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Ethical leadership in the 21st century: Philosophical foundations and reconfiguration in the Arab-Muslim world

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Abstract

Ethical leadership is now a central topic of reflection in moral philosophy and the humanities, in a context marked by a crisis of legitimacy, normative fragmentation and ecological urgency. This article offers a conceptual analysis of ethical leadership in the 21st century, questioning the conditions for its reconfiguration in the Arab-Muslim world. Using a philosophical and hermeneutic approach, the study brings together the contemporary moral thinking of Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, and Hans Jonas with the classical resources of Islamic philosophy and ethics: Al-Fārābī, Ibn Roshd, Al-Mawardi, and Ibn Khaldoun.

We support the hypothesis that ethical leadership cannot be conceived as a simple exercise of power or a formalistic application of norms, but rather as a responsible praxis based on justice and the preservation of the common world.

Finally, the article shows that the Arab-Muslim world offers original normative resources for thinking about contextualized ethical leadership capable of responding to contemporary challenges without succumbing to postmodern relativism or the ideological instrumentalization of religion.

Keywords: ethical leadership; khilāfa; amāna; Islamic ecosophy; emergent reason.

Introduction

The question of ethical leadership is now a major issue in philosophy and the humanities. Globalization, the weakening of institutions and mistrust of political and economic elites have profoundly transformed the conditions for collective action. In this context, leadership can no longer be reduced to technical competence, the ability to influence or even effective decision-making. It now entails a broader moral responsibility.

In the Arab-Muslim world, this issue takes on a particular dimension. The societies concerned are experiencing persistent political and social crises, often marked by the instrumentalization of religion, even though they have a rich philosophical heritage that could shed light on contemporary debates. However, this heritage is generally either sacralized in an apologetic manner or discredited in the name of modernity.

How can we conceive of ethical leadership in the 21st century that is philosophically rigorous, morally demanding and culturally situated in the Arab-Muslim world? This is the

central question we will address in this article, which is part of the debate on the ethics of governance.

We argue that ethical leadership is far from being a simple technical style of governance. It is a critical articulation between contemporary moral philosophy and Islamic ethics, conceived as an open interpretative corpus oriented towards justice and the common good, rather than a closed dogmatic system.

Our methodological **approach** is **conceptual and hermeneutic**, drawing on both major figures in Western ethical thought (**Aristotle, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas**) and classical resources in Islamic philosophy and ethics, notably **Al-Fārābī, Ibn Rushd, Al-Māwardī and Ibn Khaldūn**.

Far from any dogmatic interpretation, this research aims to provide a critical analysis of certain concepts of Islamic ethics. The objective of such an analysis is to demonstrate the vitality of this tradition and its capacity to address contemporary challenges without renouncing its fundamental normative goals.

I. Philosophical foundations of Western ethical leadership

1. Leadership, authority and responsibility

1.1 Max Weber

In the Western philosophical tradition, the question of leadership¹ is closely linked to that of authority. Max Weber² distinguishes between three types of domination: traditional authority, charismatic authority and rational-legal authority. Each type is based on a specific form of legitimacy. However, ethical leadership cannot be confused with a simple sociological typology of domination. Indeed, as it aims to be ethical, it requires a normative justification that questions the very foundations of obedience³. Ethical leadership implies a constant questioning of the purposes of action and the responsibility of the decision-maker.

¹ A concept that became popular in the 20th century, the word comes from the English verb "to lead", which means to guide, direct or steer. Although the word is recent, the concept is ancient: the idea of guiding and directing has existed since antiquity. Leadership is the ability to influence, motivate and guide a group towards the achievement of a goal beyond mere hierarchical authority (leadership, *Dictionnaire Larousse*, larousse.fr, consulted on 15-12-2025).

² Max Weber, *The Scholar and the Politician*, trans. Catherine Colliot-Thélène, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

³ *Ibid.*

1.2 Hannah Arendt: the secularization and re-establishment of authority

In her book *The Crisis of Culture* (1961), Hannah Arendt analyses the crisis of modern values through the prism of the collapse of traditional forms of authority. She observes that the gradual secularization of Western societies has weakened the religious reference points that once underpinned the unity and legitimacy of power. Deprived of these metaphysical foundations, contemporary leadership can no longer impose itself as a natural given. It must now constantly justify itself through its ability to build and preserve a common world, acting in the general interest in a context of plurality.

This analysis is similar in many respects to that advocated by Max Weber in *The Scholar and the Politician* (2003). By distinguishing between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility⁴, Weber asserts that the legitimacy of authority in the modern world does not depend on the leader's personal convictions or traditional or sacred charisma, but on a practical rationality in which the leader assumes responsibility for the consequences of their actions in the public and historical sphere.

For Weber and Arendt, the question of authority can no longer be taken for granted. It becomes problematic in the face of the loss of traditional frameworks of legitimacy. The exercise of authority must derive its legitimacy from the action itself and its consequences in a world marked by uncertainty and pluralism.

1.3 Hans Jonas, the principle of responsibility: an ethic for the future

Hans Jonas⁵, broadened the scope of ethical reflection on responsibility. Responsibility ceases to be a simple relationship between an actor and his contemporaries and extends to the future of humanity and the preservation of the conditions of life on earth.

According to Jonas, this extension profoundly changes the figure of the leader. Leaders are no longer judged solely on the immediate effectiveness of their decisions, but also on

⁴ "The ethics of conviction, that is to say, the unconditional absolute of what is commanded as good (...) one must answer for the foreseeable consequences of one's actions." *Ibid.*, pp. (181, 182). For Weber, politicians cannot hide behind their convictions or intentions, even the most puritanical ones. They must anticipate the consequences of their actions and be accountable to others for them. Let us add this nuance: (moral) convictions are important but insufficient to justify political action.

⁵ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: An Ethics for Technological Civilization*, trans. J. Greish, Paris, Flammarion, 1998.

their potential irreversibility⁶. Leadership thus becomes a form of moral vigilance, attentive to the fragility of the world and aware of its own limitations.

It should be noted that this idea of vigilance originates from Aristotle's concept of 'phronesis'. In *Nicomachean Ethics*⁷, Aristotle defines this concept as the ability to deliberate correctly on what is good and beneficial to human beings in each particular situation. The prudent man, or 'phronimos', is someone who knows how to take concrete circumstances into account, who seeks the middle ground between two extreme and opposing situations, and who considers the common good rather than his own personal interest, guided in all his actions by experience and a keen perception of reality.

1.4 Habermas, ethics of discussion and communication

From another perspective, Jürgen Habermas⁸, with his theory of the ethics of discussion (or communicative ethics), bases moral legitimacy on the possibility of rational deliberation between free and equal subjects. He shows that the validity of norms depends on their acceptability by all concerned, in a dialogue without constraint. Ethical leadership must not impose a vision: it must first create the institutional and discursive conditions for an authentic, open debate, where every voice can be heard and where decisions emerge from reasoned exchange.

These contributions allow us to think of ethical leadership as a process of mutual influence, a mediation between norms, institutions and singularities (personal qualities), rather than as a solitary exercise of power.

II. Ethics and leadership in Arab-Muslim thought

1. Edifying concepts

1.1 *Khilāfa* and *amāna*: an ontology of responsibility

According to Gaston Wiet⁹, the term "caliphate" refers to a function that serves to "qualify the dignity of the leader of the Muslim community¹⁰". It is interesting to note that the word is translated as "successor", a title devoid of political status.

⁶ Certain political decisions may have irreversible consequences for the future of humanity. For example, uncontrolled arms policies threaten life on earth.

⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. Tricot, Vrin, 1993.

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Ethics of Discussion*, trans. by M. Hunyadi, Edition du Cerf, 1992.

⁹ Gaston Wiet (1887-1972) was a French orientalist and Arabist, author of *Grandeur de l'Islam*, Paris, La Table ronde, 1961.

¹⁰ "Caliphate," *Encyclopédie Universalis.fr*, accessed 15 December 2025.

¹¹ Islamic vocabulary, <http://www.francopol.org>

The Khalifat can therefore be commander of the faithful, as he can be a war leader, but in all cases "he is supposed to be the guarantor of respect for and the inviolability of Muslim doctrine (...) "¹¹".

Furthermore, under the entry "Shiism" in the *Encyclopédie Universelle*, Henry Corbin¹² writes that the concept of "khalifat concerns only the smooth running of social and political affairs, (...) the Sunni conception of the imamate in the person of the khalifat is a purely secular conception¹³". He specifies that it is in Shiism that the imamate has the meaning of "*wali Allah*", friend of God, and is therefore invested with a religious mission endowed with sacredness.

We note that in Islamic tradition, the concept of *khilāfa* (vicariate¹⁴) cannot be reduced to a political or institutional function. It fundamentally refers to a condition of human beings entrusted with responsibility. This is inseparable from "*amāna*¹⁵", meaning the trust entrusted to humans as custodians on earth. This concept implies accountability and humility. It follows, therefore, that the responsibility inherent in khilafa is primarily ontological: it defines human being and existence before taking on a political or social form. It is also moral in the sense that it guides and directs human conduct. Being a custodian and not an owner means that all forms of power are by nature conditional and subject to moral judgement. It is precisely this vision that authoritarian regimes seem to ignore.

1.2 Justice "*adl*", mercy "*rahma*" and the purposes of the Law "*maqassid sharia*": bulwarks of Islamic ethical leadership

"Adl"

The concept of "adl" justice in Islamic ethics is highly complex and is addressed in numerous interpretations in the literature. We will limit ourselves to proposing a definition in line with our objective: the word "adl" means fairness, objective balance, impartiality and right action. It is the primary virtue expected of rulers and judges¹⁶.

¹² Henry Corbin was an Orientalist philosopher with a keen interest in Iranian Islam and the author of a vast body of work, including *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire*.

¹³ *Encyclopédie Universalis.fr*, accessed 15 December 2025

¹⁴ We also find this concept of "vicariate" in Christianity, in the sense that the vicar is not only the Pope, representative of Christ on earth (Catholic tradition), but every believer (especially in Protestantism) is invested with a responsibility to bear witness to and serve God.

¹⁵ Sura 33 (Al-Ahzab), verse 22, presents the term in the sense of a trust.

¹⁶ "Adl", <https://she.hal.science/file/index/docid/179900/filename/DictionnaireIslam.doc>

"Rahma"

The concept of "rahma" means benevolent and reformative mercy.

Maqāṣid al-sharī'a

"*Maqāṣid al-sharī'a*"¹⁷ (the higher purposes of the Law) is a theory that consists of the preservation of life, reason, dignity, property and offspring. This fundamental principle in Islamic ethics provides a teleological framework that goes beyond a purely legalistic interpretation of Islamic ethics.

From this approach, Islamic leadership establishes itself as human stewardship on earth (*khilafat*), acting in accordance with the divine trust (*'amana*). Its actions are conditioned by justice (*adl*), which is exercised in mercy (*rahma*), with concern for the common good (*maqasid*).

Understood within this conceptual framework, Islamic ethical leadership is inherently excluded from any totalitarian tendencies.

2. The founding philosophers

2.1 Ethics of virtue and the purposes of law: Al-Farabi

In *Ārā' Ahl al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* and *Tahṣīl al-Sa'āda*, Al-Fārābī¹⁸ (872-950) asserts that the purpose of any political organization is *sa'āda*, true human happiness. This position is in line with the Aristotelian tradition, according to which the city exists for the sake of *eudaimonia* (*happiness*) (*Politics*, I, 1252b), but Al-Fārābī broadens its scope by incorporating a metaphysical and eschatological dimension.

The leader is not defined by his ability to impose order, but by his ability to guide the community towards moral and intellectual perfection, for it is in these terms that happiness is defined. An unjust city, even if stable and prosperous, is

described as an 'ignorant city', because it fails to achieve the human purpose.

2.2 Rationality of the law and criticism of authority: Ibn Rushd

The contribution of Ibn Rushd¹⁹ (1126–1198) is decisive in understanding the relationship between power²⁰, law and reason. In *Faṣl al-Maqāl*²¹, he argues that authentic revelation cannot contradict demonstrative reason, as both seek the truth. Sharia is therefore not a set of arbitrary prescriptions, but a rational norm oriented towards human good.

Ibn Rushd shows that legal disagreement is constitutive of Islamic normativity. Far from weakening the law, this plurality prevents its confiscation by political or religious power. The ruler is not above the law, but is now its responsible interpreter.

This position is in line with Aristotle's criticism of tyranny as the rule of caprice (*Politics*, IV)²², but it also informs modern criticism of the sacralization of power. Any authority that claims to impose a single, un-predation of religious law disqualifies itself morally and rationally.

2.3 Power as a moral trust: Al-Māwardī

In *Al-Ahkām al-Sulṭāniyya*, Al-Māwardī²³ (974-1058) conceptualizes power as an *amāna*. The legitimacy of the ruler depends on the exercise of justice, the protection of rights and respect for the law. Injustice is not simply an ethical failing; it constitutes a breach of the moral contract between the ruler and the community.

This conception prevents any absolutization of authority and places leadership within a logic of conditional responsibility. It has conceptual affinities with the ethics of responsibility developed by Hans Jonas, although responsibility is ultimately

¹⁷ This concept was developed by Abu Ishaq Al-Shatibi, see the online book: Bleuchot Hervé, *Droit musulman*, Presse Universitaire d'Aix-Marseille, 2000, <http://doi.org/10.4000/books.puam.979>

¹⁸ Christian Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie islamique ?* Paris, Gallimard, 2011. <http://she.hal.science/file/index/docid/179900/filename/DictionnaireIslam.doc>

¹⁹ André Bazzana, Nicol Beriou, and Pierre Guichard (eds.). 2005. *Averroès et l'averroïsme, XIIIe-XVe siècle [Averroes and Averroism, 12th-15th centuries]*, Lyon, Presse Universitaire de Lyon.

The book is available in digital format at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.19465>

²⁰ In his article "Ibn Roshd et le pouvoir almohade" (Ibn Roshd and Almohad power), Dominique Urvoey questions the attitude of Ibn Roshd, known for his outspoken criticism of totalitarianism, when he was, for a

period of his life, an important figure in the strict Almohad regime. This article is published in the collective work edited by Bazzana, A., Beriou, N., & Guichard, P. (eds). 2005. *Averroès et l'averroïsme*. Lyon. <http://doi.org/10.4000/books.pul.19465>

²¹ Averroes, *Traité décisif*, edited and translated by Marc M. Geoffroy, Paris, Vrin, 1996.

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, (translated by Pierre Pellegrin), Paris, Flammarion, 1993 (Original work written around 335 BC).

²³ <http://she.hal.science/file/index/docid/179900/filename/DictionnaireIslam.doc>

A major text on classical Islamic public law. Al-Mawardi sets out the functions of the caliphate, the conditions of the imam, the organization of power and the foundations of Sunni Islamic political thought.

based on moral transcendence and not solely on fear of future consequences, as Hans Jonas argues.

2.4 Decline of power and moral corruption: Ibn Khaldūn

With Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), thinking about leadership took on a historical and sociological dimension. In *Al-Muqaddima*²⁴, he shows that all political authority tends to become corrupt when it detaches itself from justice:

"(...) the sovereign is naturally inclined to reserve all authority for himself; one indulges in luxury, indolence and rest. When the empire has acquired its natural form through the establishment of autocracy, the introduction of luxury leads to its decline²⁵."

Luxury, violence and arbitrariness gradually destroy the moral cohesion that underpins power.

This analysis echoes modern diagnoses of the trivialization of political evil (as Hannah Arendt points out: "evil" becomes systemic when it is normalized and integrated into the structures of power). Ibn Khaldūn shows that this normalization breeds injustice, which inevitably leads to decline.

Although inspired by Sharia law and the Quran, classical Islamic thought, through these highly erudite philosophers, displays a rationalism of great critical rigor, a principle that resonates deeply with Western ideals. However, the reality in most Islamic countries is one of authoritarian styles of governance. This tension between the ideal of Islamic leadership and authoritarian practices deserves to be explored in greater depth.

III. Contemporary tensions and abuses of leadership

1. Instrumentalization of religion and ethical immorality

The contemporary instrumentalization of religious discourse is one of the most problematic abuses of leadership in several political contexts in the Arab-Muslim world. References to justice ('adl), trust (amāna) or Islamic morality are invoked not as genuine guides for action, but as rhetorical tools aimed at conferring an appearance of sacredness and moral authority on often authoritarian regimes or practices.

²⁴ First part of kitab al ibar, the Muqaddima or Prolegomena (published in 1377), a major work by Ibn Khaldoun known for presenting the cyclical theory of power.

²⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *The Prolegomena*, trans. W. MacGuccckin de Slane, Part I, Section 3, p. 11

This instrumentalization gives rise to a veritable ethical immorality: the language of virtue is emptied of its substance and mobilized to justify injustice, the concentration of power or even repression.

Moral discourse is detached from lived realities. By repeatedly invoking "divine will", "cultural specificity" or "traditional values", the real issues of governance – social justice and public accountability – are obscured.

2. Postmodernity and normative fragmentation: the quest for a difficult balance

Contemporary Muslim societies are not isolated from global upheavals. They are fully affected by the dynamics of postmodernity, marked by the pluralization of value systems and the erosion of grand unifying narratives (whether religious, ideological or national). This normative fragmentation presents leaders with a complex dilemma.

One (seemingly easy) solution is to seek refuge in an absolutist vision aimed at reinstating a monolithic conception of law and morality. This is most often based on a literalist and closed interpretation of sacred texts, denying the complexity of the contemporary world. Such denial paves the way for forms of authoritarianism and exclusion.

At the other end of the spectrum, radical relativism, fuelled by cultural globalization and digital networks, leads to the dissolution of ethical reference points. This process reduces values to subjective and negotiable constructs, compromising the foundations of collective action and shared justice.

Between this dissolving relativism and rigid absolutism, ethical leadership struggles to find a balance²⁶. How, indeed, can timeless spiritual principles be articulated with the changing demands of a pluralistic world? How can authority be exercised that is at once firm on the ends of justice and the common good (maqāṣid), yet flexible, dialogical and inclusive in its methods?

This tension reveals a profound crisis of authority. The challenge for modern leadership is to build an ethical framework that is both rooted in spiritual tradition and fully engaged with contemporary realities. It must be capable of integrating diversity without falling into value nihilism and defending principles without resorting to dogmatism. It is in

This version (there are several) that we consulted is available online at: <http://classiques.uqac.ca> or doc-developpement-durable.org

²⁶ This crisis of values also affects secular societies and is at the heart of contemporary debates.

this narrow and demanding space that a true practice of responsible Islamic leadership, faithful to the spirit of *khilāfa* and *amāna*, could be reinvented.

3. Leadership as responsible praxis

Islamic ecosophy and emerging reason

According to Islamic cosmology, every element of the world is perceived as a sacred sign, and every human being is its custodian. This vision paves the way for a profound harmony between ethics, spirituality and nature, forming the basis for a true integrative ecosophy²⁷. This invites us to move beyond the dominant instrumental rationality to cultivate what the thinker Mohammed Arkoun calls 'emerging reason'²⁸. A critical, historical and open reason, which emerges from the dialogue between spiritual heritage and contemporary challenges. This reason is no longer confined to fixed dogmas. It is a reason in the making, capable of creatively articulating the ethical imperatives of tradition with the ecological and social demands of the present. It allows us to rethink the place of humans in the living world, not as dominators, but as responsible guardians.

Emerging reason calls for critical moral education and just institutions, for it is itself the product of a collective effort of reflection, debate and reform of structures of thought and power.

Conclusion

The reflection developed in this article starts from a fundamental question: is it possible to conceive of Islamic ethical leadership in the 21st century that combines philosophical rigor, moral standards and fidelity to spiritual traditions?

To answer this question, we have examined the theoretical and philosophical foundations on which such leadership is based.

Analysis of Western traditions reveals that the concepts of power, ethics, morality, governance and responsibility are essential levers for ethical leadership that is both demanding and operational. The approach adopted in this study shows that the study of Islamic ethics highlights similar requirements. Indeed, far from any dogmatic interpretation,

Islamic ethical thought demonstrates a critical and rational rigor as powerful as that of Western philosophy.

Islamic ethics are based on a rich body of interpretation: open and oriented towards justice (*adl*), compassion (*rahma*), responsible governance (*khilāfa*, *amana*) and the higher purposes of the Law (*maqasid*). These universal principles nevertheless remain deeply rooted in their spiritual sources.

This comparative analysis shows that the articulation between philosophical rigor and fidelity to sources is not only possible but necessary to the establishment of authentic Islamic ethical leadership. Such leadership would be able to respond effectively to the contemporary challenges of governance.

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²⁷It is a philosophical ecology, the concept (ecosophy) was coined by the philosopher Arne Naess in 1960 to raise awareness in human society of a new way of inhabiting the world, a wisdom of inhabiting. See the article by Mustapha Cherif, "L'homme et la nature" (Man and Nature), published on 9 November 2013 in *Les Cahiers de l'islam*, in lescahiersdelislam.fr

²⁸ According to Arkoun, emerging reason (in Arabic: al-'aql al-nāshī') is opposed to closed reason (al-'aql al-mustabidd). It refers to a critical faculty that emerges from a historical and contextualized re-reading of texts, open to interculturality and the complexity of the modern world. This ties in with the critique of instrumental rationality (Mohamed Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Paris Maisonneuve&Larose 1984).

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