

Putting History in its Proper Place

In his Muqaddima, Ibn Khaldun (rh) discusses the importance given to history. He writes, فإن فن التاريخ من الفنون التي تتداوله الأمم والأجيال ... وتؤدي لنا شأن الخليقة كيف تقلبت بها الأحوال واتسع "The art of history is one of the arts that peoples and generations pass on ... History conveys to us the affair of the vicegerent man, how conditions changed and the scope and field of countries expanded and they populated the earth until they were called to depart and the time came for their demise."

Studying the past grants greater insight into people, how they organise themselves, and how they administer their affairs. Ibn Khaldun (rh) later writes, وفي باطنه نظر وتحقيق وتعليل للكاننات ومبادئها دقيق وعلم بكيفيات الوقائع وأسبابها عميق فهو لذلك أصيل في الحكمة عريق وجدير بأن يعد في علومها وخلق وإن فحول المؤرخين في الإسلام قد استوعبوا أخبار الأيام وجمعوها وسطروها في صفحات الدفاتر "Within history there is a careful examination, investigation, and explanation of beings and their ideologies, and a profound knowledge of the nature of events and their causes. Therefore, it is authentic in wisdom, deeply rooted, and worthy of being counted among its bodies of knowledge. History is worthy of being considered among bodies of knowledge. The most eminent historians in Islam have absorbed the news of the days, collected them, and written them down on the pages of notebooks."

Ibn Khaldun gives a vision to the ideological historian, إنما هو ذكر الأخبار الخاصة، بعصر أو جيل فأما ذكر الأحوال الملمة للأفاق والأجيال والأعصار فهو أس للمؤرخ تنبني عليه أكثر مقاصده وتبين به "History is merely the mention of news specific to an era or generation. As for mentioning the comprehensive conditions of visions, generations and eras, it is the basis for the historian, upon which most of his objectives are built and through which his news is clarified."

Ibn Khaldun adds, كانت حقيقة التاريخ أنه خبر عن الاجتماع الإنساني الذي هو عمران العالم وما يعرض لطبيعة ذلك العمران من الأحوال مثل التوحش والتأنس والعصبيات وأصناف التغلبات للبشر بعضهم على بعض وما ينشأ عن ذلك من الملك والدول ومراتبها وما ينتحلها البشر بأعمالهم ومساعدتهم من الكسب والمعاش والعلوم والصنائع وسائر ما "The truth of history is that it is news about human society, which is the civilization of the world, and what is exposed to the nature of that civilization of conditions such as savagery, domestication, partisanship, and the types of domination of some people over others, and what arises from that of authority and states and their ranks, and what people assume through their works and endeavors of earning and livelihood, sciences and industries, and all the other conditions that occur from that civilization by its nature of conditions."

From the past, lessons can be drawn. This is affirmed in the Noble Qur'an when Allah (swt) says, **“قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلُ كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُشْرِكِينَ”** Say, **O Prophet, “Travel throughout the land and see what was the end of those destroyed before you - most of them were mushrikoon.”** [TMQ Surah ar-Rum 30:42].

Sometimes, however, people misuse history to justify their indecent or condemnable actions. Ibn Khaldun (rh) mentions this when he writes, وفي كتب المؤرخين معروفة وإنما يبعث على وضعها الحديث بها الانهماك في اللذات المحرمة وهتك قناع المخدرات ويتعللون بالتأسي بالقوم فيما يأتونه من طاعة لذاتهم فلذلك تراهم كثيرا ما يلهجون بأشباه هذه الأخبار وينقرون عنها عند تصفحهم الأوراق الدواوين "It is known in the books of historians, and what prompts them to write this down is their

preoccupation with forbidden pleasures, and the removal of the barrier to intoxicants. They make excuses by imitating the people in what they do of obedience to their own desires. Therefore, you see them often babbling on similar stories, and focusing on them when they browse the papers of the recorded history. If they had imitated them in other than this of their conditions, and the attributes of perfection, that are appropriate to them and are known about them, ﴿لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ﴾ **“it would have been better for them”** [TMQ Aali Imran 3:110] ﴿لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾ **“if only they knew”** [TMQ Surah al-Baqarah 2:102].”

It is therefore important to put history in its proper place. As a believer, it is understood that legislation is from Allah (swt). Our actions are based on the Ahkam of the Shariah. Once the permissibility of an action has been established, the strategies and styles of implementing the action can be numerous. To find the worthiest strategy, history can be referred to.

For example, when the Ottomans expanded their territories into the Balkans, many non-Muslim communities came under their rule. To administer these communities effectively, they referred to the Pact of Umar (ra) as a precedent.

From Karen Barkey’s paper, “The Ottoman Millet System: Non-Territorial Autonomy and its Contemporary Legacy”: “Ottoman rulers recognized the diversity of religious and ethnic communities that made up the empire. They understood that this vast diversity could not be assimilated and that there was no viable way to grant groups territorially based rights. Instead, in accordance with the organizational strength of each community and the precedent created during the seventh century by the Pact of Umar, which spelled out the privileges and burdens of non-Muslim communities living under Muslim rule, they negotiated ad-hoc agreements with the heads of religious communities. The millet system is the general name given to these arrangements between communities and the imperial state.”

The millet system persisted for centuries in the Ottoman Khilafah, organising the relationship between the Muslim authorities and their dhimmi subjects. However, the 19th century saw the introduction of the Tanzimat reforms, where Ottoman statesmen, who were influenced by the French legal system, began making several changes to the Shari’a rulings. The Ottoman Law of Nationality in 1869 formally replaced the distinction between Muslims and dhimmis with the term “Ottoman”.

The attempt by the Ottoman statesmen to “equalise” their subjects was met with opposition from both Muslims and non-Muslims.

In his book, “A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire,” M. Şükrü Hanioglu provides details on the matter: “The edict also weakened the privileged status of the Greek Patriarchate vis-à-vis the other non-Muslim religious institutions. A typical Greek reaction to the reform edict was: “the state has made us equal with the Jews. We were satisfied with Muslim superiority.” Particularly revealing was the insistence of all Ottoman religious communities that the relationship between each community and the center remain a bilateral one; millet leaders insisted that any new privileges must be conferred on them as a distinct community, not as Ottomans. Thus, far from encouraging the dissolution of barriers between the various communities, millet representatives fought for their preservation.”

The old system, which was based in the Shari’a and granted rights to the different communities based on their religion, was replaced by a system rooted in ethnic nationalism. M. Şükrü Hanioglu later writes: “As late as 1870 the Bulgarians appealed to the state for recognition not as ethnic Bulgars, but as a distinct religious community

in the traditional mode, to be headed by the ethnarch (political leader of an ethnic group) in Istanbul”.

However, attempts to preserve the traditional arrangement failed. The insistence on equal citizenship for all communities, coupled with a number of unpopular economic reforms, contributed to the spread of dissatisfaction amongst both Muslims and non-Muslims. In areas such as Bulgaria and Macedonia, the peasant class began to revolt and these rebellions, with the support of European powers, eventually developed into the nationalist independence movements that eroded the Ottoman Khilafah.

The final result is the arrangement that we see today: the Muslim world divided into a number of nation-states. Each territory is in a far weaker state than they were before the collapse of the Khilafah and each are shackled to the schemes of the Western neo-colonialists. It is difficult to see what good nationalism has brought the Muslim world. The Kurds, who were once the loyal subjects to the Ottoman Khalifah are now subject to violence and hostility from the Turkish government. The Jews and Muslims of Palestine lived together in harmony for centuries under the Khilafah and now today, the Zionist nationalist program is responsible for the deaths of close to 50,000 Palestinians in 2024 alone.

Karen Barkey notes that in the aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War, one journalist wrote: “A large number of Lebanese intellectuals and politicians, faced with the war in their country and the failure of authoritarian regimes in neighbouring countries, are nostalgic for the last period of the Ottoman regime. They set it up as a model of civil peace and modernization. They deplore the destruction of this system by European imperialism”.

Here, then, do we see the importance of history. It is common for people to assume that the reality they live in is unchangeable and thus they accept their condition even if it is oppressive and unjust. History, however, presents us with a number of alternative realities and helps us to understand the possibility of changing our present circumstances. As sincere believers, our goal is to establish the rule of the Shariah and in the pages of history we may find lessons to help assist us in our goal.

Allah (swt) said, ﴿قُلْ سِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ انظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُكْذِبِينَ﴾ “Say, “Travel throughout the land and see the fate of the deniers.”” [TMQ Surah Al-Anaam 6:11].

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
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