

theories of cooperation, as well as his contributions of empirical case studies of the Turkey-Iraq relationship, add major insights to the literature related to Turkey and Iraq's foreign policy. Additionally, the historically based discussion will provide readers with deep knowledge about the transformation of

Turkey's foreign policy toward Iraq, and Iraq's foreign policy toward Turkey. *Rethinking Turkey-Iraq Relations* deserves high praise for its inclusive framework and formulation of new analytical tools in the quest to understand the evolution of historical relations between Turkey and Iraq.

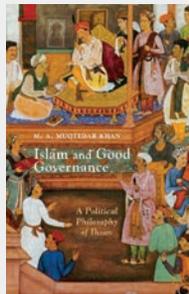
## Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan

By M. A. Muqtedar Khan

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Political science literature has not been overly friendly toward Islam in recent decades. Questions about Islam's compatibility with democracy, its relationship with terrorism and the lack of good governance in Muslim countries have dominated academic discourse for a long time and Muslim scholars, who are generally defensive in these discussions, have had difficulty making their voices heard. Undoubtedly, the facts on the ground do not help those scholars who argue that Islam is not incompatible with good governance. Terrorist attacks by radical jihadist organizations such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, which claim to act in the name of Allah, the failure of the democratization process in the Arab Spring, resistant-to-change authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and ongoing conflicts between different Muslim sects in places like Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan have supported the spread of the argument that Islam as a political force cannot bring fair, representative and well-functioning governance to Muslim people around the world. The solu-



tion, the prevailing argument goes, is the full secularization of politics in Muslim-populated countries.

In *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*, Dr. Muqtedar Khan challenges this argument by offering a normative account of Islam that relies on the concept of *Ihsan* (the pursuit of perfection), one of the three main components of *din* (religion) along with *Islam* (the practice of religion) and *Iman* (articles of faith). According to Khan, Muslim politics and academic discourse overwhelmingly focus on the implementation of Islamic rules and laws under the concept of *Shariah* while ignoring the “final destiny of the true believer.” *Ihsan*, in other words, doing beautiful deeds (p. 77). Sufi scholars and practitioners, as an exception, seem invested in the idea of *Ihsan*; however, either because they see politics as a corrupting force or because they believe that one reaches perfection only by detaching from the world, they are generally pessimistic, if not hostile, to the idea that *Ihsan* can play a role in Mus-

lim politics. Yet, Khan points out, since “Allah has ordained *Ihsan* in all things” as the Prophet Muhammed reminded Muslims, it is not appropriate to avoid perfection in politics (p. 99). *Ihsan* is not only about non-political activities such as writing good poems or building beautiful mosques, it is also about pursuing good governance for Muslims. According to Khan, what Muslims should seek is not an Islamic state that provides *Islam* and *Iman* through strict control and punishment, or a full secularization of politics that totally avoids religion. Rather, it is the pursuit of *Ihsan* that promotes doing beautiful deeds as well as individual and societal perfection in all areas of human interaction. Khan argues that good governance can be realized if Muslim politicians and societies seek compassion, mercy, and love in pursuit of *Ihsan*, instead of harshness, intolerance, compulsion and violence in pursuit of divine law, or *Shariah* (pp. 1-2).

Khan elaborates this argument in six main chapters. First in Chapter 2, the author explains how Muslims lost the idea of *Ihsan* by focusing on punishments instead of mercy and forgiveness in interpreting Islamic rules. Here the example of breaking a Ramadan fast is quite interesting, as Muslims are required to fast for two successive months if they intentionally break a Ramadan fast; Khan shows that the prophetic tradition has a strand that includes mercy and tolerance that judicial interpretation avoids. Many Muslims, including me before reading this section, do not know –or are not taught– the full version of the tradition in which the Prophet showed mercy to a man who broke his fast through sexual intercourse but was not forced to fast for two months (p. 19). In Chapter 3, Khan identifies four Muslim responses –traditionalism, Islamism, modernism and, secularism– to the problems of modernity and

shows how these approaches instrumentally use Islam as a source of political mobilization while problematically ignoring the normative values within it. Khan especially criticizes Islamists and traditionalists who regard Islam as a worldly ideology similar to capitalism and communism and fail to “separate what is Western culture and what is essential modernity” (p. 70). Chapter 4 aims to fill this normative vacuum by explaining the concept of *Ihsan* in Islamic thought and sources. Here Khan explains the classical and contemporary understanding of *Ihsan* through the works of several philosophers including Ibn Arabi, Al-Ghazali, Jalaluddin Rumi, Sheikh Muhammad bin Hassan and Sheikh Abdesselam Yassine. Khan argues that despite *Ihsan* being the key to enlightened understanding of Islam and the concept being analyzed by several scholars in the past and present, today there is a general disinterest in benefitting from it in perfecting political behavior (pp. 97-99).

As a reply, the author presents his own understanding of *Ihsan* in Chapter 5. In his long section, Khan first shows how the Quran and prophetic traditions give a special emphasis to *Ihsan* and why people should seek perfection and beauty in everything they do: to gain God’s love because “God loves those who do *Ihsan*” (p. 113). Then Khan discusses the concept as a sociopolitical philosophy by unveiling eight elements of *Ihsan*. These elements are witnessing, vigilance, reflection, love, aesthetics, mercy and forgiveness, epistemology, and self-annihilation. Through these elements, Khan aims to “extend the sacred into the public arena without depriving it of its sacred and mystical content” (p. 125). Chapter 6 presents a critical reading of the history of Islamic political thought and shows how a *Shariah*-based understanding of Islam has dominated the Muslim world while *Ihsan* has been avoided in political governance. Khan

maintains that in the golden periods of Islamic history, the politics were truly progressive as pragmatic and inclusive solutions were sought to address political hardships. In the Prophet's time, consent and accommodation among different tribes was sought while elections were not seen as a departure from Islamic rules. While these policies were in line with the concept of *Ihsan*, over time judicial and instrumental approaches –through the influence of Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah–dominated Islamic discourse and replaced the aim of good governance with other objectives such as implementing *Shariah* or restoring the global dominance of Islamic civilization. Criticizing these historical developments, Khan presents a political alternative with the help of *Ihsan* in chapter 7. By arguing that Islamic governance “is the realization of virtuous outcomes such as social justice, tolerance, acceptance, compassion and peace” (p. 209), Khan proposes five *Ihsan*-based principles for Islamic governance. In essence, these proposals recommend that Muslims should return to the prophetic example of constitutionalism, consent and inclusiveness in governing themselves and should focus on good governance instead of Islamic government. Khan also maintains that Muslims should seek security and freedom in order to perfect their behavior while understanding justice in normative ways instead of through the limiting influence of judicial interpretation.

*Islam and Good Governance* should be seen as one of the most unique books in the literature. By focusing on a concept that has been ignored, both in the literature and in political discourse, Khan shows that secularism is not the only option for providing good governance in the Islamic world. Rather, he main-

tains that Islam includes a normative dimension, *Ihsan*, which calls upon human beings to seek perfection and beauty in all of their behavior, including political affairs. According to Khan, the problem with contemporary Islamic governments and movements is that they overtly focus on the judicial, *Shariah*-based interpretation of Islam that values strict laws and punishment instead of constitutionalism, consent and inclusiveness, which are critical elements in the prophetic tradition of governance. The contemporary literature about politics and religion lacks this kind of normative discussion which makes Khan's contribution important in scholarly terms. Yet the problem with this well-researched book is the fact that in the current form of Islamic politics, it is not clear how politicians can succeed in bringing this normative understanding into action, let alone if they will be willing to introduce *Ihsan* in their own political behavior. In other words, Khan presents a normative account but does not show how we can realistically, not normatively, implement *Ihsan* in current politics. With today's destabilizing conditions in the Islamic world, we may need principles based on *Islam*, but the rules shaping Islamic politics are totally different from what is dreamed of in Khan's *Islam and Good Governance*. Therefore, a politician most likely will regard the book as a wishful dream instead of a political guide in a realistic world. Still, this gap between idealism and realism does not diminish the scholarly contribution of the book. Just as Kant's normative contribution shaped the realistic politics of Europe a couple of centuries later, it is possible to argue that normative discussions among Islamic scholars today may push Islamic politics in the right course once the dark clouds over the Muslim world dissipate.