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Source: *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Jan., 1985), pp. 27-39

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/544368>

Accessed: 01/07/2013 02:54

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ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION AND THE LEGEND OF POLITICAL FAILURE

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*in memory of
Marshall G. S. Hodgson*

How Marshall G. S. Hodgson overcame the narrow conventions of orientalism to apply an imagination of the broadest scale to the history of Islamic civilization involves the mysteries of creation.¹ Surely one major reason why this courageous scholar developed such a grand vision of history lies with his fundamental humanity. His publications on other cultures are not demonstrations of intellectual superiority but are protests against the absence of empathy in the interpretation of human events.² Cantankerous, stubborn, complex, he challenged readers to leave their moorings and to set out with him on a demanding intellectual as well as moral journey. Taking not the familiar events of his own civilization as his subject matter, he sought to explain the entire history of Islamic civilization, *The Venture of Islam*.³

To do this, Hodgson discarded the procedures of his own craft and set the events of Islamic civilization within the framework of world history. Unhesitatingly, he crossed cultural frontiers and applied comparative history in a field known for its concentration on the sources, the chronological view of history, and the properly authenticated tradition.⁴ Like all innovators, his work attracted criticism. If we sum up the objections, what they say is that Hodgson simply went too far in his assault on ethnocentrism. His comparison of the Renaissance with cultural highpoints in the civilizations of China and Islam is perhaps the most well-known example.⁵ For him the Renaissance was no more than something similar to the flowering of Sung China or the blossoming of the High Caliphal period in Islamic history. Along with this double-barreled judgment on a period where developments are crucial to our understanding

¹ Marshall G. S. Hodgson died suddenly on 10 June 1968. What follows is the revised text of the Twelfth Hodgson Memorial Lecture, which was delivered at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago on 20 April 1981.

² Opposite the title page of volume one of *The Venture of Islam* is the following quote from John Woolman: "To consider mankind otherwise than brethren, to think favors are peculiar to one nation and exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in

the understanding."

³ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*: Vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam*; Vol. 2, *The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*; Vol. 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago, 1974).

⁴ See, for example, Hodgson, "The Role of Islam in World History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 2 (1970): 99–123; and my article, "Consensus or Conflict: The Dilemma of Islamic Historians," *The American Historical Review* 81 (1976): 788–99.

⁵ Charles Issawi, "Europe, the Middle East and the Shift in Power: Reflections on a Theme by Marshall Hodgson," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (1980): 487–89.

[*JNES* 44 no. 1 (1985)]

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0022-2968/85/4401-0002\$1.00.

of modern science alone, Hodgson brashly observed how Islamic civilization need not be overshadowed by the political accomplishments of Early Modern Europe: the Ottoman, Safavids, and Moghuls brought a high degree of order and prosperity to their territories during the same era.⁶

Comparisons of this scale carry all the dangers of oversimplification. Early Modern Europe and Islamic civilization of the Gunpowder Empires emerged from quite different pasts. There is, for example, the special place of the Renaissance and the Reformation in modern history: since the values of modern politics and science are derived from the changes in the European mentality which occurred during these two periods, comparing all of Early Modern European history with the golden era of the Abbasid Caliphate requires more explanation than the somewhat cavalier treatment given in the *Venture of Islam*.⁷ On the other hand, Hodgson's measurement of the political accomplishments of Islamic civilization in light of European experience is provocative and offers a means of escaping the routine approaches to both European and Islamic history.

What Hodgson challenged was, among other entrenched ideas, a popular view of Ottoman political history. For a number of reasons, some of which will be examined below, it is convenient to emphasize the barbarity of Ottoman politics. One can, as Ivo Andric did in *Bridge on the Drina*, evoke vivid images of the cruel Turk by describing the plight of those so unfortunate as to fall unto the hands of Ottoman executioners.⁸ God help the unsuccessful rebel! His failings produced pyramids of skulls, impalements, strangulations. . . . If, however, we apply a little critical energy to the subject of violence, we soon discover ethnocentrism or nationalism behind many of the colorful descriptions of the Empire's politics.⁹ One consequence of this situation for Ottoman historians is that they lie in wait for authors who belabor the theme of political violence. To someone on guard for such an outlook, Hodgson's viewpoint on the Age of the Gunpowder Empires comes as a distinct shock. If he had mildly defended post-sixteenth century Islamic civilization, his argument might have passed unnoticed. But an equation of the Asian Era with the Renaissance and Reformation, no matter how improbable, provokes questions on the scale of Hodgson's comparison: for example, is there a fundamental misconception of Islamic political history at work and therefore have our sources continually led us astray; or has the violent transformation of modern times, no matter how much analysis is applied, falsely colored the past?

Traditions of Illegitimacy

When these broader questions are examined, one learns how widespread the agreement is on the belief that, with the exception of the Prophet's time, Islamic civilization failed to provide a satisfactory political system. Scholars are familiar with the theme for selected periods of Islamic history. To pick one well-known example, the Umayyids are condemned as Kings, their policies are described as tyrannical, and their

⁶ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3, pp. 3–15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 570–74.

⁸ Ivo Andric, *Bridge on the Drina*, trans. Lovett Edwards (New York, 1967).

⁹ On the level of violence in Islamic civilization

no one is better at exposing the ethnocentric basis upon which most generalizations rest than Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1966), esp. pp. 271–307; and *idem*, *Islamic Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh, 1966).

beliefs are deemed impious.¹⁰ A sense of how entrenched this attitude is can be obtained by summarizing what the sources say about politics throughout the entire range of Islamic history.

No negative generalization on politics can apply to the Prophet's time. According to tradition, Muhammad and the first two Caliphs revealed to the Faithful God's pattern for government. Thereafter, however, failures to maintain peace within the Islamic community came one after another. By the time of Uthman's Caliphate in the middle of the seventh century, something had come unraveled. Civil war between Muslims raised, in Shiism, the issue of political legitimacy to the level of religious conviction and established the impious rule of the Sufyanids, the early Umayyids. Within a generation, their authority, based as it was on tribal institutions, collapsed into the military despotism of the Marwanids, the late Umayyids. But government by means of Syrian forces was in turn undone by the absence of an Islamic legitimacy and the insufficient number of Syrian troops.¹¹

Then the Abbasids, who propagandized in messianic tones for the establishment of Islamic institutions, attempted to create a legitimate political aristocracy through Hashimite connections and to assimilate the imperial traditions of antiquity. Soon their revolutionary energies waned. Old tribal hostilities to the institutions of settled society combined with the alienation of religious leaders to strip the Caliphs of their legitimacy. By the ninth century the poverty of their political resources compelled the Abbasids to rely upon imported slave armies. The resulting style of politics, whose distinguishing features were violent rule by barely civilized warriors and a wide gap between ideal and actual government, are reasons for the collapse of the Abbasid regime.¹²

There is little need for a lengthy discussion of the political shortcomings of post-classical times. They are known in vivid detail; for with few exceptions—the Fatimid dynasty being one—the Abbasid successor states regularly failed in their primary duty; they were unable to defend settled society against the assault of invaders. From the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries, Turks, Mongols, Crusaders, Arabs, and Berbers came out of deserts, steppes, and mountain ranges and crossed over the seas to conquer one region after another. Edward G. Browne's Victorian translation of a passage from Ibn al-Athir gives us a sense of this bloody era:

For some years I continued averse from mentioning this event, deeming it so horrible that I shrank from recording it, and ever withdrawing one foot as I advanced the other. To whom, indeed, can it be easy to write the announcement of the death blow of Islam and the Muslims, or who is he on whom the remembrance thereof can weigh lightly? O would that my mother had not borne me, or that I had died and become a forgotten thing ere this befell!¹³

¹⁰ Abbasid historians are largely responsible for the tarnished reputation of Umayyid rulers. There are, however, other explanations for the hostility to the Umayyids that one finds in the classical sources. For a statement of the classical attitude toward the Umayyids and explanations of why they bear such a burden, see Ann K. S. Lambton, *State and Government in Medieval Islam* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 43–68; and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism* (London, 1977), pp. 19–34.

¹¹ H. A. R. Gibb, "The Evolution of Government in Early Islam" in Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk, eds., *Studies on the Civilisation of Islam* (London, 1962), pp. 34–45; Lambton, *State and Government*, pp. 45–48.

¹² Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 59–91, is the most powerful statement of the Abbasid political failure.

¹³ Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1902), pp. 427–31.

While it is true that Muslim governments eventually drove out or absorbed these alien forces and even expanded the boundaries of Islamic civilization, nonetheless, the political result for the ruled was deemed unfavorable: it consolidated the hold of aliens, Turks, upon government; and as Ibn Khaldun described for North Africa, subjected urban society to the unstable fortunes of tribal politics.¹⁴

What happens after the middle ages of Islamic civilization is less clear, perhaps because the sources are less available. Whatever the reasons, the Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul Empires did, for a while, defend the borders and produce order and stability not present in the immediate past. Yet as the historian Naima observed for the Ottomans, they were unable to sustain this early success.¹⁵ During the seventeenth century the ruling élite of the three gunpowder empires rapidly lost control of their populations. Corrupt leaders—"the wine drinkers"—and inept politics led to decentralization, military failure, and rebellions. By the end of the eighteenth century, Ottoman debilities even permitted an invasion of the very heart of the Protected Territories: Egypt.¹⁶ Not only did the Europeans approach the Holy Places in Arabia, but they also made it difficult for the Sultans to control the protected communities of non-Muslims as combinations of internal and external unbelievers seemed destined to reverse the hierarchies of a society based on the final revelation of God.¹⁷

While the words employed in these sweeping generalizations are modern, the complaint they voice is found everywhere in the sources and in modern scholarship. If one accepts the truth of only a portion of what is said about Islamic politics, then a puzzle of grand dimensions must be solved: how have the governments of Islamic civilization, so laden with political instabilities, so devoid of legitimation, and so incapable of lasting success, been able to maintain a political identity for over a millennium? Or for that matter, why in the face of such failure is there a modern demand for Islamic government?

The Myth of Failure

I do not believe we witness extraordinary political failure over the entire history of Islamic civilization. I do believe the scope of these negative opinions I have described in the briefest manner suggests the presence of a myth. If that is the case, it is necessary to step outside the legend to produce a more accurate history of Islamic politics. This will, however, be difficult because there is, on the plane of political criticism, a much wider basis for a negative view of Islamic politics than one finds in Islamic civilization's own records. It is, therefore, worth recognizing who these myth-makers are before an attempt is made to break their hold upon history.

¹⁴ C. E. Bosworth, "Barbarian Invasions: The Coming of the Turks into the Islamic World" in D. H. Richards, ed., *Islamic Civilisation 950–1150* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 1–16; and R. Le Tourneau, "Nouvelles orientations des Berbères d'Afrique du Nord 950–1150," *ibid.*, pp. 127–53.

¹⁵ Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 102–3.

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London, 1961), pp. 40–72, places the inva-

sion in the wider context of the relations between the Middle East and the West. For reference to the exhaustive diplomatic accounts of Napoleon's Middle Eastern campaigns, see Stanford J. Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 1 (London, 1976), pp. 268–71.

¹⁷ Moshe Ma'oz, *Ottoman Reform in Syria and Palestine 1840–1861* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 200–240, for the nineteenth-century upheaval in the relations between religious communities.

First among those who have written the story of Islamic politics in light of their own beliefs are the men of religion. Why they denied sanctity to all but the sixth-century government of Medina is no doubt related to the hold ancient religious ideas had upon the Muslim lettered class. Paradoxically, the rapid, widespread conquests of the Arabs reinforced an archaic mentality unfavorable to the political regimes responsible for the rule of conquered territories. Thus the earlier time *was* the golden age and political difficulties that followed were tolerable because they might herald the arrival of the Mahdi/Savior.¹⁸ With such a well-defined early model of politics in mind, men of religion found it difficult to reshape their myths to fit the imperfect order of later times. Institutional history in the classical era supported this state of mind: rapid acquisition of the lands and populations of the ancient world forced the caliphs to employ practices borrowed from the cultures of antiquity before these were religiously assimilated into the new civilization. Similarly, the rapid conquest of the Fertile Crescent attracted large numbers of Arab tribesmen at a time when the techniques for socializing them had only begun to evolve. Taken altogether, these events undermined the legitimacy of the Umayyid regime in the eyes of a lettered class bent on universalizing their religion.¹⁹

Even under the Abbasids, the Ulama nearly gave up the great game. During the most tumultuous period of the Abbasid Caliphate, they accepted rule by the most recent converts—Turkish slaves—if they would only guarantee the protection of the Community. Other explanations for the gulf between the men of religion and the political élite exist, not the least of which is the triumphant emergence of the Ulama themselves out of an Iraqi religious milieu in which ideas about the profane nature of politics were deeply embedded.²⁰

What is surprising about this situation is how the Ulama have found an ally on this issue among their cultural opponents. From the age of the Crusaders to the present, propagandists against Islam have consistently adopted a point of view on politics roughly comparable to the perspective of the Ulama. The politics of Islamic civilization was shot through with violence; in comparison with the rulers of the Christian West its leaders lacked legitimacy, and in modern time its ruling élites are unable to maintain order.²¹

Only recently have scholars identified and analyzed the ideas of a third group of critics: the Middle East's modern intelligentsia. Like all parvenu groups the new élite seeks something in the not too distant past to criticize as a means of reinforcing their commitment to change the current order. Now that the colonialists are gone and arguments about economic imperialism lack the personal element necessary for good propaganda, it is convenient to blame the woes of modern life on the disastrous course

¹⁸ On the relation between the religious mentality of the Muslim lettered élite and Islamic history, see Thomas Naff, "Towards a Muslim Theory of History" in Alexander S. Cudsi and Ali E. Hillal Des-souki, eds., *Islam and Power* (London, 1981), pp. 24–36. This article owes much to the work of the late Abdul Hamid el-Zein and to Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 49–130 and *passim*.

¹⁹ Gibb, "An Interpretation of Islamic History" in *Studies*, pp. 3–10; and Crone, *Slaves*, pp. 40–49.

²⁰ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 29–34, 120–29, and *passim*.

²¹ A good example is P. M. Holt, *Egypt and the Fertile Crescent 1516–1922* (London, 1966). See also my review of this work in *Middle East Forum* 43 (1967): 63–71.

of events after the eleventh century, on the invasions of the Middle East by Central Asian nomads—on Turks, Mongols, and tribesmen in general. With apologies to the historians of Spain and the New World, I dub this myth, *la leyenda de los turcos*, the “black” legend of Islamic history. It is historically based on the impact of the destructive Turko-Mongol invasions and emotionally centered on the modern need to find an internal scapegoat.²²

To pillory the tribesmen for the shortcomings of political history is too convenient. They have few advocates among urban populations anxious to forget their rural past, and this attitude is supported by the historical tension between the pastoralist and townsman. While there is, for example, plenty of evidence of the tribesman’s destructive influence on settled society between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, the marshaling of evidence on their negative role ought to set off warning signals. More than in other civilizations the material and cultural conditions in which Islam rose and prospered gave the tribesman a central place in the life of Islamic civilization. Ibn Khaldun long ago drew attention to the tribes and their relation to political order. Let him be a guide to the history of the Muslim world, and the condemnation of the tribal violence will soon turn to a complaint against the political structure of Islamic civilizations. Again we are taken back to the grand puzzle: if this political order is so violent, so illegitimate, why did it last for such a long time?

Tribalism and the Structure of Politics

Alas, here another effort to get below the surface of events is required if we are to understand the crucial position of the tribesman in Islamic history. First, we in the twentieth century must recognize that we are dealing with another ill-understood world in which tribesmen made up a large section of society and often produced the dominant military and political élites. Second, we should understand that writers hostile to the story of the tribesmen provide us with our information. If we fail to come to grips with this time now lost to us, we will not comprehend how the tribesmen influenced the rhythm of political change. If we cannot go beyond our sources, so opposed to the nomad, we will be unable to comprehend the shape of a political structure entirely different from the centralized bureaucratic forms of modern times.²³

It is conventional to point out that Islam emerged in an arid climate favorable to both settled and pastoral life. In what manner the geography of this dry zone which juxtaposes two different ways of life has influenced political institutions is the subject of a continuing debate. The reigning generalization states that the interpenetration of mountain, desert, and sea fostered a dynamic relation between urban and nomadic societies.²⁴ Rulers, given the treacherous nature of rainfall in this arid zone and the

²² Repudiation of the tribal past reflects urban man’s contemporary defeat of the tribesmen. Historically the hostility to the nomad rests upon the tension between the “desert and sown” and the reaction of the literate classes to the Turko-Mongol invasions. In modern times the issue is complicated by the struggle between Arab and Turkish nationalism. See Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge, 1981),

pp. 52–58, 94–96, 109–69. For the difficulties modern Arab intellectuals must handle, see Abdallah Laroui, *La Crise des intellectuels arabes* (Paris, 1974), pp. 21–44 and passim.

²³ Gellner, *Muslim Society*, pp. 1–85.

²⁴ Xavier de Planhol, *Les Fondements géographiques de l’histoire de l’Islam* (Paris, 1968), pp. 11–35.

scattered, segmented distribution of small communities, were required to manage a diffuse and constantly shifting maze of political relationships. How they were able to fuse together the strength of the tribesmen, the power of a divine message, and abilities of literate townsmen is the political story of Islamic civilization.

At the beginning of this history, a cosmopolitan trading community, armed with a religious message, assembled tribesmen and villagers in western Arabia where agricultural activities were not extensive and sent armies against the surrounding states. Once the agricultural communities of the Fertile Crescent were absorbed, the conquering regime of the Umayyids set out to create a new structure for society. Gradually the nomadic life style of the Arabs of Arabia combined with the ways of the agricultural communities of the river valleys and of the Iranian plateau to form a basis for a new civilization. At no point, however, in the complex pattern of settlement, formed mainly in Umayyid cities, did the new culture lose touch with its tribal past.

Thus the order of politics which appeared under the Caliphs reflected a shifting compromise between antiquity's hierarchically organized and class-structured agricultural communities and the segmented societies of arms-bearing kinsmen. Great benefits came from this conservative assimilation of the tribesmen. But in politics the weight of the pastoralist weakened the ability of central government to conduct its affairs in the manner of previous regimes. A new blend of institutions strengthened a spirit of independence which conflicted with the forms of servitude demanded by the bureaucratic states of antiquity. What Islamic civilization absorbed into its culture was the segmented politics of the tribal world, and this meant a regulation of the social order through the threat of exterior violence, a distribution of legitimacy tilted in the direction of the social group rather than the state.²⁵

From Arab conquests to the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, Muslim élites managed to contend with the inherent tensions of a political culture stretched between city and steppe. No matter how severe the disagreements between the partisans of different blends of this social mixture, neither political leaders nor the converting masses gave up the idea that the resulting compromise ought to be Islamic. When, for example, pastoral institutions dominated, the Kharijite definition of Islam could apply. When, on the other hand, the agricultural and urban conditions of Egypt demanded a more organized form of government, the Fatimid version of Islam could satisfy the Community—for a while. Whatever the mixture of rural and urban elements, the common religious idiom was Islam.²⁶ So distinctive was this religious linkage between tribal and settled elements that it impressed itself not only on politics but on the entire range of culture from economic institutions to poetry.²⁷ Not like China when it came to the place of the nomad, the tribesman was not absorbed in Islamic society; he was a major actor in this political drama.

²⁵ The compromise is best revealed in areas where the contact between agricultural societies dependent upon the management of large scale irrigation systems and pastoralists has been severe. J. L. Wilkinson, *Water and Tribal Settlement in South East Arabia* (Oxford, 1977) is an excellent study of the result.

²⁶ See W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and the Integration of Society* (London, 1961), pp. 87–142, for a

discussion of the social roots of sectarianism in Islam.

²⁷ Pre-Islamic poetry remained a model for poets throughout the literary history of Islamic civilization. This had the effect on one level of keeping urban Arabs in touch with the pastoralist. See R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 285–86.

Legitimacy and the Challenge of the Middle Ages

The most formidable challenge to the political structure of Islamic civilization prior to the arrival of industrial society occurred between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries. Ironically, for a civilization that so tightly linked the pastoralist to its destiny, it was the nomad who nearly destroyed its social order. Jammed helter skelter into the Iranian plateau for over four centuries, Turks and Mongols rode over agricultural and urban communities, leaving behind them a wounded civilization.²⁸

Usually mined for its accounts of how civilized life suffered, the age of tribal invasions can also be seen as a time of testing for the political institutions of the Islamic world. Viewed from Toynbee heights, Muslim rulers met the challenge of their Middle Ages. If such is the case, we need to measure this political success and see what effect it had on the attitudes literate élites adopted toward the legitimacy of the Islamic political system.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century the Mongols withdrew from the Middle East, the Turks assimilated, and the crusaders fled. Not only did the Turks convert, but large numbers of Orthodox Christians in Asia Minor also accepted Islam, shifting the boundaries of the Dar-al-Islam northward. Moreover, during these four centuries of change, Islamic civilization altered its internal balances to produce the imperial unities of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul periods. Then, even by the standards of European authors, the Islamic empires evoked a respect which fit poorly with the legend of political failure.

A great part of the reason for the successful exit from the age of Central Asian invasions rested with the ability of the leaders of state and society to handle problems not that far afield from the political and social challenges of early Islamic history: that is, the governments of the Sultans controlled the tribesmen, encouraging their assimilation and, in the case of Asia Minor, using their martial abilities for the conquest of new territories.²⁹ Pastoralists neither destroyed the institutions of the classical period nor presented a challenge so overwhelming that past practices could not be used.

Fortunately for this argument the Middle Ages of Islamic civilization produced a historian with a sense of the morphology of his history. Ibn Khaldun lays bare the dynamic relations between pastoralist, urbanite, religion, and the formation of a state. Once again, it is worthwhile repeating his explanation of political change to refute charges of failure levied against a political system in which tribesmen often possessed a great deal of power.

At the base of Ibn Khaldun's argument for the frequent rise and fall of dynasties in Islamic history lay an incompatibility between life on the steppe and in the cities. He assumed that the constant struggle between tribes imbued the nomad with military abilities and from time to time with a political cohesion superior to that of urban society. If a tribal leader could only bring together a group capable of developing

²⁸ I. P. Petrushevsky, "The Socio-Economic Conditions of Iran Under the Il-Khans" in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5, *The Saljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 483–537, is an example of research emphasizing the destructive

consequences of the Mongol invasion.

²⁹ Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Los Angeles, 1971).

strong political cohesion such that, with some military success, they could begin conquests, then the formation of an empire would be possible.

But as the political movement on the steppe expanded from a tribal chieftainship to the government of cities, cohesion on the basis of kinship and political leadership was no longer sufficient. Rule over large areas and populations required something more than a tribal army: the rudiments of a bureaucracy run by a literate class and some form of religious legitimation were necessary. Once these institutions were established and the new movement set in motion, the founder of the regime then delineated the frontiers of his empire up to the place where the internal cohesion of the state could no longer maintain itself. At that point, so Ibn Khaldun observed, the pattern repeated itself. Somewhere on the border, a new combination of political and military talent would appear to challenge an imperial élite weakened over time by the fatal incompatibility between the hard life of the steppe and the softer existence in the cities, the authoritarian tendencies of urban government and the dissident behavior of a society infused with tribal mores. Thus did an old order pass and a new cycle begin.³⁰

It is remarkable how well Ibn Khaldun's analysis explains the facts of Islamic political history. Often indeed have rulers from the al-Murabids of the eleventh-century Maghrib to the Saudis of twentieth-century Arabia assembled the right combination of kinsmen and religious revivalism to start a migration from steppe to city. The arguments for failure based upon the comings and goings of states in the Islamic Middle Ages capture only the froth of politics. They ignore, as Ibn Khaldun demonstrates, an underlying structure of great strength.

Certainly the Khaldunian picture of state formation suffers from abstractness. Its efficiency as an explanatory tool declines as the centers of state formation move away from the more brutal steppes and especially as Islamic civilization entered the gunpowder age. Firearms and their organized use by imperial bureaucracies reduced the power of the tribesmen markedly and impeded their capacity under right leadership to activate the wheels of politics.³¹

The Shepherds of Islamic Civilization

What stirs up negative judgment about this period of Islamic political history is the place of the military slave; for powder technology confirmed the central role in government of men who by any standards were barely assimilated. Employed at the center of state, the military slaves enjoyed powers which appear grossly out of touch with religious and social values of Islamic society.³² Purchased from steppe traders or recruited from conquered populations, they were converted, separated from society, trained as warriors, and advanced to high position. Many advantages went to those who pursued power with these slaves. They owed little allegiance to local society and kinship claims and in theory were loyal to their owners. They could, given their total dependence on the will of their masters, be trained to use new weapons or be assigned

³⁰ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 2d ed., 3 vols., trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, 1967), vol. 1, pp. 261–86.

Ibn Khaldun's Military Elite," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 4 (1972): 173–201.

³² Crone, *Slaves*, pp. 80–81.

³¹ See my article "Firearms and the Decline of

to remote areas. Within the bureaucracy, rulers could ignore the strength of ascriptive factors and advance slaves, for a while, on merit alone. With luck, these men survived warfare and political intrigue to retire into society where their children, born as free Muslims, were, in theory, unable to follow their father's career and therefore to form a military aristocracy capable of challenging ruling families.

We can begin an accounting for the presence of military slaves with Abbasid history. According to their critics, the Caliphs were unable to generate wide public support for post-revolutionary policies and, therefore, confronted a population less and less convinced of the legitimacy of their rule. As the distance between society and the ruling class widened, the Caliphs fell back upon private armies of slaves imported from the Central Asian steppe to maintain the power of what became an increasingly autocratic élite.³³

Slave armies were not known for winning the hearts of the populations they ruled, nor were they famous for producing long-lived regimes. Abbasid history did not escape these generalizations, and so one finds in the records of the classical era, as well as in the time of the gunpowder empires, ample evidence for the illegitimate and violent behavior of ruling classes that arose out of a slave environment: they ignored the Holy Law, they became sultanmakers, they exploited unmercifully the society that supported them, and finally, in the eighteenth century they abused the slave system and formed a military aristocracy which resisted the introduction of modern military technology.³⁴ Like the tribesman of Ibn Khaldun's world, the military slave of later times also suffered from the contempt urbanites displayed for military ruffians whose talents were necessary for the survival of civilization.

There are, however, other ways of looking at this unique practice of Islamic civilization. Rather than berating the Abbasids for the failure of their politics to bring forth institutions close to Islamic ideals, we can see the slave system as a remarkable adaptation of the tribal warrior to the interests of Islamic society. Taken from mountain and steppe regions where the role of violence in their culture prepared them for warfare, the tribesmen were organized into slave armies and effectively turned against both internal and external opponents.

Modern historians are aware of the military service Ottomans, Mamluks, and Moghuls rendered to the service of Islamic civilization. Less appreciated is the internal role of the military slave. How to rule a society of cousins all organized into a myriad of social orders, each making a minimum concession of power to external institutions was the internal political question. Just as Ibn Khaldun had concluded, this could be done by a combination of political and religious élites who were able to develop principles of cohesion which embraced the variegated social mosaic of Islamic civilization. But the historical trend from the fifteenth century onward clearly ran against tribal origins of political power. Aided by the introduction of gunpowder, the slave institutions of city and town shifted the balance of power against the countryside. In place of the tribal leaders and their followers, Sultans could employ the political and military talents of military slaves anywhere without unbalancing local hierarchies, without connecting the ruling class directly to the kinship structure of the ruled. As political

³³ Ibid., pp. 61–81.

³⁴ D. Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom* (London, 1956), pp. 63 ff.

mediators, the soldiers and administrators of the gunpowder empires not only more effectively defended an Islamic civilization cast in large political units, but also the internal structure of its segmented society. In such a manner did these unpopular slaves guarantee the functioning of a civilization that valued very little the disciplines associated with absolutist bureaucracies of Europe.³⁵ From the point of view of those who wish to develop a modern society in the Middle East the slave administrator did not fail; in fact, he succeeded very well.

This assessment of the social position of military slaves again puts one in touch with both the history and structure of Islamic politics. Their violence notwithstanding, the slaves cannot be accused of demolishing existing institutions. By the modern age they were themselves an old and established part of the cultural order. Ambitious élites from the Abbasid Caliph Ma'mun to Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud of the twentieth century either came to power with the aid of the slaves corps or formed units whose social constitution inclined in that direction for the defense of Islamic institutions. Judgments about the legitimacy of politics in Islamic history cannot be made in the absence of a comment upon the relation between the political order and the other institutions that defined this great culture. If we claim that society regularly produced leaders from Shah Abbas to Mulay Ismail, who successfully manipulated similar elements of power to bring about an order deemed Islamic, we must know whether they supported the ways of life commonly recognized as Islamic.

There is no evidence of ruling classes encouraging a change in basic religious mentality. Tribesmen and the refugees from the long medieval interregnum were gathered in by institutions owing allegiance to the mystical vision of Islam. Enormously flexible in symbolic, doctrinal, and institutional makeup, the Sufi movements from the Bektashiyya of Asia Minor to the Chishtiyya of India adjusted religion to the cultural idioms of the invading tribesmen and of the disoriented populations of Islamic civilization's core regions. Without a clear and universal definition of religious identity, innovation could have led to unbelief. Hence fundamentalists, whose social base was the city, reigned in the extravagant tendencies of the Sufis. For the rulers of the gunpowder empires the religious balance need only be organized. Let the brotherhoods serve rural societies and the urban lower classes; let also the Ulama check any latent revolutionary tendencies, be they based upon Sufism or Shiism. What Ottomans, Safavids, and Moghuls did not do was to encourage the growth of a new intelligentsia capable of competing with the Ulama; rather, what they did provide was bureaucratic support for formal versions of both majority, and in the case of the Safavids, minority—Shiite—expressions of Islam.³⁶

From the social standpoint, Turko-Mongol invasions increased the ethnic complexity of the Arid Zone and heightened the influence of tribal institutions. Islamic Sultans responded to these developments with policies whose trajectories were set long ago.

³⁵ By stressing the social role of the military slave, I go beyond the point of view developed in L. Carl Brown, *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey 1837–1855* (Princeton, 1974) and Gellner, *Muslim Society*, pp. 174–78.

³⁶ Only in the nineteenth century did the Ottomans begin to encourage the growth of a secular movement; see Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal, 1964), pp. 89 ff.

Influenced by the social doctrines of Islam, tribal institutions and imperial ideals of Eurasian origin, Muslim rulers made no attempt to impose common religion, language, and social custom. They favored instead the growth under their imperial shields of societies of small scale. Their protection of the social order from major acts of violence in turn encouraged kinship relations to thrive, to settle into tight patterns determined by Islamic law and the customs of a region whose geography encouraged particularism.³⁷

Similarly, ruling élites did nothing to undermine the economic foundation of Islamic civilization in the post-Mongol age. While the invasions of the tribesmen shifted the economy in the direction of nomadism, once they were settled the opportunities for long distance trade expanded. Gradually imperial bureaucracies grew and, through their increased military power, were able to stimulate the growth of agricultural activity. Yet this sector of the economy continued to display a spirit of conservatism. Already well-polished by the end of the classical period, the institutions which distributed the usufruct of land as a form of payment to an impermanent military élite returned in more elaborate form under gunpowder bureaucracies. This and other fiscal and legal practices connected with the exploitation of land did not encourage a capitalistic transformation of the agricultural economy. What the political élites of the gunpowder governments did was guarantee a renewal of the classical economy.³⁸

Modern Revolution and Islamic Civilization

If we look at the politics of Islamic civilization from the vantage point of its own history and institutions, if we overcome *la leyenda de los turcos*, if we judge states in terms of their defense of the basic structures of Islamic civilization rather than according to ideal categories of its own or foreign traditions, and if we test this civilization on how it handled its medieval challenge, then we must conclude that the idea of a failure in Islamic political history is itself a failure.

Inability to understand this past, moreover, leads to another difficulty, to a serious misunderstanding of the forces of solidarity within Islamic civilization on the eve of the modern period. Neither images of the eighteenth century Ottoman Empire as a land of political chaos, nor views of a somnolent Middle East ruled by decadent Sultans will withstand vigorous examination. When the politics of the eighteenth century, let alone the nineteenth, is studied without the weight of the legend of failure, nothing like the shattered remains of the Roman Empire forms the political background under which the West penetrated Islamic civilization.

How to grasp the history of this great culture in its last hours requires a special typology of knowledge, one that lays less stress on event and places more weight on institutional change. Colonial armies did not defeat Islamic civilization. If linguists will forgive me, what the colonists and their Middle Eastern counterparts did was to

³⁷ See my *The Forgotten Frontier* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 156 ff.

³⁸ Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300–1600* (New York, 1973), pp. 121–62.

introduce into an old chess game a new piece of great power: the technology of industrial society.³⁹ The result was the collapse of old social structures and the eruption of violent change.

To see this from inside the political history of Islamic civilization is to understand the erratic policies of Selim III, Muhammad Ali, and Abdülhamid II. They all knew or learned how the past limited their freedom of action. They all were in touch with settled institutions, habitual practices, and restrictive world views during times when new forces tore apart the web of tradition. Their tragic destinies should be told in terms of the Middle Eastern revolution of modern times and not offered as proof of the flaws in Islamic political systems.

From a contemporary vantage point, it is easy to see how shattered is the structure of Islamic civilization. A rush into the industrial way of life upsets agricultural society. Tribal life dies in the face of the machine gun and resettlement. Urban order collapses in front of demographic avalanches. Confessional society explodes when confronted by nationalism, and ideological dispute polarizes politics into acts of assassination. All this fills the newspapers with reports of violence. But these upheavals of a revolutionary age should not condemn the politics of another time.

Islamic political history is poorly done. European authors selectively understand the past to justify either the actions or institutions of the West. The Ulama and new Middle Eastern intelligentsias deal severely with Islamic leadership for polar opposition reasons. Together, the three groups create a legend of political failure which obscures an appreciation of the stability of Islamic civilization and the revolution which is modern times.

³⁹ This metaphor is appropriate for historians. There is no indication that Islamic civilization's nineteenth century institutions had evolved in a direction that would support a large-scale introduction of modern technology. Instead, the instruments of

industrial life were either forced upon Islamic society or adopted willy nilly for the purpose of achieving a goal in one sector of society without understanding the impacts such an action might have in other areas.