

Conceptual Leadership Based upon the Writings of Muslim Thinkers: A Survey of Sources



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Abstract

This article will focus on conceptions of leadership amongst muslim thinkers. Ideas of leadership not management will be explored in this article. Preference would be given towards the turath especially al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Khaldun. Questions: Has muslim thinkers devised a certain way of thinking about leadership and its models that would then be applied at their particular time and context? Is there or are there conceptual models based solely upon the teachings of the Prophet or more dynamic in the sense that each of these models are open-ended which are wholly determined by various socio-political considerations? An analysis of muslim thinkers closer to our period would also be undertaken. Notably Muhammad Iqbal, Seyyed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. It is believed that such leadership values are to be rooted within a particular understanding of the universe and the subject, thus a particular worldview which is based upon Islam. Ideas dealing with values and concepts are intertwined when discussing worldviews and leadership which is based upon such an idea. Were the muslim thinkers working within such a framework or was it more of an open-ended system? This is an interesting question in itself and would help further in locating and situating the ideas of values and its discussion in the wider field of Islamic thought and philosophy. Instead of the usual descriptive method normally employed, a more dynamic way would be used where conceptions are discussed vis a vis the thinkers involved/selected. In the end hopefully we would be able to answer some of the questions we initially set out to answer. The paper forms a part of an ongoing research on conceptions of leadership in Islam.

Keywords: leadership values, Plato, al-Farabi, worldview, conceptual model

Introduction

Conceptions of leadership remain an arbitrary issue amongst Muslim thinkers in the past. As most of the thinkers were sponsored and financed by the state thus most of their ideas of leadership would not have evolved out of free thinking of the issue. Our paper would like to glance through major writings of political importance in Sunni Islam in order to come to a somewhat minor conception of leadership. The major writings on leadership are broadly based upon the writings of al-Farabi, al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Khaldun¹. Their thoughts on the subject deserve utmost attention for they are the main figures who have contributed towards the rise of political thought within Islamic thought of the Sunni school.

For our purpose here in this paper, what we require is basically an understanding of what leadership is and how these main figures have conceptualized the idea of leadership. When looking at concepts we are looking for some philosophical underpinnings for such an understanding. Having a philosophical understanding of the issue of leadership would help us in two ways. One, it will enable us to better understand the “why” such thinking of leadership had emerged from the particular thinker. Second as philosophy deals with first principles which is the foundation for the building of such conceptions thus by having an understanding of the philosophy behind it would enable us to better adapt to modern or contemporary concerns. Thus making our conception of leadership better suited for our time and place.

It is self-evident (*badihi*) that to argue that conceptions of a leader in Islam today is the figure of the Holy Prophet. However if we look closely at the writings of early Muslim thinkers we do not find a detailed discussion on this. Perceptions of the Prophet have mainly been as an individual who was made responsible by God with the message. It seems that the conception of a leader was not high on the agenda of the writings of Muslim thinkers. Even though the Holy Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) was appointed as the leader of the nascent community it seems that conceptions of his leadership were not really discussed by Muslim thinkers. To study why this is the case is not the aim of this paper. Perhaps that can be the subject of another paper.

Conceptions of leader or ideas of what an ideal leader should have as his character was not discussed deeply in the writings of muslim thinkers². If we look into the main writings of Muslim thinkers we would find the earliest discussion lies in the works of Abu Nasr al-Farabi.

1 For the sake of this conference, we shall not dwell on the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Mawardi as these figures are discussed by other presenters.

2 This has been hinted for some time now by the late Muslim scholar, Prof. Muhsin Mahdi of Princeton University, see Mahdi (2010).

Al-Farabi's discussion on leadership or his conception of a leader ties with his discussion on perfect society. This is seen in his *Ara' ahl madinah al-fadhilah*. Farabi is known as a logician, mathematician and of course a philosopher who has written on politics. Al-Farabi believes that human being cannot achieve perfection without political association. What he means by this is that human being cannot achieve perfection or their aim of perfection without the help of other human beings. Perfection to al-Farabi concerns the life of physical as well as the spiritual life. In all these aspects human beings need and require help from others to succeed.

“unlike divine beings man is not eternally perfect but needs to achieve his perfection through the activity proceeding from rational understanding, deliberation, and choosing among the various alternatives suggested to him by reason.”

In discussing the characteristic of the ruler, al-Farabi list some of the most common including knowledge, inspiring leadership, exemplary leadership and have the ability to determine and define the work of others. Mahdi (1999) summarises it as follows,

Fārābī begins his discussion of the supreme ruler with the emphasis on the common function of the ruler-philosopher and the ruler-prophet as rulers who are the link between the divine beings above and the citizens who do not have direct access to knowledge of these beings. He is the teacher and guide “who makes known” to the citizens what happiness is, who “arouses in them the determination” to do things necessary for attaining it, and “who does not need to be ruled by a human in anything at all” (Ketāb al-sīāsa, pp. 78-79). He must possess knowledge; not need any other human to guide him; have excellent comprehension of everything that must be done; be excellent in guiding all others in what he knows; have the ability to make others perform the functions for which they are fit; and have the ability to determine and define the work to be done by others and to direct such work toward happiness. These qualities evidently require the best endowments, but also the fullest development of the rational faculty. (According to Aristotelian psychology as Fārābī presents it in his political works the perfection of the rational faculty. (p.225).

Furthermore:

This supreme ruler is the source of all power and knowledge in the regime, and it is through him that the citizens learn what they ought to know and to do. As God or the First Cause of the world directs everything else, and as everything else is directed toward Him, “the case ought to be the same in the virtuous city; in an orderly fashion, all of its parts ought to follow in their activities in the footsteps of the purpose of its supreme ruler (Mabāde’, ed. Dieterici, pp. 56-57; cf. Ketāb al-

sīāsa, pp. 83-84). He possesses unlimited powers and cannot be subjected to any human being or political regime or laws. He has the power to confirm or abrogate previous divine laws, to enact new ones, and “to change a law he had legislated at one time for another if he deems it better to do so” (*Ketāb al-sīāsa*, pp. 80-81). He alone has the power to order the classes of people in the regime and assign in them their ranks. And it is he who offers them what they need to know.

He has all the power in the world and obeying him is absolute obedience. As Muhsin Mahdi (1999) nicely summarises it:

Thus far, Fārābī identifies the ruler-prophet and the ruler-philosopher. They are both supreme rulers absolutely, and both have absolute authority with regard to legislating beliefs and actions. Both acquire this authority in virtue of the perfection of their rational faculty, and both receive revelation from God through the agency of the active intellect. (p.225)

As the ruler is the most learned and thus by qualification knows what is best for the people thus following him is to achieve success in and happiness in this world. Al-Farabi's view of happiness is tied to the perfection of reason. As Muhsin Mahdi (1999) says:

The attainment of happiness means the perfection of that power of the human soul that is specific to man, of his reason. This in turn requires disciplining the lower desires to cooperate with and aid reason to perform its proper activity and also acquiring the highest arts and sciences. Such discipline and learning can be accomplished only by the rare few who possess the best natural endowments and who are also fortunate to live under conditions in which the requisite virtues can be developed and noble activities performed. The rest of men can only attain some degree of this perfection; and the extent to which they can attain that degree of perfection of which they are capable is decisively influenced by the kind of political regime in which they live and the education they receive. Nevertheless, all the citizens of the virtuous regime must have some common notions about the world, man, and political life. But they will differ with regard to the character of this knowledge, and hence, with regard to their share of perfection or happiness. They can be divided broadly into the following three classes: (1) the wise or the philosophers who know the nature of things by means of demonstrative proofs and by their own insights; (2) the followers of these who know the nature of things by means of the demonstrations presented by the philosophers, and who trust the insight and accept the judgment of the philosophers; (3) the rest of the citizens, the many, who know things by means of similitudes, some more and others less adequate, depending on their rank as citizens. These classes or ranks must be ordered by the ruler who should also organize the education of the citizens, assign

to them their specialized duties, give them their laws, and command them in war. He is to seek, by persuasion and compulsion, to develop in each the virtues of which he is capable and to order the citizens hierarchically so that each class can attain the perfection of which it is capable and yet serve the class above it. It is in this manner that the city becomes a whole similar to the cosmos, and its members cooperate toward attaining happiness.”

There is the issue of what is then the difference between the Prophet (as a leader) and the philosopher-king who is not a Prophet?

To revert to Muhsin Mahdi (1999) again:

It explains the possibility of prophecy as the perfection of the faculty of imagination, and that imagination can almost dispense with the rational faculty and receive the images of divine beings directly and without the latter’s mediation. There are two powers by means of which a human being can communicate with the Active Intellect: his imagination and his rational faculty or his intellect. When he communicates with it by means of his imagination, he is “a prophet who warns about what will happen and who informs about what is taking place now”; while when he communicates with it by means of his rational faculty he is “a wise human being, a philosopher, and has complete intelligence” (Mabāde’, ed. Dieterici, pp. 58-59).

Therefore the difference is that for the Prophet it is the imaginative faculty that is perfect but for the philosopher-king it is the rational faculty. It has to be remembered and understood that to al-Farabi the imaginative faculty is the perfection of the rational faculty. In other words the rational faculty is subordinate to the imaginative faculty.

What does this all mean to us? How are we to abstract what is important for us in our discussion of the conceptions of leadership in Islam? I want to discuss this in the next few lines as a way of concluding this discussion on al-Farabi.

One thing which is clear is that al-Farabi’s conception of leadership is an ideal which unfortunately we in our time of technological awareness is not able to perceive and some might not even understand. Secondly Farabi’s conception of leadership in his writings demonstrate to us his ability to preserve the muslim framework of knowledge and wisdom. There is no postmodern shift in his understanding of leadership. The leader should be the best in knowledge, ethics and shun worldly pleasures. These are very much the character of a religious individual which is different from the leader who is expert in manipulating and not necessarily knowledgeable as he is able to use information from his subordinates

to pursue his interest. Such leadership style and quality are the quality of what al-Farabi termed as leader of the madinah al-khabisah or the ruinous city.

The next muslim thinker or philosopher who was much more dominant than al-Farabi in the field of philosophy was Avicenna (d.1037). In his illustrious career Avicenna had served under many rulers and kings, you would think that he had discussed leadership in a more systematic way than al-Farabi. However what we find is the opposite. In fact Avicenna did not even consider political philosophy as a separate science to be dealt with in a systematic manner. Mahdi (1999) blames the popularity of Ibn Sina for the decline in Islamic political philosophy in Islamic scholarship. Avicenna's unsystematic treatment of the issue did not arise from his ignorance of such a venture in the works of philosophers before him such as Plato, Aristotle and of course al-Farabi. It might have come out of his desire to stay aloof from political matters.

In one of his writings namely the Mobahathat, Avicenna does go into a discussion on kingship and rulership. However he does not venture far from Plato and Aristotle's views on it. He includes the shari'ah and revelation as a requirement for kingship/rulership and Prophethood which is termed as *nomos* by the two Philosophers (Mahdi, 1987). From here Avicenna goes on to prove why political science which he regards as being part of practical sciences help prove why prophecy and the divine law are both necessary for the sake of achieving the good.

Mahdi's (1987) conclusion is apt for our survey of Avicenna:

All this points to the fact that Avicenna was fully aware of the range of investigations in which practical science can engage following the models presented in the political works of Plato, Aristotle, and Fārābī. Yet he chose not to follow these models but to chart a new path that assumes the validity of these models and applies their conclusions to particular aspects of the Islamic divine Law. To do so, he had to move backwards, as it were, from the beliefs and practices prescribed by the divine Law to the spiritual, moral, and rational purpose and meaning that lay behind them. To perform this task safely and effectively, he found it prudent to abandon the Platonic and Farabian views of political science as the architectonic practical science if not the architectonic science simply, and revive the practical Aristotelian division of wisdom or philosophy into theoretical and practical sciences.

Nevertheless, Avicenna's sharp division in practical science between the human governance that pertains to a single individual (ethics) and that which does not pertain to a single individual but takes place through partnership (household management and politics) points to the importance he placed on private perfection

and thus to the subordination of practical science as a whole to the pursuit of theoretical knowledge. This, however, was enough to initiate the decline of political philosophy among those who maintained the Islamic philosophic tradition in the East until modern times, with the result that the Muslim community finds itself meeting the practical political challenge of the modern world with only a faint memory of an indigenous political-philosophic tradition. (pp. 84-88)

Mahdi's quotation above proves to us how it is difficult to trace muslim conceptions of leadership in the works of early muslim thinkers. It seems as if it is an unimportant topic as well as something that is neglected for the sake of obedience to the ruler of the day. In the 14th century however we find a thinker who is prominently known as sociologist extraordinaire in Islam, Ibn Khaldun challenging this view. In his *al-Muqaddimah* which deals with the rise and fall of civilizations, Ibn Khaldun approaches the topic on leadership or Imamate by discussing the two main views prevalent amongst the muslims. Ibn Khaldun (1989) then outlines the main qualities an Imam should have which are, "knowledge, probity, competence and freedom of the senses and limbs from any defect that might affect judgment and action" (p.158).

Knowledge refers to the ability of the leader to have knowledge of the law and thus able to execute them properly. Probity (*al-'adalah*) concerns his qualities which is free from major sins and his ability to conquer his lower self from sinning. Competence (*al-kifayah*) is his willingness to execute the divine commands and undertaking warfare when it is required. Free from physical defect and ability (*salamatu al-khawwas wa al-a'dha'*) is clear that the leader should not be someone who is handicapped as this will burden and limits his accessibility to certain areas which are important. Being handicapped was seen by Ibn Khaldun as being a limitation upon the ability of the leader towards fulfilling his duties.

Unlike al-Farabi and Avicenna above, Ibn Khaldun does not however discuss how he derived such conceptions and upon what philosophical foundations they were they built.

Al-Attas Conceptual On Leadership In Islam

Generally, al-Attas conceptual on leadership in Islam is reflected from his deep understanding on the traditional Islamic sciences such as Islamic Philosophy, Metaphysics, Islamic Theology, as well as history and literature. Like many earlier Muslim scholars, al-Attas regards the Quranic verse which deals with the appointment of human being as the vicegerent (*khalifah*) of God on earth as one of the important foundations of the conceptual on leadership in Islam. For al-Attas this special position given to man is come together with the burden of trust (*amanah*) which is placed upon him. (al-Attas, 1993) Al-Attas also considers the Prophetic saying that each of us is a leader, and each of us will be held

responsible for his leadership as a serious reminder for all mankind to always responsible in all actions in his life. For al-Attas, it is absurd to perceive the notion of leadership in Islam without grounding it in the fundamental elements of the Islamic worldview as he sees it. In this respect, al-Attas's parameter of Islamic worldview which include the nature of God; the nature of Quran; creation; religion; knowledge; man; freedom; values and ethical virtues; and happiness have mould the understanding of leadership. Consequently, all concepts, ideas, principles, ethics, values, practices of leadership in Islam have something to be related to the mentioned worldview. Al-Attas(2007) mentions:

These principles and values concisely presented herein, we believe, are shared by all Muslims, regardless of their theological, legal, or political orientations. In Islam, all the principles and values that encompass principled leadership, personal and corporate values, and sound business ethics –including corporate governance – are derived from these and other related elements of the worldview.
(p.2)

By grounding the notion of leadership in this manner, al-Attas manage to universalize almost all of important aspects of leadership. For instance, the scope of leadership according to al-Attas should not be confined to a certain limited aims of specific organization. Instead one should accommodate the principles and values derived from the Islamic worldview as the scope of leadership. In other words, the aim of organizational leadership should not been over emphasized the universal aim of leadership which are based on Islamic worldview at the level of man as individual. Therefore the good principles and values which supposedly possessed by man as individual can accelerate the attainment both the individual as well as organizational aims.

Unlike some scholars who specify the aim of leadership as managing changes in the context of organizational leadership or to maintaining the influence of followers in the context of political leadership, Al-Attas regards the most important aim of leadership is to manage life as a whole with full realization to what is permanent and unchangeable. In order to attain this aim, one really needs to believe that leadership is closely related to the matter of duty and “trust” (*amanah*) which comes together with it “responsibility” (*takif*) and “accountability” (*mas’uliyah*). For al-Attas, the internalizing the basic questions regarding the nature of man, his purpose of life, and the meaning of happiness can escalate the implementation of the trust, responsibility and accountability of leaders. In addition to that the answer offered by Islam to the basic questions regarding the nature of man will lead to the attainment of true understanding on the concept of *change, development* and *progress*.

Al-Attas also makes a very clear elaboration pertaining to the ethical foundations of leadership in Islam. History has witnessed that the success of the four rightly guided caliphs

is based on knowledge and sincere and consistent ethical practice. For instance al-Attas explains the high moral values of leadership as shown by Caliph Ali when he sent a letter to Malik B. Al-Ashtar upon Malik's installation as governor of Egypt after the escalation of unrest during the reign of his predecessor, Muhammad Ibn Abi Bakr. Caliph Ali stated "Good rulers are known by what their subjects say about them. So, the best stock you can build is your good deeds Do not say. 'I am in charge and I shall be obeyed.' This is a sign of weakness in the heart and of a shaken faith, and an invitation to trouble. (al-Attas, 2007).). These ethical foundations are grounded from the framework of the religious virtues which combine both the external (*zahir*) and the internal (*batin*) virtues. In elaborating this ethical leadership context, Al-Attas has classified them into four cardinal virtues and several destructive vices. Wisdom (*hikmah*), courage (*shaja'ah*), temperance (*'iffah*) and justice (*'adalah*) are regarded by al-Attas as the significant virtues to be implemented by leaders in both internal and external activities. With relation to the aspect of vices, al-Attas mentions that lying, breaking promise, and betraying trust, slander, envy and avarice as the root vices destructive of leadership. (al-Attas,1990)

Al-Attas also acknowledge the importance of skills for effective leadership. These skills can be classified into several skills that are based on cognitive competency such as having strategic visioning and continuous learning; emotive competency such as makes an impact for a specific intentional objective and communicates effectively in adverse or difficult situations; and executive competency such as takes personal ownership and accountability for results as well as demonstrates ability to balance idealism and skepticism in decision-making. It is worth mentioning that al-Attas make caution that leaders should not over-emphasize practical knowledge at the expense of theoretical knowledge or to equate knowledge with tendency.

Conclusion

The works of our muslim philosophers or thinkers al-Farabi, Avicenna and al-Attas helps us better to understand the reason why certain values were chosen and not others. For one, such values were chosen due to their fulfillment of the philosophical projects of each of the thinkers involved. The meaning of perfection which is tied to the imaginative faculty led al-Farabi to choose the quality of rationality to be the most significant value a leader should have. The aim of achieving and fulfilling the worldview of Islam is the foundation for al-Attas's conceptual model of leadership. Al-Attas list down the core values important towards fulfillment of such high an aim and thus produces a conceptual model of leadership based upon the worldview of Islam for the first time in muslim thought. However some questions can still be raised against the al-Attas's model.

However all these thinkers have not given us a conceptual leadership model which is universal or can be universally applied. Philosophical questions and discussion on each of

the foundation for each of the muslim thinkers can still be raised. Issues of interpretation and conceptual rigidity are valid questions which require more time than is available in this paper. In conclusion we can say for certain that venturing into muslim writings on the subject we have to our advantage found many relevant gems for our work in producing a conceptual model based wholly on Islamic worldview.

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