

Political Creativity among Religious Leaders: The Case of Muhammad

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Abstract: This article is a preliminary study on the concept of Islamic creative thinking through the life of Muhammad. This study aims to reassess the creativity of Muhammad specifically in political and statesmen points of view, and to highlight his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs. The study employed qualitative content analysis through evaluating relevant reports, articles and texts. Despite the flourishing literatures on his life and biography, aspects relating to his qualities, skills and virtues in light of contemporary condition are still lacking and understudied. Obviously, this article focuses only on a few aspects of his life; particularly his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs. This preliminary paper will provide a distinctive perspective on the concept of creativity and innovation and its necessity in contemporary Islamic political approach, which should be considered as an important characteristic for both modern Islamic and western worlds. Future works may focus on modeling the political creativity and innovation framework for future leaders.

Key words: Creativity • Politics • Sunnah • Innovation • Leadership • Muslim

INTRODUCTION

In the Islamic world Muhammad is the perfect creation of mankind, as mentioned by Afzalur Rahman [1]. Some western scholars view Muhammad, both as a prophet and politician, as Armstrong [2] writes "...so he wore himself out in the creative effort to evolve an entirely new solution." His leadership was most comprehensive and dynamic, from religious leader to political and military leader (Federer) [3]. Ernest Renan; a French critic who famously wrote in 1851, observed that Muhammad was the only religious leader who lived "in the full light of history"[4].

Muhammad was the leader. As a politician leading a state, he succeeded in establishing the first political entity in the Arab Peninsular. In that new entity, the Arab society from various tribes and clans was united: a great achievement, which has never been achieved by an Arab

leader before Muhammad. He made Islam a 'cement of civilization' by tying Arab and later on non-Arabs together. His way of dealing with people in Makkah and Madinah indicates his great political leadership. Therefore, this paper will critically reassess the creativity of Muhammad specifically from the political and statesmen's points of view. This study also aims to highlight his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs.

Muhammad as a Statesman: A statesman may be defined as someone who has the wisdom and vision to inspire policies and actions with long-term goals in mind; someone with breadth of view and idealism; someone who has the capacity to compromise with dignity, allowing all parties in a dispute to feel they are victorious; and someone who is not short sighted, partisan or opportunistic (Javeed Akhter) [5]. Montgomery Watt [6]

has coined Muhammad as a far-sighted political strategist. Even John Esposito [7] and Michael Hart [8] recognized Muhammad as one of the exemplary leaders of all times. Marshall Hodgson [9] also mentions that Muhammad established the first Muslim state by uniting the Muslims and the non-Muslims. There were no new tribes of believers or revolutionary groups but only heterogeneous group of people with better structure of society as compared to Makkah society. Muhammad had to become a statesman to safeguard his community and protect them from excessive prosecution as explained in the Quran:

“And slay them wherever ye find them, and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship until they first attack you there, but if they attack you (there) then slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers. But if they desist, then lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrong-doers” [10].

Although there are countless number of events and instances where Muhammad demonstrated his qualities to deal with the situations creatively and innovatively, the writers have decided to take only a few events into account for this paper.

The Diplomacy of Muhammad: It is creditable for modern Muslim intellectuals to search for inspiration in managing modern society through the exemplary attitude of Muhammad. One of the policies introduced by him was to initiate a ‘political contract’ between the Muslim community and other social groups in Madinah. In Islamic history, this contract is known as ‘*Mithaq al-Madinah*’ or the Madinah Charter. An Egyptian writer, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, in *The Life of Muhammad* [11], considers this as a ‘*wathiqah siyasiyyah*’ or political document guaranteeing the freedom of faith, freedom of opinion, the protection of the country, the rights to live and own property, a judicial system for resolving disputes, and the rights of non-Muslims; the first constitution written and documented as such. Even Clausewitz highlighted in his work, *On War*, the important and the necessity of unity as a fundamental element in nation building, and how internal dissension could lead to the collapse of nation [12].

Muhammad also developed a very sophisticated intelligence service after the establishment of state of Madinah. This action is to ensure that he is well aware of what is happening around him, and to keep him well informed of current situation. Through various events that happened afterwards, for examples, in the event of the Battle of Badr, many literatures mentioned that Muhammad always received news from his agents (not in terms of divine intervention or revelation) in order to make correct and fact-based judgments. There is also countless number of reports stating that Muhammad often sought the opinions of his companions and discussed with them before he made any decision. This proved the creativity of Muhammad and his thorough-mindedness in terms of diplomacy.

In the case of the Hudaibiyyah treaty, the truce was signed in the year 628CE. It allowed Muslims to make their pilgrimage to Mecca in the following year. In 629CE, Muhammad established control over the Hijaz and led the pilgrimage to Mecca as scheduled (John Esposito) [13]. The conversation that took place between Muhammad and Suhayl ibn Amr shows the highest degree of diplomacy demonstrated by Muhammad towards his enemies, and what more towards his companions. The four points of treaty also showed the creativity and far sightedness of Muhammad in preaching Islam. No doubt the treaty benefited Muhammad and Islam in the long run. It also became the cornerstone of the establishment of Islam in Arabia (Mahmoud Ayoub) [14]. However, after twenty-two months, the tribe of Bakr with the help of Quraysh took vengeance on the tribe of Khuza‘ah, thus killing several people. In his response, Muhammad prepared to attack Makkah. Nearly all western scholars and Orientalists wrote with prejudice that the action of Muhammad was morally and politically driven (Pipes) [15]. In fact, the Quraysh violated the treaty, and Muhammad’s decision to attack was driven by the violation of the treaty agreement. This is another event on how Muhammad showed his forbearance quality.

Conflict Resolution: The theme of *surah Yusuf* represents a process of conflict resolution between Muhammad and the Quraysh who conspired to assassinate him, forcing him to emigrate from Makkah to Madinah. Some scholars (Husayn Haykal, [16]; Martin Lings, [17]; Sarwar [18]; and Muhammad Ali, [19]) believed that Muhammad had already participated actively in the Alliance of Fudul, which significantly later became the principle in trade.

The creativity of Muhammad is further evident when one reads on how he managed to solve a conflict that arose among the Makkan tribe of Quraysh with regard to an incident of the Black Stone (*Hajar al-Aswad*). It is reported that the Quraysh were rebuilding the walls of the Ka'bah and when the time came to place the Black Stone in its place in the southeast corner of the Ka'bah, each tribe took it upon itself, with honor, to place the Stone in its designated position (Abdel Halim Mahmoud) [20].

With each tribe bent on placing the Stone in its rightful position before the other tribes had a chance to do so, matters began to escalate to a point where the tribes were on the verge of starting a scuffle, but when a suggestion was made that they should rest for a while and abide by the opinion on the matter of the first person to enter the holy compound, the tribes began to calm down. It so happened that Muhammad was the first person to enter the holy compound, and thus he was asked to be the judge and solved the matter fairly (Abdel Halim Mahmoud) [21]. His sage solution on this dispute saved the day. Muhammad spread his own cloak on the ground and placed the Stone upon it. He then asked a representative from each tribe to come forward and lift part of the cloak from one corner. When all the representatives lifted their parts of the cloak, the Black Stone began to rise and when it reached the required height from the ground, Muhammad went forward and set it in its designated place in the Ka'bah, thus allowing all the Quraysh tribes, as well as himself, to share equally in the glory and privilege of having placed the Black Stone in its rightful position (Husayn Haykal) [22].

Another lesson that can be learned from this incident is that the collective work of sharing a burden can lead to a collective reward, which in this case was the sharing of the glory of having placed the Black Stone in its designated position in the Ka'bah. The burden was much lighter by lifting the stone after placing it on the cloak that allowed equal participation of each tribe. If only one tribe had been allowed to lift the stone, it would have been rather heavy to lift and, furthermore, much dissatisfaction would have ensued among the tribes that were not given a chance to participate in its lifting. Thus, the decision by Muhammad to engage all the tribes was a much-needed intelligent and creative solution that led to the task at hand being completed with relative ease, and quickly ended a dispute that might have escalated into a physical fight with, perhaps, some injuries. In the end, all parties were happy at having been given a chance to lift the stone.

International Affairs: The decision made by Muhammad in allowing Muslims to migrate to Ethiopia twice (in 615 and 616CE) is not due merely to psychological attachment to his breastfed mother, Ummu Ayman. The migration to Ethiopia is an example of his political skill in seeking alliances with others. When the persecution increased in Makkah and some of his followers found it difficult to live in that environment, he allowed them to migrate to Ethiopia and seek help from the Christian King there. In Ethiopia, Muslims found peace and they reciprocated the King's hospitality with prayers, and supported the King and his party. Muslims' relations were so good with the monarch that he grew to love Islam and became a Muslim before his death. This is a great example of how two different people and religions were able to live in peace and harmony, thus refuting the "clash of civilizations" theory.

Delegations to Neighboring Monarchs: It is mentioned in history books (Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri) [23] that Muhammad sent over 80 envoys to neighboring tribes, monarchs and countries. Muhammad also sent an invitation to Heraclius, the Emperor of Rome, to Islam. By sending military expeditions to neighboring areas and signing pacts between Madinah and the neighboring countries, Muhammad wanted to signal the emerging power and influence of Islam and break the Quraysh's dominance over the Arab Peninsular. These expeditions served as vanguards in providing Muhammad with the information he needed to pave the ways for the preaching of Islam, not only in Arabia but also in other continents (Fethullah Gullen) [24]. Muhammad is also acknowledged as an innovator of the concept of the Prisoner of War (POW) (Fethullah Gullen) [25]. Although war had started long before the coming of Islam, there was no general guideline regarding the POWs. In fact, Muhammad was the first to set such rules right after the Battle of Badr. It shows that there is no 'zero sum game' in Islam, but only pure mercy.

DISCUSSION

In analyzing Muhammad's creativity in lights of the above discussion, it is of importance to note that the advent of Muhammad has not only changed the political landscape of Arabia but also played a major role in influencing the political course of future history of mankind. This is due to the fact that Islam encompasses the religious, social, political, and economic dimensions,

and Muhammad exemplified the perfect embodiment of Islam on this earth in all facets of life. He was a prophet and at the same time a statesman, a policy regulator, an economic planner, an educator, and a family man. In the political realm, some of the political creativity and innovation of Muhammad has been highlighted through a few selected cases comprising the aspects of diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs, where in each case he was able to institute policies and changes that lead to political and social stability despite the complexity of the multi religious and multiracial environment of Arabia at that time. Nonetheless, in examining the factors that lead to his success as a statesman and politician, a number of contributing factors, both tangible and intangible, are important to be noted such as the social and economic conditions as well as individual characteristics of leaders, among others.

In this regard, this paper highlights only the extraordinary psychological traits as expressed by Muhammad, through his acts and policies, and his role in instituting political change and stability. In his study of political creativity, Brett Kubicek [26] has demonstrated the link between social conditions and individual characteristics. He has also identified two main characteristics, which are crucial for political creativity; the mindset and aptitude of the leader. The former is simply defined as the level of willingness of the leader to take on extraordinary problems at the individual, group and social level, while the latter is explained as the level of his ability to solve extraordinary problems at the individual, group and social level.

The willingness of a leader includes his level of motivation to launch a policy; resilience to accept setbacks without conceding defeats; persistence to work on long term commitment, incremental forms of change; patience; and his ability to stay focused on a problem for a long time with self control. On the other hand, the ability of a leader means his level of open-mindedness to question convention and improve it; intelligence to understand social dynamics; expertise and insight to utilize available resources; influence to persuade and coordinate others to keep them focused; as well as his adaptability to recognize dead ends and shift strategy as needed (Brett Kubicek) [27].

From the cases discussed before, it is evident that Muhammad has demonstrated these two traits of a successful political leader at an extraordinary level. Firstly in term of his mindset, Muhammad had always demonstrated a high level of willingness and motivation

in any particular situation. For instance, his determination to spread and implement the messages of God resulted in him and his followers getting various kinds of tortures, abuses, embargo and so on during the early years of Islam in Mecca. Nonetheless, Muhammad remained steadfast and unmoved by all the threats and enmities shown towards him. He firmly believed that God is by his side and would help him overcome all the hurdles and difficulties that they were subjected to, as mentioned in the Quran [28].

At the same time, he also encouraged some of his followers to migrate to Ethiopia as a way out from the relentless ill treatment from the pagans of Mecca. Muhammad has creatively and carefully chosen Ethiopia as a safe haven for the Muslims due to its peaceful and just ruler who also shared similar theological belief regarding Jesus with the Muslims. It was also a strategic move made by Muhammad so that the Muslims could establish their presence beyond the borders of Arabia and gain the psychological and political support of an influential power against the tribal authority in Mecca (Montgomery Watt) [29].

In another example, such as the Hudaibiyah Treaty, Muhammad had also shown his patience, self control and far-sighted political strategy when accepting the treaty imposed upon him by the Quraysh. This treaty, which seemed disadvantageous for Muslims at that time, roused disappointment and anger from some of his followers. However, Muhammad was resilient on signing the treaty despite the setback and honor it until eventually it was transgressed by the Quraysh. This led to the peaceful conquest of Makkah in 8th AH without any bloodshed, in which Muhammad was able to restore stability in the region (Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri) [30].

Secondly, in term of his ability, Muhammad was endowed with an extraordinary level of intelligence and wisdom in understanding the social and political dynamics among the various tribes in Arabia at that time. An excellent example of this can be seen from his creative solution for the Black Stone placement issue, which had nearly triggered tribal wars and caused unnecessary conflict in Mecca. Similarly, Muhammad had also succeeded in establishing stability in Madinah through the introduction of the Charter of Madinah in which he included all the existing Arab and Jewish tribes under the banner of the new rules and united them under his political leadership. In this political and social contract, the rights of each citizen were spelt out clearly in addition to their obligations and duties towards the Islamic rule.

Therefore, this document provided Muhammad a solid foundation towards a peaceful and stable nation building in a city, which was once broiled in turmoil and continuous conflict between the Aws and the Khazraj. Nevertheless, the most important factor that served as the basis of the Prophet's intelligence, creative insight and wise strategy lies in his internal and spiritual strength through his firm belief and faith in God. This, in fact, is the main source of his high level of motivation to undertake his duty despite the hurdles that he faced along the way. Divine guidance in the form of revelation was also bestowed upon him to console, clarify, assist and give direction in time of needs as mentioned in the Quran [31].

Similarly, if the policy or decision made by Muhammad was deemed not the best of choices by God, the revelation also serves to remind him of his ultimate objective. For example, in the aftermath of the Battle of Badr, Muhammad decided, after consulting his companions, to allow each of the prisoners captured during the battle to redeem themselves through material means. However, God has reminded him, as stated in the Quran [32], that it was not commendable since many of the prisoners were arch enemies of Islam and by allowing their release might be harmful for Islam and Muslims. In short, in his mission as a messenger of God and a leader, Muhammad is a perfect embodiment of the Quran, which is reflected in his traits, characteristics and examples shown throughout his life. In fact he is the role model par excellence; one whom Muslims of all ages and times should emulate. In one of his works, Montgomery Watt [33] is bound to acknowledge him, despite his biased and prejudiced views against him, as:

"A man in whom creative imagination worked at deep levels and produced ideas relevant to the central questions of human existence, so that his religion has had a widespread appeal, not only in his own age but in succeeding centuries"(pg.240).

Thus, in the political dimension, Muhammad should serve as a model for the modern Muslim political leader, who is not only just and fair, but also creative and innovative in introducing and implementing policies for a peaceful, balanced and just nation [34]. This two important traits shown by Muhammad other than his strong faith and belief in God, should be studied and practiced so as to produce Muslim leaders of today and tomorrow capable of expressing political creativity for the benefits of their followers. Although the revelation was

completed with the demise of the Prophet, yet through sincere supplication, *tawakkul* and *taqwa*, one is guaranteed the assistance and grace of God in overcoming the challenges of life.

CONCLUSION

Many scholars agree that Muhammad was not only a great religious leader, but also a creative, innovative and great political leader. Despite the flourishing literatures on his life and biography, aspects relating to his qualities, skills and virtues in light of contemporary condition are still lacking and understudied. Obviously, this article only focuses on a few aspects of his life; particularly his creativity in diplomacy, conflict resolution and international affairs as discussed earlier. Thus, it is hoped that this preliminary paper will provide a distinctive perspective on the concept of creativity and innovation of Muhammad and the necessity of its implementation in the contemporary Islamic political approach. Future works need to focus on modeling the political creativity and innovation framework for future leaders, and thus unlock the black boxes of creativity and innovation.

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