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# The Political Context of Islamic Economics

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# The Political Context of Islamic Economics: High and Low Road Strategies

*Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani**

ONE of the primary functions of any science is classification. Whether in natural or social sciences, the task of an analyst is to classify disparate events under formal classes. By definition, therefore, such classes or categories are formal and artificial. Nevertheless, they help in: (a) comprehension of the problem, and (b) projection of non-existing futures.[1] The act of *formalisation* becomes especially important for a discussion about desirable but non-existing (one could also say utopian) situations. The subject of our discussion falls into this class of problems. We are carrying out discussion about a system of economic relationships which does not exist. Nevertheless, we have certain notions about a desirable future system. What should be a relevant classification for our discussion? One could conceive of several classifications depending on one's interests and the level of discussion. For the purposes of a discussion on the Political Context of Islamic Economics, I have preferred to categorise the discussion under three classes: THEORY, POLICY and PRACTICE.

**Theory, Policy and Practice**

By Theory, I refer to the abstract principles of economic activity: principles related to consumer behaviour, the nature of money, distribution of wealth, etc.

By Policy, I refer to a strategy for the realisation of certain objectives in a given time and horizon. Policy comprises guidelines based on certain theoretical beliefs.

By Practice, I refer to the concrete steps for carrying out a policy in a specific operation. Social philosophers of different ages and areas of the world have conceived of social planning under similar categories. One finds

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a reference to these categories in a wide spectrum of writings sufficiently diverse to include Ibn-Khaldun, the American literature on the so-called Policy Sciences and the works of Communist strategists such as Mao and Lenin.[2] There are grey areas in between Theory, Policy and Practice. And that aspect of it is most crucial. It is the task of any leadership to have a clear vision of what falls in which category. A choice of this nature requires both technical competence and an artful intuition about the political environment.

This paper is an attempt to perform a two-fold task of:

(a) Clarifying the distinction between Theory, Policy and Practice.
(b) Focussing on the Policy aspect of Islamic Economics.

**A Framework for Policy Formulation**

Policy Formulation is usually for a middle range time-period, let us say for a period from five to fifteen years. It is our hypothesis that for this time range, the objectives of political leaders play a decisive role in the determination of economic relationships. In this statement, we are making an explicit disagreement with the orthodox Marxist and Liberal conceptions about economic determinism.[3] At any stage of human history and means of production, political leaderships are faced with a number of choices regarding economic relationships. We argue that within the parameters which are provided by long range forces, political leaderships make the decisive choices. Therefore, a discussion on economic policy or strategy, must contain a discussion of the objectives of political leaders.[4]

Political leaderships can be divided into several types. We have chosen two types that we think are most inclusive and explanatory for our purposes:

(a) Goal-Oriented Leadership.
(b) Value-Oriented Leadership.

This division is based on the categories of human motivation provided by Max Weber.[5] Max Weber has two other categories: effective or sentimental and traditional motivations. The difference between these and the earlier two categories is that these (the latter two) are not based on calculation, and hence are in a way not rational. We assume that all political leaderships in our times are rational. However, one type of rationality is based on the pursuit of values and principles, the other type of rationality is based on the pursuit of goals only.

The political leaderships in the Islamic community of our time can be divided into goal-oriented leadership and value-oriented leadership. As we shall explain below each leadership has elements of the other category. However, the driving force in each case is represented by one motivation. To repeat, our division into ideal types is formal and not based on evidence from the empirical world.

Let us call the value-oriented policy the *High Road Strategy* and the goal-oriented policy the *Low Road Strategy*.

**Value-Orientation and Goal-Orientation**

As Muslims, we adhere to certain values dealing with economic issues and relations. These values are related to production, distribution and consumption of wealth. The pursuit of these values is supposed to achieve two goals: prosperity in our individual and group lives and prosperity in the world hereafter.[6] The goal of prosperity in this world is broken down into sub-goals such as group-solidarity as a means to achieve the goal of prosperity. Similarly there are other sub-goals such as higher rate of economic growth, higher standard of living, etc.

It is imperative that in due course of time, certain groups of a community should become more concerned with goals than with values that originally inspired those goals. This can happen for several reasons. Firstly, the distinction between values and goals and the link between the two is never very clear and definitive. Secondly, there is a tendency among most individuals and groups to be concerned with the immediate and concrete rather than with the distant and abstract. Thirdly, the pursuit of certain goals develops a dynamism of its own. Conscious and unconscious interests develop which obstruct such changes in goals which may be desirable under changed circumstances. The rigidity on goals means a negation of the primacy of values. On the other hand, it is also imperative that in a community, certain groups should rise with a renewed enthusiasm about the primacy of values. We believe that the history of any dynamic community is shaped by an ongoing struggle between these two groups: groups to whom values are primary and groups to whom goals are primary. The fate of a community is largely determined by the nature and the shape of this struggle. This struggle can be productive or unproductive in terms of the development of the community. Therefore, we should try to understand and perhaps shape this struggle.

Since Islamic Economics is one aspect of the multi-faceted Muslim community, it is subject to the kind of struggle mentioned above. To repeat our earlier terminology, Islamic Economics is subject to an implicit and explicit struggle between the High Road (value-oriented) and Low Road (goal-oriented) strategies. Below we turn to a rather tentative analysis of these two strategies. In each case we shall ask the following questions:

(a) Who are the prominent proponents of the strategy?
(b) What is the nature of their objectives?
(c) What is the nature of their own motivations, and the nature of their appeals to the Muslim community?

Since the method of this paper is not empirical but primarily theoretical, our use of empirical examples may be lacking in accuracy. Nevertheless, our purpose of laying out a theoretical framework for further analysis will be served.

**High Road Strategy**

(A) The proponents of this strategy comprise of the revivalist movements which have operated in almost all Muslim countries in this century. In almost all cases their organisation was established during the period of the struggle of Muslim peoples against their colonial masters. The immense humiliation of foreign rule inspired a devotion to the forgotten values of Islam. In most cases the Revivalists provided the ideological seed for independence movements. The treasured Muslim value "sovereignty of none other than Allah" was invoked with great intensity. The "Sovereignty of Allah" was a value; national independence was a goal. Gradually the goal took precedence over the value. And in almost all cases, the Revivalist groups were pushed to the back seat during the final stages of independence movements, or very soon afterwards.

Consequently the High Road Strategy groups of today are very clearly non-governmental groups. They, generally, constitute the sentiments or the organisation of opposition to the ruling regimes in the Muslim countries.

*To summarise, their first characteristic is that they are non-governmental, often opposition groups.*

Secondly, they are organised on a national basis. Since in each case they emerged during a period of struggle against colonial rule and were important members of independence movements, the locus of their organisation was coterminous with that of the independence struggle. *The second characteristic of the proponents of the High Road Strategy is that they are national in organisation.*

Thirdly, in almost all cases these groups were involved in bitter conflict with the post-independence regimes, which resulted in a substantial out-migration of their prominent members. An unanticipated result of this out-migration is the creation of certain transnational links among them.[7] *The third characteristic of the High Road strategies is that they seem to be acquiring a transnational organisation.*

(B) By our definition, the objectives of High Road Strategies are value-oriented. In the realm of Economics, these values are related to questions, such as, production, distribution and consumption of wealth. Since the relevant unit for the attainment of these objectives happens to be nation-state, their activities are focussed around the domestic politics of nation-state. The tendency to concentrate on domestic politics is further reinforced by the national form of their organisation.

*To summarise, the objectives of High Road strategists are value-oriented and related to domestic politics of nation states.*

(C) The question of motivations is highly speculative, nevertheless extremely central to a discussion about the creation of a new world order or a new system (such as Islamic Economics). There are two aspects to motivations: motivations of the leadership of change itself and motivations which underlie the appeal of this leadership to the community in general. The second aspect of motivations reveals the perception of the leadership about the behaviour of the community, i.e., their perception of what inspires or can inspire the community.

Following our method of constructing ideal-types, we divide motivations into two types:

(a) self-interest;
(b) altruism (non-self-interest)

While self-interested behaviour is predicated on the assumption that one can increase one's utility by an increase in one's own pleasures, altruistic behaviour is predicated on the assumption that one can increase one's utility without reference to personal pleasure. In simpler words, for altruistic behaviour social interest takes precedence over individual interest.[8]

Altruistic behaviour can be crucial for the creation of a new social system. The irony of a movement of change is that those whose interest lies in change are often too weak to organise change, and those who have the strength to bring about change have an interest in status quo. It is precisely some form of altruistic behaviour that breaks this vicious circle. A movement for social change aims at creating a social good, in the form of a better society. While the benefits of the new society are enjoyed by a large group of people, the cost incurred in bringing about the change is borne by a much smaller group.[9] The motivation for bearing this cost often comes from the altruistic instinct of man.

Returning to the question of motivations in a Strategy for Islamic Economics, we argue that the High Road strategists operate under motivations of altruism. This is in conformity with their objectives which aim at bringing about a fundamental change in the existing social structures. While their personal activity is motivated by altruism, their appeals to the community comprise of a combination of self-interest and altruism. It comprises a promise of better life here and hereafter. Such a combination is perfectly suitable to the logic of collective action for change. It contains an appeal to two audiences: to those whose interest lies in change and who can be motivated by self-interest, and to those whose interest lies in status quo and who can be motivated for change by an appeal to altruism. However, the correct combination of this duality of appeal is not an easy job. As a result of this complexity, some groups have accused the Revivalist movements of supporting radical change, while others have accused them of supporting the status quo.

*To summarise, we can say that the motivations of High Road strategists are basically altruistic.*

**Low Road Strategy**

(A) The proponents of this strategy belong mainly to the Modernist movements. The Modernist movements, like the Revivalist movements arose in response to the colonial domination of the West. They, like the Revivalists, chose to fight the colonial West. But, unlike the Revivalists, they were markedly influenced by the secular philosophy of Western political thought. While they did not renounce their identification with Islam, their concern was not the revival of Islamic principles. Their activities became focussed around the establishment of independent and modern nation-states. Their identification was with the community of Islam but not necessarily with the principles of Islam. In most cases they did not express explicit disinterest in the introduction of Islamic principles. On the contrary, the need for such an effort was given some approval. Nevertheless, the main drive behind their activities was national development and modernisation.

Since the leaderships of the independence movements in the Muslim countries were largely composed of modernist elements, they constituted the national governments after independence, as political leaders or civil servants. *Therefore, the first characteristic of the Low Road strategists is that they are composed largely of governmental or semi-governmental groups.*

What is the scope of their operation regarding Islamic Economics? This is rather interesting because of a paradox. The scope of the activities of national governments regarding Islamic Economics is international. Various national governments of Muslim countries have sought co-operation with other Muslim countries on the basis of Islamic solidarity. This is paradoxical because the Revivalists, who tend to be more universalistic in their ideas tend to operate nationally, and the national governments, who by definition are particularistic, tend to operate internationally. But, despite this apparent paradox, the international focus of the Low Road Strategy is understandable. The domestic application of Islamic Economics requires a structural change in conformity with Islamic Principles. This is not the primary concern of the Low Road Strategy.

On the other hand, the international application of Islamic Economics primarily demands solidarity in the international Muslim community. And since the latter interests the Low Road Strategy, its activities tend to be in the international field. *The second characteristic of the Low Road Strategy is that the focus of its activity is international.*

(B) By our definition, the objectives of the Low Road strategists are goal-oriented. These goals can be generally described as economic growth, industrial development and higher standard of living. In order to achieve these objectives, the Low Road strategists lay emphasis on certain principles of Islam, such as, solidarity among the community, hard work and discipline, etc. But to them, the more salient aspect of Islamic solidarity is in the international field. Here they seek to make economic agreements and treaties with other Muslim countries for mutual development and growth.[10]

*To summarise, the objectives of the Low Road strategists are goal-oriented and focussed around international co-operation.*

(C) On the question of motivations, we shall repeat our earlier statement about the composition of the Low Road strategists. They are largely composed of governmental groups. Since most governmental activity is carried out on non-altruistic considerations, altruism is not a prominent motivation in this group. Social theorists tell us that organisation leads to a decline in utopian visions.[11] This seems more true for organisation of governments. Governments operate on the basis of individual or group self-interest.[12] Consequently, their appeals to the community are also based largely on self-interest. The objectives of the Low Road Strategy do not include a radical change in the social structure. Instead, the objective is to concentrate on the total capabilities of the society, with some neglect of relative group capabilities within the society. The orientation is toward reform rather than radical change. The philosophy of reform is not inconsistent with the logic of self-interest. Each individual and group can theoretically perform a countervailing influence on the power of other individuals and groups by simply taking care of their own self-interest.

*To summarise, we can say that the Low Road strategists operate on the motivations of self-interest.*

**Summary**

Up to this point, we have argued that an analysis of the objectives of political leaderships is crucial to a correct understanding of economic relationships. We classified objectives of political leaders into two categories: value-oriented and goal-oriented. We then proceeded to draw up two classes of strategies: High Road and Low Road strategies. We analysed the Actors, the Objectives and the Motives involved in each strategy. All of the above is part of our effort to set up a framework for the formulation of a Policy for Islamic Economics. Up until this point, our discussion has been focussed around the *Actors* in the process. We shall now give a brief analysis of the *Environment* in which the Actors play their roles.

**The Environment of Action**

Historians have a habit of labelling every period of history by a distinctive characteristic. We find titles such as the Age of Reason, the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Crisis, the Age of Democracy, etc. Historians do this retrospectively. Their observations of a certain period shows the predominance and the frequency of the occurrence of a certain characteristic. Why do we find this phenomenon in history? Different social scientists have suggested that human actions have a tendency towards disequilibrium. The path of human endeavours is not from one equilibrium to another disequilibrium.[13] Societal action, they would argue, is generated by an interplay of surpluses and deficits, to use the jargon of economics. It is precisely this characteristic of human action which brings about the predominance of a certain quality in every age. The task of a prudent and creative leadership is to make a correct judgement about what is most required in its age. A correct judgement on this would enable the leadership to shape the future according to its vision, rather than react to circumstances casted by others. He who has a correct judgement of his *environment* can exert great influence in shaping it. Regarding the subject of this paper, we can argue that *a successful Islamic Economic Strategy must be based on a correct assessment of the socio-philosophical environment of our age.*

What is the predominant characteristic of our environment? By its very nature, this question needs extensive discussion on the one hand, and can be answered only in speculative terms on the other hand. To the author of this paper, it appears that future historians will remember our age as the Age of Justice. Our age has witnessed an intense interest in justice within nations and justice among the larger community of nations. To say that ours is an Age of Justice does not imply that justice prevails in our age. This would be as wrong as, for example, assuming that reason prevailed in the so-called Age of Reason. Reason was not prevalent but the ideal of Reason was the most appealing and affective ideal in that age. So may be our case: justice is certainly not prevailing today, but it appears to be most needed. As an ideal, it has and, perhaps, will continue to warm the hearts of those living in our Age. A Strategy for Islamic Economics should, in my opinion, give a special place to the notion of economic and socio-political justice.

Depending on their judgement of the environment, and as a function of their objectives and motivations, different groups in an Islamic community are bound to come up with different strategies for Islamic Economics. A study of policy formulation must include the process of interaction among these competing strategies.

In reference to the earlier sections of this paper, we shall now look into the process of interaction between High Road and Low Road Strategies.

**Interaction Among Competing Strategies**

The two strategies have certain similarities and differences. In terms of the scope of its desired activities, the High Road is inclusive of the activities of the Low Road. In other words, the High Road includes the objective of creating a Muslim community but goes beyond that in insisting that the organisation of such a community should be strictly according to the principles of Islam. In the past, this difference has led to a bitter conflict. Muslim governments (who would be generally placed under our Low Road category) sought to acquire their legitimacy from their association with Islam. But on this, they were challenged by the proponents of the High Road Strategy, who believed that the Low Road Strategy was not inclusive enough to be titled as an Islamic Strategy. Since governments or regimes, are extremely sensitive on the question of their legitimacy, the High Road Strategy was bitterly resented by them. Gradually the conflict between the two strategies became a dispute on each other's legitimacy. Conflicts in which the contending parties deny the legitimacy of each other's existence are always bitter and often irrational (a good example would be conflict among certain sects of a religion). In such a conflict, the parties do not make a genuine effort to understand the true objectives and motivations of each other. Such conflicts are not productive in terms of the community. In conventional terms, they are negative-sum conflicts.

However, not all conflicts have to be negative sum. Conflictual process can very well be a positive-sum process. This is not to forget that a positive-sum conflict is not always desirable. This question should be decided by one's relationship to the community under consideration. Suppose A and B are in conflict over C. The ultimate objective of A is the elimination of the total community C. The ultimate objective of B is to maintain status quo as obtains in C. In this situation, negative-sum conflict may not be undesirable for the purposes of A. In effect, for A they might be desirable, because each negative-sum conflict diminishes the total capabilities of C. Let us see another situation in which A and B have mutual interest in enhancing the capabilities of the total community C. Nevertheless A and B have conflict regarding their relative capability within C. In this situation a positive-sum conflict may be more desirable.

The lesson we draw from the above discussion, is that in determining his strategy, a strategist should understand his relationship to the opposing party as well as his own attitude and the attitude of the opposing party to the space in which the conflict is taking place.

Let us return to the issue of interaction between High Road and Low Road strategies. It is the understanding of this author that there is a logic for conflict between the two, for reasons of difference on their composition, objectives and motives, as explained earlier. Nevertheless, this conflict can be positive-sum, let us call that *un-antagonistic conflict*, rather than negative-sum, let us call that *antagonistic conflict*. In the past the conflict has been largely on the antagonistic pattern. One reason for that was that each did not recognise the legitimacy of the other. For transforming the conflict to an un-antagonistic pattern, the two will have to extend greater legitimacy to each other.

This was our third and final step towards setting-up a framework for formulating a Policy for Islamic Economics. The first step was related to the *Actors*, the second to the *Environment*, the third to the *Interaction*.

*In the third step, we underscored the need for a strategist to determine whether his interaction with competing strategies will be based on an antagonistic or un-antagonistic pattern.*

**Interaction Among Muslim Economists**

Towards the end of this paper, I shall make a diversion from the discussion on interaction among competing strategies to interaction among economists. Muslim Economists are making an effort to work out a Theory and a Policy for Islamic Economics. In their effort to do this, how should they communicate among themselves and with the larger community of Muslims? In order to answer this question, we should say a little about the functions of an economist in general. Of the several functions they perform, the following come readily to mind:

(1) Explanation of the existing economic relations in a society.
(2) Make projections into the future, based on a knowledge of the "anatomy" of the existing economic system.
(3) Help in economic planning, based on an understanding of the above two.
(4) Lay out a framework for basic transformation of existing economic relationships.

The last of the above functions is performed by unconventional economists. This activity goes beyond conventional economics to the borders of philosophy and covers all areas of social sciences. The system transformation function requires a holistic understanding and a vision into the future. Since it deals with a non-existing system, it is less concerned with qualities required for the implementation of an existing system. Because of their lack of interest in conventional techniques, system-transformation economists are sometimes relegated to a low status within the dominant academic tradition.[14] In his study of economic philosophers, Robert Heilbroner introduces us to a system-transforming caste of economic philosophers who formed an "Underworld of Economics".[15] The dominant tradition, then, comprised of the early mathematical economists like Edgeworth, Walras and Jevons. Mathematical Economics, as Heilbroner explains, develops during a period of basic agreement on a system.

I take the opportunity to indicate this subject for discussion because I feel there should be greater clarity in our mind about:

(a) The relevant techniques for a group of economists interested in system-transformation.
(b) Our relationship with the dominant academic tradition of our times.

I would not hesitate to point out a contradiction inherent in the above argument. The techniques required for system-transformation are different from the techniques required for system-implementation. But if system-transformation efforts are serious and purposive then they must contain a formula for a post-transformation system. This is an inherent dilemma: how to reconcile the utopian character of system-transformation with the pragmatic character of a post-transformation society.

Instead of creating confusion by an unreal effort to make consistency out of real dilemmas, we should squarely face this contradiction. In other words, our policy formulation should focus on:

HOW TO ACHIEVE UTOPIAN (AND ALTRUISTICALLY MOTIVATED) GOALS BY PRAGMATIC MEANS?

## Notes

1 Arthur L. Strincho, MBE, *Constructing Social Theories*, 1968.
Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, Chandler Publishing Company, 1968.

2 Muhsin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldūn's Philosophy of History*, The University of Chicago Press, 1957.
Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lanwell, eds., *The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1971.

3 On this similarity between the Marxist and the Liberal positions see Raymond Aron, *Main Currents of Sociological Thought*, Vol. I (1970).

4 On the political nature of economic decision-making see Robert Dahl and Charles Lindbloom, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*, New York, Harpers and Brothers, 1953. Also see:
Richard M. Cyert and James G. March, *A Behavioural Theory of the Firm*, Prentice Hall, 1963.

5 Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. with Introduction by Talcot Parsons, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964.

6 فى الدنيا حسنة وفى الآخرة حسنة .

7 By "transnational" we refer to groups of individuals from different national backgrounds who do not represent their national governments. On the definition of "transnational", see Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, eds., *Transnational Relations*, Harvard University Press, 1972.

8 For an interesting discussion on self-interest and altruism as two different but equally rational modes of action, see Norman Frohlic, *Self-interest and Altruism, What Difference?*, Journal for Conflict Resolution, Vol. 18. No. 1, March 1974, pp. 55–73.

9 Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*, Harvard University Press, 1965.
Thomas C. Schelling, *On the Ecology of Micromotives*, The Public Interest, No. 25, Fall 1971, pp. 59–98.

10 For example, a resolution on economic matters presented at the Lahore Summit of Islamic countries was based on the theme of mutual co-operation for prosperity, development and control over natural resources.

11 Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, The Free Press, New York, 1972.
Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., New York, 1936.

12 For a systematic treatment of different explanations of government behaviour, see Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1971.

13 Most notably see:
Albert Hirschman, *A Bias for Hope*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1971.
——, *The Strategy of Economic Planning*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1958.
Gunar Myrdal, *Economic Theory and Underdeveloped Regions*, Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row Publishers, 1957.

14 For interesting insights into the sociology of knowledge, particularly on the creation of new paradigms, see:
Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

15 Robert Heilbroner, *The Wordly Philosophers*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1972.

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