

## **TADBĪR: THE KEY ELEMENT OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN ISLAM\***

Dr. Mohd Zaidi bin Ismail  
Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM)  
E-mail: zaidi@ikim.gov.my; mohdzaidi68@gmail.com

That good governance is a sine-qua-non for the well-being of any nation is, at present, beyond contention. So too is sustainability as a key factor in relation to the future not only of any nation but also of mankind as a whole, involving as a necessary element the reunification and harmonisation of economics and ecology. However, the current discourse on these two significant themes has been primarily shaped, to a large extent, by the Western intelligentsia, with some even having gotten wide circulation and hence global acceptance.

Muslims' response to the discourse has been varied though, ranging from unqualified consent and wholesale adoption of it to its critical assessment, if not outright rejection. Whatever it is, all the aforementioned by no means imply that there is little room left for other meaningful contributions. One which I am proposing herein pertains to imbuing governance and sustainability with the original spirit of *tadbīr*, a term so familiar to almost every one of us but whose meanings, unfortunately, have thus far escaped our minds' gaze.<sup>1</sup>

“No mind is as good as *tadbīr*.” Such has been the declaration of our Prophet Muhammad, S.A.W., in one of his Traditions. In fact, Imam Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, the most eminent Muslim scholar of the eleventh–twelfth century C.E., in a special chapter dedicated to explicating knowledge and intellect in his famous work, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, considered human intelligence which has arrived at such a mental station as being couched in *tadbīr* to be intellectually mature. But why is *tadbīr* said to be so? Our Prophet being the paragon

---

\* A keynote address on the 1st of June 2022 in the Ninth International Conference on Management and Muamalah (9th ICoMM 2022), with the theme “Reestablishing True Muamalah Towards Real Sustainable Development,” at Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor (KUIS).

<sup>1</sup> Inspired originally by the many monumental works of my two dear teachers—Tan Sri Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Prof. Dr. Wan Mohd Nor bin Wan Daud—particularly on the Worldview of Islam as well as the pertinent role of Islamic key terms and islamised language[s] not only in projecting and nurturing but also in protecting and preserving such a worldview, this proposal of mine derives entirely from my earlier research and works, three of which were published by IKIM, i.e.: “Imbuing Governance and Science with *Tadbir* for Sustainable Development,” Chapter Two (pp. 39–46) in *Science for Sustainable Development: Islamic and Interfaith Perspectives*, ed. Azrina Sobian and Muhammad Husni Mohd. Amin (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), 2017; reprint 2020); *Good Governance: Adab-Oriented Tadbīr in Islām*, co-authored with Dr. Mohd Sani bin Badron (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia (IKIM), 2011); as well as “Conceptualizing *Tadbīr* as a Constituent of Governance in Islam,” *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World* 3 (2010): 27–47.

of wisdom, there are certainly grounds as to why he made such a declaration and which we, as responsible Muslims, must use our reason to find out. In what follows, I shall attempt to outline some of the underlying reasons.

Firstly, based on our perusal of authoritative lexicons of the Arabic language, *tadbīr* is a key term pertaining to the Islamic concept of governance, administration and management, acting as a pivot for such other governance-related terms as *ri'āyah*, *siyāsah* and *idārah* and constituting the centre of their semantic field.

Secondly, *tadbīr* fixes our mind's attention to outcomes, to ends and consequences, to results. It orientates us to the future. It emphasises that one be visionary and farsighted. From an ethical point of view, it demands that we be sagacious, foresightful, and prudent. To borrow an apt description by ibn Ṭiqṭiqā in his *al-Fakhrī* (said to be composed in 1301), "the determined ruler is he whose decisions precede the occurrence which makes them necessary, and who anticipates a pressing danger before its onset." *Tadbīr*, thus, is a particular act of human intelligence and, as such, is synonymous with *tadabbur*, another important term stemming from the same linguistic root. Unfortunately, just like *tadbīr*, *tadabbur* has been widely used loosely, without reference at all to its root meaning in the Arabic language. This then has led to it being misunderstood to be synonymous with other terms that generally denote "thinking" or "contemplation" such as *tafakkur*: hence, the urgent need to provide sufficient explanation on the meaning of *tadabbur*. To do so, it is important that we pay attention to its explication in *al-Ta'rifāt*, a famous dictionary of technical terms by a Muslim polymath of the late 14th and early 15th century, al-Sayyid al-Sharīf 'Alī al-Jurjānī (d. 1413). "*Tafakkur*," he explains, "is the directing of the intellect's observation to proofs while *tadabbur*, to consequences." As such, the applying of *tadabbur* to the Qur'an specifically means the intellect's observing and scrutiny of the outcomes as contained in the Qur'an as well as the lessons derived therefrom. In fact, there are no less than 34 verses in the Qur'an which are directly concerned with outcomes, many of them pertaining to earlier peoples who disobeyed God and His prophets. Yet, *tadabbur* applies not only to the Qur'an but also to other matters. Furthermore, such noetic activities need to be comprehensive and holistic in order to qualify as *tadabbur*. This is because sincere, honest and serious contemplation of consequences demands that one be prospective, retrospective, introspective and inspective. It has to be prospective because consequences as results-to-be require that the mind's eye be directed to the future. The contemplation needs to be retrospective because any noetic act concerned with outcomes has to involve looking at history, examining what has happened, so as to not only identify patterns of events and occurrences which are flowing to the future but also predict their probable ends. The intellectual act should be introspective too. For, it requires its agent to look at his or her own self, assessing his or her strengths vis-à-vis weaknesses, in order to properly plan and be prepared in moving forward with all the anticipated consequences. Finally, it must be inspective because its agent is required to examine his or her current situation in the context of the flow of events to the future. All the four modes of contemplation encapsulated in *tadabbur* as outlined above may also be represented by the combination of sight, insight, hindsight and foresight, all in a single view.

Thirdly, in directing ourselves to the future—namely, to the ends and outcomes, *tadbīr* also requires that we adopt a balanced and integrated approach. For, *tadbīr* is both thinking and acting; it is knowledge as well as practice; it is mind-set cum life-style. As summarised by al-Jurjānī, *tadbīr* is "the mental act of examining the outcomes by means of knowing what is good, as well as the practical act of putting matters into effect in accordance with

the knowledge of what will follow in the end.” Hence, a Muslim who is involved in *tadbīr* must be both knowledgeable and action-oriented; he or she ought to be not only practical and active but also thoughtful and reflective.

1. Fourthly, insofar as the absolute knowledge and realisation of the future are concerned, only Allah performs *tadbīr* in the perfect sense. In fact, “The Governor” (*al-Mudabbir*) is one of His Names. In this respect, and in relation to the four Qur’anic verses pertaining to *tadbīr*, a famous Muslim polymath of the thirteenth century C.E., Imām Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, explains: “Allah performing *tadbīr* means: Allah decrees and foreordains according to the requirement of wisdom and He also does that which is done by one whose act is always appropriate and who attends to the ends and outcomes of affairs such that nothing unbecoming would ever come into existence.” In fact, Shāh Waliyyullāh, the well-known Muslim scholar of Delhi of the seventeenth century C.E., in his famous work *Hujjat Allāh al-Bālighah*, argued that with regard to the bringing into being of the world, *tadbīr* is the last in the order of the three intimately-related Divine Attributes-Acts; the other two being *ibdā’* (*creation ex-nihilo*) followed by *khalq* (proportioning). As such, in line with the well-established ethical principle of emulating the Names-Attributes of Allah (*takhalluq bi Akhlāq Allāh*), not only does *tadbīr* remind us of Allah but it should also connect any Muslim involved in it with “Him Who Governs Absolutely.” In other words, in as much as a Muslim who governs ought to be ever mindful of the *Mudabbir*, he should also be really humble and accountable before Him.
2. Fifthly, *tadbīr* being essentially outcome-oriented, one should realise that outcomes or results are not identical with aims or objectives. For not every aim will result in an outcome and, likewise, not every outcome achieves the intended aim. As such, there are some elements of unknowability about goals as something yet to be realised in the future, whereas outcomes, when referring to past and present events that are well documented, are more factual.
3. Sixthly, there are indeed varieties of goals and outcomes. Not only are they not always the same but they are also subject to a certain order of priority and posteriority. Some aims are good and noble, some are bad and evil. Yet among the good ones, some are better. Similarly, there are also amidst the bad ones those which are worse. Some ends are more permanent and certain while the rest are ever changing and indefinite. Among them also, there are those which are more ultimate whereas the others only serve as means or intermediaries to the former. Hence, there is a hierarchical system of aims and objectives, having in turn a certain order of methods and ways conducive for living such a system. Very much relevant in this respect is a counsel by the Second Caliph of Islam, ‘Umar al-Faruq, R.A.: “An intelligent person is not merely one who is able to distinguish what is good from what is bad but one who is able to recognise the better of two evils.”  
Seventhly, anyone seriously concerned with *tadbīr* shall have to attend to a fundamental question: how can a Muslim who is tasked with governance determine not only the right goals and outcomes but also the possible correct ways leading thereto?<sup>2</sup> It is in answering such a question that an important epistemic principle applies, which requires that one begin with what is clear, definite and certain in exploring unknown and uncharted territories.<sup>3</sup> In

---

<sup>2</sup> Such a question is very much pertinent in a Muslim’s analysis and assessment of any proposal or document related to sustainable development, such as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the summary of which is available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For an elaboration on this epistemic principle, see our monograph, *Islam and Higher-Order Thinking: An Overview* (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 2014), especially Chapter II and III.

this respect, what is generally clear and certain to Muslims is that Allah being The Governor has made manifest in His Two Books not only His wills, rules and regulations but also His signs and symbols. One of the books has been referred to in the religious, intellectual and scientific tradition of Islam as His Revealed Book (*al-kitāb al-tanzīlī*)—i.e. the Qur'an—exemplified then in the Life of the Prophet Muhammad. The other book, in turn, is known in this tradition as the Created Book (*al-kitāb al-takwīnī*)—i.e. the Cosmic Entirety, or the Universe as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

From the former book, i.e. the Qur'an as well as the Prophet's Life as its manifestation, Muslims can expect to derive guidance, criteria and guidelines. In this regard, since Muslim luminaries derived most of their insights from these two sources, of very much help are the vast legacy of their scholarly writings, including the invaluable legal corpora that contain legal aims and objectives (*al-maqāṣid al-shar'īyyah*) as well as legal maxims (*al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyyah*). It is also in this regard that one should differentiate between human natural desires and their acquired desires, between human needs and human wants, and more specifically, between what falls in the category of *al-ḍarūriyyāt* (the necessities), *al-hājjiyyāt* (the requisites), and *al-tahsīniyyāt* (the complements), respectively. All these are necessary elements, criteria and parameters in any attempt by concerned and intelligent Muslims at formulating their alternative(s) to the set of assessment factors that is now popularly known as ESG, amidst the many challenges and predicaments besetting mankind nowadays, such as climate change, ecological crises, food security etc.

In regard to matters which are clear and certain in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Traditions, at least two directly concern and involve outcome or end. Firstly, one's goal has to pertain to the Ultimate Outcome, the Last Day (*al-Ākhirah*). For Muslims, without any doubt, the goals one should aim at ultimately have to do with what is already established and certain—that is to say, with the afterlife the doorway to which is death, as well as with the state of happiness (*al-sa'ādah*) in the life-to-come the culmination of which is the gift of the Vision of God (*ru'yat Allāh*). For this reason, no pursuit of goals can be irreligious, being driven merely by pragmatic and utilitarian considerations. In Islam, governance is as much a teleological science as it is the art of deployment; it concerns not only the outer, societal facets of human life but also—and in fact more fundamentally—its inner, individual dimensions. Furthermore, governance as applied to the human self, his household, as well as his community and the state—which in earlier centuries is actualised as ethics, economy and politics—is such as to realise justice and real propriety (*ʿadl* and *adab*) as prerequisites of happiness; hence, the human self, his household, as well as his community and the state is to be conceived of and accordingly addressed not as discontinuous, independent sectors but instead as realms constituting a continuous spectrum, different yet mutually related and reflexive. Secondly, the objective has to ultimately relate to Allah, whose name among others is THE END (*al-Ākhir*). The spirit of *tawhīd* which is so inherent in Islam demands that one's end comprise not only goods of this world (*al-dunyā*) but also those of the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*), especially when man finally returns to his Almighty Creator. Since God is also The First and The Last (*al-Awwal*

---

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see my two earlier articles: "The Nature of the Cosmos and its Implications on Science Education," *Educational Awakening: Journal of the Educational Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2008) (Institute of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)): 103–130; as well as, "The Cosmos as the Created Book and its Implications for the Orientation of Science," *Islam & Science: Journal of Islamic Perspectives on Science* 6, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 31–53. The latter article was also republished in *Studies in the Islam and Science Nexus*, volume 1 of *Islam and Science: Historic and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Muzaffar Iqbal, 4 vols. (Farnham, England, dan Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2012).

*wa al-Ākhir*), the origin and the end (*al-mabda' wa al-ma'ād*) in Islam ultimately point to the very same Being who not only out of His Mercy bestows upon His creatures the gift of existence but also assigns them their specific significance and places in the vast hierarchies of being. In fact, as man comes from Allah unto Him also will he return, and no one, if he really knows, will wish a bad return. Hence, Allah is, for the true believers, their sole focus of attention and concern.<sup>5</sup>

As to the latter Book—that is to say the Cosmos as a whole, the Divine Governance of it is indeed His Pattern of Recurrent Acts which has been referred to as the all-inclusive *Sunnat ALLāh*, appearing partly in the modes of Cause-Effect correlation and of the rise and decline of nations and civilisations in the theatre of history, holding sway not only over the physical domains but also over the ethico-spiritual realms, regulating not only socio-political life but also individual and family lives. Granted the regularity of the *Sunnat ALLāh*, which Allah Himself has promised us in the Qur'an and which Muslims believe in, it is partly to the past and present outcomes that one's mind should be directed in order to not only derive some meaningful lessons and useful insights in predicting the future, but to also avoid repeating similar mistakes, facing much the same pitfalls, and being trapped in essentially the same quagmire. In this respect, in governance, a Muslim mind must make the utmost use of hindsight and derive the best lessons from history. Such is actually the meaning of the Prophet Muhammad's reminder: "A believer is not stung twice in the same hole." Hence, in carrying out *tadbīr* faithfully a Muslim needs to be as much retrospective (in fact, introspective, as well) as he be prescient.

In fact, it is in relation to the *Sunnat ALLāh* that governance when imbued with the spirit of *tadbīr* will have to not only involve science but also become undetached from theology. By science-cum-theology here is meant the very first thing Muslims of earlier times had been taught when they began to learn the Creeds of Islam, the one referred to terminologically as '*aqīdah*'. Among the necessary preliminaries, or *sine qua non*, of learning such creeds during those times is one's good grasp of the difference—though not necessarily in an exclusive manner—of the three primary kinds of judgments which humans cannot avoid passing when assessing various matters. The three are (1) judgments proceeding from the *sharī'ah* (Islamic Law); (2) judgments issuing from human reason; and (3) judgments arising from the human experience of series of happenings in the world. The standard terms employed to refer to them are *al-ḥukm al-sharī* (rendered into Malay as *hukum syara'*), *al-ḥukm al-'aqlī* (known in Malay as *hukum akal*) and *al-ḥukm al-'ādī* (translated into Malay as *hukum adat*), respectively. By the first kind of judgements are meant the five main categories of rulings in the Islamic Law, i.e., *ḥarām* (forbidden), *makrūh* (strongly disliked), *mubāḥ* (permissible), *mandūb* (commendable) and *wājib* (obligatory). The second kind, in turn, refers to the three categories of rational estimation which logic is primarily concerned with, that is to say, *mustahīl* (impossible), *jā'iz* or *mumkin* (possible; in Malay, *mungkin*) and *wājib* (necessary). [And mind you, do not confuse *wājib* belonging to the first kind with *wājib* of this second kind!] The third kind consists in human efforts of establishing the sort of existential relation a thing has with another thing, be it positively or negatively, such efforts being based mainly on the recurrence of such things in the past, be the recurrence distant in time or quite recent. To illustrate this last kind of judgments in simple terms, let us take the example of the relation between "one's thirst" and "one's act of drinking" as two atomic occurrences. In one's assessment of the nature of their relation, one will have to judge based on at least one's own experience of them before passing the reasonable judgment that one's act of drinking

<sup>5</sup> See the Holy Qur'an: *al-Baqarah* (2): 46; *al-Mā'idah* (5): 105; *Yūnus* (10): 4; *al-Hajj* (22): 41; *al-Mu'minūn* (23): 60; *al-Qaṣaṣ* (28): 70; *Luqmān* (31): 22; *al-Najm* (53): 25; *al-Ḥadīd* (57): 3; and *al-Layl* (92): 13.

relates negatively to one's thirst, if not at all times, at least most of the times. In so doing, one will also expect the same to hold water in the future while being aware that one may also be mistaken in one's anticipation or forecast. In fact, such kind of judgments properly belongs to what we may generally regard now as the realm of science. As to the relation between the second and third kinds of judgments, it should be noted that according to Islamic Theology (*ʿIlm al-Tawḥīd*, *ʿIlm Uṣūl al-Dīn* or *ʿIlm al-Kalām*), not only is the existential status of the entire creation in itself contingent (*mumkin*) but even all its parts—including series of events—are also possible. Indeed, they as a whole are often referred to as *al-mumkināt* (the possibles or possibilities) in the sense that according to the mere judgment of human reason without recourse to actual human experience, just as they may or may not happen, they may happen this way or in any other way. As such, to somewhat ascertain the way they have been and may also be subsequently, a person needs to take into account the actual human experience of them, particularly as recorded faithfully in history. An *ʿādah* (Malay: *adat*), as alluded to earlier, is “the way a thing has been” so much so that the manner it has been recurring is regarded as its custom. As nothing in the world is considered to be not the Acts of God (meaning God's creation), another term which such scholars also frequently use to refer to *ʿādah* is *Sunnat ALLāh*, namely, God's customary way of acting.<sup>6</sup>

4. Last but not least, despite its significance as outlined above, *tadbīr* being a familiar word to almost all Muslims itself poses a great challenge because an overwhelming majority of them tend to stick to its prevalent vulgarised, or corrupted, sense at the expense of its original import as espoused in the Islamic Intellectual and Scientific Tradition. As such, it goes without saying that the very first step towards imbuing governance as well as sustainability with the original spirit of *tadbīr* involves necessarily the drawing of people's attention to its genuine, balanced and comprehensive meaning as discussed in the foregoing paragraphs. In a world where good governance and sustainability have been increasingly pressing issues, that *tadbīr* encapsulates all the aforementioned is very telling and calls for our immediate attention and concerted efforts.

---

<sup>6</sup> For an explanation on *mu ʿġzah* (miracle) vis-à-vis *ʿādah*, see my article, “Science and Religion amidst Covid-19,” Chapter 1 (pp. 7–11) in *Islam & Pandemics: Lessons from Covid-19*, ed. Mastura binti Mohd Zain and Mohamad A'sim bin Ismail (Kuala Lumpur: IKIM, 2020).