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What Makes A Strong Leader? The Power of the 99 Names

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Introduction

What makes a leader? How do we apply traditional values in a way that is appropriate for conditions today, with a view toward future developments? There are many questions, but few deeply satisfying answers. People say they want strong leaders. But what qualities make a strong leader who is truly good and beneficial for a community?

From a traditional Islamic and Arab perspective, being a good leader meant following true guidance and developing noble traits in the self through the emulation of divine qualities. It is this tradition of cultivating divine qualities in the self (*takhalluq bi-akhlaq allah*) that formed the vital core of Islamic and Arab teachings on leadership as a form of service to God and to the community. When the divine qualities, *Asma' Allah al-Husna* (the 99 Beautiful Names of God) were invoked in the name of a person, that person was often called the servant of the quality: hence the name *Abd ul-Rahman* (Servant of the Compassionate) and not just *Rahman*. A person who excelled in the service of a divine quality was a true leader of the people.

Leadership in the Middle East was traditionally understood to be based on interlocking covenants in which the delegation of power and authority was contingent on the willingness of the *'abd* (servant [of God]) and *khalif* (steward for the community) to honor an interest greater than his own and renounce purely personal aspirations for power and authority. On the one hand, the would-be leader was first and foremost responsible and subservient to God, whose grace and blessing were conditional upon humble surrender. On the other hand, the aspirant to leadership was also responsible to the community, whose loyalty could only be expected if he fulfilled his divine obligations to them. The ideal leader from a traditional perspective, therefore, was doubly a servant – both to God and to the people. Service to God and representation of *all* the people -- all groups and interests -- constitute the joint, essential functions that make this individual a greater leader.

Traditional Islamic and Arab values are most urgent to reflect on at a time when Iraq and the Middle East desperately needs greater leaders who are in touch both with the needs of others and with the spiritual richness of their heritage. Islamic teachings

on the divine qualities constitute a foundational – yet also contemporary and dynamic – path for those who seek to manifest authentic and essential values in times of change through dialogical engagement with their communities. In practice, leadership emerges within the context of communication and action. It is a function of an operational situation and an understood action program, and demands a generous measure of free assent from those who follow. A great leader may wish to exercise what he or she feels to be its natural bent for leadership, however this will be impossible unless followers consent to be led. In short, coercion and the disempowerment of the community is not leadership, as resources needed for progress and community well-being are diverted to maintain institutions of fear. Who leads and who follows, in other words, is important only *after* agreement is reached on where everyone wants to go; in other words, after the articulation of vision and the establishment of cooperation and trust.

How do we begin? Contemplation of divine qualities as expressed in the *Asma' Allah al-Husna* provides a template and a model for reflection both for personal training and for the effort to actualize the highest values of the community. Where these are present, the essential prerequisites emerge to inspire the confidence, support, and cooperation of a community that rewards leadership with the dynamism and unity needed to envision and achieve a collective destiny.

Leadership is Empowerment

Being a leader involves being a representative both of leadership qualities and of people. A leader models leadership qualities by speaking and acting respectfully toward everyone. To be a true statesperson, one must also be an accomplished facilitator. The leader as facilitator is a compelling example of the quality of *al-Malik*, the Possessor of Power or Sovereignty. Politics and leadership always involve power, but power for what purpose? A leader, in the fullest spirit of generosity (emulating *al-Wahhab*, the Bestower, *al-Razzaq*, the Provider, and *al-Muqit*, the Maintainer), is one who owns power in order to empower others. This power manifests *al-Qadir*, the All-Powerful.

Yet, what actions are connected to such power? Moral leadership is the ability to inspire or awaken (*al-Khabir*, the One Who is Aware) people to their innate potential. A leader provokes people to act, and act toward proper ends, that are ultimately for the good of the whole community. With the responsibility of empowerment, he or she awakens and encourages people, both men and women, to fully participate in society at all levels (social, moral, economic, and political) and to form and develop their own accounts of social reality. In doing so, a leader then becomes a witness (*al-Shahid*, the One who bears witness) to the societal processes through diligent observation of his/her own actions and environment (*al-Raqib*, the Ever-Watchful, *al-Hasib*, the One who takes into Account, *al-Muhsi*, the Accountant).

Clearly, a greater leader needs to be an effective politician (a good strategist and tactician), but this needs to be in service of moral statesmanship, not personal and momentary advantage (*al-Ghani*, The Rich, for he or she has no desire, and *al-Mughni*, One who does not need). A variety of characteristics describe such a moral stature (*al-Majid*, Nobility, *al-Jalil*, Majesty, *al-Azim*, Dignity or Excellence).

The power of an effective leader is thus drawn from a multifaceted strength. For the leader to remain true to the purpose of their leadership, power has to be anchored upon an unwavering commitment to the common good and to engendering all the qualities considered above. But fulfilling this requirement demands that leadership

must communicate these principles in speech and in deed both clearly and consistently. When wisdom for the need of the community calls on tough and forceful action, the leader must be tough and forceful (*al-Aziz*, Mighty, *al-Jabbar*, the Repairer, *al-Qawi*, the Strong, *al-Matin*, the Firm in Resolve). The problem is that force can easily get out of hand, and often triggers cycles of counter-resistance through injury to dignity, mercy, wisdom, compassion, and unity. When there are no ways to ensure that the use of force is used only to uphold the presence of these other qualities, which it is obliged to protect, the use of force may ultimately destroy the qualities and purposes for which it is merely servant. Indeed, the greater leader must know how, above all else, to avoid having the exercise of force, whenever appropriately possible, and to know how to reunite the community whenever official action is taken that divides the hearts and minds of the community it serves and represents.

Leadership requires more than the elites merely adopting a mood of optimism or generating fear of the future. Leadership requires action and intention. In order to balance the *sifat al-jalaliyyah*, qualities of Majesty, a leader also needs to develop *sifat al-jamaliyyah*, the qualities of beauty. The first two names of Allah which are *al-Rahman*, *al-Rahim*, the Compassionate and the Merciful. Every *surah*, or chapter, within the Qur'an except for one begins with the invocation of the *Bismillah al-Rahman, al-Rahim*, "In the Name of the Compassionate, the Merciful." Out of all the names and qualities of God, *rahma* is the most mentioned in all its derivative forms in the Qur'an. Both of these facts and many other legitimize the Hadith by the Prophet Muhammed: "God's Mercy is Greater than His Wrath." God's manifestation, mercy and compassion, have always been a means of God relating to and with human beings. Thus God's presence has been called the "Breath of the Merciful"—for He breathed mercy into Adam—and human beings accepting His mercy achieve sympathetic consciousness.

As reflected in the Arabic saying: "I am the *al-Rahman* and thou art the *al-Rahim*, I have derived thy name from my name." *Al-Rahman* is God's Mercy and *al-Rahim* is creation's compassion. *Al-Rahman* gives Mercy only to the merciful, who is receptive to His mercy. In turn those who embody *al-Rahim*, the merciful, relate to one another through mercy.

This receptivity is the inherent nature of *rahma*, mercy, and an essential element of a leader. History shows us that the loyalty inspired by leaders who demonstrate meercy and compassion are profound. Other qualities linked to *rahma* are *al-Latif* (the Gentle), *al-Halim* (the Clement), *al-Karim* (the Generous), *al-Wadud* (the Loving), *al-Ra'uf* (the Kind). Empathetic consciousness enables a good leader to forgive and spread the habit of forgiveness to others (*al-Ghaffar*, the Forgiver, *al-Ghafur*, the All-Forgiving, *al-'Afu*, the Pardoner).

Guardian of the Public Interest

A greater leader cultivates these qualities at the individual as well as the collective levels. Every thought, action, and word is directed in relation to the context of the greater Whole. A greater leader becomes a guardian of the public's interests (*al-Mumin*, the Guardian of Faith). He or she protects (*al-Muhaymin*, the Protector, and *al-Wakil*, the Solver of Problems, and *al-Hafez*, the Preserver). As spokesperson, he or she embodies visionary leadership and seeks to represent all of the people. The subtle relationship between power and influence, between executive image and agenda setting is constant and dynamic. To effectively lead, it is a necessity that a leader inspires mutual trust, and this requires the ability to be a good communicator: the leader's view

must be all encompassing (al-Wasi, the All-Embracing, and al-Basit, the Expander). This means that leaders must be very good listeners (al-Sami', the All-Hearing) and fine observers (al-Basir, the All-Seeing). To hold vision is to be a mapmaker: to see that all of the old maps are out of date, and that we do not yet have new, good and reliable maps. In order to invent our own maps, with all the skills that doing so accurately and compassionately require, leaders need both humility and dignity (which may be linked to al-Shakur, the Thankful, and al-Hamid, the Praiseworthy).

Leadership demands vision. Why vision? Vision avoids drift and self-centeredness, it mobilizes the energy and imagination of the people, and it widens and deepens the sense of mutual responsibility while articulating what is possible and demanding discipline, sacrifice, and the capacity to dream. The presence of vision on the part of leaders is the best insurance against the dangers and needs of chauvinism and the short sightedness of self-interest. The results of chauvinistic leadership are compromises and cynicism, and the demoralization of community and tradition. Much of our common "wisdom" is rooted in and held stagnant by cynicism, premised on the belief that human society is not capable of rising above its best (albeit selfish) dreams. This belief paves the way for the dangers of "charismatic leadership." A democratic society should not tempt the people to overload leadership by expecting too much. In addition, leaders should not expect blind loyalty. Blind loyalty denies creative dynamics that challenge and stimulate the leader. The charismatic leader earns greatness by learning how to listen to observers, followers, and advisors.

Leaders need vision that has faith (*al-Mu'min*, the Faithful) and wisdom (*al-Alim*, the All-Knowing). Like power, leaders do not need wisdom for themselves alone, for they possess the courage and strength to be able to share it. One cannot be an effective representative without finding and facilitating creative ways to prioritize and balance all the interests of the people and groups in a fair and inclusive way on the basis of wisdom (*al-Hakim*, the All-Wise), which is both principled and practical, far seeing and yet focused on meeting the issues of the moment in a fair (and just) and balanced (in *al-Hakam*, the Judge, wisdom is connected to the sense of having good judgment). A successful nation needs a broad public dialogue, with a great variety of suggestions and opinions, and not only consultation. "Justice" (*al-'Adl*) itself is a dynamic and not merely static or purely legal concept. Justice is embodied in the "rolling consensus" of people for more democracy, more equality, more opportunity, and pride in one's community and tradition, above all perhaps – for more of a sense of community.

From Leadership By Force To Leadership By Consensus and Cooperation

Building a system of good governance must begin with good leadership – from the outset this means that the character and education of leadership is crucial. Secondly, it is the recognition that the people have the right to know and learn what proper leadership is, so they may be empowered to remind those in leadership positions of their responsibilities. An attentive citizenry is one of the most important institutions to ensure greater leadership and reward effective government. Traditionally in the Middle East, power has been dispersed in society, although not along the lines of Western systems of checks and balances, and there have been ways of choosing and removing leaders that often worked fairly well to keep them representative, responsible and honest. Through working such qualities as *al-Hadi*, the Guide, *al-Rashid*, the Guide to the Right Path, and *al-Warith*, the Inheritor, a greater leader seeks to fulfill the sacred

trust to inspire and empower the whole community. This trust is essential for health, vibrancy and the long-term sustainability of a untied and prospering community.

True leaders are consensus builders (*al-Muqaddim*, the Expediter). They work to build mutual trust and agreement on principles of fairness among their people, as a basis for cooperative efforts in which all have some expectation of shared benefit (*al-Barr*, the Source of All Goodness). Since no one party can force any of the others to cooperate, and since each one has a selfish temptation not to cooperate, each must trust the others not to take advantage of both the opportunity and the temptation to cheat. Cooperation requires, then, mutual expectation of a willingness to sacrifice short-term self-interests for the common good (*al-Jame'*, the Gatherer).

Because of the need to rely on mutual trust, cooperation based on fairness involves some risk. The more confidence one has in the trustworthiness of the other cooperators, the less this risk will be. The role of fairness in the game is to obligate cooperators not to take advantage of each other in a risky situation. It is sometimes necessary to build a basis for trust by starting with relatively low-loss, low-risk cooperative ventures, and working up towards bigger, higher-payoff, but higher-risk enterprises.

While having shared objectives that benefit all is a necessary precondition for cooperation, it is not sufficient. There is a crucial role for leadership at each stage in the confidence-building and community-building process (*al-Salaam*, The Source of Peace): forming common goals, establishing mechanisms for cooperation, ensuring that efforts will be coordinated, determining the fair allocation of benefits and burdens, and identifying the roles and responsibilities of the various actors in the cooperative enterprise. Leadership is needed to promote solidarity without which the highest values of the community do not manifest and underlying norms of fairness and reciprocity cannot be effective. When cooperation is achieved, however, a greater leader will be known as a good friend (*al-Wali*, the Protecting Friend).

For too long the Middle East has only known strong leaders who have based their power and authority on coercion and the subversion of the needs and will of their communities. Greater leadership is not patterned on the worst expressions of post-colonial leadership, where the misfortune of inherited and elitist indifference to the community was compounded by the diffusion of the military means of oppression. Instead, Middle Easterners are presented with an opportunity to reclaim what is authentic and enduring in their traditions and to infuse deeper meaning and vision into the tasks and challenges that lay before them. As foundational reminders of the true nature of strength and power, these qualities of greater leadership may be reflected upon in navigating through the various obstacles and open pathways that lie ahead, and clarifying principle or strengthening resolve when held back by doubt or temptation.

A greater leader who embodies the qualities represented by the *Asma' Allah al-Husna* is a democratic leader, in the true sense of democracy as a form of collaborative and participatory communal governance. Just as positive character cannot be imposed but must rather be consciously cultivated, so it is with democracy. Democracy cannot be successfully implanted from the outside. It is an indigenous and delicate flower that only flourishes when deeply rooted in the dreams and hopes of the great majority of a nation. Democratic behavior is a learned behavior, and democracy is only learned by practice. Today Iraq has an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate greater leadership and give hope to a community that has been exhausted by systematic

disempowerment and denial of its voice and dreams in the making of its future. In bringing hope and inspiration to the community through leadership, vision and empowerment, Iraq today is charged with the enormous and daunting task of bringing the future to the community. The greater the challenge, that much greater is the reward.

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