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Governance As a Delicate Balance: On the Concept of *Lutf* in Islamic Mirrors for Princes

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Abstract

This article is concerned with Islamic works on political ethics as a practical guide for competent governance. The article primarily focuses on the concept of *lutf* (gentleness) in the works of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* (the ethics of government, i.e., Islamic mirrors for princes). The main argument is that Muslim writers of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* literature warned rulers against depending on coercive power as the basic mode of governance. Instead, the majority emphasized that the most practical way to govern a state was to practice governance based on a balance between rewards and punishments. Based on their advice, rulers should avoid cruelty in favor of an interdependent political order based on social cooperation between the different classes. The article first explains the concept of *lutf* and the importance of avoiding cruelty. Second, the article relates how *lutf* operates in the realm of public policy, ruler-people relations, and the responsibility of rulers. Finally, the article highlights how *lutf* dictates a functional elite structure based on loyalty and mutual respect. The methodology of this article relies on primary sources, mostly analyzing the presence of *lutf* as a concept and the details of governance surrounding the concept. The article seeks to show the intricacies of the state through understanding the concept of *lutf* and its relation with practicing politics in a cohesive Muslim social structure.

Keywords

Al-ādāb al-sultāniyya – Islamic mirrors for princes – *tuf* – moderation – elites – competent governance

الحكم كميزان دقيق: حول مفهوم اللطف في الآداب السلطانية

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الخلاصة

يتناول هذا المقال المصنفات الإسلامية عن الأخلاق السياسية كدليل عملي للحكم الرشيد. يركز المقال في المقام الأول على مفهوم اللطف في مصنفات الآداب السلطانية أو ما يسمى مرآة الأُمراء الإسلامية. الفكرة الرئيسية هي أن مصنفي الأدب السلطاني من المسلمين حذروا الحكام من الاعتماد على القهر كطريقة أساسية للحكم. وأصروا بدلاً من ذلك على أن الطريقة الملائمة لحكم الدولة هي إدارة الحكم على أساس التوازن بين المكافآت والعقوبات. فيجب على الحاكم، بناءً على نصحهم، تجنب القسوة لصالح نظام سياسي مترابط قائم على التعاون بين طبقات المجتمع المختلفة. تشرح المقالة أولاً مفهوم اللطف وأهميته تجنب القسوة. ثانياً، يتناول المقال كيفية وجود اللطف في مجال السياسة العامة، والعلاقات بين الحاكم والشعب، ومسؤولية الحكام. وأخيراً، يسلط المقال الضوء على كيف يقوم اللطف بهيكله نجبة فعالة مبنية على الولاء والاحترام المتبادل. تعتمد منهجية المقال على المصادر الأولية في الأساس، وتركيز معظمها على تحليل وجود اللطف كمفهوم وتفاصيل الحكم المحيطة به. ويسعى المقال إلى بيان تعقيدات الدولة من خلال فهم مفهوم اللطف وعلاقته بممارسة السياسة في بنية اجتماعية إسلامية متماسكة.

الكلمات المفتاحية

الآداب السلطانية – مرآة الأُمراء الإسلامية – اللطف – القصد – النجبة – الحكم الرشيد

1 Introduction

In the field of classical Islamic political thought, the works of *al-ahkām al-sultāniyya* (the ordinances of government) are a primary source to know the legal duties and obligations of a ruler in Muslim polities. However, the genre of *al-ahkām al-sultāniyya* alone is not sufficient to understand the different angles of political duties in the Muslim polity.¹ *Al-ahkām al-sultāniyya* works illustrate the basic requirements for legitimate rule over a Muslim polity but usually stop there, at the basic legalities. There are added prescriptions on the duties of the ruler aside from the ones found in *al-ahkām al-sultāniyya*, mostly in other writings such as the works of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* (the conduct of government, i.e., Islamic mirror for princes), which are advice manuals to guide authority figures.² The focus of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*'s genre on the ethical excellence of political action makes it grounded in the realities of the political world and the ethical precepts that cultivate success. Hence, this genre fundamentally deals with the best way to govern society given all of its internal differences and concerns.

Not many studies have focused on the subtle dimension of responsibilities and the underlying socio-political structure found in *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* works.³ Much of the works are either translations or books that deal with the genre's historical concepts. This article aims to fill that gap by focusing on the internal logic of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* and tries to explain the authors' vision of a good polity. Despite the many detractors, closer observation demonstrates that writings on *ādāb al-mulūk* were neither unrealistic nor mere propaganda.⁴ So the concepts dealt with in this article seek to illustrate not only the presence of a coherent and competent state logic towards administration, but also

1 For works on *al-ahkām al-sultāniyya* see the following works: al-Māwardī's (d. 450/1058) *al-Ahkām al-Sultāniyya wa-l-Wilāyāt al-Dīniyya* ("The Ordinances of Government and the Religious Jurisdictions") (al-Māwardī 2014); al-Juwaynī's (d. 478/1085) *Ghiyāth al-Umam fī Illiyāth al-Zulam* ("The Aid of Nations in the Surrounding Darkness") (al-Juwaynī 2014); al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) *Faḍā'ih al-Bāṭiniyya* ("The Scandals of the Esoterics") (al-Ghazālī 2002); and Ibn al-Azraq's (d. 901/1496) *Badā'ī' al-Silk fī Ṭabā'ī' al-Mulk* ("The Most Beautiful Pearls on the Characters of Power") (Ibn al-Azraq 2008).

2 To read more on *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*, see Black 2011, 111–117; Dinçer 2018, 48–61.

3 Some prominent studies on *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* include Marlow 2022; Kumar 1985, 307–327; and Black 2011. However, these studies primarily focus on the historical context and evolution of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* and do not delve deeper into the underlying logic of the structure present in the genre.

4 The terms *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* and *ādāb al-mulūk* are used interchangeably to indicate the same genre of political writings in the Islamic tradition.

prove wrong the accusations of supporting tyranny and absolutism.⁵ The genre elaborates at length on how to conduct politics in a conscious way that ensures political success without losing sight of how ethical principles are in fact set in realistic advice. In light of what was mentioned, this paper will focus on particular concepts that played a central role in Muslim political practice, such as *lutf* (gentleness), *qaṣd* (moderation), and other related concepts.⁶ These concepts will be used to illustrate the basic mode of conduct for rulers in the Muslim polity. In short, the paper will discuss the importance of balance in approaching the question of how to conduct ethical political action. The paper will trace the mentioned concepts to see how Muslim political thought understood the nature of good political action and the limits of a ruler.

For its methodology, this paper relies on a textual analysis of the primary sources of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* works, and then extract the relevant concepts if not mentioned explicitly. Afterwards, the article compares different works in how they define and conceptualize the concepts and meaning to have a fuller image of how they understood these concepts. The issue is that aside from some modern works, the genre of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* is not that well studied compared to other political genres in Islamic political thought. Secondly, secondary sources are valuable for their study of the historical context of the works used in the article and for analyzing some structure and some goals the authors might have had in mind. However, these are not enough to depend on when analyzing the primary sources, for they may carry some preconceptions of Islamic political thought that could be detrimental for understanding the genre and its overall connection to political practice.⁷ Hence this article focuses mostly on the primary sources of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* in order to attempt understanding the internal logic of political authority and administration. It also tries to understand the logic of governance and the practical advice to preserve the state.

The article first discusses the concept of *lutf* and its opposite *shidda* (cruelty), as these two opposing concepts illustrate how rulers deal with their subordinates and subjects in general. Second, it explores the concepts of *rahma*

5 For such critiques, see for example: Bütshish 2014, 15. For further discussions on justice and tyranny in *ādāb* literature, see Zatari and Fili 2022.

6 Linguistically, *lutf* refers to light bodies with an almost ethereal aspect. It also means delicate things that cannot be detected with the senses or the ability to expertly deal with matters that need precise handling because of certain key elements that are not apparent to the onlooker (see al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 2014).

7 One can see this in Ann Lambton's study who observed that *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* works were primarily concerned with ethics rather than politics, and that Islamic political thought was not theocratic, traditional or stifled (Lambton 1962, 91–119).

(clemency), and *tughyān* (transgression), to demonstrate the limits of a ruler's conduct. Lastly, the paper gives a short and simple introduction to how *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* works illustrated the relation between elites and commoners and the role of the ruler in this relationship. It is important to note that these works were not utopian nor mere fantasies but were meant to give practical principles to ensure political success. These works were taught to train good and competent rulers, and they proposed ethics to have a role in the political realm without compromising realistic concerns related to power and authority. The article elaborates on the details of this assertion throughout the following sections.

2 The Concept of *Lutf*

Classical Muslim political thought emphasizes balanced governance, taking the well-being of the social order into consideration.⁸ *Al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* was the genre most concerned with the practical aspects of good governance, setting certain points of consideration in the form of concepts. Two concepts that figure prominently in meaning if not explicitly are *lutf* and *raḥma* (compassion and mercy). Governance based on compassion and mercy figures prominently in the genre of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* as opposed to unwise rule based on coercion and arbitrariness. *Al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* works focus on the personal attributes of the Muslim ruler and his personal conduct in governance. Although the writings in this genre act as manuals for personal use, readers can better understand the underlying ideas once a comprehensive image of the political order is given.

Lutf as wise and gentle governance is not presented as an abstract concept, or expressed in difficult philosophical language, but is rather expressed in a practical manner to guide political action. In essence, there is a cluster of concepts and teachings that aim to guide Muslim rulers to act with mercy and compassion. The locus of all these teachings lies in the principle of *qaṣd* as expressed by Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn al-Rabī' (d. 272/885). Moderation means the avoidance of extremes in political action on the part of the Muslim ruler, bringing benefit to others as well as framing one's actions as acts of worship (Ibn al-Rabī' 1983, 345–354). Thus, governance becomes an act of worship and

8 The reason this article uses the term governance is to avoid anachronism by comparing modernist perception of the state and the confusion that may arise from this mixing. For a comprehensive analysis on the difference between modernists' approach to politics and the approach found in Muslim sources, see Hallaq 2012, 48–70.

a manifestation of excellence based on *qaṣd*. The literature considers mercy and compassion to be foundational political practices included under moderation, and an indispensable element of communication between the ruler and the ruled. Abū Bakr al-Ṭurṭūshī (d. 520/1127) emphasized the practice of mercy as an integral base for sound political practice. He used the term *ʿafw* (forgiveness) and related it directly to several Qurʾānic verses (al-Ṭurṭūshī 2016, 271):

And let them pardon and forbear. Do you not desire God Forgive you?
And God is Forgiving, Merciful.

Q 24:22; NASR et al. 2015, 873

Al-Ṭurṭūshī's advice is that forgiving a transgressor is wiser than punishing him or taking enjoyment in doing so. This is especially the case when it comes to the innocent general public. Al-Ṭurṭūshī quotes the Sāsānian Emperor Shāpūr (r. 239–270 CE):

My sons. If you fail to fill the hearts of the subjects with love, then fill it with fear. Yet this is not in the form of punishing the undeserving but rather to hasten it for the one who deserves it.

AL-ṬURṬŪSHĪ 2016, 279

Though this may contradict al-Ṭurṭūshī's emphasis on forgiveness of transgressors, he quickly asserts that this is for transgressions that merit response or cases in which forgiveness will only encourage further corruption. This is a call for moderation, by which the Muslim ruler is taught to be conscious of his power over others, and to exercise it with restraint. Al-Ṭurṭūshī warned against extremes and argued that both punishments and rewards should be carefully considered. "If punishment is necessary, then it should be for the sake of chastisement not revenge, and as a deterrent not out of personal desire" (al-Ṭurṭūshī 2016, 280). Connecting *lutf* with rewards and punishments is not unique to al-Ṭurṭūshī. Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 142/759) advised moderation, recommending that it should be known to all that the ruler is not hasty with rewards or punishment to keep both hope and fear present in the people's hearts (Ibn al-Muqaffa' n.d., 71).

The paradigm of mercy and compassion leads to another pillar of political success: obedience to authority. The call to be compassionate towards subjects from different classes highlights the fact that obedience is not unconditional but bound to how a ruler operates. Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥaddād (d. ca. 674/1275) explained this relation through the Sāsānian political tradition, in which the prosperity of political authority is shown to be the result of justice. This is followed by the question of what enhances kingly authority. He answers:

Gentleness with subjects, taking what is due from them and returning it at the right time, securing the frontiers and securing the roads. Taking the right of the oppressed from the oppressors and not to incite the strong against the weak.

IBN AL-ḤADDĀD 1983, 74

As such, in *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*, there is a direct relation between gentleness, justice and obedience leading to political success. The emphasis on the personal character of the ruler points towards practical ways to maintain political order and lead it to prosperity in accordance with ethical uprightness. It points towards another layer of political authority beyond official positions and protocols; holding authority goes beyond holding a title that represents it. The authors of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* works were well aware that solely holding the title of king did not guarantee political success, but rather the actions of the title's holder, and whether or not they understood the deeper meanings of political authority and its protocols. Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092) points towards the relation between competence and titles by insisting that a title must reflect the honor of the holder and his true rank. All titles will lose meaning when given to the undeserving who cheapen the title through their mismanagement and ignorance (Niẓām al-Mulk 2007, 186). Ethical principles serve a practical role that reflects the principle of gentleness and compassion towards the ruled on the part of the ruler.

Ibn al-Ḥaddād gave an example of how Arabs chose their leaders through observing six traits since pre-Islamic times.⁹ These six traits are generosity, strength, patience, forbearance, eloquence, and lineage (*nasab*), to which Islam added a seventh, the virtue of non-indulgence (Ibn al-Ḥaddād 1983, 117). This means that a ruler has to be both competent and self-invested in the well-being of the community in order to practice gentleness or see it as necessary at all. *Lutf* here is not simply acting naively or nicely but rather the ability to balance between when to punish and when to reward. This balance is then surrounded by a set of protocols and principles that guide a ruler to the appropriate balance when dealing with various cases, arising from the many social groups and classes he governs.¹⁰

9 It is important to note that *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* focuses on personal traits, competence and skill when prescribing the conditions for a leader. However, prescriptions such as these change according to the genre of political literature. For a different formula of prescriptions, see *al-aḥkām al-sultāniyya* literature. See also works such as al-Ghazālī 2002; Ibn al-Azraq 2008; al-Māwardī 2006.

10 It is important to note that the presence of guiding principles is a warning against making attaining authority a goal in itself. If that is the case, then seekers of authority will be vulnerable in front of more ambitious actors. Therefore, there should be careful practice of

The paradigm given above is the basis for a just order, justice here meaning a competent system that can protect and deliver the essentials of life to different classes for comprehensive prosperity.¹¹ It is essentially the threat of coercion surrounded by the gentleness of mercy and a wisdom of when to punish and when to reward. The following section will explore these principles in detail in the form of relations between the Muslim ruler and both the common people and the elites.

3 *Lutf* and the People

It should be clear by now that *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* is fundamentally concerned with competent political action, and that emphasis on leniency is an essential part of governance. The emphasis on *lutf* is not a call for utopian compassion-based politics, but rather an emphasis on the limited utility of coercion in the political realm. *Al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* literature shows governance for what it really is: a balancing act between general welfare and class/individual interests so the state can survive and thrive. The social structure present in the genre becomes more apparent once this objective is clearly understood. Hence, the focus on how the Muslim ruler ought to interact with others since the different classes are not simply objects to exercise power on, but rather elements that form the foundation of political success. One can understand the division between classes and how the Muslim ruler should handle the different categories of the socio-political bodies. Ibn Nubāta (d. 768/1366) illustrated the classical division of the literature in his book *al-Mukhtār min Kitāb Tadbīr al-Duwal* (“The Selection from the Book of Governing States”) between the governance of self, the elites and then the public (for more details, see Ibn Nubāta 2012).

The genre of *al-ādāb al-sulṭāniyya* views the responsibility of a Muslim ruler to be the securing of political stability and social cohesion by ensuring the practice of sound policies. One of the primary ways a Muslim ruler does this is by supporting elites not based on loyalty alone, but on merit as well. This is also connected to *lutf*, which, if justice is key to a good system, then *lutf* is the bedrock necessary to have justice to begin with.¹² *Lutf* is the compass of action

politics in the framework of competent governance to avoid the dangers of quick collapse (see 'Abbās 2020, 40).

11 For more on a comprehensive concept of justice in primary sources, see al-Māwardī 2012, 224–230; al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī 2010, 249–253.

12 For more primary sources from the Persian tradition on the importance of gentleness, see al-Nayrīzī 2018, 210.

towards the different social groups in Muslim society, and it opens the road to a just order by putting all the political elements in their place. In this context, securing a class of elites from Muslim society plays the biggest role in securing the common people as a larger community, and will lead to maintaining security and order, which is the main reason why states exist in the first place.

As a result, authors of these advice manuals understand injustice not as a simple breaking of ethical precepts at the individual level, but as a disruption of the political order due to the ulterior motives of those in positions of power mismanaging general affairs.¹³ Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) illustrates this dynamic by asserting that rulers are placed in the world to prevent transgressions, just as prophets are sent to reveal truths to humanity. Subsequently, a ruler who exercises power to balance between people and avoids corruption is just. Wellbeing encompasses both the good of this world by providing security and economic prosperity and the Hereafter by commanding good and forbidding evil (Bağdatlı 2018, 206).¹⁴ The desired result is to encourage good conduct from the people when their needs are met properly. Whereas the ruler who does the opposite is an evil omen and his state does not last long. Al-Ghazālī places the primary responsibility for political success and failure on the ruler, since they are the ones entrusted with the general affairs of governance (al-Ghazālī 1988, 43–44).

For al-Ghazālī, political power is important to ensure order in the world, which will consequently lead to good order in religion. That will lead to good governance in this world and happiness in the Hereafter. Islam needs a socio-political order to thrive and reach its potential, thus making it the basis of serving good and following the Prophet (Black 2011, 103). It becomes clear why the ruler bears the responsibility of success and failure since the welfare of Muslims in this life and the Hereafter depends on a healthy socio-political order, the responsibility for which primarily lies with the ruler.¹⁵ Similar to al-Ghazālī, al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038) emphasizes this responsibility in the form of the ruler showing clemency when in full control. The reasoning behind this is that the rulers need their people in various affairs to uphold the state while the people need only one thing from him, that is competence and letting them pursue their livelihood without interruption. This does not only entail showing mercy to the wrongdoer, but also generosity and justice in conducting state affairs (al-Thaʿālibī 2005, 213). Al-Thaʿālibī's assertion establishes the

13 For more on the concept of justice in *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*, see Zatari and Fili 2022.

14 For the importance of placing Allāh at the center of intention in political action and an example of the crucial place of Islamic beliefs, see Luṭfī Pasha 2017.

15 For more on al-Ghazālī's political thought, see Black 2011; al-Ghazālī 2002.

relation between clemency and gentleness on the one hand, and the importance of order and the existence of the state on the other. If humanity's wellbeing comes from order, then functioning governance is crucial. *Lutf* becomes a foundational element since it appears to be the element responsible for building a secure social environment by simply leaving the general population to their devices while maintaining general welfare.

Lutf could be understood to be an organic bond when it comes to the ruler-people relationship.¹⁶ It goes beyond the technical relations and protocols between elites and the head of state, if not encompasses it entirely. To explain further, the ruler-elites relations are based on personal bonds or via small groups that have calculated interests to be respected. *Lutf's* presence is by a set of behaviors, policies and protocols that aim to secure the elites' loyalty and proper promotion through merit. This is not to say that the bonds between rulers and elites are not organic, but rather that they are dictated by more precise procedures of what can be called higher politics. Generally speaking, the ruler-people relations are more impersonal compared to the direct contact a ruler has with the elite class.

Lutf becomes more of a general principle than a prescription of specific behaviors since contact between the ruled and the rulers is through an institutional apparatus. The rhetoric in *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* shifts to prescriptions of building infrastructure and making livelihood easier for common people. But it is important to remember that *lutf* is practiced with the common people for similar goals as with the elites, that is to secure the population's loyalty and productivity. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Nayrīzī (d. ca. 799/1397) asserted that seeking the satisfaction of the common people is one of the Muslim ruler's most important goals. More importantly, the ruler has to maintain friendliness and love between himself and the people in accordance with the Shari'a (al-Nayrīzī 2018, 176). He functions as a facilitator for a better life, security, and prosperity as the basis for justice, and the framework of public policy (for more details, see 'Abbās 2020, 50–51). It can be understood that ethics are not abstract ideals, but a guide to practical politics without which government will not succeed.

The principle of *qaṣd* becomes the main guide once again, as compassion and clemency can only be fully exercised when moderation is the reference point of action. In this environment, a balance between intimidation and persuasion is necessary when handling the common people. If governors and rulers are quick to punish and have a cruel disposition, their loyalists will diminish in number and the socio-political order will fracture (Sālīm 1997, 366).

16 This is comparable to al-Māwardī's concept of *ulfa* (for more, see Zatari 2021).

Ibn al-Azraq (d. 899/1491) notes that the Muslim ruler is in a sensitive position, because if he over commits in effort, he will burden the people and if he neglects them, the people's affairs will fall into corruption (Ibn al-Azraq 2008, 505). He emphasizes that the only solution is moderation in all affairs of governance. This demands good management of the self as well as others.¹⁷ Here, Ibn al-Azraq is calling the ruler to lead by example and securing the integrity of the governing body. This, Ibn al-Azraq believed, would secure the uprightness of the people and their welfare (Ibn al-Azraq 2008, 506). On the other hand, the common people will be estranged if they witness the head of state as well as state elites turn to mismanagement and corruption. This presence of a gap between the elites and the common man is the start of political instability that could end the state.¹⁸ It is under these assumptions that we can understand the complexity of the pre-modern Islamic political concept of the Circle of Justice.

The world is an orchard and the state is its fence. The state is an authority by which people live. Law is a rule by *mulk*. *Mulk* is an order upheld by soldiers. Soldiers are supporters upheld by wealth. Wealth is sustenance cultivated by the people. The people are servants encompassed by justice. Justice is sought after and with it is the ordering of the world. The world is an orchard and the state is its fence.

IBN AL-AZRAQ 2008, 202

The Circle of Justice illustrates the integration of different social groups into a network of hierarchies based on organic relations between the ruler and elites as well as between the ruler and the people.¹⁹ *Lutf* is the main element maintaining the balance of the social order and its interdependent components. The circle of the state is understandable once *lutf* is clearly defined in terms of competent political action. *Lutf* with the common people is essential to maintain general productivity and stability, as their loyalty is maintained by having a beneficial political system run by competent elites who are characterized by integrity. The destruction of the state and its instability comes from cruelty as mentioned. Ibn al-Azraq explained that the reasoning behind the importance of *lutf* is that the ruler in particular and the state in general must not be a burden on the population.

17 For more on the relation between self-betterment of rulers and governance, see Tašköprizâde 2014; Kâshifî 2019.

18 To understand the importance of elite dynamics in detail, see Turchin 2007.

19 For more details on the concept, see London 2011.

The people are not interested in the person of the sultan, whether he is handsome, his face has beauty, he has great knowledge or a sharp intellect, but rather they are interested in how the ruler will benefit them (the people).

IBN AL-AZRAQ 2008, 643

The interdependent relation between the ruler and the people is measured by what benefits the ruler and adds to the people's wellbeing. To secure general wellbeing, Ibn al-Azraq argued for the ruler's self-betterment by avoiding corrupt retinues, officials, and wasteful habits. Uprightness and generosity are key, so cultivating endearment in the people will cause them to be loyal to the ruling authority, and this can be done through service, humility, and generosity (Ibn al-Azraq 2008, 506). Interdependence points towards an implicit agreement between *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* authors on accepting limits set on the ruler's powers and humanity's ability to exploit their environment (see Marlow 2022, 217).²⁰ Interdependence simply shows these limits of political authority with the principle of *lutf* and its role in maintaining stability and social cohesion.

4 *Lutf* and the Elites

Al-ādāb al-sultāniyya literature recognizes the socio-political order is founded on a hierarchy as the bedrock of competent politics, which is based broadly on the division between the commoners and the elites.²¹ The influence of Sāsānian political thought in this regard is apparent, given the strong influence of Persian political institutions and literature on authors of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* (for more, see Marlow 2022, 3–12). What is important is that *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* treated the relationship between the ruler on the one hand and social classes on the other as based on the ruler's competence.²² The ethical stipulations are put there as a guide, and the reader can look at Ibn Nubāta as an example.²³ It

20 For an original Arabic text on the subject, see al-Māwardī 2012.

21 Elites is a broad term, but when it comes to *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* literature, it is used to refer to the personal retinue of the ruler and those with titles and ranks who are meant to manage state affairs (ʿAbbās 2020, 49).

22 *Al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* is full of Sāsānian political narratives and discourses, it can be seen in primary sources such as when al-Māwardī quotes the Sāsānian emperor Ardashīr (Artaxerxes, r. 224–241 CE): “If a king turns away from justice, the subjects will abandon obedience to the king” (al-Māwardī 2012, 276). For a modern study on Sāsānian influence on Islamic political thought, please refer to Marlow 2002, 66.

23 It is crucial to note that although the Sāsānian political tradition had a great influence on Islamic political thought, Ibn Nubāta did not depend on Sāsānian sources in his work (see also Luṭfī Pasha 2017). Moreover, there are other scholarly figures who criticized some

is important to note that elites are groups that have influence or authority over politics, and as such building good relations with them is necessary on the part of the ruler. Ibn Nubāta remarked regarding this:

Governing the affairs of elites is harder and more tiring than governing the affairs of commoners. This is the case because the stern king takes each of them (the elite) under close observation to the point of having nothing hidden from their affairs, knowing their behaviors clearly. The goodness of the ruler comes from the goodness of his retinue.

IBN NUBĀTA 2012, 117

Ibn Nubāta pointed towards the aforementioned importance of *qaṣd* in regard to rewards and punishments. He also draws attention to the more fundamental level of political practice of utilizing intimidation and persuasion (al-Fārūqī 1992, 236). According to him, moderation in rewards and punishments is the practical way of utilizing intimidation and persuasion. On that he says:

Achieving what is beneficial and removing corruption cannot be done except with intimidation and persuasion. Governance is a balance, and both of these aspects are the scales. The adjustment of the rulers regulates governance.

IBN NUBĀTA 2012, 117

He continued to describe both intimidation and persuasion – what we would refer to today as the carrot and the stick – as elements in governance which must be properly balanced to ensure success (Ibn Nubāta 2012, 118). Ibn Riḍwān al-Mālaqī (d. 783/1382) imparts further details in regard to ruler-elites relations and asserts the importance of the ruler's retinue as the centerpiece of high politics, which means that the retinue has to be lively. This means maintaining *lutf* in interaction as well as showing respect for the prominent figures or groups in Muslim society.²⁴ The ruler must promote the meritorious and the noble to the rank that befits them while blocking the promotion of those who are undeserving or lowly. Practically speaking, this means to make the

unfavorable elements of the Persian political tradition, especially its rigid caste system (al-Āmirī 1988, 160, 176). For further criticism of the caste system, see al-Birūnī 1958, 76.

24 The importance given to elites is common in Muslim political literature. The reason behind this emphasis is the impossibility of the ruler to govern a polity single handedly. The need for people with expertise in different relevant fields in relation to governance imposes an emphasis on elites. For more on the dependency of rulers on other social elements, see al-Dihlawī 2010, 167.

meritorious loyalists close by giving them official titles or handsomely rewarding them for their achievements.

Ibn Riḍwān emphasized proper treatment according to rank to avoid future enmity or any damage to loyalty (Ibn Riḍwān 2007, 155). It is important to note here that respectable and low ranking does not simply point to those born in the upper classes as opposed to those of humbler origins. Rather, high ranking here indicates those of good character who can serve the Muslim state without having their personal ambitions or desires standing in the way of proper engagement with political goals. To illustrate, Ibn Riḍwān dedicated a section of his book to honoring the loyal by rewarding them as well as maintaining excellent communications by being transparent, trusting them as well as putting them before the close and the far in matters of state. In addition, Ibn Riḍwān pointed towards doing the exact opposite to the disloyal (Ibn Riḍwān 2007, 231). Loyalty here does not simply mean thankfulness with words but with actions instead, meaning that the relation between the loyalist elites and the Muslim ruler is one based on the transaction of beneficial deeds. In essence, his advice encompasses the use of persuasion in regard to those of merit as well as intimidation of those who can damage the state.

The use of ethical concepts is in keeping with principles of good governance, thus integrating utilitarianism with moral precepts. It is safe to say that *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* authors were concerned primarily with the state's stability and social cohesion while not wanting to separate good governance from ethics. This does not mean that the authors of the genre were simply moralists, but rather that their efforts aimed to demonstrate that successful political leadership and statecraft were inseparably connected with certain political principles. This idea is highlighted by ruler-elite relations, as ethical treatment of elites and notables and the promotion of competent figures who are characterized by uprightness and discipline are pre-conditions to having a loyal following and a well-functioning state apparatus. This means that competence and political utility are fundamentally connected. A quote from Ibn Riḍwān illustrates this dynamic:

To that (i.e., what corrupts the state) belongs the ruler's preoccupation with vanities, accompanying the knaves and publicizing corruption. The caliph al-Amīn (r. 193–198/809–813) was following this method, so his affairs went into decline, while his brother al-Ma'mūn (r. 198–218/813–833) was the opposite in these regards, so his power increased. The ancients said: "Be upright so the people become upright towards you".

IBN RIḌWĀN 2007, 378

Abū Bakr al-Murādī (d. 489/1096) goes into further detail on the basis of promotion and picking the ruler's retinue and close officials. He argued that there are three classes of people: the dignified noble, the lowly knave and those in between. The dignified is to be treated with generosity and friendliness since he will return the act with gratitude. The knave is to be deterred with fear since he does not feel gratitude, and the one in between should be treated with a mix of both fear and rewards in order to keep him disciplined. Treating one category in a way befitting another brings disaster. Al-Murādī said:

Know that if you disrespect the dignified you will open a door of harm and iniquity. And if you show generosity to the knave, you will bring forth evil from him, and your generosity will increase his rebelliousness. And if you treat the one in between one-sidedly (i.e., only fear for example) the other side will be void.

al-Murādī 2009, 145

Ibn Nubāta called the competent ruler *al-malik al-ḥāzim*, "the judicious king." He defined him as one whose interaction with governors and officials follows the prerequisites of upholding civilizational structures. Ibn Nubāta then referred to these prerequisites as upholding justice with the people and gentleness in interactions, a concise summary of how a Muslim ruler should interact with elites and the people as a whole. Competent gentleness is to build a network of loyal experts who are as invested in the state structure as the ruler himself. Doing the opposite and transgressing by being cruel and hasty with harsh punishments will have damaging effects. As a warning from the effects of cruelty, al-Tha'ālibī emphasizes clemency as one of the greatest beneficial virtues in the short and long term. Clemency and forgiveness maintain political authority and attract loyalty, barring the fact that punishment is necessary if the crime is unforgivable such as betraying secrets or undermining the ruling authority. Al-Tha'ālibī concludes his thoughts by asserting that officials and elites will be positively invested if clemency is the main mode of interaction between rulers and elites. The tangible results will be more sincere advice, and personal investiture in the wellbeing of the political structure (al-Tha'ālibī 2005, 95).

5 Conclusion

The genre of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* is concerned with the competence of governors and the effectiveness of decisions taken by authorities. The main function

of the genre was to have realistic manuals for the sake of teaching competent and balanced political action that steered governors away from cruelty, incompetence, and injustice.²⁵ The concepts used by *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* authors were not isolated from reality, but rather intended to bring about the best results in a political environment dominated by imperial styles of governance. In short, *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* works were not written to define the nature of political authority, power, and legitimacy, but as a guide for authority figures on proper conduct when exercising their power.

This article focuses on the concept of *lutf* and its central role in governing the Muslim state. Governance based on *lutf* is juxtaposed with unwise rule by force or cruelty. Like other positive concepts in *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* literature, *lutf* is considered as a source of political success and state longevity. On the other hand, the opposites of these terms are used to warn against political struggles and state collapse. *Lutf* is based on *qaṣd*, the primary intention of which is to avoid extremes. In the case of *lutf*, this signifies the importance of intimidation and persuasion as moderation manifested in political practice.

Both intimidation and persuasion balance one another and ought to be well-placed according to the case in question. The ruler should surround himself with an aura of both punishments and rewards, visible at all times to keep officials, governors, and others in order. *Lutf* rests on moderation between intimidation and persuasion, a reminder that cruelty does not build loyalty but rather destroys any attempt to cultivate it in the first place. The authors of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* works usually composed their texts in a way that reminds the ruler that titles do not guarantee political success. Rather, they argue that it is the exercise of balanced actions and good policies that leads to the obedience of the general population and the loyalty of the elites. *Qaṣd* leads to *lutf* and the latter leads to the competent exercise of power, the very goal of the genre of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*.

Lutf is a relational concept concerned with how rulers deal with the common people in general and the elites more specifically. Ruler-people relations are based on balancing between the interests of social groups and general welfare. The aim is to exercise justice to maintain balance, *lutf* stands out as the key to practicing justice by putting each social group in its proper role within the socio-political body. The dependence on *lutf* is an admission of how limited coercion is and how it can damage the political landscape if practiced

25 This advice can also be found in books not typically placed under the category of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya*. Ibn al-Azraq al-Malaqī cites Ibn al-ʿArabī al-Mālikī's (d. 543/1148) argument for practicing gentleness and that governors are the ones who are supposed to practice gentleness above all else (Ibn al-Azraq 2008, 404).

without restraint. The authors of *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* literature remind the Muslim ruler of how he needs his people in many fields and professions, yet they only need from him one thing, that is, competence that eases the burden of their labor. Cruelty is the antithesis of competence since it damages relations between the Muslim ruler and his people in addition to hindering people from their livelihoods.

The result is interdependence between the ruling authority and its people. The circle of the state is understood in more detail once *lutf* is taken into consideration by seeing how the ruler guarantees obedience and prosperity in exchange for easing the means of livelihood for his people. Interdependence translates directly into the elites as well, and how they fit in the role of governance. *Lutf* in elite interaction is by showing respect for the respected figures or groups in society. The meritorious and the noble in his upbringing should be promoted to befitting positions, while the undeserving or potentially corrupt should be banned from promotions. Loyalty grows simultaneously with promoting those of merit. This is the result of the ruler's wise usage of intimidation and persuasion to attract the fitting to handle the responsibility of statesmanship with him. Once that occurs, *al-ādāb al-sultāniyya* authors express how the state almost organically attracts affluence. The practice of *lutf* maintains justice in the socio-political sphere, produces competent and upright elites, leads to the obedience of the people, and ultimately the political success of the ruler.

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