

SYLLABUS
POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND LEGITIMACY IN
ISLAMIC POLITICAL THOUGHT

INSTRUCTOR: Lilian Abou-Tabickh

COURSE DESCRIPTION

After Muhammad's death in 632, the Muslim community needed a new leader. In the early period, the community faced a series of critical questions that continued to be debated for centuries: How should a leader be chosen? What is the basis of their legitimacy? What should the scope of their authority be? These discussions produced two predominant views on legitimate leadership, which eventually defined the two main sects in Islamic political thought: Sunni and Shi'i.

This second-year course introduces students to primary texts on political authority and legitimacy in Islamic political thought. The course is organized into four themes, each focusing on key concepts. The first part covers the foundations of politics and its purpose. The second part examines various methods of selecting a ruler through the concepts of selection (*ikhtiyār*), testament ('*ahd*'), and designation (*naṣṣ*). The third part explores the bases of legitimacy through the ideas of precedence (*sābiqa*), moral excellence (*faḍīla*), kinship (*qarāba*), and '*asabiyya*. Finally, the fourth part analyses the concepts of caliphate, imamate, and sultanate, investigating the scope and nature of their authority. These concepts are examined as they were developed, debated, and applied across different periods in the political history of the Muslim world, from the era of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs in the seventh century CE to the end of the eighteenth century.

The course draws on a range of sources, including advice literature, political philosophy, political theology, historical texts, and documentary films. Classes will consist of short lectures, active learning strategies, and presentations.

LEARNING GOALS

This course will provide

- an overview of the history of political thought, focusing on the diverse discussions that arose after the death of the Prophet Muhammad regarding who should lead and govern the community
- an explanation of key concepts related to political authority and legitimacy in the political history of the Muslim world
- an understanding of the historical and intellectual contexts in which certain political arrangements were proposed, including the Arabic Pre-Islamic and early Islamic context, the Persian and Greek intellectual traditions, and the later Islamic theological context
- a critical examination of the various arguments used to legitimize different political models and the reasons for differences among scholars

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

By the end of the course, students will

- have acquired knowledge of central figures and texts, as well as an understanding of key terms in Arabic and Islamic political thought
- have also gained clarity on common misconceptions in this subject area
- be able to articulate different arguments on the topic of political authority and legitimacy using relevant concepts
- have acquired an understanding of the political context and the circumstances within which certain concepts were introduced or used
- be able to evaluate arguments about different political arrangements
- have improved their ability to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes, and actions, and to connect what they have learned to current conditions
- have improved their ability to think analytically and critically, and to demonstrate independent thinking

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSESSMENT

Class participation (20%): The course requires active engagement with the texts, along with coming to class prepared and ready to participate in discussion and other activities.

Weekly responses (15%): In pairs, submit five one-page, single-spaced responses to the week's readings. Each response should include the topic, a summary of the author's argument, and connections to other readings from the same week or previous weeks. In addition, state what you have learned and conclude with a question arising from the readings. All responses must be read by everyone before class. Weekly responses are due the day before class by 6:00 PM. Successful submission of all responses will contribute 5% to your grade.

Weekly responses (10%): Submit five one-page, single-spaced responses to the week's readings. Each response should include the topic, a summary of the author's argument, and connections to other readings from the same week or previous weeks. In addition, state what you have learned and conclude with a question arising from the readings. All responses must be read by everyone before class. Weekly responses are due the day before class by 6:00 PM. Successful submission of all responses will contribute 5% to your grade.

Response presentation (10%): In pairs, students are required to present one of their responses in class and relate it to their classmates' responses. Each presentation and discussion should last 15 minutes. Sign-up during WEEK 1.

Response presentation (5%): Students are required to present one of their responses in class and relate it to their classmates' responses. Each presentation and discussion should last 15 minutes. Sign-up during WEEK 1.

Research paper / project proposal (5%): Submit a half-page single-spaced outline of your plan for the final paper. You may draw on assigned and recommended readings, as well as external sources, for your paper. The final essay or project may either respond to

one of the questions provided in WEEK 1 or explore a topic of your choice. The outline is due in WEEK 11.

Final paper / project (35%): Write a 6-8 page (1500-2000 words), double-spaced paper on a theme raised in the course. Alternatively, you may choose to create a digital project using Digital Google Slides, in which you compare different arguments and engage in critical dialogue with them. You may draw on assigned and recommended readings, as well as external sources, for your paper or project. Topic suggestions and the due date will be announced.

EXPECTATIONS, POLICIES & STATEMENTS

TBA

CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the course content and an overview of the syllabus

WEEK 2: FOUNDATIONS OF POLITICS

REQUIRED READING:

Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton, N.J. University Press, 1967.

- Chapter 1/PD 1: *Human Social Organization is Something Necessary*, pp. 89-93
- Chapter 3/50: *Human civilization requires political leadership for its organization*, pp. 137-139

Al-Jāhiz. *The Life and Works of Jāhiz*. Translation of Selected Texts by Charles Pallet. Translated from the French by D. M. Hawke. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969.

- *Need for an imam*, pp. 63-64

RECOMMENDED:

Najjar, Fawzi. "Siyasa in Islamic Political Philosophy." In *Islamic Theology and Philosophy: Studies in Honor of George F. Hourani*, edited by Michael E. Marmura, 92-110. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1984.

Assignment due: Weekly response 1
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 3: WHO SHOULD RULE?

REQUIRED READING:

Al-Jāḥiẓ. *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ*

- *Procedure for accession to the imamate*, pp. 81-82

Sharon, Moshe. "The Development of the Debate Around the Legitimacy of Authority in Early Islam." In *The Articulation of Early Islamic State Structures*, edited by Fred M. Donner, 15-35. London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Assignment due: Weekly response 2
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 4: CONDITIONS OF LEGITIMATE LEADERSHIP 1

REQUIRED READING:

Al-Jāḥiẓ. *The Life and Works of Jāḥiẓ*

- *Portrait of an ideal imam*, pp. 65-66

Afsaruddin, Asma. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse of Legitimate Leadership*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002.

- Ch. 1: The Excellence of Precedence, pp. 36-51

Assignments due: Weekly response 3
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 5: CONDITIONS OF LEGITIMATE LEADERSHIP 2

REQUIRED READING:

Afsaruddin, Asma. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse of Legitimate Leadership*. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002.

- Ch. 2: The Precedence of Excellence, pp. 80-98

Documentary film: The Caliph: Part 1 – Foundation

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3O9d7PsI48&ab_channel=AlJazeeraEnglish

RECOMMENDED:

Afsaruddin, Asma. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse of Legitimate Leadership*. Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 2002.

- Ch. 4: The Excellence of Propinquity to the Prophet: Kinship vs Companionship, pp. 146-196

Assignments due: Weekly response 4
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 6: THE TERM ‘CALIPH’ DURING EARLY ISLAMIC RULE

REQUIRED:

Al-Qadi, Wadad. “The Term ‘Khalifa’ in Early Exegetical Literature.” *Die Welt des Islams* 28, no. ¼ (1988): 392-411.

Marlow, Louise. *Medieval Muslim Mirrors for Princes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

- Introduction: The Arabic, Persian and Turkish Mirror Literatures, pp. 3-10

Documentary film: The Caliph: Part 2 – Division

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuplOE5JB4M&t=28s&ab_channel=AlJazeeraEnglish

RECOMMENDED:

Marsham, Andrew. ““God’s Caliph” Revisited: Umayyad Political Thought in Its Late Antique Context.” In *Power, Patronage, and Memory in Early Islam: Perspectives on Umayyad Elites*, edited by Alain George and Andrew Marsham, 3-38. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Assignments due: Weekly response 5
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 7: AL-FARABI ON THE PERFECT RULER

REQUIRED READING:

Al-Farabi. *On the Perfect State*, revised text with introduction, translation and commentary by Richard Walzer. Chicago: Kazi, 1998.

- Chapter 15: Perfect Associations and Perfect Ruler, pp. 229-253 (esp. 239-247)

RECOMMENDED:

Mahdi, Muhsin. *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy*. University of Chicago Press, 2010

- Chapter 6: The Virtuous City, pp. 125-146

Assignments due: Weekly response 6
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 8: HOW DO RULERS COME TO POWER?

REQUIRED READING:

Al-Mawardi. *The Ordinances of Government*, translated by Wafaa H. Wahba. Reading, United Kingdom: Garnet Publishing, 1996.

- Chapter 1: On the Appointment of the Sovereign (*Imām*), pp. 3-22

RECOMMENDED:

Gibb, Hamilton A. R. *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*, edited by Stanford J. Shaw and William R. Polk. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

- Al- Māwardī's Theory of the Caliphate, pp. 151-165

Rosenthal, Erwin I. J. *Political Thought in Medieval Islam: an Introductory Outline*. Cambridge University Press, 1958.

- The Caliphate: Theory and Function, Al-Māwardī, pp. 27-37

Assignments due: Weekly response 7
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEKS 9: WHO SHOULD RULE ACCORDING TO AL-GHAZALI?

REQUIRED READING: **You may choose one of Al-Ghazali's works.**

Al-Ghazali. *Al-Mustazhirī*, translated by Richard J. McCarthy. Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

- Volume 4, Chapter 9: *On the Establishment of the Legal Demonstrations that the Imam Charged with the Truth .. is the Imam Al-Mastazhir Billāh*, pp. 274-280

Al-Ghazali. *Moderation in Belief*, translated by Aladdin Mahmud Yaqub. Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2013.

- Third Chapter: On the Imamate: Second Issue: On showing who among mankind may be appointed an Imam, pp. 231-235

Documentary film: The Caliph: Part 3 – Decline

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXXSo7WzZsk&t=4s&ab_channel=AlJazeeEnglish

RECOMMENDED:

Carole Hillenbrand. "Islamic Orthodoxy or Realpolitik? Al-Ghazali's Views on Government." *Iran* 26 (1988): 81-94.

Assignments due: Weekly response 8
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 10: IBN SINA ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

REQUIRED READING:

Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of The Healing: A Parallel English Arabic Text*, translated by Michael E. Marmura. Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005.

Book 10:

- Chapter 5: *Concerning the caliph and the imam*, pp. 374-378

RECOMMENDED:

Miriam Galston. 1979. "Realism and Idealism in Avicenna's Political Philosophy." *The Review of Politics* 41, no. 4 (1979): 561-577

Assignments due: Weekly response 9
 Response presentation and class discussion
 Paper proposal

WEEKS 11: IBN RUSHD ON WHO SHOULD RULE

REQUIRED READING:

Ibn Rushd. *Averroes on Plato's Republic*, translated by Ralph Lerner. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974.

- Second Treatise, pp. 121-153

RECOMMENDED:

Belo, Catarina. Some Considerations on Averroes' Views Regarding Women and Their Role in Society. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 20, no. 1 (2009), 1–20.

Fakhry, Majid. *Averroes (Ibn Rushd): His Life, Works and Influence*. Oxford, England: One World Publication, 2001.

- Chapter 8: Ethics and Politics, pp. 97-114

Assignments due: Weekly response 10
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 12: SCOPE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

REQUIRED READING:

Jaana S. Islam & Adem Eryigit. *Islam and the State in Ibn Taymiyya: Translation and Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

- Chapter 3: The Office of Islamic Government, pp. 45-49
- Chapter 5.3: Caliphate vs Monarchy, pp. 144-152

RECOMMENDED:

Anjum, Ovamir. *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Chapter 6:

- *The nature of political authority*, pp. 246-248
- *Formal doctrine: Ibn Taymiyya and the caliphate*, pp. 252-265

Hassan, Mona. "Modern Interpretations and Misinterpretations." In *Ibn Taymiyya and His Times*, edited by Youssef Rapoport and Shahab Ahmed, 338-350. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Assignments due: Weekly response 11
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 13: LEGITIMATE POLITICAL AUTHORITY & ITS SCOPE

REQUIRED READING:

Ibn Khaldūn. *The Muqaddimah*

- Chapter 3/1: *Royal authority and large dynastic power are attained only through a group and group feeling*, p. 313
- Chapter 3/23: *The meaning of caliphate and imamate*, pp. 385-388
- Chapter 3/24: *The differences of Muslim opinion concerning the laws and conditions governing the caliphate*, pp. 388-402
- Chapter 3/25: *Shi'ah tenets concerning the question of the imamate*, pp. 402-414
- Chapter 3/26: *The transformation of the caliphate into royal authority*, pp. 414-428

RECOMMENDED:

Fromherz, Allen J. "Writing History as a Political Act: Ibn Khaldun. 'Asabiyya, and Legitimacy." In *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*, edited by Amira K. Bennison, 47-57. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014.

March, Andrew. "Constitutional Authority." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Islamic Law*, edited by Peri Bearman and Rudolph Peters, 179-192. London: Routledge, 2016.

Assignments due: Weekly response 12
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 14: LEGITIMACY OF THE SULTAN IN OTTOMAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

REQUIRED READING:

Marlow, Louise. *Medieval Muslim Mirrors for Princes*

- Chapter 1.5: The Arabic, Persian and Turkish Mirror Literatures: The Early Modern Period (Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century), pp. 16-18

Celebi, Katib. *The Balance of Truth*, translated by G. L. Lewis. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957.

- Chapter 11: The Cursing of Yazid, pp. 84-88.

RECOMMENDED:

Marinos Sariyannis. *A History of Ottoman Political Thought up to the Early Nineteenth Century*. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018.

Chapter 1: The Empire in the Making

- Section 2: The Introduction of Imperial Ideals, pp. 44-46
- Section 3: Shifting Means of Legitimation, pp. 59-62

Assignments due: Weekly response 13
 Response presentation and class discussion

WEEK 15: CONCLUDING REMARKS