

Prerequisites for Political Understanding and Policymaking (4)

The History of Nations, Their Characteristics, Alliances, and Conflicts

(Translated)

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When history is studied, the student must distinguish what benefits him from what does not. This distinction is made by linking the study of history, to the purpose for which it is studied. If one seeks literature and eloquence, he delves into the history of his nation's writers. If one seeks entertainment, he engages in the myths of nations. If driven by curiosity, he pursues matters in history that have no answers. However, the politician does not take these paths. Instead, he proceeds in the direction dictated by his goal, the study of the politics, guardianship of the affairs, of yesterday.

History:

The history of nations, states, and leaders consists of reports about conditions that took place, related to managing affairs and changing situations. At the time, these were political events, and today they have become history. Studying the history of nations, states, and leaders is beneficial in many aspects. The history of leaders enlightens the insights of the active politician engaged in politics, as he reflects on the actions of leaders who changed the course of events, rescued their countries from crises, spared their nations from calamities, or elevated their nations to the ranks of global powers. This confirms to him that what is possible in politics is reality itself, and it is also what reality can become when handled by the hand of a politician.

The history of states benefits the politician by providing real experience of the development of the international balance of power, the emergence of international customs and laws, and the effective tools that have been used throughout time to enforce political orientations and achieve planned policies.

The study of the history of nations gives the politician insight into nations and peoples, their traits, and how events related to them are connected to the qualities carried by those nations.

Current leaders in the world often draw inspiration from historical leaders of their nations. The leaders of the Islamic Ummah derived their contributions from the Prophet (saw), from the Khulafaa' Rashidun (Rightly-Guided Caliphs) after him—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali (may Allah be pleased with them)—and from Khulafaa' (Caliphs) who excelled in caring for the Ummah and the state, such as Harun al-Rashid and Suleiman the Magnificent (may Allah have mercy on them).

In America, its leaders draw their determination and direction from the founding fathers who built America, preserved its unity, and established it to become the foremost state in the world, such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

In Russia, its leaders derive their vigor and even their political orientations from their historical figures like Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.

Thus, the study of history is essential for shaping role models for young leaders and motivating them to emulate their predecessors in contribution and capability.

What concerns us in our discussion here, is what can be gained from history in terms of political understanding and policy-making. Therefore, it is necessary for us to study the history of our Ummah and the history of the active nations in the world. This study requires focusing on the pivotal points in the history of nations, not on the entire detailed history of those nations. This must be approached as follows:

Firstly: A general study of the history of any nation from its inception, which leads to a clear picture of the characteristics that have accompanied this nation since its beginning. This is something that influences our view of that nation both in times of its rise and its decline. If a nation possesses the qualities of leadership, resilience, the fulfillment of its responsibilities, and the ability to bear responsibility for others, then that nation will not perish. If it stumbles, it will quickly return, gather its strength, and once again shape the world according to its own way.

However, if a nation possesses traits of wickedness, cunning, strong networking with others, or ease in winning friends and neutralizing enemies, then such a nation becomes a calamity for the world, bringing nothing but misery and war in pursuit of its own interests. If a people combine deceit with cowardice and a habit of intrigue, then that people becomes a source of unrest for any state that they control, and they must be prevented from taking any leadership position in any country that they can rule over, and so on.

Secondly: It is necessary to study the pivotal moments in the history of nations, that brought about fundamental changes in their course, as well as to study the state of the world at those turning points, when the change occurred in favor of the nation or against it. In this way, the politician understands the fluctuations of the international scenario, and foresees the rise of one nation and the decline of another.

For example, the Treaty of Hudaybiyyah was a pivotal moment in the history of the Islamic Ummah, followed by the sending of letters to the kings and emperors of the world. The battles of Qadisiyyah and Yarmouk were also pivotal in the state's emergence onto the global stage, as was the conquest of Constantinople. Conversely, Peter the Great's war against the Uthmani Khilafah (Ottoman Caliphate) in the region of the Sea of Azov, after he had established a port there to block sea supplies to the Crimean Tatars, was one of the decisive wars in the history of Tsarist Russia. Likewise, the American Revolution, which led to the birth of the United States of America, and the two World Wars, were also such turning points.

These junctures provide a picture of the international scenario, its transformations, the causes of its shifts, the reasons behind the weakening of some states and the strengthening of others, and the political intrigues and traps woven by some nations against others. History repeats itself, though each time in a different form.

Thirdly: It is necessary to study the dangers that surrounded nations, and the major wars waged against them, to identify their historical adversaries and the vulnerabilities through which they were breached in their wars.

Russia views Europe as nothing but an enemy, and this is historically confirmed: Europe invaded Russia significantly three times, the Great Northern War led by the Kingdom of Sweden, the Battle of Borodino led by Napoleon, and when Hitler invaded them during World War II. This highlights the fact that Russia was invaded all three times through its western gateway, which made the protection of its western frontier a matter of life and death. For this reason, Russia took an extremely fierce stance when Ukraine requested NATO membership, a move encouraged by America to ignite this hotspot, which indeed erupted in 2022.

Fourthly: It is necessary to study recent history, due to its connection with current issues, by examining the political projects undertaken by states and whether they are still pursuing them or have abandoned them due to failure or success.

If the history of a given issue, around which current events are unfolding, is not known, then any analysis of the present circumstances without looking into its history is incomplete. The different dimensions of the issue cannot be fully revealed without understanding its past. For example, when examining the Palestinian issue, one must know its history from the time it was targeted by the British, through its occupation, to its being handed over to the Jews, and the granting of authority over parts of it to Jordan and Egypt. Then come the related projects of a one-state or two-state solution, the relationship between the Jews and Jordan, the Jewish view of Jordan throughout the issue's history, and the plans drawn up by the Americans to reach the two-state solution, starting with encouraging the partition of Palestine into two states in 1950, then adopting the two-state project in 1959, then steering the Oslo Accords of 1993 to their advantage, leading up to the Deal of the Century in 2020. This also includes the shift from the Arab Peace Initiative to normalization and then "peace," the changes in Jewish orientations between Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the shifts in Jewish loyalties between Britain and America, America's eventual control of the entire stage, and the division within the two American parties, with each supporting different factions among the Jews. Thus, whenever a new event occurs, its context becomes understandable.

It is also necessary to observe a very important matter: history is a mixture of events and facts. There are events that happened to a nation or state tied to specific circumstances, and there are historical facts independent of circumstances. One must adopt the facts, and set aside the events tied to temporary conditions. For example, the Islamic Ummah is not a bloodthirsty nation, even if in its history blood was shed due to domestic disputes. Looking closely at those disputes, their roots are found in circumstances that arose, or in external groups that confused the Ummah while it was off guard. An example of this is the events with the Khawarij, the establishment of the Fatimid State, and the Qarmatians' control of the Sacred Masjid. However, these did not take the history of the Ummah out of its true context, namely, carrying the responsibility of spreading its ideology to the world. The Ummah remained on this course until its state was brought down, and now it has returned to work for the rebuilding of its state once again.

So, the event tied to circumstances was the bloodshed in the Ummah's disputes, and this is not to be taken as its essence. The historical fact is the Ummah's responsibility to spread its ideology, and this is what must be taken.

Thus, forming a historical picture of the active nations and those that were, or could become, active is essential for the politician whether he seeks to engage in political understanding or in shaping policies.

The characteristics of peoples

The study of the characteristics of peoples is essential for political analysis, as well as for those formulating policies related to a people or a nation.

The policies decided by political leaders in a given country are not separate from the traits they carry, and these traits stem from the nature of the people from whom they emerge. The choice of objectives is inseparable from the characteristics of peoples: a people aspiring to dominance over others will choose different goals than a people concerned only with themselves, whilst a people who feel responsible for others will adopt political objectives, unlike those whose nature is selfishness.

The characteristics of peoples influence the plans and methods employed to reach a goal. A people that detests injustice will not follow the same course as a people accustomed to it, even if both peoples are pursuing the same objective.

The policy drawn by the leading state in the world, toward peoples and nations, must take into account the characteristics of those peoples. For example, the expansion of the Islamic state into Al-Sham and Africa involved a military form, while Islam reached Indonesia and spread widely there through Muslim traders without war. Thus, if a state employs the same approach toward two different peoples without considering their natures, it will not achieve the same results with both, and may even face failure.

Similarly, there is a difference between the German people and the Afghan people: America occupied Germany for many years, yet the Germans never even threw a single stone at them. However, when America occupied Afghanistan, it found no peace until it withdrew after twenty years in a humiliating manner. Therefore, a policymaker must take into account the characteristics of peoples when devising policies concerning them.

The Messenger of Allah (saw) teaches us this. When Quraysh sent negotiators to him at Hudaibiyyah, he adopted a different approach for each one according to what suited him. When Quraysh sent the Ahabeesh, led by Hulays ibn Alqamah al-Kinani, the chief of the Ahabeesh who were allies of Quraysh, the Prophet (saw) said, «إن هذا من قوم يتألهون، فابعثوا الهدى **This man is from a people who revere the sacred. Send the sacrificial animals to pass in front of him so that he may see them.**» **في وجهه حتى يراه»** When Hulays saw the sacrificial animals flowing toward him in their garlands, their hair worn out from long restraint away from their place of sacrifice, he was deeply moved and returned to Quraysh without meeting the Prophet (saw), out of reverence for what he had witnessed. He told them what he saw, but they said to him, "Sit down, you are just a Bedouin and have no knowledge." At this, Hulays became angry and said, "O people of Quraysh, by Allah, this is not what we pledged to you, nor what we agreed upon with you! Is one who comes to honor the House of Allah to be turned away from it? By Him in whose hand is Hulays's soul, you will either let Muhammad proceed with what he came for, or I will march with the Ahabeesh against you as one man!" [Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah, Ibn Hisham].

The characteristics of peoples can be discerned by tracing their history. What is meant is not a detailed reading of their history, but rather looking at the pivotal moments within it, and that is sufficient.

It is necessary to examine the history of their rise, the history of their decline, their dealings with their enemies, as well as their response to crises that befall them. From studying these stages, general characteristics of these peoples can be derived.

The characteristics of peoples can also be discerned from the nature of their lands. Peoples who live in regions open to the seas, trade routes, transportation, and fishing develop traits that suit the nature of their land and their common occupation. For this reason, the English were among the most capable peoples in dealing with others and communicating with them, and among the most cunning and deceitful.

By contrast, the Arabs lived in harsh lands, between deserts and high mountains. Their life was difficult, their food dry, and they were unbothered by hardship in their living. In fact, the vastness of their deserts broadened their horizons, so Allah (swt) guided them to trade as a way out of their difficult livelihood. Thus, they combined the ability to connect with others with the strength of their toughness. They did not take to hypocrisy nor did they like lying.

The Prophet (saw) described their traits when he left the gathering of Banu Shayban after asking them for support, saying, «يا أبا بكر أية أخلاق في الجاهلية ما أشرفها بها يدفع الله عز وجل بأس

«بعضهم عن بعض، وبها يتحاجزون فيما بينهم» **“O Abu Bakr, what noble morals in the Days of Ignorance! By them Allah (swt) repels the violence of some of them against others, and by them they restrain themselves among one another.”** [Dala'il al-Nubuwwah, Al-Bayhaqi].

Thus, the nature of the land and its common occupation are among the causes of a people's collective traits, and history bears witness to this.

Agreement and Conflict

Historically, communities and later states did not live isolated from one another. If this was not the case for communities and states in the past, then it is even more evident today that states cannot live in isolation from others, especially those that have a motive to engage with the outside world.

We exclude from this discussion those tribes and groups that still live in remote jungles, even though they themselves are not completely isolated from their surroundings, as they wage wars and secure interests among neighboring tribes. However, they are excluded on the grounds that they have no influence whatsoever on the international arena.

The states of this world are either influential or influenced. Therefore, any community that decides to withdraw from the world will inevitably be affected by the ambitions of those states that choose to be influential.

The states of the world engage with others either out of a drive for dominance or a drive for colonialism. The drive for dominance may stem from the desire for the supremacy of race, the supremacy of nation, or the supremacy of an ideology, all of which fall under this framework. The drive for colonialism encompasses every form of exploitation of other states' resources and wealth, whether through military occupation or through political or economic agreements.

These two drives push the players on the international stage toward either conflict or agreement. The drive for racial supremacy was Hitler's tool in rallying the Aryan race to wage wars for control over Europe. Although he moved toward Denmark and Norway to secure the iron shipments coming from Sweden, the broader direction he displayed was driven by the superiority of his race, and thus, this drive led toward conflict.

As for the Islamic state, it swept across lands, opening them up, driven by the supremacy of its ideology, Islam, without regard to wealth or resources. The conquest of Egypt and Al-Sham was carried out in the same manner as the conquest of the poor lands of the Arabian Peninsula.

The drive for supremacy cannot reconcile with the drive for supremacy of another, except through temporary truces, after which it resumes working for the dominance of its principle, race, or nation.

As for the drive of colonialism, it is a vile motive that pushes the strong to consume the weak by humiliating and even enslaving them, in order to exploit the resources of their land for the benefit of their enemy. For this reason, the Western capitalist states prioritized conflict for the sake of colonialism above every other motive during the period in which they colonized the Islamic world and Africa.

It reached the point where France colonized Niger and employed Nigerien children to extract uranium from its mines, which was then shipped to France to fuel its nuclear reactors that light up France with electricity, while the people of Niger died in the mines and had no light when night fell upon them.

The drive of colonialism was also what drove King Leopold II of Belgium, who controlled the African Congo, to cause the death of ten million Africans, not to mention the slave trade, which was treated as a commodity by Europeans in past times.

Conflict arises between those driven by motives of dominance. Two countries then clash in a struggle that sweeps across their borders and pushes them into a state of actual war, until one side yields and surrenders, and the stronger prevails in dominance over both countries.

However, since nationalistic borders were sanctified, this type of conflict has become internationally condemned. Thus, states resorted to circumventing this international stance through popular referendums. For instance, in Austria there was already popular sentiment in favor of unification with Germany, before the Anschluss process (Anschluß Österreichs) that annexed Austria to Germany. Likewise, Russia encouraged separatist movements in eastern Ukraine, then recognized the separatist republics, Donetsk and Luhansk. These republics then requested Russia's protection against Ukrainian aggression, and this staging was important for Russia, so as not to appear in violation of international law.

Conflict also occurs among those with the same orientation, stemming from a state's drive for dominance within its own sphere and, consequently, in the world, as well as from competition over resources. The Western capitalist states clashed violently in Muslim lands, leading America to pull the rug out from under England's feet in its former colonies by igniting regions and eliminating agents. For example, America set Yemen ablaze through the strikes led by "Saudi Arabia" against Yemen in 2015, thereby providing the Houthis who at that time aligned with America an opportunity to enter the political arena in Yemen and to pull the rug out from under Ali Abdullah Saleh and those who stood behind him after his assassination.

Indeed, America ignited Iraq in order to end its subordination to England and to take control of its resources.

On the other hand, the same interests that drive states into conflict also drive them into agreement. In 1961, America saw it in its interest to enter a phase of détente with the Soviet Union, in order to curb the ambitions of other major powers. However, once it had exhausted its benefit, it abandoned détente in 1979.

It is necessary to note the difference between conflict based on hostility and conflict based on competition. When the European states clash with America, their conflict is in the realm of competition over the spoils of the world, since Europe sees that it and America share the same values and civilizational orientation, and that America is in fact the offspring of Europe. Thus, they form a single front, unifying against others while competing among themselves.

In contrast, the conflict between Russia and Europe is not driven by competition, but by hostility and this hostility is historical between these two fronts.

The study of conflict and agreement is only necessary with regard to the states that are active in the world, or issues connected to them. It is also necessary for nations and peoples that possess the elements required to become major powers. As for others, examining them is of no importance at all.

Historically, conflict and agreement have driven states to agree upon customs, and then laws respected by all. They have also driven states to form alliances and hold international conferences.

[To be continued]