Makram Abbès. *Islam and Politics in the Classical Age.* [*al-Islām wa-l-Siyāsa fi al-Aṣr al-Wasīt*] translated [from French] by Muhammed Haj Salim. Beirut: Nuhudh Center for Studies and Publications, 2020, 208 pages.

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The relationship between Islam and politics in the classical age is a subject of dispute. Scholars debate the nature of this relationship, delving into questions like whether there is a balance between them or whether one regulates and determines the other. Was al-Mawardi (d. 1508) writing on politics the same way al-Farabi was? How were Islam and politics perceived in classical Muslim contributions? Which classical books (or topics) should one scrutinize to reach an accurate and comprehensive understanding of this relationship? Makram Abbès proposes a method for understanding Islam and politics in the classical age. For him, one should examine three different types of writing: *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya*[1] (mirrors of princes), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and lastly, philosophy. Each of these topics has specific focuses, methods, and outcomes. The book consists of an introduction and three main parts, each respectively dealing with one of these three themes, plus one chapter on the conception of the state according to Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), and a conclusion.

In the introduction, Abbès criticizes Western literature on Islam and political thought, such as the works of Bertrand Badie and Patricia Crone (d. 2015). He argues that most contributions influenced by Max Weber (d. 1920) look at Islamic political thought as a rigid structure inevitably subjecting the political to the divine, which denies people agency in arranging the public space or the ability to influence reality. Abbès aims to trace the

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1 This is *Sultanic* literature writing specifically for the *sultan* (political leaders) to guide him and his administration based on morality.

emergence of ideas, the formation of traditions, and the emergence of the leading models of Islamic political thought. He seeks to demonstrate that the history of politics in Islam was not a history of subjecting politics to the divine, as has been presented in the Western literature on Islam. He intends to show a positive political culture in Islam whose value must be emphasized. He considers how politics has been thought of in Islam from three perspectives: a historical perspective through *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya*, a legal perspective through Islamic jurisprudence, and a rational perspective through philosophy. This three-fold division aims to discover the principles behind every view and political issue that the classical scholars examined.

In the first part, "tradition of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya*" is analyzed. This genre of literature emerged in the eighth century CE. It contains norms of behavior for political authorities. It includes ancient knowledge from Persian, and Greek, the experiences of great ancient kings, the political and military exploits of the Arabs, and the biographies of the Caliphs of Islam. This tradition is attentive to the historical contexts in which events occurred. A book like *Sirāj al-Mulūk* by al-Turtushi (d. 1126) belongs to this genre. Abbès maintains that *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* does not examine justifications of legitimacy or authority. Instead, it considers political authority as an inevitability and a means to restrain the beastly destructive desire of man (p. 29). Thus, it requires a deep knowledge of human nature, its weaknesses, and its strengths. Knowledge about human nature is the cornerstone of conceptualization in *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* (p. 38).

The author contends that in *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya,* there are recurring topics such as self-discipline. Much of the advice for the leaders is about improving their conduct to enable them to discipline their subjects justly. Thus, ethical norms are central; for instance, the notion of justice. Abbès quotes al-Thaʿalibi (d. 1038), who articulates that "[justice is the] basis of politics, and even the major politic" (p. 67). Religion is significant because it offers a moral model, creating a system of duties in society. However, the scholars of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* did not consider policymaking from the perspective of *fiqh* (p. 85).

In the second part of the book, politics is evaluated from the perspective of *fiqh*. *Al-Aḥkām al-Sulṭāniyya* by al-Mawardi is the first book in political *fiqh*. The writings in this tradition reflect the set of general and abstract rules that the jurists sought to legitimize. Moreover, political *fiqh* distinguishes *ḥaqq* (right) from *bāṭil* (false), good governance from bad governance; it defines the rules and their exceptions (p. 99). For the author, thinking about exceptional cases is one of the characteristics of Muslim jurists

which demonstrates their talent to adapt to various possible circumstances (p. 105). Furthermore, the writing in this tradition raises many questions about the state of necessity to be existed and how to justify its existence.

Abbès asserts that the Muslim jurists' objective is to maintain the cohesion of society, which is the primary basis of the state's obligation. Jurists did not formulate *fiqh* in opposition to absolute authority; they instead relied on the moralization of politics. For them, *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) - as a way to prevent civil war and chaos - was behind the jurist's support of absolute authority. Abbès holds the jurists accountable for justifying absolute authority and not making *fiqh* as a balance against absolute power. However, he acknowledges that the jurists' position has a context, where the caliphate's institutions became fictitious due to ascendant authority of the princes (p. 107).

In the third part of the book, the tradition of political philosophy in Islam is assessed. Abbès endorses the assertion that the legacy of philosophy is predominantly devoted to thinking about the city. This tradition pays significant attention to normative politics. He considers al-Farabi a great philosopher whose philosophy centered on political issues. His contribution gave an impetus to a legacy that would later continue in Andalusia with Ibn Bajja (d. 1139) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1126). In searching for foundations for politics, al-Farabi turned towards Plato and Aristotle and combined them in the "search for the virtuous" (p. 132). Abbès, however criticizes al-Farabi's philosophical discourse for being binary. Abbès elaborates on Andalusian philosophers, such as Ibn Bajja, considering him the first genuine Muslim philosopher who theorized originally about the city (p. 155). The author argues that al-Farabi and Ibn Bajja offer differing readings of the Platonic model of the city (p. 159). For philosophers, the problem of acquiring perfections and the possibility of human reform was dominant in their political writings. However, they painted a picture of man as he ought to be, not just as he is.

The last chapter is dedicated to the idea of the state as given by Ibn Khaldun. Abbès emphasizes that the issue of the state was not studied better than with Ibn Khaldun (p. 170) who sought to understand why men form societies, what civil society's objectives are, and how the state rises and collapses. The author maintains that the emergence of political power results from the encounter of three purely natural dynamics. First is aggressive human nature which compels the individual to submit to authority to settle disputes. Second are lineage and *ʿaṣabiyya* (social solidarity). Third is the desire to lead others and gain titles (p. 178). Abbès says that for Ibn Khaldūn, the interplay between religion and politics does not refer to a

relationship between two authorities represented by two institutions that may conflict or that one of them seeks independence or integration. And here Abbès claims in a well-reasoned contention that it is absurd to invoke the Pope-Caesarean model, the secular model in the strict separation between political and religious to understand the relationship between Islam and politics (p. 188).

In the conclusion, entitled "Islam and political modernity," the author claims that when the Ottoman Empire emerged as a significant political power representing Islam, it revived the ancient and medieval spirit that had driven the three traditions mentioned above (*al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya, fiqh* and philosophy). However, it failed to get past them to reach political modernity. He concludes that history, jurisprudence, and science are the axes around which every tradition revolves. *Al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* was mainly concerned with justice, the jurists with interest and necessity, and the philosophers with virtuous.

The book offers an innovative theoretical framework for understanding Islam and politics in the classical age. Although many of the classical works the author used in his bibliography are well known to the experts in the field, one of the author's significant contributions is his ability to connect ideas and concepts to present an original approach. However, a notable shortcoming of this work is the absence of the Prophet Muhammad's practice in his analysis and lack of sufficient focus on the four rightly guided caliphs. Furthermore, Abbès did not include significant classical works in his study, such as *al-Dharīa ilā Makārim al-Sharī'a*[2] by al-Ragib al-Isfahani (d. 1108), and *al-Shuhub al-Lāmi'a fī al-siyāsa al-Nāfi'a*[3] by Ibn Ridwan (d. 1381). Such contributions would broaden the perspective of the book. Nonetheless, this book is a valuable read; it reflects the richness and diversity of the classical Muslim contributions in politics, morality, and philosophy. It is highly recommended for academics and students of classical Islamic political theory, philosophy, and orientalism.

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2 al-Raghib al-Isfahani , *al-Dharī'a ilā Makārim al-Sharīa*, edited by Abū al-Yazīd Abū Zied al-A'jamī (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2010).

3 Abu al-Qasim ibn Ridwan, *al-Shuhub al-Lāmi'a fī al-Sīyāsa al-Nāfi'a*, edited by 'Ali Sami al-Nashshar (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2007).