Mirrors for Princes.” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. aop (2024): 9.
- 31 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Tibr al-Masbūk fī Naṣīhat al-Mulūk* [The Spilled Gold Dust in the Advice of Kings], Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, 1988, 47.
- 32 Abū Maṣṣūr Al-Thaʿālibī, *Adāb al-mulūk* [The Ethics of Kings], edit. Jalīl al-ʿAṭīyah. Beirut, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2005, 91.
- 33 Ibn Raḍwān. *al-Shuhub al-lāmi ah fī al-siyāsah al-nāfi ah*, 95.
- 34 Ibn Raḍwān. *al-Shuhub al-lāmi ah fī al-siyāsah al-nāfi ah*, 95.
- 35 For more on competent governance, balance and the role of political ethics, see Zatari, Fadi, and Fili, Omar. “Governance As a Delicate Balance: On the Concept of Luṭf in Islamic Mirrors for Princes.” *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1, no. aop (2024): 1-19.
- 36 Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk* [Lamp of Kings] Beirut: Dar al-Minhaj, 2016, 399.
- 37 Leder, Stefan. “Sultanic rule in the mirror of medieval political literature.” In *Global Medieval: Mirrors for princes reconsidered*, eds. Regula Forster, Nequín Yavari (2015): 94-108. Ilex Foundation Series 15
- 38 Niẓām al-Mulk. *Siyar al-Mulūk aw Siyāsāt Nāmāh* [The Book of Kings], ed. Yusuf Bakkar. Beirut, Dar al-Manhal, 2007, 54. For an English translation for the book, see Darke, Hubert. *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings: The Siyar al Muluk or Siyāsāt-nama of Nizam al-Mulk*. London: Routledge, 2002. For more on Niẓām al-Mulk himself, see Rizvi, S. R. A. *Nizam Al-Mulk Al-Tusi His Contribution to Statecraft, Political Theory and the Art of Government*. Ashraf Printing Press, 1978.
- 39 Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, 400.
- 40 Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, 401.
- 41 Al-Murādī, Abū Bakr. *al-Ishārah fī tadbīr al-Imārah* [The Directing in the Management of the State], ed. ʿAlī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2009, 124.

- 42 Zadari, Fadi, and Fili, Omar. "The Image of Sultān in Islamic Mirror of Princes." *darulfunun ilahiyat* 33, no. 2, (2020), 8.
- 43 Al-Murādī, Abū Bakr. *al-Ishārah fī tadbīr al-Imārah* [The Directing in the Management of the State], ed. 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2009, 137-138.
- 44 For more on the emphasis on the interdependence of the duties of the ruler and the ruled, see Toral-Niehof, I. "The "Book of the Pearl on the Ruler" in The Unique Necklace by Ibn 'Abd Rabbih: Preliminary Remarks'. In *Introduction to Global Medieval: Mirrors for Princes Reconsidered*, eds. by Regula Forster and Nequín Yavari, 145-146. *Ilex Foundation Series* 15
- 45 It is apparent as well that justice is an important religious value and not simply a tool of competent governance. Indeed, competent government is a top priority in the Adab literature but it is not considered in isolation from an ever present moral framework that is driven by Islamic teaching. An illustration of this is al-Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salām's comment on justice as one of the names of Allah. He describes it as a name that shows Allah's fairness with his creation, in his giving of taking, harming or benefiting. It is an ever-present aspect of divine action that causes fear in the heart of the unjust man and a hope for the victims of injustice. An example for one who seeks to avoid injustice in his behavior in an attempt to manage the affairs of others by being impartial with the various sorts of people under his care. See Al-'Izz Ibn 'Abd al-Salām (1996), *Shajarat al-ma'ārīf wa-al-aḥwāl wa-ṣāliḥ al-aqwāl wa-al-a'māl*, ed. Iyād Khālid al-Ṭabbā', Beirut and Damascus: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu'āṣir, and Dār al-Fikr.
- 46 Al-Māwardī, Abū al-Ḥasan. *Tashīl al-Nazar wa-Ta'jīl al-Zafar: fī akhlāq al-Malik wa-siyāsāt al-Mulk* [Facilitation Consideration and Acceleration the Victory in the Ethics of the King and Kingdom's policy], ed. Ridwan al-Sayyid. Beirut: Ibn Al Azraq Center for Political Heritage Studies, 2012, 276.
- 47 Al-Ma'mūn, the seventh Abbasid Caliph known for his patronage of sciences and studies.
- 48 Another report attributed to Ṭāhir ibn al-Ḥusayn narrates that he was asked by his son on how long authority will remain in their hands. To which he responded, "as long as justice remains in this court." See, Al-Menawī, Zain al-dīn. *Al-Jawāhir Al-muḍīyah fī Bayān al-Ādāb Al-sultānīyah* [The Glittering Gems on the Mirror of Princes]. ed. Abdullah al-Nassir. Riyadh: King Saud University, 2013, 131.
- 49 Ibn al-Azraq, Abū 'Abd Allāh. *Badā'ī al-silk fī Ṭabā'ī al-mulk* [Marvel of State conduct, and the nature of authority]. ed. 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo, Dār al-Salām, 2008, 628.
- 50 Shayzarī, 'Abd al-Raḥmān. *al-Manhaj al-maslūk fī Siyāsāt al-Mulūk* [The Taken Path for the Governance of Kings], edit, Ali Abullah Moussa. Amman: Dar al-Manar, 245.

- 51 Al-Māwardī, Abū al-Ḥasan. *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk* [the Advice for Kings], ed. Khidr Muhammad. Kuwait City: Maktabat Al-Falah, 189.
- 52 Al-Miṣri Ibn Nubātah, *Al-Mukhtār min Kitāb tadbīr al-Duwal* [Excerpts from the book of governing states]. ed. Salwa Qandil. Beirut: Ibn al-Azraq Center for Political Heritage Studies, 2012, 207-208.
- 53 Ibn al-Rabi'. *Sulūk al-Mālik fī Tadbīr al-Mamālik* [The Behavior of the Ruler in the Administration of Dominions]. ed. Hamid Rabi'. Cairo, Dar al-Sha'b, 451.
- 54 Cited in Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, 514. For the translation, see Pickthall, M.M. n.d. Islamawakened. <https://www.islamawakened.com./quran/17/16/default.htm>
- 55 Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, 515.
- 56 Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī, *Sirāj al-Mulūk*, 515.
- 57 Ibn Radwan. *al-Shuhub al-lāmi'ah fī al-siyāsah al-nāfi'ah* [The Glittering Stars in Beneficial Politics]. ed. 'Alī Sāmī al-Nashshār. Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 2007, 83.
- 58 Zatari, Fadi, and Fili, Omar. "The Image of Sulṭān in Islamic Mirror of Princes." *darulfunun ilahiyat* 33, no. 2, (2020), 14.