What Islam's Golden Age Ignored and What It Means Today

By S. Frederick Starr

During the Islamic golden age, the translation of Greek works spread selectively throughout the Muslim world. Scholars focused on metaphysics, science, and mathematics, while works on political theory and governance, such as Aristotle's *Politics*, remained untranslated. Even political satire, like the Greek comedies, was deemed too controversial for translation.

Muslim societies were very slow to embrace modern knowledge and establish institutions to promote it. Some contemporary observers today assert that institutions like al-Azhar in Cairo that date back a millennium are counterparts of the earliest European universities in Italy, France, and England. But the former were dedicated to perpetuating a known body of knowledge rather than to updating or revising it. In our own time, many disciplines remain quite underdeveloped in the Islamic world, with only one Muslim having earned a Nobel Prize in physics. Today, however, some Muslim countries are dedicating both financial and human resources to overcoming what they acknowledge as a developmental deficiency in the realm of knowledge.

How far this belated development will advance and how deeply it will penetrate into Muslim societies themselves remains unknown. However, this educational project has been greatly stimulated by the rediscovery of the great scientists of the so-called "Muslim Golden Age," approximately from 800 to 1200. Figures like Biruni, who measured the earth more precisely than any European until the seventeenth century; al Khorezmi, who reinvented the field of algebra and gave his name to our term "algorithm"; and Ibn al-Haytham, who invented the field of optics, all stood well in advance of their Christian contemporaries up to the Renaissance.

The rediscovery of this previously overlooked age of genius has been the work mainly of Western researchers, but Muslim scholars have now climbed fully on board. The rediscovery of this diverse band of innovators has been a tonic to officials, educators, and entrepreneurs in Muslim societies. It has converted the challenge of

creating *de novo* into a process of rediscovery, focusing on their own history and culture. This has led in turn to valuable research into the origins of that golden age of Muslim science and thought.

Modern scholarship has shown how the early intellectual life of the Islamic world was supercharged by the introduction into the medieval Islamic world of Arabic translations of masterpieces of ancient Greek thought. Without these many translations of classical Greek works from the age of Pericles, the golden age of Muslim intellectual life would not have occurred. While many authors were translated, the works of Aristotle led the pack. It was above all this student of Plato and tutor of Alexander the Great from the fourth century BC who sparked the Muslim intellectual renaissance a millennium ago.

Even though translations were made elsewhere, the geographical base of the translation movement was the newly planned city of Baghdad, founded in AD 762. Translations were essential because the number of Muslim politicians and clerics who knew Greek could be counted on one hand. But where were translators to be found? The one group in the Mediterranean world that knew both Greek and Arabic, as well as their own Syriac language (an Aramaic tongue), was Syrian Christians. With bishoprics all across the region, the Syrians were well abreast of developments in the world of Islam. When the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur (774–775) established a library in Baghdad, which came to be called the "House of Wisdom," he expressed a desire to furnish it with Arabic translations of major works from the past. Syrian Christians jumped at the opportunity to provide translations of ancient Greek texts. Several even traveled to Constantinople to scoop up valuable manuscripts, knowing that friends of the new library would pay them handsomely for translations into Arabic, the working language of Islam.

Which works of the ancient Greek thinkers were translated? Many of the translations have been lost, but of the many we know about nearly all were in the fields of medicine, mathematics, astronomy, algebra, and philosophy. Everything else was excluded from translation and hence from the awareness of the greatest minds of Islam. Which were the most important works of ancient Greek thinkers *not* translated into Arabic? Here the plot thickens. While praising the intellectual curiosity of the new Muslim rulers and intelligentsia of Baghdad, recent scholars fail to report on the works that never made it into translation and hence had no impact on the Muslim mind. This omission, to say the least, is unfortunate, for we can learn as much about the golden age of Islam from what was not translated as from what was

The list of neglected works is long and impressive. Astonishingly, prominent among that *salon des refusés* were the ancient world's greatest thinkers on society, law, politics, and history. In other words, everything pertaining to the conduct and governance of cities, states, and whole societies was excluded from the Arabs' otherwise inquiring minds. Thus, Herodotus's *Histories,* so rich in geographical details and replete with pungent accounts of the diverse cultures of the East, was never translated. Similarly, Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, a brilliant analysis of the prolonged civil war between Athens and Sparta and of the internal dynamics of the contending parties, also failed to find a translator.

Yet more serious is the absence of an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, arguably the ancient world's most profound analysis of the diverse ways in which political decisions are actually made, as opposed to the claims of rulers and their minions. Besides being the source of our term "politics," this work goes beyond ethics, which Aristotle saw as pertaining only to individuals and to the rules and practices of whole communities. While Plato's *Republic* proceeds from abstract first principles and remains in the clouds, Aristotle's *Politics* was based on actual field research, which led him to collect 158 civic constitutions. Studying these, Aristotle asks "what works?" rather than "what should work?"

Aristotle's focus was on human agency. The list of works from Greece's age of genius that the Arabs neglected extended beyond landmark studies of politics and law. Also rejected were the many classical texts that presented human nature as it actually is, rather than as it ought to be. First among such works were the tragedies. Not one of the hundreds of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides was translated into Arabic, thus denying the Muslim world an appreciation of the very concept of tragedy in human affairs.

It is perhaps no surprise that Baghdad's prudish new rulers made no effort to commission translations of the pungent and uproariously funny comedies of Aristophanes, the father of comedy. With *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs* unknown to speakers of Arabic, audiences in Baghdad and elsewhere in the Muslim world were never exposed to the Greeks' ability to poke fun at exalted leaders like Alcibiades, respected cultural figures like Euripides, and even solemn national events like the Peloponnesian Wars. Some of the Greek comedies would doubtless have been too ribald for the staid Muslim leaders. But did they also conclude that the Greeks' sharp wit, engaging satire, and bold use of parody posed potential dangers to themselves? Whoever made the decision not to translate these works denied the Muslim world models of how civilized people can laugh at their rulers and at themselves.

Who made these choices? The question is far from trivial. Since so many other works by Aristotle found their way into Arabic, it is natural to ask whether other masterpieces were excluded because the translators failed—for whatever reason—to pitch them to the wealthy patrons of the new library in Baghdad? Or was it because the Caliph's inhouse librarians and intellectuals decided not to buy them? If the former, did the translators make a decision not to gather and propose to their Baghdad patrons the translation of ancient Greek works on politics, law, history, as well as tragedies and comedies? This is possible but unlikely, as a translation enterprise was, in its way, a market relationship with sellers promoting potential wares to buyers, and the buyers responding according to their preferences and pocketbooks. Or, alternatively, was it because the Byzantines themselves had lost track of Aristotle's *Politics* and other Greek works on political culture and society and that the middlemen could not find them? But while it is true that, as a recent scholar has argued, that "Aristotle's *Politics* was the least popular

of his major works in Byzantium,"[*] it was certainly known there and would have been accessible to any eager and profit-minded researcher connected with Baghdad.

Whether and how these forces came into play, what cannot be denied is that the Abbasid rulers of the Muslim Caliphate and their intellectual colleagues in Baghdad made no discernible effort to acquire and translate copies of Aristotle's *Politics* or Herodotus's *Histories*, let alone the tragedies of Aeschylus and the comedies of Aristophanes. They apparently concluded that the Muslim audience in Baghdad and beyond had no need for Greek insights into politics and the foibles of human society, all of which were judged irrelevant to, or even incompatible with, the Muslim audience in their new capital of Baghdad and the new Muslim world order they were striving to uphold.

It is only fair to point out that neither Greek tragedies nor comedies found favor in either medieval Western Europe or Byzantium, too. But even if they chose to pass over their deeper implications, these contemporaries of Baghdad's Muslims at least had access to some of the texts. And of even greater significance, ancient writings on history, law, and practical politics were well known to them through their reading of the many surviving works of Roman authors. Thinkers in the Latin world knew full well that chroniclers and analysts like Cicero, Sallust, and Caesar wrote about pre-Christian eras, but they did not reject them on religious grounds. Through reading these Latin classics, medieval Europeans gained profound insights on the character of Political Man in all societies and the conflicts between moral concerns and sheer ambition that exist at all places and times.

In contrast, the Islamic Renaissance of 800–1200 showed almost no interest in the intellectual achievements of ancient Rome. To be sure, there were exceptions, notably the translation of major works by the Greco-Roman physician Claudius Galen, a native of Asia Minor whose exhaustive treatise on medicine was translated in full—but from the Greek original, not from Latin. Separated by language (but not distance) from the Roman heritage and with no Latin translators comparable to the Syrians, Baghdad evinced no interest in ancient Rome and did not even translate Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which were written in Greek.

Did the Muslim rulers' cultural and religious censorship focus exclusively on ancient Greece and Rome? In fairness, we must note that Muslims long showed the same disinterest and even hostility toward the politics and culture of India. As with Greece and Rome, however, they gained information on Indian mathematics, including its invention of the concept of zero and its decimal system of counting, mistakenly known as "Arabic numerals." At least one Indian work on astronomy was also translated. And in striking contrast to the Muslim East's utter disinterest in Greek and Roman society, Hindu India attracted a brilliant Muslim scientist and scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni. Biruni's massive and sophisticated study entitled *India (Al-Hind)*

[*] Anthony Kaldellis, "Aristotle's Politics in Byzantium," in *Well Begun Is Only Half Done: Translating Aristotle's Political Ideas in Medieval Arabic, Syriac, Byzantine, and Jewish Sources*, ed. Vasileios Syros, vol. 388 of *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 121.

delved into the social, political, and even religious sources of Indian advances in mathematics, astronomy, and other sciences. Sadly, Biruni's great study was largely ignored, and the Muslim world produced no Biruni for ancient Greece or Rome.

Did Baghdad's cultural censorship find its counterpart in the Latin West's censorship of works from the Muslim East? Well before the Renaissance, Western scholars had taken a keen interest in the few Muslim writers whose works reached them across the Mediterranean. Translation from Arabic into Latin began as early as the late tenth century and continued with a mounting intensity in the centuries before the Renaissance. No such parallel curiosity is evident in the Muslim world, down to the nineteenth century. This calls for an explanation. Why did Baghdad and the Muslim East embrace ancient Greek philosophy, logic, mathematics, and medicine but remain closed to its insights on the life of societies and the workings of politics? Why did the Muslim East embrace ancient learning in some fields with such intensity that it moved far ahead of the West but remained utterly closed to the Mediterranean world's wisdom on society, politics, and law?

Two lines of explanation present themselves. The first, as we have seen, focuses on practical issues pertaining to access to ancient texts. The Syrian intermediaries sought to scope out and respond to the wishes of their well-heeled patrons in Baghdad. There is no evidence of their having proposed translations on these subjects to their paymasters in Baghdad, only to be refused. Nor on the demand side is there any evidence that the paymasters in Baghdad requested translations of Greek or Roman works on society and politics but failed to receive them.

It is not that the Muslim world was deaf to concerns about the nature of society, politics, and history. Many early Muslim writers, beginning with al-Farabi, a native of what is now Kazakhstan, offered insights on the good society. Recent critics have noted parallels between Farabi's exposition and Plato's *Republic*, fragments of which were known to him thanks probably to their inclusion in works by the Hellenistic founder of neo-Platonism, Plotinus. Similar to Plato, both Farabi and most other Muslim jurists who followed him called for a single and all-powerful ruler who is the source of all laws and rules for society and whose wisdom justifies his harsh and relentless efforts to impose those regulations on a passive and ignorant populace.

Such ideas are at the heart of countless works by Muslim jurists in the centuries that followed. Having acknowledged that all questions of civil and personal life had not been addressed in holy writ, a few jurists strove to apply Quranic principles to problems that had not existed in the Prophet's day. Differences among them gave rise to the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence that still exist today among Sunni Muslims and to the separate Shia school of law. Of these, only the Hanafi school (which still prevails across Central Asia) allows for juristic discretion and acknowledges local customary law.

While Farabi defended his proposals as obvious to any thinking mind, it is no accident that they closely echoed the dictates of the Quran. The holy book affirms that all legitimate authority in human affairs derives from Allah as revealed to his prophet Muhammad and as supplemented by the Prophet's later utterances, compiled in his voluminous "sayings" or hadiths. It is the task of a single and all-powerful leader to apply

this body of holy writ to society, and of society to submit to this authority and reject all claims not derived from it.

Such an approach obviates the need and justification for politics as understood in the Greco-Roman world. While this approach was at least marginally compatible with Plato's *Republic*, it was flatly at odds with Aristotle's *Politics*, with the endless political maneuvers and improvisations described by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, with the political tugs-of-war that infuse both Greek tragedy and comedy, with the entire corpus of Roman legislation, and with the very human political struggles described by Rome's greatest historians. The Quran, thus interpreted, excluded all politics in the Western sense of the word and rendered the translation of classic works on political parties and factions, political biographies, and struggles over legislation not only irrelevant but impious—a means of encouraging behavior that undermined holy writ. As such, they were banned.

To be sure, there were Muslims who thought otherwise, notably the rationalistic Mutazilites, who flourished briefly under the Abbasid Caliphate with official patronage. But these were seen as attacks on the Word and always ended in victory for the literalists who demanded submission to Quranic tradition. Throughout the Muslim world, such blunt calls for submission to religious authority were repeated constantly over the following centuries.

In *What Went Wrong*, a book on Muslim hostility to the application of dispassionate reason to politics and society, the late British scholar Bernard Lewis traced the issue to comparatively modern times. He offered fulsome praise for the golden age of Islamic culture but argued that thereafter the Muslim East slipped backwards, a process that culminated in its failure to participate in the Renaissance and the age of science that followed. By implication, argued Lewis, the task of forward-thinking Muslims today is not simply to borrow from the modern West but to study and reclaim the glories of the more remote Islamic past.

This call appeals to many in both the East and West. It has been adopted as official doctrine by many forward-thinking Muslim governments. Indeed, the author of this essay has long supported such an approach and has developed it in books and articles. However, there is a problem with this worthy summons: namely, that Islam's golden age systematically excluded from its main discourse all serious discussion of society, politics, and law, as understood in the literature of the classical world that it otherwise embraced so fully. Both the Baghdad leadership and the pious intelligentsia of the Muslim world embraced and enforced this ban.

While the causes and motivation for this action were complex, it is clear that the main driver was their conviction that the correct approach to all questions of society, law, and politics had been revealed by Allah to his prophet Muhammad and articulated in the Quran and hadiths. As long as these texts were accepted and applied literally and fully, as was overwhelmingly the case in most Muslim societies down to modern times, they severely restricted the range of acceptable discourse on society and politics. This left the world of Islam bound by ecclesiastical constraints and bereft of the concepts needed to consider politics, participation, and law in the Western sense of those terms.

As a consequence, Muslim thinkers of the golden age bequeathed to later generations an approach to society and governance that would have been more at home in an ancient autocracy or Plato's dictatorial utopia than in any modern society since the Renaissance. In sharp contrast to the modernity of the early Muslim world's embrace of science and medicine, the golden age's bequest to later generations in the sphere of governance and society focused on the ideal of a single absolute lawgiver and ruler who exercises unlimited centralized power over every aspect of the lives of a pious and docile populace.

What paths does such an approach offer Muslim societies today? One may speak of three alternatives. First is the fundamentalist approach: to launch a thoroughgoing reversion to the past, as was done to varying degrees by the Salafists, Wahhabis, the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. Second is a full-blown secularism: to reject the Muslim heritage and fully secularize the state and laws, as was done by Ataturk, the Soviet rulers of Central Asia, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Shah Reza Pahlavi. Third: an approach with respect for, but not subservience to, the clergy and the demands of the faith. This third approach calls for secular laws, courts, and state institutions that are respectful of traditional faith but not subservient to its every demand or to the mullahs who interpret it.

It is not the task of this study to catalog those present-day thinkers and regimes that have embraced each of these alternatives or to evaluate their successes and failures. Suffice it to say that there are independent-minded thinkers and politicians across the Muslim world who have embraced what their critics call "Western" notions of sovereignty and citizenship. However, the most thoroughgoing embrace of the third alternative—to combine modern ideas on the state, law, and civil society with respect for religious tradition but not to be controlled by it—is to be found in the newly sovereign states of Greater Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, but also Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic.

The post-Soviet states have the advantage of having been forced by the collapse of the USSR to reinvent their polities *de novo*. They accomplished this with a blend of Realpolitik, Western notions of citizenship, courts, and rights, and important but neglected aspects of Muslim thought. There are three identifiable phases in their development, extending from 1991 to the present. First, the collapse of the USSR led to a vacuum of power and ideology across the breadth of Central Asia. Wahabis and other champions of political Islam seized upon this crisis, flooding Central Asia with armed activists and missionaries. Indigenous Islamists, who had existed as an invisible underground in Soviet times, now appeared in the open, making common cause with the proselytizing outsiders. The new governments struck hard against these groups, meeting force with force. When Kyrgyzstan tried instead to co-opt such groups, it failed. Civil war in Tajikistan almost led to the collapse of this post-Soviet state. In the process, the new rulers brought down upon themselves a firestorm of criticism from Western governments and human rights groups—a verbal tsunami that reached a crescendo after the Uzbek government suppressed a heavily armed Islamist insurrection in the Uzbek city of Andijan in 2005.

Meanwhile, a second phase began as the new governments set about drafting new constitutions and laws. Because it was what they knew best, they turned first to Russian legal thinkers, past and present. Even though the early *Rus* embraced Byzantine Christianity in the tenth century, it did not adopt either the Code of Justinian or other elements of Roman law. However, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia's judicial reformers had absorbed the corpus of Roman law, which they knew of thanks to their wholesale embrace of German legal codes. Surprisingly, this strain of legal thought persisted into Soviet times and was reflected (though rarely applied) in Soviet jurisprudence. As a result, elements of Roman law became the common heritage of lawyers and judges across colonial Central Asia. This intellectual infusion was accompanied by the wholesale translation and publication in Russian of the classics of Greek and Roman political thought, including Aristotle's *Politics*, Thucydides, Cicero, and Sallust.

Together, these two developments opened to Muslim Central Asia the entire corpus of thought about politics that the Muslim Caliphate had turned its back on a millennium earlier. Thanks to them, the post-Soviet constitutions of Central Asia feature classical Western views on the state, citizenship, sovereignty, and civil procedure. More important is the fact that the new constitutions of these Muslim societies all contain articles affirming that religious institutions and associations are separate from the state and subject to its laws. Even if they have often been ignored in practice, these innovations mark a decisive break with the region's past. That this was due to Russian and then Soviet colonial rule in Central Asia is one of history's many paradoxes.

Needless to say, debate on these important matters was largely confined to professional jurists, academics, and top governmental officials. However, in launching a third phase of reform, the governments of Central Asia have endeavored to square their new thinking with the tenets of Islam. Due to their successful suppression of Islamic terrorism on their territory and to the revocation of laws that justified such repression, this could now be done in tranquility. The project has resulted in the resurrection and revitalization of ancient alternatives to the repressive orthodoxies that dominated the faith for a millennium. Uzbekistan has led the way on this. The golden age of the Baghdad Caliphate bore the strong stamp of Central Asia. Its army was made up largely of Central Asians, and the plan of Baghdad itself can be traced to a prototype in what is now Turkmenistan.

Leading the charge in the intellectual sphere were members of the remarkable Barmak family from Balkh in what is now northern Afghanistan. Converts from Buddhism, the Barmaks were responsible for the Caliphate's focus on medicine and its curiosity about Indian mathematics and astronomy. Balkh, besides having been for centuries a great center of Buddhism, was the birthplace of Zoroaster, founder of the ancient faith of the entire Persianate East. Called Khorasan and including cities like Nishapur near today's Afghan–Iranian border, the region became a key center of resistance to the orthodoxy and dogmatism that prevailed in Baghdad and other Muslim lands. The key to this "Balkh theology" is the embrace of human agency. Faith, it claims, comes from the heart and not from the guidance of others. It therefore holds that people are free to use reason without prophetic guidance and to determine their

own actions within the scope of God-given possibilities.

Today's Muslim reformers in Uzbekistan and elsewhere in Central Asia not only embrace this deep regional tradition of epistemology but have brought to the fore its neglected early champion, the tenth-century jurist Abu Mansur al-Maturide. Conveniently born in Samarkand, Maturide epitomized the less authoritarian Hanafi school of jurisprudence that took early root in Central Asia and still prevails there today. He taught that Allah created all possibilities and left human beings free to choose among them. In the public sphere, he separated beliefs from actions.

Modern jurists in Uzbekistan and elsewhere were quick to realize that this interpretation removed Muslim impediments to concepts of rights, citizenship, and civic participation that had been marginalized or banned since the early days of the faith. They also grasped the fact that this "enlightened Islam" opened the door to a full-blown reconciliation between Islam and the long-suppressed concepts of governance, law, and civic life that had prevailed in classical Greece and Rome. Armed with such thoughts, in 2020 Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev convened an international conference on Maturide in the thinker's hometown. Thinkers across the region and beyond are now embracing this neglected thinker as a Muslim bridge builder to modernity.

Uzbeks and other Central Asians are making advances in the legal and civic spheres that should command the attention of the entire Muslim world and beyond. Rather than attacking Islam, these reformers are combining neglected strains of Muslim thought and classical Western concepts of civil law and governance to promote approaches to society and politics that Islam's golden age turned its back on a millennium ago.

Select Bibliography

Coulson, N. J. *A History of Islamic Law.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011.

Dalrymple, William. *The Golden Road: How Ancient India Transformed the World.* London: Bloomsbury, 2024.

Gutas, Dimitri. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*. 2nd ed. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Kennedy, Hugh. *The Court of the Caliphs: The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004.

Lewis, Bernard. *What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

O'Leary, DeLacy. *How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2001.

Reilly, Robert R. *The Closing of the Muslim Mind: How Intellectual Suicide Created the Modern Islamist Crisis.* Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010.

Starr, S. Frederick. *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

S. Frederick Starr is the founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and a distinguished fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council, based in Washington, D.C., and Stockholm, Sweden.