

MAKRAM Abbès  
*Al-Māwardī: De l'éthique du prince  
 et du gouvernement de l'État*

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Makram Abbès's *Al-Māwardī: De l'éthique du prince et du gouvernement de l'État* comprises a translation of al-Māwardī's (d. 1058) *Kitāb Ṭashīl al-naẓar wa ta'jīl al-ẓafar fī akhlāq al-malik wa siyāsāt al-mulk*, a general introduction, and an extensive essay on the art of governance in Islam in three parts: "Political Theology and Secularization," "Rational Government in the Mirrors for Princes," and "Al-Māwardī as a Political Thinker".

The questions Abbès poses to his material concern the contours of political thought in medieval Islam, and what is entailed in a genuinely political treatment of that political order (p. 29). The aim is not to collect information on the religious or institutional aspects of Islam by rummaging through medieval mirrors for princes, but rather to excavate the rules and principles of politics and government. Read discerningly in their entirety, Abbès suggests, the texts testify to the ubiquitous presence of an autonomous political sphere bounded by rational norms in premodern Islamic political thought.

Among the book's many strengths is the double persona of its imagined adversary: at once the orientalist (Patrons de Volney, d. 1820) and the contemporary Muslim intellectual ('Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, d. 1966) who tends to overlook medieval Islam's rich heritage of meditations on the arts of governance and significantly, their practical regard (p. 14-18). The main methodological contribution of Abbès's introductory essay is reflected in his endeavour to treat Islamic political thought in a continuum, exploring the many ways in which the premodern heritage is mobilized — or not, as the case may be — in contemporary academic publications, particularly in the Arab world.

An ancillary objective is the rehabilitation of al-Māwardī as an independent political thinker. Modern scholarship, relying exclusively on his *Aḥkām al-sultāniyya*, has cast al-Māwardī as an advocate for the fusion of political and religious power in the office of the caliphate. That interpretation, Abbès argues, is rooted in a conflation of origins with essence, a quintessentially orientalist strategy that views any political precept grounded in Islamic theological debates as imbued with an inalienable religious essence (p. 177-78). On the contrary, al-Māwardī's

caliphate is first and foremost a political office with a religious function that is, simply put, derivative (p. 173-87). Thus, Abbès disagrees with Henri Laoust and others who have read *Aḥkām* as al-Māwardī's attempt to theorize caliphal and Sunni restoration. That missionary function, Abbès writes, is imposed by misconceptions regarding the political role of religion in Islam (p. 186). Al-Māwardī acted as a free agent, unencumbered by allegiance to a political master. He attempted to reformulate Islamic conceptions of leadership to accommodate the historical realities of the era, first and foremost among them being the caliph's lost ground in the face of strong non-Arab sultanate rule. What material terrain was deemed unrecoverable, al-Māwardī and likeminded intellectuals sought to compensate with ideological capital.

To counter Laoust's thesis, Abbès adopts an empiricist frame and marshals historical evidence to buttress his points. He highlights the sustained cooperation of the Abbasid caliphs with the *mutashayyi'* Būyids to defeat myriad challenges to Abbasid hegemony in Baghdad, including Shī'i ones, (p. 186-7) and al-Māwardī's role as an intermediary between caliph and prince. At times Abbès adopts an apologetic stance in his defence. For example, he argues that al-Qādir's (r. 991-1031) creed should be understood as a political response to real pressure emanating from the sizeable Ḥanbalī community in Baghdad, rather than as a true reflection of the caliph's own proclivities (p. 188-91). This and other instances of the caliph putatively acting upon popular demand are collated to document a tacit contract that obligated the prince to protect the rights of his subjects, be mindful of his duties, and rule with justice (p. 41-78).

Refuting Laoust, however, perhaps deserves no more than an aside. The secularization of the Islamic political order from the ninth century onwards is commonplace in more recent discussions of medieval Islamic political thought, summarized in Patricia Crone's 2004 survey, (*Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, p. 146) as well as evident in the writings of Ibn Khaldūn, and Ibn al-'Arabī as Abbès himself points out, (p. 182-3) and in many other instances. Here and elsewhere in the study, Abbès's presentation suffers from a lack of engagement with current secondary literature of the field.

By way of contrast, Abbès's discussion of medieval interpretations of the pre-Islamic precept of twinning religion and politics, (p. 89-97) which relies heavily on specific usages of sovereignty, religion, and justice in various mirrors for princes, offers a nuanced and informative reading of the commerce in authority between the religious and political spheres.

His analysis of the lexical field of *dīn*, which includes, apart from religious doctrine, an ethical component based on human exemplars, of which the Prophet Muhammad is paradigmatic, is convincingly incisive and instructive (p. 91-94)

In the opening chapter and throughout the long commentaries that could have been presented in a tighter and concise format, Abbès attempts to extract a technical vocabulary from the medieval sources to argue, one assumes, against the alleged dearth of systematic and critical political thought in the Islamic world. An example will illustrate the point. The well-known paradigm linking self-rule with the rule of others, commonplace in premodern political thought around the globe, is according to Abbès, what links ethics to politics, and has *tadbīr* as its Arabic equivalent. Having thus glossed *tadbīr* as a “technical” term, Abbès proceeds to delineate its conceptual parameters, and to enumerate the various valences of its usage in premodern political thought (p. 11-14) *Tadbīr* is at work when battles are planned, when chemicals are mixed to produce an elixir, when budgets are drawn, economies regulated, and when physicians heal the sick. In this instance, as in others strewn across the text, Abbès is not just engaged with dubbing equivalents, but also with constructing a theoretical scaffolding. What remains unclear is whether the technical, specialized usage and performative aspect of *tadbīr* and other such precepts are recognized in medieval debates or anointed as such by modern scholarship.

Abbès’s quest to codify an Islamic political lexicon culminates in a glossary, where the author explains the ideological freight of several political terms based on his own reading rather than on specific examples drawn from the primary material. As the sole interlocutor of what medieval political precepts meant to their contemporaries and what they mean to their present-day progeny, it is unclear if Abbès considers himself properly credentialed because he is a modern scholar of political thought, or a Muslim thinker *tout court*. *Malik* for instance, (p. 495-96) is paired with *mulk*, and defined as king, and in the medieval period referred to the sovereign. The semantic field of *mulk* implies both possession and reign, so it came to acquire an imperial/pluralist dimension, as it involved rule over a number of territories and a multitude of peoples. With the weakening of centralized caliphal rule beginning in the tenth century, and the concomitant emergence of local dynasties, *mulk* came to be used as an equivalent of *dawla*, (p. 486-88) to encompass a fusion of power and sovereignty that make possible the administration of a state.

Even a cursory engagement with secondary scholarship on medieval European political thought should have disabused Abbès of the singularity of the Islamic instance, and qualified further his lineage of his political precepts. Larry Scanlon, to cite one example among many, has pointed to the dual notions of ideology and power embedded in the medieval dichotomy of *potestas* and *auctoritas*, derived from Roman constitutional usage. *Auctoritas* could designate a judgment, advice, persuasion, and institutional power. *Auctor* could refer to author, founder, originator or inventor, as well as progenitor or father. In its earliest occurrence in the Twelve Tablets, *auctor* implied a rightful seller of property. As for the *potestas* assigned to the people in the writings of Cicero and others, the emphasis was on its putative nature. The absolute power of the office of the Roman emperor depended in part on its ideological claim to speak for the empire as a whole, which entailed creating a number of constitutional fictions to camouflage it. The actual exercise of this unlimited power depended precisely on the maintenance of its constitutional, albeit fictional, disguise. The ideological valences of *auctoritas* and *potestas* explain how and why Church leaders adopted that Roman lexicon, replacing the figure of the emperor with the Church as the source of Roman collective identity, empowered to speak on its behalf. (Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, p. 37-53, reference is at p. 40)

Apart from an urge to universalize Islamic political precepts by pointing to Western cognates without also probing into dissimilarities of context or usage—*adab* is an equivalent to the Greek *paideia*, *ādāb sultāniyya* is the equivalent of *ars regiminis*, (p. 25) the economic component of *hisba* makes it equivalent to the Greek *agoranomos* (p. 179) — Abbès also tends to refer to and locate an Arabo-Islamic culture, where there is none to be found. For instance, he writes of tenth-century Arabo-Islamic humanism (p. 29), Arab mirrors for princes (p. 24), and Arab political thought (p. 26). The conflation of Arabic language with ethnogenesis suggested by such seemingly concise hyphenated terms, challenged since the early Islamic centuries, is symptomatic of Arab nationalist discourse of the last two hundred or so years.

Apart from these mostly tangential reservations, Makram Abbès *Al-Māwardī* offers the reader a fine study that succeeds in framing the many questions that remain to be asked (and answered) about writing politics in the medieval Islamic world. The translation is clear and meticulous, and the analysis is perceptive though marred by prolixity in too many places. A sharper editorial scalpel should have excised

the frequent restatement of the main themes that distract the reader from focusing on the essential perceptive readings and observations. There is still much worth pondering here about the manifold ways in which political thought collided with the past and the sacred in medieval Islam.

#### REFERENCES

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