

Assessment One

A Profile of a Significant Thinker Associated with Muslim Politics: Ibn Taymiyya

Muslim Politics

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Introduction:

Taqi al-Din Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya is undoubtedly one of the most significant and influential philosophers of Islamic thought. His puritanical approach to Sunni Islam has not only had a profound impact on Islamic history but also on contemporary Islamic societies worldwide. Preaching for Islamic reform, Ibn Taymiyya's approach to an ideal Islamic society is a return to the original teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, advocating to incorporate (or re-incorporate) the original tenants of Islam, pure from innovation (*bidah*) and changes. Although there were other factors leading to his subsequent detentions, Ibn Taymiyya was jailed by various regimes in the Islamic Caliphate six times within six years, primarily due to legal and theological-related discrepancies he had with the state.¹

Yet, even when analyzing from a contemporary political lens, this ideological predecessor of the much later Wahhabi and Salafi movements is not without controversy. The impact of his philosophies, both political and social has garnered significant attention, particularly in its relationship with militant groups. The concept of a glorified imagined past of an Islamic society without the tarnished innovations of later generations commonly features an image of how this indigenous form of Islam can withstand changes, from various others. These others commonly include those within Islam (although their status as Muslims according to this specific ideology is often invalidated), as well as those outside of Islam, primarily Jews and Christians.

This essay is going to examine aspects of Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy, primarily on his views of Islamic political structure and ideal Islamic society. Part I will examine Ibn Taymiyya's concept of the outsider within Islamic political society, illustrating his vision of Islamic political authority. Part II will examine, the relevance of his teachings and philosophy to contemporary militant groups and modern-day Wahhabi and Salafi movements. Although these factors will analyze the impact of Ibn Taymiyya's views on Islamic political philosophy and theory, these factors also affect contemporary Islamic thought, primarily on intra-Islamic coexistence and interfaith relations.

¹ Donald Little. 1973. "The Historical and Historiographical Significance of the Detention of Ibn Taymiyya" (International Journal of Middle East Studies), 4.3: p 313 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/162162>

Part I.

One key theme in Ibn Taymiyya's political philosophy is the significance of the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in Islamic society, particularly within the political framework. Within early Islamic caliphates, there is a unique relationship of non-Muslims having a significant role in the Islamic political system, specifically as adept administrators. When assessing the role of administrators within early Islamic caliphates, particularly the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, there is a strong presence of Christian administrators, sometimes working directly with the reigning Caliph. Primarily due to their experience in administration within the Byzantine Empire and the fluency of various regional languages, their adeptness by Muslim rulers was instilled from the onset.² Yet, this was not without controversy. Even before Ibn Taymiyya's time, there were complaints from Muslim subjects within the Islamic Caliphate, particularly regarding the influence and stature of non-Muslims in positions of political power.³

Ibn Taymiyya's political philosophy of the collective "other" within Islamic political society is cohesive and lucid. When assessing authoritarian rule in Islamic societies, Ibn Taymiyya has an interestingly different reaction to the ruler of the regime, depending on if the ruler is a Muslim or non-Muslim. For example, if a leader is a non-Muslim tyrant, Ibn Taymiyya is of the belief that raising arms would be obligatory. However, this sentiment is not held with the same vigilance as that of a despotic Muslim ruler. For the latter, Ibn Taymiyya believes that a Muslim subject should obey a Muslim ruler, regardless of his tyranny since having a sitting (Muslim) leader as opposed to none is preferable.⁴

When analyzing this within a political framework, there is a clear distinction of obedience in Ibn Taymiyya's political philosophy, to that of a Muslim and non-Muslim, and the rules that should be followed for either possible circumstance by the wider Islamic community. Interestingly enough, this sentiment is further depicted in Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of Husayn

² Mun'im Sirry. 2011. "The Public Role of *Dhimmīs* during 'Abbāsīd Times," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 74.2: p. 202 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41287947>

³ Sirry, p. 194

⁴ Camille Mulcaire. 2013. "Assessing *Al-Qaeda* from the Teachings of *Ibn Taymiyya*," *E-International Relations*: p. 2 <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/assessing-al-qaeda-from-the-teachings-of-ibn-taymiyya/>

ibn Ali's, a highly revered figure in Islamic (especially Shiite) tradition, revolt against the often-portrayed corrupt reign of the Umayyad Caliph, Yazid I.⁵

The concept of a collective other within Islamic societies is a prominent feature of Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy. However, the incorporation of the antithesis of Islamic purity within a political framework is not limited to just Jews and Christians- it extends to those within Islam as well, although Ibn Taymiyya and his likeness would take exception to label them Muslims. This can be witnessed in his demonization of Shiites.

For instance, when assessing early Islamic history and the schisms associated with multiple personalities during this period, Ibn Taymiyya not only creatively denounces Jews but also Shiism as a doctrine, illustrating the threat they both potentialize to the wider Islamic community and to political stability. Ibn Taymiyya illustrates this by relaying a legendary story of Ibn Saba, who according to Ibn Taymiyya, was a devout and founding member of the Shiite movement, who held reverence for the fourth Rashidun Caliph, Ali. Apparently, Ibn Saba was also a member of the mob that killed the third Rashidun Caliph, Uthman. However, Ibn Saba was a closeted Jew, and the entire purpose of his exclamation of Shiism and reverence for Ali was a wider conspiracy to destabilize the Islamic government, thereby alluding directly to the dangers that both Jews and Shiites present to Islamic political stability since the pair is synonymous in their interests.⁶ Therefore, one can witness a joint narrative of anti-Semitism and anti-Shiite rhetoric, illustrating the dangers both present in not just their involvement in Islamic government, but civility in Islamic society.

Part II.

Although jailed for much of his own life, Ibn Taymiyya enjoys interesting relevance when analyzing wider Islamic political philosophy. This is especially true when assessing the political philosophy of multiple militant groups, such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Boko Haram. Militant figureheads, such as Osama bin Laden have mentioned Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy on multiple occasions, justifying their rhetoric and actions to that of Ibn Taymiyya's existing

⁵ Nebil Husayn. *Opposing the Imam: The Legacy of the Nawasib in Islamic Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 123

⁶ Husayn, p. 122

philosophy.⁷ Similarly, Boko Haram echoes a sentiment to that of Bin Laden from a more philosophical perspective, specifically to the ideas of the reformation of Islam to its (believed) indigenous roots, as well as it being the basis for Islamic law.⁸

Although there are numerous political, social, and economic factors for the rise of militancy, there is an interesting parallel of shared ideology between militant groups to that of Ibn Taymiyya's, often desired for potential implementation. For instance, the concept of the prevalence of innovation (*bidah*) amongst Muslims, is a common feature in both Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy, often echoed by radical groups. Both Ibn Taymiyya and groups such as ISIS used the concept of *bidah* as illustrating the deviation of each's contemporary Muslim society from indigenous Islam. In terms of ISIS, this often leads to the destruction of sites and masses of respective minority groups, including but not limited to Shiites, Sufis, and Christians.⁹

It is also important to note, that Ibn Taymiyya's influence is not just limited to radical terror outfits, but also contemporary Islamic governments. This is primarily witnessed with the official decreed state-sponsored doctrine of Wahhabism within the monarchy of Saudi Arabia. When assessing Ibn Taymiyya's influence on the Wahhabi and Salafi tradition, he and Ibn al-Qayyim are often considered to be the literary founding inspiration for the 17th century's Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's puritanical movement, along with other Hanbilite scholars.¹⁰

Interestingly, one can also witness the concept of the abhorrence of *bidah*, within Saudi Arabian state policy. Like ISIS' destruction of religious and archeological sites, Saudi Arabia has engaged in similar acts of destruction of shrines, particularly of Sufi and Shiite importance. Following the new world order post-World War I in 1925, the newly formed Saudi Arabian state, destroyed the historic Al-Baqi graveyard, also the burial grounds of prominent Islamic figures, to avoid the practice of possible grave worship, over the fear of committing possible *shirk* or

⁷ Atta Barkindo. 2013. "'Join the Caravan': The Ideology of Political Authority in Islam from Ibn Taymiyya to Boko Haram in North-Eastern Nigeria", Perspectives on Terrorism, 7.3: p. 35

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26296938?seq=1>

⁸ Barkindo, p. 37

⁹ Hassan Hassan. 2016. "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 5 <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context-pub-63746>

¹⁰ Nabil Mouline. 2014. "The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia", (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), p. 53 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1t4p>

idolatry.¹¹ Hosting the gravesites of multiple Shiite Imams and Sufi (along with Sunni) figures, the destruction is often viewed as an act of religious supremacy of puritanical Wahhabism over that of other sects and subsects within Islam.

Conclusion

The relevance of Ibn Taymiyya and his doctrine has had far-reaching implications, in not just Islamic history but the contemporary geopolitical Islamic environment. Although jailed numerous times within his lifetime, Ibn Taymiyya would eventually find a passionate audience, not least of all on later Muslim figures such as Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his eventual alliance with the later formed Saudi state.

However, the prevalence of Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy and the similarities shared with contemporary militant groups is also noteworthy, especially in the concept of *bidah* and *shirk* when engaging in polemics (and violence) against various religions, sects, and subsects. Although there are multiple factors for the rise of militant groups, especially in terms of global politics, the correlation between Ibn Taymiyya's philosophy and that of militant groups allows for a wider understanding of not just the historical factors associated with the rise of puritanical Islamic movements, but it's contemporary relevance when attempting to understand intra-Islamic and interfaith relations.

¹¹ Adeel Mohammadi. 2015. "The Destruction of Jannat Al-Baqi: A Case of Wahhabi Iconoclasm", University of Toronto Undergraduate Journal of Middle East Studies, 1.8: p. 49-50

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