

Qur'anic Guidance on Good Governance

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An Overview

Islam is first and foremost an ethical, practical and spiritual understanding of the world and the cosmos mediated by the concept of the absolute unity of God (*tawhīd*). By subscribing to unity of God one undertakes a covenant with oneself, one's Creator and all other creatures. A person's belief in One God calls him to be responsible not only to himself and fellow human beings, but to everything in the plant and the animal world and the overall environment, as everything in the universe is created by the one God, and has a purpose. In order for man to understand this purpose, the Qur'an repeatedly asks mankind to observe, ponder, and use reason. (Consider, for example, 4:82; 23:68; 38: 29; 47: 24.)¹ The emphasis on the role of reason in determining man's relationship with everything in the universe is central to man's ability to utilize it for the benefit of humanity. By highlighting the rights and obligations of God over man, and man over man, the Qur'an establishes the point that man serves God mainly by serving humanity.

In this journey of life one is happy and successful when one enjoys one's life in an orderly and civilized manner. It gives spiritual satisfaction when one fulfills one's responsibilities to God and the society. In this process the individual will not only satisfy his material and spiritual needs, but also contribute positively to human civilization. Naturally, for the realization of this vision of human life, good governance is a prerequisite. The importance of good governance is underscored by the fact that no civilization in history was established without a good government. Therefore an individual may seek happiness and success in his personal life by obtaining guidance from the Most Merciful – the Creator of the universe – in fulfilling his obligations toward

¹ There was lively debate on the conflict between reason and revelation in early Islamic history. The Qur'an places priority on the use of reason in accepting the divine message. With the passage of time it became clear that Islamic rationality would never accept a conflict between reason and revelation. If any such conflict occurred, it must be due to an incorrect interpretation of revelation or because of a misunderstanding of reason or lack of human knowledge which is in constant state of evolution and improvement. Therefore, pure reason would never contradict authentic revelation. The debate reached its climax with the contributions of Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazzali. Then Ibn Taymiyyah gave the most moderate and rational explanation of the issue. For detailed discussions, see Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyyah, *Dār Ta'arud al-'Aql wa al-Naql*. (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud University Press, 1979); and George F Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

society. The Islamic worldview integrates the role of the individual in absolute terms with the overarching concern for peace and general human well-being.

Human beings are a special creation of God. God has created man as His representative (*khalīfah*). God has made everything else in the universe subservient to man, and if he utilizes them positively, he participates in God's continuous process of creation. This participation is neither by chance nor optional, but a responsibility – the purpose of one's very life and existence. God has not left man empty-handed to fulfill his responsibilities in this life. He has endowed man with reason, physical and intellectual capabilities, knowledge and other resources. These potentialities and resources – including one's very own life – are given to man as a trust (*amānah*). Hence he is not the absolute owner of any one of them. Even his own body and life has been given to him on trust; hence, he is not allowed to abuse them or harm himself. That is why drug abuse and suicide are forbidden (*haram*) in Islam. Potentially there is an enormous prospect for innovative creativity and growth in this process of creation. But this cannot occur without a direct involvement of man. Since human beings have been endowed with the ability to think, rationalize and understand, they must strive to cultivate their potentials in order to qualify to be contributors to this process of creation and growth initiated and spearheaded by God. Thus the underlying principle guiding man's life and relationships with all the other creatures is that everything in the universe is a trust (*amānah*) from God to man, and as representative of God on earth, man has been assigned the duty of establishing civilization and a peaceful society.

God has fashioned the nature – *fitrah* – of every human being in such a way that no one can survive alone.² In other words social organization is vital for mankind, and no human organization can be established without some form of universal principles accommodating the interests of all or most members of a given group. Therefore it may be safely suggested that some form of political organization existed from the very beginning of human history. Unfortunately very little information is available about the early formation of ancient civilizations. The Qur'an tells that mankind originally belonged to one community (*ummah*), and God has guided them by sending prophets with glad tidings and warnings, but they disagreed among themselves for selfish motives; this led to division in the society (2: 213). These divisions occurred because some "holders of religion" sold the sacred message "at a cheap price" (2: 102-103) for their personal worldly gains. Every individual is free to choose between an ethical life and a life motivated by selfishness, greed, and evil desires. The challenge for mankind is to overcome this negative power and thereby contribute to the growth of civilization. Good governance is indispensable for the peace and prosperity of human civilization. We believe that with the passage of time human beings have grown more mature and they have acquired greater enlightenment to understand properly the purpose of life. They are also supposed to have acquired better judgment and self-control to understand Divine guidance. This document contains the following fundamental key points.

² This is a key concept in both Islamic ethics and theology. For a detailed discussion, see Al-Tahir Ibn Ashur, *Maqāsīd al-Sharī'ah al-Islamiyyah*. (Amman: Dār al-Nufais, 1999), 189-195.

1. The essence of Qur'anic guidance on good governance is the understanding of the concept of *amānah* (trust) and *'adālah* (justice) within the framework of the Islamic worldview.
2. The Islamic worldview is determined by the Qur'anic story of creation.
3. The concepts of *amānah* and *'adālah* (justice) provide a framework for the main practical concepts (i.e., *sharī'ah* and *shūra*) of good governance in the Qur'an.
4. The principles behind the *sharī'ah* and *shūra* are open to human understanding based on reason.
5. Islamic humanism manifests itself in a significant way in the formulation of principles central to the establishment of Islamic political institutions.
6. An understanding of Islamic humanism necessitates both a deep look into Islamic history and the development of an Islamic theory of knowledge.
7. While *amānah* and *'adālah* provide the ontological basis, the *sharī'ah* and *shūra* furnish the practical mechanism for Islamic polity.
8. The *maqāsid* (objectives) of the *sharī'ah* are meant to preserve religion, life, reason, progeny and wealth. An overarching principle of all policy making (political, legal, economic, social, environmental etc.) that emerges from these objectives is *maslāhah* (public interest). Public interest can be defined in simple words as promoting and preserving the things that are beneficial to society and preventing the things that are harmful to it.

Human Beings are God's Vicegerents on Earth

The Qur'an clearly underlines the role of the individual and of the community in establishing a government. The Qur'an explains its worldview by telling the story of the origin of man. It introduces the story of creation through a conversation between God and the angels (2: 30-39; 15: 28-44; 38: 69-74). One will find similarities between the stories of creation in the Qur'an and in the Old Testament. According to the Qur'an, God expressed His will to the angels about creating on earth a new being who would be the best of all His creations and would be assigned the status of His vicegerent (*khalīfah*). The angels expressed their reservations, fearing that the new being would create chaos and disorder in society and shed blood and would bring suffering to his own species. This cautious response by the angels indicates the potential aptitude of human beings. In response God did not rule out the possibility of corruption and bloodshed by human beings completely; He only said to the angels that they did not know what He (God) knew. God then created Adam from clay and breathed into him His Own Spirit (15: 29; 32: 9; 38: 72). Thus Adam was gifted not only with such faculties of hearing, seeing, and understanding; he also received the potential to develop God-like qualities such as being caring, responsible, kind, just, wise, forgiving and so on. Human beings, therefore, are unique and privileged as opposed to everything else in creation. The Qur'an also speaks of a covenant between man and God (7: 172) in which man recognized God's position as his Creator. In other words, the ability to perceive the existence of the Supreme Being is inborn in human nature.

God also created a spouse for Adam and taught him certain "names" (interpreted as knowledge) and demonstrated in the presence of angels that man knew more than

them. As God blew His Own Spirit into Adam and blessed him with faculties to acquire knowledge, it is these two components of His being that were at the foundation of man's unique status as the best of all the creations of God, and hence his role as God's vicegerent. God asked the angels to prostrate before Adam (to acknowledge the higher abilities of man): all prostrated except one named Satan, who was living amongst the angels. The Qur'an also refers to him as Iblīs. The Qur'an introduces Satan as one who was from among the jinn, a species made of fire (18: 50). Satan disobeyed God's command to prostrate, arguing that he (Satan) was superior to man because he originated from fire and Adam from clay. It is noteworthy that Satan based his argument on his pride, rooted in perceived racial superiority, a phenomenon commonly responsible for causing conflict in society. Satan ignored the fact that God had breathed His Own Spirit into Adam and also that Adam had already demonstrated his superiority in knowledge. God then expressed His displeasure and expelled Satan from the rank of the angels. Satan, however, turned vengeful against Adam and sought God's permission to live until the Last Day, which was granted.

God allowed Adam and his spouse to dwell in the heavens with a specific instruction — not to approach a certain tree. However, because of his forgetful nature or because of his desire for immortality (*al-khuld*), Adam did not remember God's instruction and Satan succeeded in persuading him and his female companion to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Adam and his companion immediately realized their fault and begged for God's mercy and prayed for His forgiveness. God granted their prayer and they were forgiven.³

God now brought Adam into action by sending him and his companion to earth. Satan, the enemy of Adam, was also sent to earth. All of them would dwell on earth for a certain period (*ilā h□īn*). During this period Adam and his progeny would be tested for whether or not they would honor God's act of forgiveness and live up to His expectation. From the Qur'anic perspective this is the beginning of human history. And this history becomes a challenge for mankind; it presents man with choices and the freedom to choose from various options in life. It would be a test for man to live in history and choose to be either a participant in God's continuous process of creation or be an accomplice of Satan and spread corruption and disorder on earth. While God accepted Satan's desire to spread corruption and disorder on earth, He assured man, saying that Satan shall not be able to tempt those who would sincerely follow divine guidance. The children of Adam were to receive guidance throughout history. Therefore, the Qur'an maintains the position of the possibility of God's intervention in history. The Qur'an mentions the names of many prophets through whom guidance was given to mankind. The Qur'an emphasizes that every community in history was guided by prophets from within the community.

God intervenes in history in a number of ways, miracles being one of them: the birth of Jesus was one such miracle. In the early period miracles were necessary in order

³ The story of creation is fully narrated in two places in the Qur'an: in chapter 2 (*al-Baqarah*) and chapter 7 (*al-A'raf*), though the general theme of creation is treated with different emphases in other parts of the Book.

to convince mankind of the divine connections between God and the prophets. With the passage of time the human mind matured and reached a stage where it was ready to understand the divine connection to prophethood rationally. The Qur'an generally holds rationalism and history as foundations of its divine connection. In response to the demand made to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to perform miracles, the Qur'an produced rational arguments from nature and history to establish the existence of God and His role in history. From the Islamic perspective both the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad have been preserved by history. This Qur'anic narrative of creation underscores the commonalities in the monotheistic interpretation of human history.

Because of the forgetful nature of man, God's guidance throughout history reminds him to establish peace on earth and to guard himself against Satan's tempting and maintain law and order in society. Thus the earth became for human beings a ground for continuous struggle. According to the Qur'an, the prophets in history reminded mankind of the fundamentals of God's message and stressed the direct spiritual-ethical encounter between the individual and God. When man is reminded about the purpose of his creation and his role as God's vicegerent, it appeals to his nature. God's message is rational and for justice. As a result man is generally inclined to do good to his self and to his society. However, he is in constant struggle between his forgetful character and his desire to be good and happy by establishing peace with justice and order in society. This struggle is against evil forces on the one hand, and human longing for perfection on the other. In this struggle against evil forces, God is in favor of man. Whenever he does anything good and contributes positively for himself and for society, he naturally feels happy and content. If he is swayed by evil forces, initially he feels bad and discontented. But if he continues to be swayed, God lets him exercise his freedom to choose. Since this freedom is the product of the sense of responsibility expected of man in his role as the vicegerent of God, it comes with a corresponding obligation to be accountable. For every decision or choice that the individual makes, he is accountable. It is through this built-in principle and process of accountability that the Qur'an combines worldly human life with the life hereafter. It declares that man will be accountable for his actions, and at the end of human history there will be another life and man will be rewarded or punished on the basis of his performance in this struggle. For the children of Adam this world or human history will be a testing ground, and although God has created man in the best constitution, man also has the potential to go down to the lowest state of the low (95: 4-5).⁴ In other words the Qur'an grants the individual complete moral autonomy: God, the Sovereign, has bestowed man with the freedom and capacity to choose between good and evil. In this sense man is also sovereign in the making of his choices. Therefore, the Qur'an emphasizes both the ethics of intention and the ethics of action for human beings in carrying out their responsibilities.

The story of creation is very important for us to understand the role of individuals in human history, for it reveals a number of salient features about human nature which

⁴ It should be noted that the sources of evil are ultimately created by God, and Satan was initially good before he rejected the commandment of God. It should also be noted that the freedom of choice, which enables human beings to fulfill *amānah*, also enables them to misuse *amānah* and thereby commit evil.

are relevant in understanding the progression of human history. Even though man is the best of God's creations, being His vicegerent and carrying breathed His Own Spirit in him, God has also made him weak (4: 28) because He wants to test mankind. This means that although man has the potential to develop God-like qualities, he is also subject to temptation. In other words, although man has the intellectual and spiritual potential to internalize God's attributes, practice them in his personal and social life, and create peace and harmony on earth, he also has the potential to go astray. Unlike God, man has desires, passions, and physical needs; if they are guided by evil designs, these will cause him to be subjected to the Evil One. This aspect has been demonstrated in the story of creation in the character of Satan. Satan has been empowered till the end of history to tempt man and to lead him astray from achieving God-like qualities. This temptation is the root cause of corruption on earth. But man can save himself if he follows the guidance that God promised to Adam and his progeny through the prophets and the revelations sent at various stages in human history. Therefore, history from the Qur'anic perspective is a record of conflicts between man's potentials of being the true vicegerent of God on earth and his being subject to temptations from Satan. It is a struggle for right and truth, which could be achieved through following God's guidance and by overcoming wrong which befalls on man due to his weakness and unlimited desires and passion for self-centered material gains. Even worse, sometimes man has the capacity to internalize satanic motives and outperform Satan himself. In this struggle Satan is an anti-man force, and no man is immune from Satan's temptation, not even a prophet (22: 52; 17: 53). But at the same time God is with man in this struggle. Whenever man approaches God with a good intention, he receives God's favor manifold (4: 40; 6: 160). History, therefore, is a record of the continuous exercise of using the freedom to choose between right and wrong. The process of good governance begins with individual choice. To make a wise choice is a constant struggle for human beings. The more wisely he exercises this freedom, the freer he becomes from satanic temptations. The more careless one is in exercising this freedom, the more captive one becomes to satanic forces. God promises reward for man not only in the hereafter for following divine guidance, He also assures him of success and happiness in this world.

Man has an *Amānah* or Trust to Fulfill

The Qur'an mentions the trust (*amānah*) given to mankind — a trust which the heavens, the earth, and mountains refused to accept because they were afraid of its heavy burden (33: 72) — which requires the establishment of justice in society (4: 58). *Amānah* basically is a contract between God and man on man's role in history. It defines man's rights and responsibilities in relation to all other humans and his environment and the rest of God's creation.

The word *amānah* originates from three letter root-verb a, m and n (*amn*), which means to be in the state of peace, safety and security. In the noun form, the word becomes *aman*, meaning peace, security, safety, shelter and protection. *Amānah* literally means trust, reliability, trustworthiness, loyalty, faithfulness, integrity, honesty and confidence. From this root-verb also originates *imān* or faith. In other words the Qur'an seems to

highlight the point that peace in society is achieved through individual's faith. The concept of *amānah* binds individuals with society.

The term appears six times in the Qur'an, twice in Makkah and four times in Madinan verses. The same verse is repeated twice in Makkah. Referring to the moral fiber of believers, the Qur'an declares that they are "truthful to their trusts (*amānah*) and to their pledges" (23:8; and 70:32). The verse clearly prepares the believers intellectually and morally to be serious and accountable to their own lives, and to their families and societies. The Qur'an seems to be preparing the ground for establishing a peaceful model society in history, for such a society would have been possible only with the participation of believers with strong character. A strong character for the believers was necessary because they were destined to play a key role in governing society.

The next verse on the subject was revealed in the early days of the Prophet's residence in Madinah. In it, the Qur'an reminds the believers not to be disloyal to God or His prophet and not to be dishonest to the *amānah* delegated unto them (8: 27). In the next verse the Qur'an repeats the idea that worldly goods were only trials and temptation and that man should not be misled by the desire for these trivial gains. Verses 33: 72 and 2: 283 are reported to have been revealed during the mid-Madinan period. While verse 33: 72 highlights the magnitude of the trust given to man and which the heavens, the earth and mountains refused to undertake, verse 2: 283 emphasizes the importance of trust in business transactions.

Although the Qur'an points to man's naiveté in accepting this trust, the Qur'an also clearly states that man has the potential to fulfill it. The Qur'an also points out that "We turn man whichever way he wants to turn" (4: 115), and "God does not change the situation of a people until they change it themselves" (13: 11; 8: 53). *Amānah* makes human life meaningful because it makes him squarely responsible for creating a moral social order. It provides him with the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to be God's vicegerent on earth. In other words, the Qur'an, like the Old Testament, gives the human being dignity and nobility of purpose. This is diagrammatically opposed to the idea of an absolutely natural creation without any direct intervention of the Creator.

The concept of *amānah* determines the individual's relationship with the family, society, state, and government and the humanity at large. Man is attached to these institutions both materially and spiritually. *Amānah* establishes man's responsibility toward his kin, other human beings and socio-political institutions. The concept resolves the issues pertaining to the rights and responsibilities of individuals in every facet of life. Someone's right is someone else's responsibility; the individual has a weighty contract with his society, with the animal world, with the plant and mineral worlds, and with the overall environment.

The Qur'an emphasizes every individual's independent relation with God. In this sense one may interpret religion as an individual matter, but an individual can't fulfill his trust and covenant with God without acting in accordance with God's guidance. The Qur'anic guidance relates both to the individual and to society. The Qur'an emphasizes

the idea that God created man in order for him to serve his Creator by fulfilling this trust through establishing peace (*salām*) on earth. From the Qur'anic perspective this is possible only when mankind creates a viable and just social order based on ethical principles. How can such an order be established without a good government? Can any society function without a government? Obviously not. That is why since time immemorial, God has consistently sent guidance to humankind, and the Qur'an is the last of the books of guidance (2:2, 185). It is through this guidance that God has taught man how to differentiate between right and wrong, and how to discipline himself and govern and deliver peace with justice to every member of society. However, Satan being the perpetual enemy of man manipulates and misguides man so as to thwart him from achieving this goal and to tempt him to create chaos and disorder instead. One may call this duality in human nature a form of dialectics, or challenge and response to nature. Indeed this struggle is a reality of human life. The task of establishing a good government is part and parcel of this struggle. And in this struggle against Satan, God favors man; when man takes a positive initiative, God encourages him through natural means (Consider 92: 7-10; 87: 8; 4: 40; and 6: 160).⁵

Fulfillment of *Amānah* is the Responsibility of the Whole of Mankind

The fulfillment of God's trust or *amānah* is a prerogative and responsibility of the human community; the individual is just an active partner in the process. Since no individual can survive alone, the personal needs of an individual necessitate human cooperation in society. The community as a whole becomes responsible for the accomplishment of the trust. However no meaningful, extensive and long lasting cooperation is possible without an effective government and good governance usually leads to the establishment of civilization. The more people there are who participate in the process of cooperation, the more effective the government becomes. Social scientists generally emphasize the role of coercion in the establishment of early civilizations. Unfortunately history has hardly noted the role of man's desire for peace, justice and voluntary cooperation for these goals. This is because history books have generally failed to record evidences of rises of early civilizations. In fact, many works on the subject have emphasized either coercion or divine sanction as the main mechanism for organizing society. But can one equate the method of governance of the Babylonian Hammurabi or the Egyptian Tutankhamen with that of the Israelite Solomon? Definitely not. It is unfortunate that history has hardly recorded any reliable information about the rise and growth of early civilizations. Our common sense suggests that coercion does not result in effective cooperation. The central question then is: What role did religions really play in the growth of early civilizations?

This question becomes even more complex when one finds evidences in history indicating the role of religion in uniting people for the fundamental tasks of survival such as construction and maintenance of irrigation works, storage of food, collection of taxes, maintenance of business documents, family relations, etc. Is it rational to suggest that

⁵ For detailed discussions, see Jamāl al-Din Ibn al-Jawzī, *Nizhat al-'Ayun al-Nawadhir fi 'Ilm al-Wjuh wa al-Nudhā'ir*. (Beirut: Muassat al-Risālah, 1987), 104-105; and Al-Tahir al-Ibn al-'Āshur, *Tafsīr al-Tahqīr wa al-Tanwīr*. Vol. 2 (Tunis: Dār Suhūn, 1997), 91-93.

mere coercion was able to regulate human sexual behavior? In almost all human traditions religions standardized and maintained records of birth, marriage, and death. Religion is also reported to have promoted art, literature, and science. Could such creative activities have been possible by coercion? Women in the Neolithic Age are believed to have played more active roles in society. Is it totally inconceivable that early civilizations were laid down by genuine divine guidance and then with the passage of time the ruling elite, led by powerful and cunning men, took advantage of the status quo and established domination over the weak? Did man establish domination over woman in the same manner? It is interesting to note that women generally enjoyed more rights in the early days of every early civilization than the later period of those civilizations. It is also interesting to note that with the passage of time most civilizations in history became more stratified. For example, there was little class distinction in Hebrew society before the rise of Hebrew kings. That is why later Hebrew prophets attacked cruelty, greed, oppression, and exploitation by the rich and powerful, demanded a return to the covenant and law, and criticized priests who were more committed to rites and rituals than to ethical principles.

The Qur'an is very critical of the scholars of religions in history for their manipulation of divine and noble principles for personal gain. The Qur'an categorically rejects such misinterpretation of religions and asserts that the divine purpose is to establish an ethical and egalitarian social order. It says, "Did you see the one who gives the lie to religion? It is he who maltreats orphans and works little for the feeding of the poor. Woe to the worshippers ... who deny using their utensils [to the poor]". (107: 1-7) Religion, therefore, is not merely an individual affair; instead one should say that the internalization of the true spirit of religion cultivates one's sense of belonging and necessary obligation to society.

In defining the individual's relations with society, the Qur'an declares the concept of *amānah* as the cornerstone to the establishment of institutions to govern society under a just socio-political order. The fourth chapter of the Qur'an, al-Nisā' (the Women), deals with the idea of good governance. The chapter begins with the idea of absolute human equality and deals with family government, inheritance, peace and war, Muslim-Muslim relations, Muslim non-Muslim relations, arbitration in family matters, the mischief of hypocrites, and overall social harmony. The concept of *amānah* also deals with man's behavior toward the animal and plant worlds and the environment. In the family the man and woman are entrusted with the *amānah* of cultivating talents and abilities in a constructive way and providing maintenance, care, and education, and good treatment to family members. The Qur'an reminds mankind that when anyone does anything to please God and fulfills the *amānah*, it would ultimately bring good to himself. It satisfies the human soul.

***Amānah* Must be Fulfilled with 'Adālah (Justice)**

Verse 4: 58 was the last Qur'anic verse to be revealed and the most significant from the perspective of governance of society. Addressing the believers, the verse commands, "Render the trust to whom they are due; and judge between people, do it with

justice.” The occasion of the revelation of this verse and the Prophet’s understanding of it are very significant. This verse was revealed immediately after the liberation of Makkah. Following the liberation ‘Abbas, the prophet’s uncle, demanded the key to the Ka’ba from the Bani ‘Abd ad-Dar, a clan whose members were not yet Muslim. The Prophet granted the request. Then this verse was revealed. Immediately the Prophet returned the key to ‘Uthman ibn Abi Talha and his cousin Shaybah ibn ‘Uthman, the clan’s two representative figures. The rationale behind this act was that the clan was traditionally entrusted with the key and had been providing the necessary services to pilgrims, and therefore there was no need to deprive them of the responsibility. The verse is followed by guidance for the believers on leadership and governance of society: “Follow God, follow the Prophet, and those from among you who have been entrusted with authority (4: 59).” The Qur’anic concept of *amānah* and its implication on society must be understood in the light of these verses.⁶

Verses 58 and 59 of the discourse outline the fundamental principle of government. Verse 58 says, “Allah commands you to deliver the trusts to those to whom they are due; and whenever you judge between people, judge with justice. ...” Everything in the universe belongs to God and everything was created for the service of man. Man may use anything in the world for a positive purpose, but he is not supposed to abuse anything. The “trusts” are the rights and responsibilities of one individual over the other. They also refer to the individual’s rights and responsibilities toward the government and the government’s rights and responsibilities toward everybody and everything that comes under the jurisdiction of the government. But in this process of using everything in the service of mankind, there is a possibility that conflicts may arise among the members of the society. How does one resolve conflicts among human beings on, for instance, the question of resources in the world of creation? The verse responds to this question by saying that conducting justice is a part of this trust or *amānah*. How then does one fulfill this trust and ensure good governance? Can one ensure good governance without justice? The Qur’an responds to these questions in the next verse by saying, “O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you” (4: 59). The importance of good governance cannot be ignored under any circumstance. What happens when “those who are in authority” differ on issues of common interest? The verse continues by saying, “If ye differ in anything among yourselves, refer it to Allah and His Messenger.” This instruction for the people in authority to follow God and His messenger when settling conflicts on issues of common interest has deep implications in terms of the formulation of the principles and system of governance. As *‘adl* (justice) is one of God’s attributes, man is here instructed to be just when he is in a position of authority.

This understanding of man’s role as God’s vicegerent on earth and the use of its resources by him as God’s *amānah* to man gives a much deeper meaning to the concept of ownership in Islam. It implies that in the Islamic society or economic system private or

⁶ For a detailed discussion, see Ibn ‘Āshur, *Tafsīr*. Vol. 2, 91-102. Perhaps Ibn ‘Āshur’s analysis of verses 4: 58-59 is one of the most comprehensive and insightful. It should be noted that Ibn Taymiyyah’s *al-Siyāsah al-Shar‘iyyah fī Isṭilāḥ al-Rā‘ī wa al-Ra‘iyyah* and al-Māwardī’s *al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyyah wa al-Wilāyāt al-Diniyyah* focus only on verse 4: 59.

public ownership is not absolute. Resources are only an *amānah* whose actual owner is God, the Almighty. Whatever one owns is actually held in trust and must be used for achieving just ends. Thus every economic activity, decision and plan—whether it is production or exchange, whether it concerns an employer-employee relationship or a producer-user relationship, or consumer’s preferences and their impact on society—must be rooted in the intention to achieve just ends. From this goal-oriented utilization of resources emerges a whole dynamic of business ethics with social responsibility, respect for private property, dignity of labor and its fair share in production, and one’s duty to earn one’s living with honesty.

From establishing the moral foundations of business ethics to governing a society, a country or one’s own life to the utilization of resources—this overarching *amānization* at all levels (micro, macro, international, global and beyond) covers all activities with a sense of social responsibility and commitment to social justice within the confines of public interest. Hence as far as the fundamentals of governance are concerned, whether it is the individual’s personal life, his/her business activities or the affairs of the state and politics, all of them revolve around the concept of *amānah*, and call for preserving the public interest, which is a measurable outcome of the moral foundations of governance at all levels.

The Qur’an, recognizing human nature, accepts the potential for disagreement among its followers in matters of government. But the question is: When a matter is referred to God and His prophet, who decides what God and His prophet has ordained? In response to this question, the Qur’an seems to have given absolute freedom to man. Of course common sense demands that the people to be referred to be people who possess fundamental knowledge of the Qur’anic and prophetic teachings. The Qur’an’s frequent references to history underscore the importance it places on man to have a comprehensive understanding of history. This would include not only growth and development within Islamic civilization; one should also be familiar with the progress of early and contemporary civilizations. This knowledge should incorporate the philosophical and scientific foundations of those civilizations.

***Shūra*: A Cornerstone of the Islamic System of Good Governance**

The Qur’an emphasizes *shūra*—or consultation among members of the community—in issues of governance (3: 159; and 42: 38). The commandment involves both private and public domains, including business and government affairs. Women are equal partners with men in consultation. Non-Muslims living under Islamic jurisdiction also are partners in the decision-making process as long as they, like everybody else, fulfill the trust as members of the society. The concept of *shūra* underlines the participation of all members of the community in its affairs. Many contemporary Muslim scholars have compared this Qur’anic directive with modern day democracy. But the Qur’an seems to go beyond current democratic practices; it emphasizes fairness and justice, and if democratic institutions fail to provide justice (e.g. recognition of the tyranny of the majority) for not only for human beings, but also for plants, animals and the whole environment, the Qur’an says that God will take mankind to task. Here one is

reminded of the Socratic disapproval of Athenian democracy. From the Qur'anic perspective the Socratic concern for moral and universal values would be extremely relevant. A good government must be guided by these values.

***Amānah* and 'Adālah Demand Accountability and Transparency**

The Qur'an recommends the establishment of an effective government for carrying out the *amānah*, which requires commitment to honesty and justice. The sincere administration of *amānah* has honesty and justice as its prerequisites. Commitment to honesty becomes the touchstone of universal justice because an authority conducting justice without commitment to honesty may conduct justice selectively as and when it serves its interests. The implementation of *amānah* with honesty and justice would deliver a number of crucial ingredients of good governance such as the participation of the people in public affairs, general consensus on major issues, rule of law, transparency, accountability, equity, efficiency, etc. The Prophet founded one such community and government in Madinah in 7th century Arabia. The polity established by the Prophet was multi-tribal, multi-religious and multi-racial. His administration and the administration of his first four successors are generally considered as the model for good governance by Muslim scholars. However even this early community was not perfect. Errors were committed and conflicts did take place among the members of the community. On occasion the Qur'an corrected, even scolded the Prophet (80: 1-10) for his errors. But from Qur'anic teachings, it clearly emerges that human effort to establish good governance may not be perfect. However, a perfect harmony between human nature and attempts to truly follow Qur'anic guidance would allow humanity to attain, if not perfection, at least the next best thing—peace with justice and happiness in life.

The inaugural speech of the first Caliph, Abu Bakar, describes the fundamental characteristics of good governance. Immediately after being elected by the community to succeed the Prophet, he said:

I have been given authority over you although I am not the best of you. If I do well, help me; and if I do wrong, set me right. Loyalty is to tell the truth to a leader; treason is to hide it. The weak among you will be powerful in my eyes until I secure his rights, if Allah so wills. The strong among you shall be weak in my eyes until I get the right from him. If people do not follow in the way of Allah, He will disgrace them. Obey me as long as I obey Allah and his Prophet, and if I disobey them, you owe me no obedience.⁷

Inherent in the above statement of the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Siddiq are the cardinal principles of good governance such as honoring the will of the people, freedom of expression, rule of law, and judicial independence. Would the caliph have accepted admonition from a non-Muslim or a woman? Could a non-Muslim quote from the Qur'an to argue that the caliph was not doing justice to him? The caliph's statement does not put any restriction. The statement clearly suggests that in performing its duties and responsibilities Islamic governance will require the government to be accountable to God

⁷ See Abu Jafar al-Tābarī, *Tārikh al-Tābarī*. Vol. 3 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1969), 224.

as well as to the people. Since this accountability is based on *amānah*, in reality the trust is fulfilled through an understanding between those who are in authority of the government and the masses. In fact with the revolutionary advancement of modern communication technologies, even people living outside of the jurisdiction of a specific government could be involved in the counseling process. Therefore a Qur'anic government can't ignore observations and recommendations of such institutions such as Caux Round Table (CRT), particularly its Principles for Business and Principles for Governance, Transparency International (TI), Amnesty International (AI), Reporters without Borders (RSF) and Human Rights Watch (HRW), many of which have much in agreement with Qur'anic values.

Islamic Humanism in the Understanding of Divine Guidance on Good Governance

From the Qur'anic perspective the government is an essential part of God's trust or *amānah* to mankind. The primary objective of this *amānah* is to ensure the well-being of the people. The government must guarantee the rights of every individual under its authority. But the responsibility of the government does not stop here; it is also duty bound to take care of the environment. Since all public policies are to be geared toward public interest, the government must also be considerate to the general well-being of future generations. The executive branch of government must accept and submit to the independence of the judiciary to ensure that nobody is above the law. Here one must note that the Qur'an is not a book of law, but a guide for the establishment of peace in society. The Qur'an fundamentally is a book of guidance in various areas of individual and collective life including governance with the aim of establishing peace and justice in society. It wants to ensure the well being of future generations. It lays down principles and sometimes injunctions in this regard. This process came to be called *sharī'ah*. The purpose of the *sharī'ah* is to ensure justice and balance between the demands of the individual and that of the society. The purpose of the *sharī'ah* is also to maintain a balance between the needs of the society and the demands of the environment. Man has been given the trust and the freedom to understand, interpret and translate God's guidance into practice. Muslims in history developed law or *fiqh* (human understanding of *sharī'ah* principles) and *qānūn* (codification of the understanding of the *sharī'ah* principles into a form of law) to achieve this goal. In general the *sharī'ah* has been very accommodative and flexible.

Comment [SBY1]:

It is interesting to note that Muslim scholars' understanding of Qur'anic guidance in good governance has been very accommodative of changes in time and circumstances. Originally, the political aspects of the Qur'an were understood as part of the '*aqīdah*—or faith—in what has been called *usūl al-dīn* or principles of religion. Discussion on the subject mainly revolved around the concept of *imāmah* or leadership during the early days of the development of the discipline of good governance. In the 9th century, al-Shāfi'ī interpreted verse 4: 59 to mean that the commandment to obey those in authority did not apply to the government of his time. Because of the civil conflict and uncertainty in the government in Baghdad during his time, al-Shāfi'ī went into self-exile in Egypt and perceived his role from among the '*ulamā'* or scholars and not from the *umarā'* or

politicians. Gradually Muslim jurists developed the methodology of *ijtihād* or independent reasoning in understanding God's guidance. In the 12th century al-Māwardi wrote *al-Ahkām al-Sultāniyyah* (i.e., principles of governance) dealing with various institutions in the government. In the 13th century, al-Juwayni developed a new science called *Maqāsid al-Sharī'ah* or objectives of the *sharī'ah* when the government of the caliph became very weak under the influence of some autocratic sultans and the government lost the spirit of the Qur'anic guidance and developed mere formalism. The focus of works on *maqāsid al-sharī'ah* became more inclusive as it expanded good governance to incorporate the welfare of the people. Following the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols in 1258, Ibn Taymiyah gave a whole new interpretation of the above two verses (4: 58 and 59) and redefined his understanding of good governance under the principles of *al-Siyāsah al-Shar'iyyah*. The concept of *maslahah* or public interest was developed and Qur'anic guidance was freshly understood and implemented to ensure public interest. All these attempts may be considered a form of Islamic humanism that generated new ideas under new circumstances. Therefore, although in Islam God is the Sovereign power; man is absolutely free to choose because he is solely capable of understanding God's will.

Comment [ABH2]:

The *sharī'ah* encourages positive utilization of available resources. As opposed to the current capitalist belief that material goods are scarce and limited, the Qur'an suggests that there are plenty of resources for every being in God's creation and there is a potential for the discovery of more assets and access to them for the rising population. This process of growth can be realized only by the use of endlessly increasing human knowledge, which is one of the ingredients of man's composition that contributes to his being the best of all creatures. However, the Qur'an emphasizes the distribution of resources as against the concentration of wealth in a few hands while maintaining the legitimacy of private ownership. Mankind is supposed to utilize resources with a sense of socio-moral responsibility as prescribed by the objectives of *sharī'ah*. And it is because of this that God strongly warns mankind against the abuse of resources. The Qur'anic idea of good governance also demands assurance of fair access of every individual to resources. The idea of *amānah* demands that if a person is appointed to a certain public position, he should not use it for self-aggrandizement or for the benefit of his associates.

Public welfare is perhaps the most important function of good governance. The Qur'an introduces the *zakāh* (sometimes written as *Zakāt*) system as one of the fundamental pillars for the re-distribution of wealth in society. It is the government's responsibility to ensure a fair and just administration of the system. In short, it must ensure public welfare as a part of the *amānah* or trust discussed earlier.

Role of Leadership in Good Governance

The Islamic concept of leadership is rooted in the institutionalization of principles rather than personalities. Nevertheless, the Prophet stands as the best example of leadership in Islam. It is worth mentioning that the Prophet was known as *al-amīn* in his society even before he began his mission. The term is derived from *amn*, from which *amānah* is also derived. As noted earlier, the notion of leadership dominated the Islamic

theory of good governance during the early days of the institution of the *khilāfah*, or caliphate. The community generally agreed with the idea that the leader had to be qualified to lead the people both in prayers and in worldly affairs because he was answerable individually to God and to the community. The leader had to rule on the basis of the trust delegated to him by God and also by the members of the community, who could publicly monitor his activities. The leader acknowledged that he was not the ruler but the servant of the people and his job was to work for the well being of all in the society, that all his decisions, actions and policies were guided by the criteria of public interest and that he was accountable to the society and to God. The leadership did not have to come from any royal family or aristocracy: Talent, character, sincerity, integrity and commitment to God's guidance were the main criteria for leadership. Early caliphs considered themselves commoners. They also separated their personal needs from the needs of the government. They were considered model characters by the rest of the community.

Some Concluding Remarks

This paper is not a final document on the subject of Qur'anic guidance on good governance. But it reflects attempts to comprehend guidance in the light of growing human ability in history. Islamic civilization has generally been open to learning from other civilizations: during the early days caliphs incorporated many ideas and practices that had contributed to the success of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Greek works were translated into Arabic and knowledge from them was used to enhance material growth and the well-being of the community. It is our firm belief that nobody has a monopoly on understanding Islam, and Islamic civilization even today should be open to positive ideas from other civilizations. The above discussion on the Qur'anic guidance for good governance brings to the fore Islam's concerns for humanity, the objective of *sharī'ah* being the preservation of peace and prosperity of the human race. These concerns and ideals have a lot in common with the concerns and ideals of other civilizations. From this convergence may emerge a vision of a common destiny for humanity. In order to realize this vision, however, the need of the hour is to establish forums, networks, and institutions through which all the civilizations and their concerned members can work together for the common good of humanity.