

Where we are (headed): Knowledge, Social Cohesion, and Public Value in Islamic Public Administration

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Abstract

This article addresses issues explored in the research project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, and published in the book, 'Islamic Public Value: theory, practice, and administration of indigenous cooperative institutions,' edited by Wolfgang Drechsler, Salah Chafik and Rainer Kattel. This special edition of *Halduskultuur*, is another of several outputs from the work. This article engages with a range of observations regarding the role of Islam in historical, cultural and political terms in public administration. We begin by asking, 'How do we know what we know?,' and link it to the growing competition to Western Public Administration posed by other perspectives and understandings, in particular the wider concept of Islamic Public Value from a range of countries, comprising the world's largest Muslim country (Indonesia), some of the smaller European Islamic populations (including Kosovo), and, a range of post-Soviet Islamic republics. The work in this research project, including in the book, returns the notions of context and temporality to the study and understanding of Islamic Public Administration; the history and impact of Islamic governance on Europe and the rest of the world especially from the time of the capture of Damascus onwards and the halt of the eastward expansion of Arab armies after the battle of the river Talas in 751. Though trade along the Silk Road continued to expand Islamic influence. As Ruskin Bond observed, 'The past is always with us, for it feeds the present,' The work that has emerged from this project explores and expands our knowledge of the interaction between different systems and cultures in a refreshing and instructive way.

Keywords: Public Value, Islamic Public Administration, Participatory governance, Knowledge, New Public Service Bargain.

Introduction

Epistemology is a curious thing; how do we know what we know? The process and understanding of acquiring knowledge are contested in many ways; the post-modern belief in the 'lived experience' often eclipsing empirical research and the scientific pursuits of the Enlightenment as a policy dynamic. This is frequently accompanied by debates regarding the clash of civilisations (Huntington 2002), 'fake news' and often bizarre 'post-truth' manifestations of the online world now mixed in with artificial intelligence. Does AI produce new knowledge or simply recycle what we already know? This is an interesting side debate; is knowledge like energy,

something that can never be destroyed, but simply transformed? And how does knowledge differ from 'belief', if at all? As Thorpe (2023) recently argued, "In the broader information environment, there will be a steep rise of deepfakes, scams, pranks, political mischief and spammy internet content. It will become, in the next couple of years, quite difficult to know what's real and what's not. Especially in the absence of regulation".

In his reflexions on the foibles of humanity, the Anglo-Indian writer, Ruskin Bond (1994) observed that even the past is not past, it reemerges in different ways, "the past is always with us, for it feeds the present" (Bond 1994). This brings us to the current debate of the research project on Islamic Public Value and its position in Non-Western Public Administration (NWPA), as led by Drechsler, Kattel and Chafik (2023) and explored in their article, *Islamic public administration and Islamic public value: Towards a research agenda*. They investigated "whether religion has a place in addressing public challenges, particularly in the context of Non-Western Public Administration paradigms such as Confucian, Buddhist, and Islamic." They especially focus on "Islam as a case study and highlight the need for real-life cases to build a grounded theory," (2023, 1). The forthcoming book (2025) brings together a range of case studies from across the Islamic world in an attempt to illustrate and understand Islamic Public Administration and draw common themes as well as highlight different traditions from within the overarching Islamic understanding of what it means to govern a state and deliver services to its citizens. They argue that:

The old standard perspective of PA is the position that there is one global way of doing PA, that PA is not contextual, and that what is now global PA is without alternative. Moving beyond this perspective requires acknowledging that different, valid PA paradigms exist. This, in turn, implies that there is not one global best (practice of) PA, but that what we call global PA is actually Western PA (2023,3).

In this, they draw upon the wealth of literature exploring the background to Islamic Public Administration (IPA) and especially the *shari'a*, and the often misinterpretation of this as Islamic law, when it is actually the articulation through revelation and prophesy of God's expectation or will. The wider understanding of the concept of public value, therefore, must also draw upon Islamic concepts of public value, alongside Western notions, such as those explored by Moore (1995); and Connolly and Zwet (2020). In IPA history and context cannot be ignored and in this it is a lesson for Western PA (WPA); context is everything, especially since more than a quarter of the world's population follow Islam (Pew Research Central 2024).

Complexities of Understanding Islamic Public Administration

These points are explored and discussed in the various chapters in the forthcoming book by Drechsler et al. (2025). For example, Xiaokun and Chao (2025) argue that in the Peoples' Republic of China, "In the current era, it is increasingly evident that the supposed universality of "good" public administration models is encountering and will continue to face challenges when applied in diverse local contexts characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity."

And in discussing the development of sectarian divisions within the Chinese Islamic traditions they note how these are overlaid with cultural and historical traditions that have had to come to terms with co-existing within a one-party state. This is a discussion regarding the accommodations Muslim communities have made (alongside Confucian communities) over the last one hundred years, though in practice we can trace these tensions and adjustments back to the very early days of the eastward expansion of Islam into China (Cunliffe 2015). During the seventh century, there were civil wars within Islam as the Muslim world advanced both west and east, capturing all of North Africa, much of Spain and the old Persian Empire's Lands and the Levant. But at this time the schism between the Sunni and Shia began to emerge (Cunliffe 2015). The Chinese and Arab armies began to clash in what is now Uzbekistan (historically Transoxia), near Samarkand. Seizing on their chance in 751 after the Arab advance stalled, Chinese armies marched through the Tian Shan and a battle took place on the river Talas. Both sides claimed victory, but the Chinese retreated to the defensible Tarim basin and the Muslims made no further attempt to expand their empire to the East. "The battle of Talas was one of the most decisive in the history of Eurasia" and after this time although Muslim influence continued in China along the routes of the Silk road, it was at the express invitation of the Chinese government to come to China as traders and not as conquerors, which structured Muslim-Chinese relations over the following centuries (Cunliffe 2015, 343-349).

During this period, we can also observe the development of IPA, especially after the capture of Damascus, when the city surrendered without a fight and (as with the Berbers later) the *dhimmi*s (protected subjects who paid a poll tax), but were otherwise unharmed, began to convert to Islam. These were a spread of Christian, non-Arabic peoples, including Persians, some Jews, Greeks, Turks, Bulgarians and Albanians. Observing the benefits of peace, the conversions continued apace under the Umayyad and later caliphates as all Muslims, whatever their ethnic or cultural background were accepted into the *ummah* (Cunliffe 2015, 344-388). Different authors describe the reluctance some early rulers had in accepting non-Arabs into the faith, not least because it meant the loss of tax income. But also because with the rapid advance in terms of territory and populations, the need to protect, control, tax and feed armies and civilians became crucial. Dead peasants don't pay taxes or grow crops to feed soldiers. From this background evolved early notions of IPA and because of the vast distances and numbers involved, it was from the beginning reliant on strong guiding (Islamic) principles, but also devolved authority and a recognition of different cultures, histories and contexts. It is within this early context that Islam and the State emerged in what we now refer to as IPA.

The variances between contemporary different groups is nowhere more obvious than in the former Soviet Union. Although often suppressed and dormant under the Soviet Empire, countries including Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, identified with Islam in ways reflecting their historical conversions and also as parts of the old Tzarist and Soviet empires. While Kosovo, formerly part of communist Yugoslavia, and before that, the birthplace of the Muslim Albanian Republic, following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, experienced governance and public administration in its own European-Islamic way, as did Bosnia (Preljević, Krupalija, and Kaminski). Kazakhstan, especially illustrates this. Formerly part of the Golden Horde, the country is the home of the original Horsemen and is the location of the domestication of horses on the Pontic-Caspian Steppe sometime in the fourth or fifth millennia BC, converting

the animals from being a source of hunted food into the foundation of cavalry, farming and transportation; it is one of the cradles of modern civilisation (Cunliffe 2015, 77). Kazakh contact with the Tzarist Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was in the form of military raids, with both sides seeking territory and often slaves as well. The annexation of Kazakhstan by the Soviet Union changed the relationship and although Islam had been an influence on the country for hundreds of years:

Kazakhs are often regarded as "bad" Muslims. An informal saying in Uzbekistan goes "If you want to become Russian, you should first become Kazakh," hinting at the crowding out of the Kazakh values, language, religious and cultural practices through "Russification" or becoming Russian. Compared to their Central Asian neighbours Kazakhs may be less intensely and less frequently engaged in Islamic traditions and practices (Mussagulova, in Drechsler et al 2025).

This reflected the nomadic traditions of the Kazakh peoples, as well as the large number of Christian and orthodox Russian and German people within the borders of the country. There has been a long tradition of adapting Islam to the nomadic people on the steppes, including *Biy Soty*, a version of customary law and peripatetic courts that fitted in with the chiefs and Khans and acted as a check and balance on their absolute power (after the death of Genghis Khan and his immediate descendants) through interpretations and applications of Islamic law.

As Urinboyev demonstrates, however, Uzbekistan, although also a former Soviet central Asian state is different again. There was a concerted attempt under Soviet rule to eradicate religion generally, and in Uzbekistan, Islam in particular. It remains a secular republic. For example:

Following the onset of Soviet rule in Central Asia, there were numerous interventions by Soviet policymakers to eradicate religious and traditional structures....these interventions were driven by the understanding that only a homogenous set of institutions across the entire space of the USSR could create the supranational Homo Sovieticus. This approach signalled the end of traditional and religious structures, such as nomadism, Sharia-law courts, mosques, and waqf institutions. As a result, the Soviet government attacked and eradicated many religious and traditional practices and structures, replacing them with state courts, law enforcement structures, schools, hospitals, and baths. However, as an exception to this modernization campaign, mahalla was not targeted for dissolution, thereby remaining as the last fortress of an Islamic public administration in Central Asia (2025).

Mahalla, being the locality or community in which people live, is in tandem the centre of civil and religious life. Urinboyev maps how the impact of Sovietisation has been laid across the *Mahalla* and indeed all of the country, but post-Soviet structures have used both pre-Soviet (Islamic), Soviet and current economic, cultural and religious dynamics to apply a complicated range of public administration roles and activities in what is effectively a developing resource-rich economy.

Although the name varies, the Ottoman/Islamic approach in Central Asia, was similar to that in Europe, as well as North Africa and the Middle East. While Uzbekistan was organised according to *Mahalla*, Western Europe's Islamic provinces were organised, at least in Bosnia in *Vakufs*:

Vakufs have a long and storied history in Bosnia and Herzegovina dating all the way back to the Ottoman conquest of the region in 1463. The notions of Islamic universalism and Ottoman patriotism were central to the political identity of Bosniaks throughout the period of Ottoman rule... many Islamic and Ottoman institutions, such as *vakuf*, were warmly received by the local Bosniak population and soon became an integral part of the broader Bosnian cultural tradition. The different types of *vakuf* properties in Bosnia during the early Ottoman period included *hans* (inns), *bezistans* (covered marketplaces), bridges, and building complexes ... Properties like this ended up playing a crucial role in developing the region...*Vakufs* functioned as independent institutions throughout the Ottoman period; during this time, there was no centralized *vakuf* administration in the Bosnia Vilayet and each *vakuf* was largely left to its own devices (Kaminski et al 2025).

As with its fellow Muslim-majority province, Kosovo, the Muslims in Bosnia suffered discrimination after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, especially during the time of Communist rule. The breakup-up of Yugoslavia and following the brutal war in the 1990s, the Bosnian authorities have seen a limited return to the concept and fact of *Vakufs*, once again building on the rich mix of heritages that include IPA.

The paper by Drechsler et al. (2023) that noted the importance of consultation and wider forms of accountability in IPA, applies beyond Europe and the former Soviet Union. Pal and Abdulfatah (2025) observe the consultative role of the *majlis al-shura* in Qatar and other Muslim states and its consultative and semi-public gatherings and discussions, noting, the *majlis*:

encourages communal participation and acts as a limited check on hierarchy. *Majlis* in particular (as simply a custom of gathering and discussion) are granular and constant mechanisms of discussion (and complaint), and provide possible discursive spaces in Arab and Islamic states (Pal et al. 2025).

Elsewhere in the Drechsler et al. book, authors point to similar fusion of earlier traditions, even within a secular state, with the powerful focus of Islam, increasingly informing structures and activities of IPA, for example in Pakistan and Indonesia. Indonesia is the largest (by population) Muslim state in the world and although governed by Islamic practice, it has combined cultural and historical attributes from its pre-colonial past within its rich mix of peoples, languages and traditions.

An Explanation as to how these mixed histories work in practice

Moore (1994) and those who have trailed his views on Public Value, have advocated and used Key Performance Indicators (amongst other things) to try to measure and chart public

value. Connolly et al. (2021) have noted the mix of tools used by those such as Barber (cited in Connolly 2021) to measure Public Value; the use and measurement of 'outcomes'; the use of co-production and co-delivery. All of these are valuable tools in modern public management, but the approach remains rooted in WPA and the measurement 'of things', something which although IPA certainly engages in, remains more than that. It is simply not the case in IPA that we can only manage what we can measure and more enlightened examples of WPA have, more in the past, taken that approach too. Three things are at play here and help us to understand it better:

1. Penumbra – the shadows and shading between light and dark. Public Policy and Public Administration is rarely binary, it is often a series of trade-offs. We don't suddenly travel from the light into the dark or the dark into the light. The core to democratic public administration is accountability in its many manifestations and it is this that enables stable and progressive economic and social development of society. But that development as it takes place is rarely linear and often not obvious. Governments have to deliver policies using civil society and the private sector, so it is not so much governing through government, but governance (Massey 2019). There is a long history of this in Islamic Public Administration, as noted in this article and the authors referred to.

2. Palimpsest – nothing in society begins on a plain piece of paper or velum. We overwrite laws, customs and practices from earlier ages. We need to be aware of these and even if we have moved on, traces of earlier ages remain and influence what we do in unexpected ways. There is often a layering of public administration reforms (Drechsler 2015). For example, the redress of grievance before the granting of supply, from early public administration and governance practice remains, but so also history, culture, language, religion and ethnicity remain part of this 'layering'. This much is very clear in Kosovo (Massey 2025). But it is also clear in the examples we have explored in this article; in all the societies discussed the process of public administration may be likened to a palimpsest.

3. Egregore – this is more than a paradigm, it is the collective mind of a community within which paradigms, data, customs, laws and history are understood (Massey 2019). It builds on the evolutionary scientist, Richard Dawkins' development of the concept of the meme. What we see with the idiosyncratic use of stories, myths and paradigms, however, goes beyond a meme and mimetic isomorphism and is in fact a kind of 'egregore'—a psychological entity that is constituted by and influences the thought process and understanding of groups of people. It can be in private sector businesses and public sector management. It may be influenced by ideologies, but it also influences the way in which ideologies are operationalized and may be transferred across sectors and groups and institutions. If we think of New Public Management and Public Value as egregores containing the perspectives and myths of a particular approach to governance (public and private) it may assist our understanding of why reform occurred in the way that it did. Such an egregore not only structures our approach to issues, it conditions our understanding of them and is intolerant of

dissent. Indeed, it does not recognise different world views; the world is either flat, or it is flat. We can see this in terms of the culture wars in the US and elsewhere and also in returning to my earlier statement regarding 'knowledge'. To explain some elements of this I refer you back to the overwritten palimpsest of history (Massey 2019, 10). But we can also think of powerful religious approaches in terms of a kind of egregore. A Muslim will always think of themselves as a Muslim in ways non-Muslims do not. Furthermore, it links that person to the way they will approach issues, problems and constraints in public administration.

New Public Service Bargain?

As noted in a previously published paper (Johnston and Massey 2024), there have been continuous paradigm shifts in our understanding of the state since 1945:

- Traditional Public Administration
- New Public Management
- New Public Governance, including public value

All of these are what Drechsler et al. (2023) have referred to as WPA. This typology has led to the development of a range of theoretical perspectives to explain the change and its impact on governance. These include hollowing-out of the state and public services (Rhodes 1997). Alongside this is a hollowing out of human resource capacity in many North American and European jurisdictions. Pollitt (2005) noted when measuring results little attention is paid to human resource issues such as equity, staff morale and motivation. These are more fruitfully addressed with the kind of collaborative, bottom-up approach favoured by IPA; at least in theory. Hood and Lodge (2006) addressed these developments with the elaboration of public service bargain: politicians normally expect a degree of loyalty and competence from bureaucrats and in return bureaucrats expect a mixture of tangible and intangible rewards such as a permanent career and good remuneration. This was a paper that was addressing WPA and in particular, UK and US versions of it, but given what we know about Islamic Public Administration, it may be that we have a good fit here as well, perhaps more so.

In asking why people are attracted to public administration, a study by Henstra and McGowan (2016) found that Canadian MPA students were attracted to public service

Because they:

- witnessed other people's disadvantage or hardship
- being personally exposed to discriminatory treatment
- desiring meaningful employment experience
- wanting to serve as change agents
- hoping to work towards solving social problems and address inequalities - improving government programs and services
- enhance the lives of the next generation of Canadians.

There is nothing in this Canadian list that is exclusive to WPA and indeed we may interpret it to also apply to the motivations of those engaged in Islamic public administration. Indeed, the five pillars of Islam encapsulates a public service ethos. For example, one could argue that *shahadah* and *salah* and *haj* are all a form of community or social cohesion and development. *Zakat* is a voluntary contribution of income to the benefit of others in the community and *sawm* is a sacrifice for others as much as orienting oneself towards higher goods.

Conclusion

We can summarise the concept of a paradigm shift in New Public Service Bargains in the table below.

New Public Service Bargain? A Paradigm Shift

Paradigm	Theoretical Roots	Nature of the state	Focus	Emphasis	Resource allocation mechanism	Nature of the service system	Value Base
Public administration	Political science and public policy	Unitary	The political system	Policy creation and implementation	Hierarchy	Closed	Public sector ethos
New Public Management	Rational/public choice theory and management studies	Regulatory	The organization	Management of organizational resources and performance	The market and classical or neo-classical contracts	Open rational	Efficacy of competition and the marketplace
New Public Governance	Institutional and network theory	Plural and pluralist	The organization in its environment	Negotiation of values, meaning and relationships	Networks and relational contracts	Open closed	Dispersed and contested
New Public Service Bargain	Human relations theory	Empowering	Organization for effective public service delivery	Meaningful and rewarding work	Fair and decent employment contract	Open	Public service capacity

Adapted from Osborne (2010, p. 10).

If we glance back to the opening remarks on epistemology, the question set, how do we know what we know? The answer quite often is that we don't. It is a mix of scientific method, for the educated; what Bovens and Wille (2017) have called the members of the diploma democracy that is those with certificates and diplomas from higher education institutions who can fully understand and engage with the technocratic world. But Islam and indeed other religions and egregores allow an understanding and engagement with governance for the less informed, thereby supplying meaning to public service and public administration that is deeper and more culturally evocative. It gives a meaning to life and social cohesion lost to many engaged in western public administration. It may become a New Public Service Bargain. We live in a penumbra and our laws and cultural norms are written in the form of a palimpsest; we need to read and understand what has gone before in order to inform where we are now and understand (perhaps) where we are going.

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