

Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership and Its Modern Implications

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Abstract

Although the Qur'an does not mandate a specific form of government, it provides broad moral directives for sound political governance. The Qur'an further refers to two specific traits in the legitimate leaders of the Muslim (and any other righteous) polity: precedence and moral excellence, two concepts which were understood to have considerable socio-political implications as well. In the secondary, extra-Qur'anic literature, there is extensive commentary on these two traits and their significance for defining legitimate leadership. This article traces the broad contours of this extended discussion and refers to its continuing relevance in our own times. It further indicates points of similarity between this discursive treatment of leadership and some aspects of the modern electoral system.

History, they say, should be studied so that one may not be condemned to repeat it. In the Islamic context, there is a great deal of justification to state the opposite: "History," we may say, "should be studied so that one may repeat it" – or at least selective parts of it. This injunction may well apply when scouring the early Islamic landscape for pointers on how to govern the polity, a topic that has been the subject of much debate in recent history and even earlier debate among Muslims of the first and subsequent generations.

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The Qur'an does not explicitly mandate a specific form of "Islamic" government. However, it does espouse certain moral concepts that have enormous sociopolitical implications. These concepts and their foundational role in shaping the early Muslim polity are reflected clearly in *hadith* literature and individual monographs that deal with the moral excellences of the Prophet's Companions. To this, one must add biographical compilations, such as Muhammad ibn Sa'd's famous *al-ḡabaqat al-Kubra* and the major exegetical works of the medieval period.

These works are a clear proof that the early Muslims remembered the discourse on legitimate leadership as having been cast in terms of two key Qur'anic concepts: *sabiqah* (precedence or priority, particularly in conversion to Islam) and *fadl/fadilah* (virtue or moral excellence).¹ Qur'anic warrants that point to the greater moral prominence of the earliest and most committed believers are, in fact, plentiful, and constitute, for Muslims, a divinely ordained vision of a hierarchy of moral excellence in both this world and the next. This is reflected in the Qur'an, as the following verses indicate: "Those among you who spent and fought before the victory are not of the same rank [as others], but greater in rank than those who spent and fought afterwards" (57:10) and "God is pleased with the foremost in precedence (*al-sabiquna al-awwaluna*) from among the Emigrants and the Helpers and those who follow them in good works, and they are pleased with Him" (9:100).

Precedence in Islam

The term *sabiqah* (or *sabq*; less frequently *qadam*), meaning "precedence" in general and, more specifically, "precedence in submission and service to Islam," was a key concept in Islam's early sociopolitical history. It was invoked to "rank" the faithful according to their excellences. In addition to early conversion, precedence in emigrating for the sake of Islam (both to Abyssinia and to Madinah) and in participating in the early battles conferred great merit. The two concepts of "precedences" (*sawabiq*) and "merits" or "excellences" (*fada'il*) were conjoined to create a paradigm of the most excellent leadership. Such a paradigm finds scriptural sanction in the following verses, among others: "God is satisfied with those who preceded foremost (*al-sabiqun al-awwalun*) from among the Muhajirun and the Ansar and those who followed them in charity, and they are pleased with Him. He has prepared for them gardens, below which flow rivers, where they will dwell forever; that is the great victory" (9:100); "Those who pre-

cede(d) are the ones who precede (*al-sabiqun al-sabiqun*); they are those who will be brought near [to God] in the gardens of bliss” (56:10-12); “Those among you who spent and fought before the victory are not of the same rank [as others], but greater in rank than those who spent and fought afterwards” (57:10); and “Those who believed and emigrated and struggled in the path of God with their property and selves are of a higher status (*a’`amu darajah*) before God, and they are the victorious ones” (9:20).

The above verses are quoted in both Sunni and Shi’i sources in support of a divinely mandated hierarchy of moral excellence. This hierarchy also had considerable political ramifications. Sunni sources uniformly assign the greatest excellence to the Prophet’s Companions among the Muhajirun and the Ansar, and recognize a certain order of precedence among them. Early conversion to Islam was the principal constituent of *sabiqah*. In his influential biographical work arranged according to the principle of *sabiqah*,² Ibn Sa’d takes special note of the earliest [Makkan] Muslims, who secretly accepted Islam before the Prophet entered the house of Arqam in roughly 616 CE.³ Their merit in doing so is occasionally highlighted by applying the phrase *qadim al-islam* to them.⁴ Among the Madinan Muslims, the pride of place goes to the 12 men (*al-muqaba’*) who took the first pledge at ‘Aqaba in 621 CE, during which they expressed their fealty to Islam.⁵ They were followed by 70 Ansari men and women, who took the second pledge at ‘Aqaba the following year.⁶ The Shafi’i exegete and jurist al-Baydawi (d. 685/1286 or 692/1293; other death dates given) includes those Ansaris who took both pledges among the *sabiqun* referred to in Qur’an 9:100.⁷

The watershed event in Islam’s early history is, of course, the *hijrah* (the Prophet’s emigration to Madinah in 1 AH/622 CE). In practically all of the sources dealing with this early period, participation in this event demarcates the *ahl al-sabiqah* (those possessing precedence) from the rest. On account of their early conversion and the grievous trials to which they were subjected, which culminated in emigration to and exile in Madinah – all of which affirmed their *sabiqah* and *fadilah* – the Muhajirun came to be almost universally recognized as constituting the first rank of Muslims. As a result, they were entitled to their reward both in this world and the Hereafter: “As for those who emigrated for the sake of God after having been persecuted, We will provide them with a fine abode in this life; yet better still is the reward of the life to come, if they but knew it” (16:41). The “lesser” *hijrah* (the emigration to Abyssinia in ca. 615 CE) also earned great merit for those

who undertook it, and these people proudly adopted the appellation “Muhajir” as well.⁸ Over time, however, “Muhajirun” came to be used almost exclusively as a term of glory for the emigrants to Madinah.

After the *hijrah*, Ibn Sa‘d accords special recognition to the Muhajirun and the Ansar who took part in Badr, the earliest and probably the most critical battle in Islam. In his entry on ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, Ibn Sa‘d records reports relating that the second caliph began his register of pensions (*diwan*⁹) with the Muhajirun and Ansar veterans of Badr, preferring them over all others, except for the Prophet’s wives, and awarding the *ahl al-Badr*, including their allies and clients, 4,000 dirhams each annually.¹⁰ Survivors of Badr who took part in the battles of Uhud, Khandaq, and the later military campaigns are among the most excellent of Muslims.¹¹ Other Companions who earn a special mention in Ibn Sa‘d’s first tier of Muslims are those who suffered grave persecution after converting, particularly on account of being from one of the weaker tribes or the lower echelons of society. Such people are collectively referred to as the *mustad‘afun*.¹²

Those who excelled in reciting the Qur’an and had superior knowledge of it also are accorded special recognition.¹³ For example, ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ud wins distinction as the first Companion to propagate the Qur’an publicly.¹⁴ Another less well-known Companion, Salim, the *mawla* of Abi Hudhayfah, is said to have led the earliest Muhajirun, which included ‘Umar, in prayer before the Prophet arrived in Madinah, on account of his superior knowledge of the Qur’an.¹⁵

Those Muslims who were present at al-Hudaybiyah and witnessed the signing of the treaty there in 6/628 also occupy a special position in this hierarchy of excellence. Yahya ibn Adam (d. 203/818) relates that Jabir ibn ‘Abd Allah reported: “We were 1,400 men on the day of al-Hudaybiyah, and the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, said: ‘Today you are the best people on earth (*khayr ahl al-ard*).’”¹⁶ In his exegesis of Qur’an 9:100, al-Tabari reports that ‘Amir ibn Fuhayrah and al-Sha‘bi, among others, understood the phrase *al-Muhajirun al-awwalun* or *al-sabiqun al-awwalun* to refer, in particular, to those Muslims who took the pledge of al-Ridwan, a reference to the treaty of al-Hudaybiyah. Other reports maintain that the phrase refers to those who took the pledge “under the tree” (*taht al-shajarah*; also a reference to the treaty of al-Hudaybiyah),¹⁷ or to all those who had prayed toward the two *qiblahs* (*sallaw al-qiblatayn*).¹⁸

The Qur’an, in 57:10, assigns a higher rank (*a‘zamu darajatan*) to those who gave of their money and fought before the *fath*, understood by many sources as referring to the *fath Makkah* (the conquest of Makkah in

9/630). This event sets up another temporal divide between an earlier group of more excellent Muslims and a later, less excellent one.¹⁹ Other reports link the *fath* with the *hijrah* and the truce of Hudaibiyah.²⁰ It should be pointed out that many Sunni sources state that this verse refers to Abu Bakr, on account of his exemplary generosity in the pre-*fath* period.²¹ However, the mere fact of conversion right before the fall of Makkah, uncoupled with the other *sabiqah*-generating deeds of the earlier period, was not enough in itself to be regarded as the most excellent. Ibn Sa'd relegates those who converted shortly before or at the time of the *fath Makkah* to his second *tabaqah* of Muslims. This tier includes such men as Khalid ibn al-Walid and 'Amr ibn al-'As.²²

When one looks at various Sunni sources – hadith, biographical, historical, and exegetical literature – it is clear that the Qur'anic *sabiqun* were defined according to their participation in specific landmark events in the life of the nascent Muslim community.²³ The literature shows that the term became broader, temporally speaking, in order to include more of the growing ranks of Muslims in the later period. The various definitions of this crucial term also clearly encode within themselves the early Muslims' growing self-awareness as forming a distinct polity with a religio-political mandate, a polity that needed to be organized according to their understanding of the moral and sociopolitical order envisioned in the Qur'an.

The *manaqib* or *fada'il al-sahabah* sections of standard Sunni *hadith* compilations in particular emphasize the *sabiqah* of the Companions as the criterion for assigning a greater excellence to them than to other members of the community of the faithful. A tradition from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri relates that the Prophet warned his followers not to malign the Companions, for “even if one of you were to give away gold equivalent to [Mt.] Uhud, he would not reach the full extent of one of them or his half.”²⁴ Al-Tabari, in his *Ta'rikh*, refers to the Saqifah episode, during which Abu Bakr got up to address the Ansar, who at first opposed his nomination as caliph. He reminded them that God had bestowed special distinction upon the early Muhajirun (*fa khassa Allah al-Muhajirin al-awwalin*) because they had believed in the Prophet, placed their faith in him, and consoled him while patiently bearing the afflictions visited upon them. Furthermore,

they are the first to worship God on Earth and to place their faith in Him and His Messenger. They are his [the Messenger's] closest associates (*awliya'*) and his kinfolk (*'ashiratu*) and are the most entitled to this matter [sc. the caliphate] after him. Only the wrong-doer (*zalim*) opposes them in that. O gathering of the Ansar, [you are] those whose excellence

(*fadluhum*) in religion cannot be denied, or whose great precedence (*sabiqatuhum al-‘azima*) in Islam cannot be denied. It pleased God to make you helpers of His religion and His Messenger. He made his [the Messenger’s] emigration to you, and from among you are the majority of his wives and his Companions. After the first emigrants, there is no one else of your status in our estimation. Thus we are the rulers (*al-umarā’*) and you are the assistants (*al-wuzarā’*). We do not fail to consult you (*la tufiatuna bi mashwarah*), and we do not adjudicate (*la naqdi*) matters without you.²⁵

In this report, moral excellence is made contingent primarily on priority in conversion to Islam. Although the Ansar are certainly among the most excellent of Muslims, based on their record of service to Islam, this statement affirms that they can never aspire to outstrip the Muhajirun who, equally pious, enjoy the added advantage of having accepted Islam prior to them.

The Qur’an also makes a causal link between a nation’s political dominance and its moral excellence (as well as the converse – a nation’s collapse on account of its moral degeneration). For example: “We have destroyed generations before you when they committed wrong while their Messengers had come with clear proofs, and they did not believe. This is how we recompense the nation of evildoers. Then we made you the successors (*khala’if*) on Earth after them in order to see how you behave” (10:13-14). The commentary of al-Tabari (d. 310/923) links these verses to the righteous reigns of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar.²⁶ The Qur’an also states: “Remember when he made you the successors (*khulafa’*) after ‘Ad and established you on Earth, making mansions out of its plains and hewing houses out of the mountains. So remember the bounties of God and do not cause mischief on Earth” (7:74) and “Moses said to his people: ‘Ask help of God and be patient, for Earth belongs to God. He causes whomever He wishes from among His servants to inherit it (*yurithuha*), and the end belongs to the righteous.’ They said: ‘We were oppressed before you came to us and after you came to us.’ He said: ‘Perhaps God will destroy your enemies and cause you to succeed (*yastakhlifakum*) on Earth and see how you behave’” (7:128-29).

Another verse points to divine “obligation” to reward the righteous with political stewardship on Earth: “God has promised those among you who believe and perform righteous deeds to cause you to succeed (*li yastakhlifannahum*) on Earth, just as he made those before you succeed (*istakhlafa*), so as to strengthen their religion for them which He has chosen for them, and so that He may replace them after that and they are evildoers” (24:55). Other verses that make this equation between righteous

action and “inheriting” Earth, explicitly or implicitly, are 7:69, 7:169, 17:38, 57:7, 6:133, 4:133, 14:19, 28:5-6, and 35:16. It is worth noting that the meaning of lexemes derived from the root *kh-l-f* in these instances clearly signify “to succeed someone” or “a group of people who have immediately preceded.”²⁷

The Qur’anic coupling of moral excellence and political stewardship on Earth in this manner, both at the individual and group levels, must have made a strong impression on the early Muslims, given that this message was so insistent and pervasive. This message is, after all, at the root of ‘Umar’s official promulgation of a merit-based moral and social order, which is embodied most conspicuously in the *diwan*, which disbursed stipends on the basis of *sabiqah* and *fadl/fadilah*.²⁸ Although modern scholarship has focused on the political and administrative consequences of ‘Umar’s establishment of the *diwan*, it has not given due attention to its underlying principles and their enormous consequences for creating a specific Islamic moral and sociopolitical order emanating from the Qur’an’s basic ethos.²⁹ Establishment of the *diwan* itself reflects the early Muslim community’s recognition of the centrality of these principles.

When ‘Umar established the official *diwan* (register of pensions) ca. 15/636, each Muslim’s *sabiqah* became an important criterion in determining the stipend’s amount.³⁰ Although the *diwan* was organized according to tribal affiliation, the principle of *sabiqah* determined its overall function.³¹ Kinship to Muhammad, primarily through marriage, was also a point of consideration, but in conjunction with *sabiqah*. It should be emphasized that the Prophet’s wives, who were awarded generous pensions,³² are counted among the Muhajirun’s earliest converts and, therefore, in themselves and through their closeness to Muhammad, possessed both *sabiqah* and *fadl*. Ibn Hazm underscores this forcefully by stating that after all the Prophets, the wives of the Prophet are the most excellent of people (*afdal al-nas*) and placing them even before Abu Bakr in rank.³³ Reports suggesting that blood-kinship in itself was a priority in establishing the *diwan* are highly suspect and certainly spurious. Of this ilk are those stating that the Prophet’s uncle al-‘Abbas (d. ca. 32/653), who converted disgracefully late to Islam and fought on the pagan Makkah side during the critical battle of Badr, headed the pension register.³⁴ Reports that ‘A’ishah headed this register are far more credible.³⁵

This system of preference met with some reservations. Ibn Taymiya (d. 728/1327-28), for example, indicates the difference of juridical opinion concerning its validity. It is known that Abu Bakr and ‘Ali showed no preference

in distributing stipends; ‘Uthman, however, followed in ‘Umar’s footsteps. Among the eponymous founders of the Sunni *madhāhib*, Abu Hanifah and al-Shafi‘i favored the equal distribution of stipends, while Malik recommended a system of preference.³⁶ Ibn Taymiyah, in support of ‘Umar, demonstrates that the Prophet himself had set in motion a preferential system for awarding stipends. Basing his statements on traditions contained in the two *Sahih*s (related by Nafi‘ from Ibn ‘Umar), he shows that the Prophet habitually apportioned three times the share of one foot-soldier to a cavalryman.³⁷ Malik, al-Shafi‘i, and Ibn Hanbal also reported this, while Abu Hanifah, relating weak traditions, maintained that a cavalryman was given two shares of a foot-soldier’s booty.³⁸ Ibn Taymiyah further affirms that the basis of this system was egalitarianism but, on occasion, showing preferential treatment in the interests of the greater benefit of society was held to be perfectly licit.

Furthermore, ‘Umar did not set up the *diwan* capriciously, nor did he award stipends arbitrarily or out of favoritism. Rather, it was set up on the basis of religious merits (*al-fada’il al-diniyah*). For example, his own son and daughter were awarded smaller pensions compared to those who surpassed them in excellence,³⁹ such as Usama ibn Ziyad. Abu Yusuf reports that when ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar learned that his father had given him a smaller stipend than Usama, he protested. ‘Umar justified his action by saying: “Indeed, Abu Usama [sc. Zayd ibn al-Harith] was more beloved of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, than your own father, and Usama was more beloved of the Messenger of God, peace and blessings be upon him, than you.”⁴⁰ Al-Jahiz writes that this episode confirms the widespread recognition during Islam’s earliest period of the importance of the principles of religiosity (*al-din*), precedence (*al-sabiqah*), and indispensable service to Muslims.⁴¹

Individual Moral Excellences

In addition to *sabiqah*, the moral excellences (*fada’il* or *manaqib*) extolled in this kind of literature include these traits in particular: truthfulness, generosity, courage, and knowledgeable ability.

Invoking these specific traits in the *manaqib* literature on the Companions comes as no surprise, for they constitute a major part of the constellation of those moral attributes identified in the Qur’an as marking the righteous person. For example:

Righteous is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the Prophets; and gives his wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk,

orphans, the needy, the wayfarer, to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observes proper worship and pays the poor-due; and those who keep their compact when they make one, and are patient in trial and adversity and in times of stress. These are the true believers, and these are the God-fearing. (2:177)

The pre-Islamic Arabs had a high regard for individual generosity and valor, particularly in the *sayyid* (the tribal leader).⁴² The Qur'anic ascription of the above attributes to the righteous believer, in conjunction with the *jahili* valorization of a number of these attributes, launched this discourse on moral excellence, and facilitated its linkage with the concept of the leadership of the most excellent Muslim.

With regard to generosity, for example, Sunni scholars cite the following verse as scriptural testimony to Abu Bakr's generosity: "So he who gives [in charity] and fears [God], and testifies to the best, We will surely facilitate for him the path to bliss" (92:5-8).⁴³ Sunni *hadith* works also record many traditions that testify to Abu Bakr's generosity. One well-known *hadith* from Abu Sa'id al-Khudri recorded by Muslim relates that the Prophet said: "The most gracious of people toward me with regard to his wealth and his companionship is Abu Bakr. ..." ⁴⁴ Ibn Abi Shaybah narrates a tradition attributed to Abu Hurayrah, who quotes the Prophet as saying: "No wealth has ever benefited me as much as the wealth of Abu Bakr." At that, Abu Bakr wept and asked: "Is my wealth and myself for anyone other than you, O Messenger of God?" ⁴⁵

The *sirah* and historical literature record several reports that relate and praise Abu Bakr's manumission of slaves. For example, Ibn Hisham⁴⁶ gives an account of the male and female slaves freed by Abu Bakr, as do Ibn Habib,⁴⁷ al-Baladhuri (d. 279/892-93),⁴⁸ and others. Ibn Sa'd records a report from Jabir ibn 'Abd Allah that 'Umar used to say: "Abu Bakr was our master (*sayyiduna*) and he manumitted our master," by which he meant Bilal.⁴⁹

In the *manaqib* and historical literature in general, generosity is presented as a hallmark of greater moral excellence and, therefore, is indicative of a greater aptitude for leadership. Al-Suyuti records an account, which describes the Muslims' preparations for the Tabuk expedition, that makes this equation quite clear. The report states that when the Prophet urged his followers to help outfit the army, Abu Bakr was the first to contribute all of his wealth, which amounted to 4,000 dirhams. 'Umar contributed half of his wealth, while 'Uthman gave a third. Upon learning of this, 'Umar is said to have remarked to Abu Bakr: "Whenever we vie with

one another in goodness, you always outstrip me with regard to it.”⁵⁰ It is significant that each Companion’s level of generosity corresponds to his respective position in the hierarchy of excellence and becomes a trope for his qualifications to assume the caliphate.

Just as Abu Bakr’s moral excellences are praised in the sources, ‘Ali’s special virtues, particularly generosity, also find ample documentation in the sources. For example, both Sunni and Shi’i scholars understand the following verse to refer to ‘Ali:

They fulfill the vow and fear a day whose evil is widespread. And they feed, for the love of God, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, [saying]: ‘We feed you for the sake of God only. We wish for no reward nor thanks from you ...’ And because they were patient and constant, He will reward them with a garden and [garments of] silk ... Indeed, this is a reward for you, and your striving is accepted and recognized. (76:7-22)

The thirteenth-century Shi’i scholar Ibn Tawus refers to two Qur’an exegetes, al-Tha’labi and Abu Nu’aym, who narrate the following story about the Ahl al-Bayt in connection with the above verses. ‘Ali’s *zuhd* (asceticism) and *taqashshuf* (disdain for luxury) are mentioned frequently in the *manaqib* and biographical literature on him, both Sunni and Shi’i. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr and Ibn Abi al-Hadid, among others, record reports that point to ‘Ali’s contempt for fine clothes and rich food as a marker of his abstemiousness.⁵¹ One report mentions that “‘Ali liked brevity in clothing and coarseness in food.”⁵² As one of ‘Ali’s *fada’il*, Ibn Hanbal mentions that on the day he was killed, he was wearing his customary ankle-length coarse cotton clothing (*karabis sunbulaniyah*).⁵³ He further records reports relating that after ‘Ali distributed all of the funds from the treasury, he would clean the premises with water (*naddafahu*) or sweep them, and then pray two *rakat* there.⁵⁴ Such reports highlight his exceptional generosity in alms-giving and his spartan lifestyle, and emphasize his qualifications for leadership.

Modern Implications of This Discourse

In the debate between the supporters of Abu Bakr and those of ‘Ali over who should succeed the Prophet, both *sabiqah* and these four traits were invoked to establish each one’s superior merits. Rather than looking at these debates as promoting sectarian divisions, at least at this very early period, I suggest that we read these dialectical encounters as healthy manifestations of what we might term *democratic impulses*. Sunni literature has consistently maintained that Abu Bakr’s record of moral excellences, vigorously

presented by ‘Umar in particular, and in some accounts by Abu Bakr himself, convinced the Muslims gathered at the Saqifah that he was indeed the most excellent Companion and therefore the most qualified for the caliphate. When he succeeded in doing so, according to these sources, the assembled people thronged forward to pledge their allegiance to him.

In some Shi‘i sources, ‘Ali’s supporters, in his absence, are described as having vigorously advocated his candidacy by reciting his impressive list of moral excellences and thus demonstrating his suitability for the office. It takes no spectacular leap of the imagination to see, in this depiction of events, reflections of the modern electoral process, through which candidates for the highest office in a democratic polity set out to woo their supporters by documenting their superior moral and professional qualifications for the position.

Promoting this Qur’an-based paradigm of leadership, which emphasizes the individual’s exceptional qualities and aptitude rather than kinship and other social privileges, serves to remind many Muslims today that their very early political history is diametrically opposed to their current lived realities. The genealogy of these lived realities takes them back to the onset of dynastic rule in 40/661, when the Umayyads came to power. By the fourth/tenth century, Muslim political theorists would suffer a convenient amnesia of the first post-prophetic 30-year period of the Muslim polity and its nature. This enabled them to articulate their acceptance of dynastic rule and to grant it the imprimatur of legitimacy, as long as the ruler applied the religious law and maintained order.

Although these theorists, such as al-Mawardi (d. 1058) and Ibn al-Farra’ (d. 1066), continued to insist that the ruler should possess moral probity, other factors, like descent from the Quraysh and meeting the minimum standards of sanity and maturity allowed these rulers to pass muster. Al-Mawardi acceded to real-politik in his treatise on *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyah* (Governmental Ordinances). In this respect, I find it significant that he begins his work with a quote from pre-Islamic poetry rather than a Qur’anic verse or a *hadith* in his section on the contract of the imamate, and occasionally refers to pre-Islamic and non-Islamic administrative practices that he considered worthy of emulation. Taking their cue in large measure from these later theorists, Orientalist and western scholars in general have relentlessly portrayed Islamic societies of all periods as almost inevitably predisposed not only to “despotism” but to “Oriental despotism,” its most venal/virulent variety in their depiction. The writings of H. A. R. Gibb and Max Weber come readily to mind as examples of such skewed philosophizing.

And yet in both the medieval and modern Muslim imagination, the era of the four caliphs (the righteous Companions of the Prophet) became glorified as representing a golden era. For very good reasons, most Muslims refer to them as “the rightly-guided successors” (*al-khulafa’ al-rashidun*), for they were, above all, understood to have implemented the Qur’anic dictum of grounding leadership in individual moral excellence and precedence. The historical tradition also informs Muslims that they did not impose their will on the people against their wishes, but sought their allegiance by proving themselves worthy of such loyalty. Abu Bakr’s inaugural address, as recorded by al-Jahiz, remains a model of humility and accountability to the people. In this key address, he is quoted as telling his audience:

You must be Godfearing, for piety is the most intelligent practice and immorality is the most foolish. Indeed I am a follower, not an innovator. If I perform well, help me; if I should deviate, correct me. ... O gathering of the Ansar, if the caliphate [lit. “this matter”] is deserved on account of *hasab* and attained on account of kinship (*bi al-qarabah*), then Quraysh is more noble than you on account of *hasab*, and more closely related than you [to the Prophet]. However, since it is deserved on account of moral excellence (*bi al-fadl*) in religion, then those who are foremost in precedence (*al-sabiqun al-awwalun*) from among the Muhajirun are placed ahead of you in the entire Qur’an⁵⁵ as being more worthy of it compared to you.⁵⁶

According to al-Jahiz, the audience was swayed by the cogency of his arguments and so express its loyalty to him. As our author points out, Abu Bakr’s sentiments, as expressed in this speech, identify him as belonging to the egalitarian camp (*ashab al-taswiyah*), which looked to Qur’anic warrants to undermine the pre-Islamic valorization of noble descent and lineage.

Conclusion

To bring this essay to a fitting close, I would like to emphasize again that Muslims should make a habit of studying their earliest history more closely, in order to reclaim and reenact the principles of sound governance evident during that period. Today, these principles would be identified as conducive to democracy. Such an undertaking would be very empowering for Muslims, who need to engage in a dialectic with a cross-section of political Islamists, who deny too vocally that modern democratic norms may indeed be extrapolated from the early Islamic political tradition. The historical record clearly belies their assertions. And the proof is there for the asking.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of these concepts and their seminal influence, see Asma Afsaruddin, *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership* (Leiden: 2002).
2. See Wadad al-Qadi, "Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance," in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh (New York: 1995), 97-99, where she discusses the arrangement of Ibn Sa'd's *tabaqah* work according to the critical criterion of *sabiqah*.
3. See, for example, the entries for 'Ubayda ibn al-Harith, 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, 'Abd Allah ibn Jahsh, etc., in Ibn Sa'd, *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*, ed. Muhammad 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata' (Beirut: 1997), 3:37, 40, 65, respectively. For the Dar Arqam, see *ibid.*, 3:183-84.
4. *Ibid.*, 3:40, 72, etc.; cf. Miklos Muranyi, *Die Prophetengenossen in der frühislamischen Geschichte* (Bonn: 1973), 35. Even the difference of an hour in submission between two Companions has been noted by Ibn Sa'd in his *Tabaqat*, 3:454.
5. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:452-70.
6. *Ibid.*, 3:321, 454, for example. According to Ibn Ishaq, the 'Aqabiyun consisted of 73 men and two women, and the pledge took place in a ravine in 'Aqaba. See Ibn Hisham, *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyah*, ed. Suhayl Zakkar (Beirut: 1412/1992), 1:299-300. For al-'Aqaba, see *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, ed. H. Gibb et al. (Leiden and London: 1960 -; henceforth referred to as *El*²), s.v., 1:314.
7. Al-Baydawi, *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'wil* (Beirut: 1408/1988), 1:419.
8. See *El*², "Muhadjirun," 7:356; and "Hidjra," 3:366.
9. For more on which, see below.
10. *Tabaqat*, 3:225.
11. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, *passim*.
12. See *ibid.*, 3:122, 170, 173, 174, etc.; cf. Muranyi, *Prophetengenossen*, 36.
13. *Tabaqat*, 3:64, 87, 112, 321, 378, etc.
14. *Ibid.*, 3:112.
15. *Ibid.*, 3:64.
16. Yahya ibn Adam, *Kitab al-Kharaj*, ed. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (Cairo: 1384/1964), 39. Some accounts say that 1,500 people were present; *ibid.*, 43.
17. Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, eds. Mahmud Muhammad Shakir and Ahmad Shakir (Cairo: 1374/1954-), 14:435-36. This view is expressed in a *hadith* in which the Prophet states: "Not one of those who pledged their allegiance under the tree will enter the Fire." According to A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et Indices de la Tradition musulmane* (Leiden: 1969), 7:37, this *hadith* is recorded by Muslim, Abu Da'ud, and Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

- Another tradition recorded by Ibn Hanbal from Jabir quotes the Prophet as saying: "Any man who witnessed Badr and al-Hudaybiyah will not enter the Fire." This is reported in 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi, *Ahl al-Jannah wa Ahl al-Nar* (Cairo: 1983), 28.
18. Cf. 'Abd al-Razzaq, *Tafsir* (Beirut: 1419/1999), 2:171; Al-Firuzabadi, *Tamwir al-Miqbas min Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas* (Beirut: 1412/1992), 213; EI², "Sahaba," 8:828.
 19. *Ibid.*, 27:220; Al-Baydawi, *Anwar*, 2:468.
 20. Al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan*, 27:220-21.
 21. See, for example, al-Baydawi, *Anwar*, 2:468; al-Firuzabadi, *Tamwir*, 576; Abu Nu'aym al-Isbahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya' wa Tabaqat al-Asfiya'* (Cairo: 1351-/1932-), 1:28.
 22. For the complete list, see Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 4:190-283.
 23. For quite an extensive treatment of the various interpretations of the *ahl al-sabiqah*, see Muranyi, *Prophetengenossen*, 32-61.
 24. Al-Bukhari, *Al-Sahih* (Cairo, 1973), 6:89, no. 3270.
 25. Al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Umam wa al-Muluk* (Beirut: 1997), 2:242-43.
 26. See his *Jami' al-Bayan*, 15:37-38.
 27. This is, of course, one of the various meanings, and an important one, that can be assigned to lexemes derived from this polysemous root. For this discussion, see Wadad al-Qadi, "The Term 'Khalifa' in Early Exegetical Literature," *Die Welt des Islams* 28 (1988): 392-411. Al-Qadi's thoroughgoing discussion of this topic demonstrates that many early exegetes and authorities during the Umayyad period understood *khalifah* and *khulafa'* as broad references to human beings in general, who would inhabit, cultivate, and rule the earth.
 28. For further discussion of this institution, see Afsaruddin, *Excellence and Precedence*, chapter 1.
 29. One indication of this is the lack of any entry on *sabiqah* in the second edition of *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*.
 30. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:224ff.; al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden: 1866), 448ff.; Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-Kharaj*, ed. Ihsan 'Abbas (Beirut and Cairo: 1405/1985), 140-44; EI², "Diwan," 3:323.
 31. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:214, 225. Based on the kind of literature we are looking at, it is easy to establish that the *diwan's* underlying principles created a specific "politics of piety," as well as a specific discourse on legitimate leadership. Both of these had a lasting influence on the conceptualization of the Muslim polity and its governance, creating an ideal against which later governments would be measured.
 32. Ibn Sa'd relates that each of the Prophet's wives was given 12,000 dirhams, as opposed to 5,000 dirhams for each male Muhajiri and Ansari who had participated in Badr, according to one report. See his *Tabaqat*, 3:225, 228 (see, however, n. 50 below); cf. Abu Yusuf, *Kharaj*, 141.

33. Ibn Hazm, *Kitab al-Fisal fi al-Milal wa al-Ahwa' wa al-Nihal* (Baghdad: 1321/1903), 4:91, 94, where he refers to Qur'an 33:6: "The Prophet is closer to the faithful than themselves, and his wives are their mothers."
34. For such reports, see Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:224ff.
35. *Ibid.*, 8:53.
36. Ibn Taymiya, *Minhaj al-Sunnah* (Riyadh: 1986), 6:101ff.
37. See al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, 6:389, no. 3692; Muslim, *Sahih* (Beirut: 1416/1995), 3:1109, no. 57.
38. Ibn 'Umar's version of this *hadith*, as recorded by al-Bukhari and Muslim, refers to two portions for the cavalryman. However, it is further elaborated upon (*fassarahu*) by Nafi' in al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, 6:389, who relates that the man who had a horse with him received three portions; otherwise, he received one.
39. Ibn Taymiya, *Minhaj al-Sunnah*, 6:101-3.
40. Cf. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:225-26.
41. Al-Jahiz, *Risalat al-'Uthmaniyah*, ed. 'Abd al-Salam Harun (Cairo: 1955), 216.
42. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an* (Montreal: 1966), 54, where he refers to the term *karim* as "one of the highest value-words, meaning roughly both nobility of birth and generosity" during the Jahiliyah.
43. See Ibn Hisham, *Sirah*, 1:212, where Ibn Ishaq is quoted as saying that these verses (up to verse 21) were revealed in regard to Abu Bakr's manumission of slaves.
44. See, for example, Muslim, *Sahih*, 7:108.
45. Ibn Abi Shayba, *Musannaf* (Beirut: 1989), 6:348, no. 31927.
46. Ibn Hisham, *Sirah*, 1:173, 211-12.
47. *Kitab al-Muhabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichstenstadter (Hyderabad: 1361/1942), 183-84.
48. Al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, ed. Hamid Allah (Cairo: n.d.), 1:186, no. 476.
49. Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, 3:175.
50. Cf. Ibn 'Asakir, *Al-Ta'rikh al-Kabir* (Damascus: 1911), 1:110.
51. See Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Al-Isti'ab fi Ma'rifat al-Ashab* (Cairo: n.d.), 3:1112.
52. *Ibid.*, 3:1108.
53. Ibn Hanbal, *Fada'il al-Sahabah* (Makkah: 1983), 1:546, no. 917; 547, no. 918.
54. *Ibid.*, 1:541, nos. 905 and 914.
55. Al-Jahiz thus understands the Qur'anic collocation *al-Muhajirun wa al-Ansar* to indicate the former's precedence in Islam in general, since they were placed before the Ansar ("*wa-innama quddimu fi al-Qur'an li taqaddumihim fi al-Islam*"); *Ibid.*, 203.
56. Al-Jahiz, *'Uthmaniyah*, 202.
57. *Ibid.*