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Commands and Prohibitions in Malik al-Ashtar's Best Interest

The Ruler and Society

Professing God's Unity and accepting Muhammad as His prophet bring in their wake innumerable consequences. If the Quran is God's Word and Muhammad His chosen messenger who **"speaks out not of caprice" (53 : 3)**, their instructions concerning all things must be obeyed. Faced with these facts of their faith, the Muslims soon developed a complicated science of the *Shari'ah* or Divine Law, a science which embraces every dimension of human conduct, including the political.

One of the earliest and best expositions of Islam's explicit and implicit instructions concerning government and its role in society is 'Ali's instructions to Malik ibn al-Harith al-Nakha'i, surnamed al-Ashtar ("the man with inverted eyelashes") because of a wound he received in battle.

He was one of the foremost Muslim warriors in the first few years of Islam's spread and one of 'Ali's staunchest supporters. He advised 'Ali against making a truce with Mu'awiyah at the battle of Siffin and was poisoned on his way to assume his post as governor of Egypt in the year 37/658 or 38/659, shortly after 'Ali became caliph following the assassination of 'Uthman.^{[1](#)}

Since these instructions form part of 'Ali's *Nahj al-balaghah*, they have been discussed by all the more than 100 commentators on the text. I have made extensive use of two of the most famous of the commentaries.

The first is by Ibn Abi-l-Hadid (d. 655/1257), a historian who was attached to the Abbasid court in Baghdad. His commentary is one of the earliest, and because of its thoroughness and exactitude forms the basis for many of the later commentaries.

The second is by Ibn Maytham al-Bahrani, a well-known Shi'ite scholar and theologian who died in 679/1282-3. In addition I have profited from the glosses of the nineteenth century reformer Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and one or two other modern Commentaries which are mentioned in the notes.

'Ali's Instructions to Malik al-Ashtar

Ali wrote these instructions to al-Ashtar al-Nakha'i when he appointed him governor of Egypt and its provinces at the time the rule of Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr was in turmoil. It is the longest set of instructions (in the *Nahjal-balaghah*). Among all his letters it embraces the largest number of good qualities.

Part One: Introduction

Part One: Introduction²

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

This is that with which 'Ali, the servant of God and Commander of the Faithful, charged Malik ibn al-Harith al-Ashtar in his instructions to him when he appointed him governor of Egypt: to collect its land tax,³ to war against its enemies, to improve the condition of the people and to engender prosperity in its regions.

He charged him to fear God, to prefer obedience to Him (over all else) and to follow what He has directed in His Book—both the acts He has made obligatory and those He recommends⁴ – for none attains felicity but he who follows His directions, and none is overcome by wretchedness but he who denies them and lets them slip by. (He charged him) to help God—glory be to Him—with his heart, his hand and his tongue,⁵ for He—majestic is His Name—has promised to help him who exalts Him.⁶

And he charged him to break the passions of his soul and restrain it in its recalcitrance, for the soul incites to evil, except inasmuch as God has mercy.⁷

Part Two: Commands and Instructions Concerning Righteous Action in the Affairs of the State

Know, O Malik, that I am sending you to a land where governments, just and unjust, have existed before you. People will look upon your affairs in the same way that you were wont to look upon the affairs of the rulers before you. They will speak about you as you were wont to speak about those rulers. And the righteous are only known by that which God causes to pass concerning them on the tongues of His servants. So let the dearest of your treasures be the treasury of righteous action.

Control your desire and restrain your soul from what is not lawful to you, for restraint of the soul is for it to be equitable in what it likes and dislikes. Infuse your heart with mercy, love and kindness for your subjects. Be not in face of them a voracious animal, counting them as easy prey, for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation.

Error catches them unaware, deficiencies overcome them, (evil deeds) are committed by them

intentionally and by mistake. So grant them your pardon and your forgiveness to the same extent that you hope God will grant you His pardon and His forgiveness. For you are above them, and he who appointed you is above you, and God is above him who appointed you. God has sought from you the fulfillment of their requirements and He is trying you with them.

Set yourself not up to war against God,[8](#) for you have no power against His vengeance, nor are you able to dispense with His pardon and His mercy. Never be regretful of pardon or rejoice at punishment, and never hasten (to act) upon an impulse if you can find a better course. Never say, "I am invested with authority, I give orders and I am obeyed," for surely that is corruption in the heart, enfeeblement of the religion and an approach to changes (in fortune). If the authority you possess engender in you pride or arrogance, then reflect upon the tremendousness of the dominion of God above you and His power over you in that in which you yourself have no control.

This will subdue your recalcitrance, restrain your violence and restore in you what has left you of the power of your reason. Beware of vying with God in His tremendousness and likening yourself to Him in His exclusive power, for God abases every tyrant and humiliates all who are proud.

See that justice is done towards God[9](#) and justice is done towards the people by yourself, your own family and those whom you favor among your subjects. For if you do not do so, you have worked wrong. And as for him who wrongs the servants of God, God is his adversary, not to speak of His servants. God renders null and void the argument of whosoever contends with Him. Such a one will be God's enemy until he desists or repents. Nothing is more conducive to the removal of God's blessing and the hastening of His vengeance than to continue in wrongdoing, for God harkens to the call of the oppressed and He is ever on the watch against the wrongdoers. [10](#)

Let the dearest of your affairs be those which are middlemost in rightfulness,[11](#) most inclusive in justice and most comprehensive in (establishing) the content of the subjects. For the discontent of the common people invalidates the content of favorites, and the discontent of favorites is pardoned at (the achievement of) the content of the masses. Moreover, none of the subjects is more burdensome upon the ruler in ease and less of a help to him in trial than his favorites. (None are) more disgusted by equity, more importunate in demands, less grateful upon bestowal, slower to pardon (the ruler upon his) withholding (favor) and more deficient in patience at the misfortunes of time than the favorites.

Whereas the support of religion, the solidarity of Muslims and preparedness in the face of the enemy lie only with the common people of the community, so let your inclination and affection be toward them. Let the farthest of your subjects from you and the most hateful to you be he who most seeks out the faults of men. For men possess faults, which the ruler more than anyone else should conceal. So do not uncover those of them which are hidden from you, for it is only incumbent upon you to remedy what appears before you.

God will judge what is hidden from you. So veil imperfection to the extent you are able; God will veil that

of yourself which you would like to have veiled from your subjects. Loose from men the knot of every resentment, sever from yourself the cause of every animosity, and ignore all that which does not become your station. Never hasten to believe the slanderer, for the slanderer is a deceiver, even if he seems to be a sincere advisor.

Bring not into your consultation a miser, who might turn you away from liberality and promise you poverty;[12](#) nor a coward, who might enfeeble you in your affairs; nor a greedy man, who might in his lust deck out oppression to you as something fair. Miserliness, cowardliness and greed are diverse temperaments which have in common distrust in God.[13](#)

Truly the worst of your viziers are those who were the viziers of the evil (rulers) before you and shared with them in their sins. Let them not be among your retinue, for they are aides of the sinners and brothers of the wrongdoers. You will find the best of substitutes for them from among those who possess the like of their ideas and effectiveness but are not encumbered by the like of their sins and crimes; who have not aided a wrongdoer in his wrongs nor a sinner in his sins. These will be a lighter burden upon you, a better aid, more inclined toward you in sympathy and less intimate with people other than you. So choose these men as your special companions in privacy and at assemblies.

Then let the most influential among them be he who speaks most to you with the bitterness of the truth and supports you least in activities which God dislikes in His friends, however this strikes your pleasure. Cling to men of piety and veracity. Then accustom them not to lavish praise upon you nor to (try to) gladden you by (attributing to you) a vanity you did not do,[14](#) for the lavishing of abundant praise causes arrogance and draws (one) close to pride.

Never let the good-doer and the evil-doer possess an equal station before you, for that would cause the good-doer to abstain from his good-doing and habituate the evil-doer to his evil-doing. Impose upon each of them what he has imposed upon himself.[15](#)

Know that there is nothing more conducive to the ruler's trusting his subjects than that he be kind towards them, lighten their burdens and abandon coercing them in that in which they possess not the ability. So in this respect you should attain a situation in which you can confidently trust your subjects, for trusting (them) will sever from you lasting strain.[16](#)

And surely he who most deserves your trust is he who has done well when you have tested him, and he who most deserves your mistrust is he who has done badly when you have tested him.

Abolish no proper custom (sunnah) which has been acted upon by the leaders of this community, through which harmony has been strengthened and because of which the subjects have prospered. Create no new custom which might in any way prejudice the customs of the past, lest their reward belong to him who originated them, and the burden be upon you to the extent that you have abolished them.

Study much with men of knowledge (*'ulama'*) and converse much with sages (*hukama'*) concerning the

consolidation of that which causes the state of your land to prosper and the establishment of that by which the people before you remained strong. [17](#)

Part Three: Concerning the Classes of Men

Know that subjects are of various classes, none of which can be set aright without the others and none of which is independent from the others. Among them are (1.) the soldiers of God, (2.) secretaries for the common people and the people of distinction, [18](#) executors of justice [19](#) and administrators of equity and kindness, [20](#) (3.) payers of *jizyah* [21](#) and land tax, namely the people of protective covenants [22](#) and the Muslims, (4.) merchants and craftsmen and (5.) the lowest class, the needy and wretched.

For each of them God has designated a portion, and commensurate with each portion He has established obligatory acts (*faridah*) in His Book and the Sunnah of His Prophet—may God bless him and his household and give them peace—as a covenant from Him maintained by us. [23](#)

Now soldiers, by the leave of God, are the fortresses of the subjects, the adornment of rulers, the might of religion and the means to security. The subjects have no support but them, and the soldiers in their turn have no support but the land tax which God has extracted for them, (a tax) by which they are given the power to war against their enemy and upon which they depend for that which puts their situation in order and meets their needs.

Then these two classes (soldiers and taxpayers) have no support but the third class, the judges, administrators and secretaries, for they draw up contracts, [24](#) gather yields, and are entrusted with private and public affairs. And all of these have no support but the merchants and craftsmen, through the goods which they bring together and the markets which they set up.

They provide for the needs (of the first three classes) by acquiring with their own hands those (goods) to which the resources of others do not attain. Then there is the lowest class, the needy and wretched, those who have the right to aid and assistance. With God there is plenty for each (of the classes).

Each has a claim upon the ruler to the extent that will set it aright. But the ruler will not truly accomplish what God has enjoined upon him in this respect except by resolutely striving, by recourse to God's help, by reconciling himself to what the truth requires and by being patient in the face of it in what is easy for him or burdensome.

(1.) Appoint as commander from among your troops that person who is in your sight the most sincere in the way of God and His Prophet and of your Imam, [25](#) who is purest of heart and most outstanding in intelligence, who is slow to anger, relieved to pardon, gentle to the weak and harsh with the strong and who is not stirred to action by severity nor held back by incapacity. Then hold fast to men of noble descent and those of righteous families and good precedents, then to men of bravery, courage, generosity and magnanimity, for they are encompassed by nobility and embraced by honor.

Then inspect the affairs of the soldiers²⁶ as parents inspect their own child. Never let anything through which you have strengthened them distress you, and disdain not a kindness you have undertaken for them, even if it be small, for it will invite them to counsel you sincerely and trust you. Do not leave aside the examination of their minor affairs while depending upon (the examination of) the great, for there is a place where they will profit from a trifling kindness, and an occasion in which they cannot do without the great.

Among the chiefs of your army favor most him who assists the soldiers with his aid and bestows upon them what is at his disposal to the extent that suffices both them and the members of their families left behind.²⁷ Then their concern in battle with the enemy will be a single concern, for your kind inclination toward them will incline their hearts to you.²⁸

Verily the foremost delight of the eye for rulers is the establishment of justice in the land and the appearance of love for them among the subjects.²⁹ But surely the subjects' love will not appear without the well-being of their breasts, and their sincerity (toward rulers) will not become free from blemishes unless they watch over their rulers, find their governments of little burden and cease to hope that their period (of rule) will soon come to an end.

Therefore let their hopes be expanded, and persist in praising them warmly and taking into account the (good) accomplishments of everyone among them who has accomplished, for frequent mention of their good deeds will encourage the bold and rouse the indolent, God willing.

Then recognize in every man that which he has accomplished, attribute not one man's accomplishment to another and fall not short (of attributing) to him the full extent of his accomplishment. Let not a man's eminence invite you to consider as great an accomplishment which was small, nor a man's lowliness to consider as small an accomplishment which was great.

Refer to God and His Messenger any concerns which distress you and any matters which are obscure for you, for God—high be He exalted—has said to a people whom He desired to guide, **"O believers, obey God, and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. If you should quarrel on anything, refer it to God and the Messenger" (4 : 59).** To refer to God is to adhere to the clear text of His Book,³⁰ while to refer to the Prophet is to adhere to his uniting (*al-jami'ah*) Sunnah, not the dividing (*al-mufarriq*).³¹

(2a.) Then choose to judge (*al-hukm*) among men him who in your sight is the most excellent of subjects, i.e., one who is not beleaguered by (complex) affairs, who is not rendered ill-tempered by the litigants,³² who does not persist in error, who is not distressed by returning to the truth when he recognizes it, whose soul does not descend to any kind of greed, who is not satisfied with an inferior understanding (of a thing) short of the more thorough, who hesitates most in (acting in the face of) obscurities, who adheres most to arguments, who is the least to become annoyed at the petition of the litigants, who is the most patient (in waiting) for the facts to become clear and who is the firmest when

the verdict has become manifest; a man who does not become conceited when praise is lavished upon him and who is not attracted by temptation. But such (men) are rare.

Thereupon investigate frequently his execution of the law (*qada'*) and grant generously to him that which will eliminate his lacks and through which his need for men will decrease. Bestow upon him that station near to you to which none of your other favorites may aspire, that by it he may be secure from (character) assassination before you by men of importance.^{[33](#)} (In sum) study that (i.e., the selection of judges) with thorough consideration, for this religion was prisoner in the hands of the wicked, who acted with it out of caprice and used it to seek (the pleasures of) the present world.^{[34](#)}

(2b.) Then look into the affairs of your administrators. Employ them (only after) having tested (them) and appoint them not with favoritism or arbitrariness, for these two (attributes) embrace different kinds of oppression and treachery.^{[35](#)}

Among them look for people of experience and modesty^{[36](#)} from righteous families foremost in Islam,^{[37](#)} for they are nobler in moral qualities, more genuine in dignity and less concerned with ambitious designs, and they perceive more penetratingly the consequences of affairs. Then bestow provisions upon them liberally, for that will empower them to set themselves aright and to dispense with consuming what is under their authority; and it is an argument against them if they should disobey your command or sully your trust.

Then investigate their actions. Dispatch truthful and loyal observers (to watch) over them, for your investigation of their affairs in secret will incite them to carry out their trust faithfully and to act kindly toward the subjects. Be heedful of aides. If one of them should extend his hand in a treacherous act, concerning which the intelligence received against him from your observers concurs, and if you are satisfied with that as a witness, subject him to corporeal punishment and seize him for what befell from his action. Then install him in a position of degradation, brand him with treachery and gird him with the shame of accusation.

(3.) Investigate the situation of the land tax in a manner that will rectify the state of those who pay it, for in the correctness of the land tax and the welfare of the taxpayers is the welfare of others. The welfare of others will not be achieved except through them, for the people, all of them, are dependent upon the land tax and those who pay it. Let your care for the prosperity of the earth be deeper than your care for the collecting of land tax, for it will not be gathered except in prosperity. Whoever exacts land tax without prosperity has desolated the land and destroyed the servants (of God). His affairs will remain in order but briefly.

So if your subjects complain of burden,^{[38](#)} of blight, of the cutting off of irrigation water, of lack of rain, or of the transformation of the earth through its being inundated by a flood or ruined by drought, lighten (their burden) to the extent you wish their affairs to be rectified. And let not anything by which you have lightened their burden weigh heavily against you, for it is a store which they will return to you by bringing

about prosperity in your land and embellishing your rule. You will gain their fairest praise and pride yourself at the spreading forth of justice among them. You will be able to depend upon the increase in their strength (resulting) from what you stored away with them when you gave them ease; and upon their trust, since you accustomed them to your justice toward them through your kindness to them.

Then perhaps matters will arise which afterwards they will undertake gladly if in these you depend upon them, for prosperity will carry that with which you burden it. Truly the destruction of the earth only results from the destitution of its inhabitants, and its inhabitants become destitute only when rulers concern themselves with amassing (wealth), when they have misgivings about the endurance (of their own rule)³⁹ and when they profit little from warning examples.

(2c.) Then examine the state of your secretaries and put the best of them in charge of your affairs.⁴⁰ Assign those of your letters in which you insert your strategems and secrets to him among them most generously endowed with the aspects of righteous moral qualities, a person whom high estate does not make reckless, that because of it he might be so bold as to oppose you in the presence of an assembly.

(He should be someone) whom negligence will not hinder from delivering to you the letters of your administrators, nor from issuing their answers properly for you in that which he takes for you and bestows in your stead; a person who will not weaken a contract which he binds for you, nor will he be incapable of dissolving what has been contracted to your loss; a man who is not ignorant of the extent of his own value in affairs, for he who is ignorant of his own value is even more ignorant of the value of others.

Let not your choosing of them be in accordance with your own discernment, confidence and good opinion, for men make themselves known to the discernment of rulers by dissimulating and serving them well, even though beyond this there may be nothing of sincere counsel and loyalty. Rather examine them in that with which they were entrusted by the righteous before you. Depend upon him who has left the fairest impression upon the common people and whose countenance is best known for trustworthiness. This will be proof of your sincerity toward God and toward him whose affair has been entrusted to you.

Appoint to the head of each of your concerns a chief from among these men, (a person) who is neither overpowered when these concerns are great nor disturbed when they are many. Whatever fault of your secretaries you overlook will come to be attached to you.

(4.) Then make merchants and craftsmen—those who are permanently fixed, those who move about with their wares and those who profit from (the labor of) their own body⁴¹ your own concern, and urge others to do so,⁴² for they are the bases of benefits and the means of attaining conveniences. They bring (benefits and conveniences) from remote and inaccessible places in the land, sea, plains and mountains, and from places where men neither gather together nor dare to go. (The merchants and craftsmen) are a gentleness from which there is no fear of calamity and a pacify from which there is no worry of

disruption.[43](#) Examine their affairs in your presence and in every corner of your land.

But know, nevertheless, that in many of them is shameful miserliness, detestable avarice, hoarding of benefits and arbitrariness in sales. This is a source of loss to all and a stain upon rulers. So prohibit hoarding (*ihtikar*), for the Messenger of God—may God bless him and his household and give them peace—prohibited it.[44](#) Let selling be an openhanded selling, with justly balanced scales and prices which do not prejudice either party, buyer or seller.[45](#) As for him who lets himself be tempted to hoard after you have forbidden him (to do so), make an example of him and punish him, but not excessively.

(5.) Then (fear) God, (fear) God regarding the lowest class, the wretched, needy, suffering and disabled who have no means at their disposal, for in this class there is he who begs and he who is needy (but does not beg). Be heedful for God's sake of those rights of theirs which He has entrusted to you. Set aside for them a share of your treasury (*bayt al-mal*) and in every town a share of the produce of the lands of Islam taken as booty (*sawafi al-islam*),[46](#) for to the farthest away of them belongs the equivalent of what belongs to the nearest.[47](#) You are bound to observe the right of each of them, so be not distracted from them by arrogance, for you will not be excused if, to attend to the very important affair, you neglect the trifling. So avert not your solicitude from them and turn not your face away from them in contempt.

Investigate the affairs of those (of the lowest class) who are unable to gain access to you, those upon whom eyes disdain to gaze and whom men regard with scorn. Appoint to attend exclusively to them a person whom you trust from among the god fearing and humble, and let him submit to you their affairs. Then act toward them in a manner that will absolve you before God on the day that you meet Him.[48](#)

For among the subjects these are more in need of equity than others. In the case of each of them prepare your excuse with God by accomplishing for him his rightfully due (*al-haqq*). Take upon yourself the upkeep of the orphans and aged from among those who have no means at their disposal and do not exert themselves in begging. (All of) this is a heavy burden upon rulers. The truth (*al-haqq*), all of it, is a heavy burden. But God may lighten it for people who seek the final end, who admonish their souls to be patient and trust in the truth of God's promise to them.

Part Four: Commands and Prohibitions in Malik al-Ashtar's Best Interest

Set aside for those who have requests (*hajat*) from you a portion (of your time) in which you yourself are free to (attend) to them. Hold an open audience for them and therein be humble before God who created you.

Keep the soldiers and aides who are your bodyguards and police away from them so that their spokesman may address you without stammering (in fear), for I heard the Messenger of God—may God bless him and his household and give them peace—say not (only) on one occasion, "No community shall be sanctified within which the rightfully due of the weak may not be taken from the strong without

stammering (by the weak)".

Furthermore suffer them to be coarse and faltering of speech and become not annoyed and angry with them. For that God will outspread the wings of His mercy over you and make binding for you the reward of having obeyed Him. Bestow what you bestow in a pleasant manner and refrain (from granting requests when you must) gracefully and while asking pardon.

Then there are certain of your affairs which you must take in hand personally. Among them is giving an ear to your administrators when your secretaries have been unable to find the correct solution, and among them is attending to the requests of men when presented to you because the breasts of your aides have been straitened by them.[49](#)

Each day perform the work of that day, for to each belongs what is proper to it. Set aside for yourself in what is between you and God the most excellent of these hours and the fullest of these portions, even though all of them belong to God if in them your intention is correct and because of them the subjects remain secure. In making your religion sincerely God's perform especially His obligations (*fara'id*),[50](#) which pertain only to Him. So give to God of your body in your night and your day, and complete in a perfect manner, neither defectively nor deficiently, what brings you near to God, no matter what may befall your body (as a result).[51](#)

When you stand to lead men in the canonical prayers, neither drive (them) away (by praying too lengthily) nor mar (the prayer by performing it too quickly or faultily), for among men there are some who are ill and others who are needy. I asked the Messenger of God—may God bless him and his household and give them peace—when he sent me to the Yemen, "How shall I lead them in prayer?" He said, "Lead them in prayer as the weakest of them prays, and be merciful to the believers."

Furthermore, prolong not your seclusion (*ih̥tib̥ab*) from your subjects, for rulers' seclusion from subjects is a kind of constraint and (results in) a lack of knowledge of affairs. Seclusion from them cuts rulers off from the knowledge of that from which they have been secluded. Then the great appears to them as small and the small as great. The beautiful appears as ugly and the ugly as beautiful. And the truth becomes stained with falsehood. The ruler is only a man. He does not know the affairs which men hide from him. There are no marks upon the truth by which the various kinds of veracity might be distinguished from falsehood.

Again, you are one of only two men: either you give generously in the way of the truth—then why seclude yourself from carrying out a valid obligation or performing a noble deed? Or else you are afflicted by niggardliness—then how quickly will men refrain from petitioning you when they despair of your generosity? Moreover, most requests men present to you are those which impose no burden upon you, such as a complaint against a wrong or the seeking of equity in a transaction.

Then surely the ruler has favorites and intimates, among whom there is a certain arrogance, transgression and lack of equity in transactions. Remove the substance of these (qualities) by cutting off

the means of obtaining these situations. Bestow no fiefs upon any of your entourage or relatives, nor let them covet from you the acquisition of a landed estate⁵² which would bring loss to the people bordering upon it in (terms of) a water supply or a common undertaking, the burden of which would be imposed upon them.⁵³ Its benefit would be for those (who acquired the fiefs) and not for you, and its fault would be upon you in this world and the next.

Impose the right (*al-haqq*) upon whomsoever it is encumbent, whether he be related to you or not.⁵⁴ Be patient in this and look to your (ultimate) account (*muhtasib*),⁵⁵ however this may affect your relatives and favorites. Desire the ultimate end in that of it (imposing the right) which weighs heavily against you, for its outcome will be praiseworthy.

If any of your subjects should suspect you of an injustice, explain to them your justification. By your explanation turn their suspicions away from yourself. Thereby you train your soul (*nafs*), act kindly to your subjects and justify (yourself) in a manner to attain your need, i.e., setting them in the way of the truth.

Never reject a peace to which your enemy calls you and in which is God's pleasure, for in peace there is ease for your soldiers, relaxation from your cares and security for your land. But be cautious, very cautious, with your enemy after (having made) peace with him, for the enemy may have drawn near in order to take advantage of (your) negligence. Therefore be prudent and have doubts about trusting your enemy in this (matter).

If you bind an agreement between yourself and your enemy or cloth him in a protective covenant (*dhimmah*), guard your agreement in good faith and tend to your covenant with fidelity. Make of yourself a shield before what you have granted,⁵⁶ for men do not unite more firmly in any of the obligations (imposed upon them) by God than in attaching importance to fidelity in agreements,⁵⁷ despite the division among their sects and the diversity of their opinions.

The idolators (*al-mushrikun*) had already adhered to that (honoring agreements) among themselves before the Muslims, by reason of the evil consequences of treachery that they had seen. So never betray your protective covenant, never break your agreement and never deceive your enemy, for none is audacious before God but a wretched fool.

God has made His agreement and His protective covenant a security which He has spread among the servants by His mercy, and a sanctuary in whose impregnability they may rest and in whose proximity they may spread forth.⁵⁸ Within it there is no corruption, treachery or deceit.

Make not an agreement in which you allow deficiencies and rely not upon ambiguity of language⁵⁹ after confirmation and finalization (of the agreement). Let not the straitness of an affair in which an agreement before God is binding upon you invite you to seek its abrogation unjustly. For your patience in the straitness of an affair, hoping for its solution and the blessing of its outcome, is better than an act of treachery. You would fear the act's consequence and (you would fear) that a liability before God will

encompass you, a liability from which you will not be exempted in this world or the next.

Beware of blood and spilling it unlawfully, for nothing is more deserving of vengeance (from God), greater in its consequence or more likely to (bring about) a cessation of blessing and the cutting off of (one's appointed) term than shedding blood unjustly. God –glory be to Him–on the Day of Resurrection will begin judgment among His servants over the blood they have spilt.[60](#)

So never strengthen your rule by shedding unlawful blood, for that is among the factors which weaken and enfeeble it, nay, which overthrow and transfer it. You have no excuse before God and before me for intentional killing, for in that there is bodily retaliation.[61](#) If you are stricken by error, and your whip, your sword or your hand should exceed their bounds in punishment– for in striking with the fists and all that exceeds it there is killing –never let the arrogance of your authority prevent you from paying the relatives of the killed their rightfully due (*al-haqq*).[62](#)

Beware of being pleased with yourself,[63](#) of reliance upon that of yourself which pleases you and of the love of lavish praise, for these are among Satan's surest opportunities to efface what there might be of the good-doers' good-doing.

Beware of reproaching (*mann*) your subjects in your good-doing (for their insufficient acknowledgment of their debt to you), of overstating the deeds you have done and of making promises to them followed by non-observance. For reproach voids good-doing,[64](#) overstatement takes away the light of the truth and non-observance results in the hatred of God and men. God–may He be exalted–has said,

"Very hateful is it to God, that you say what you do not" (61 : 3).

Beware of hurrying to (accomplish) affairs before their (proper) time, of neglecting them when they are possible, of stubborn persistence in them when they are impracticable and of weakness in them when they have become clear. So put everything in its place and perform every action at its time.

Beware of arrogating for yourself that in which men are equal; and of negligence in that which is of concern after it has become manifest to the eyes (of men), for these things will be held against you for (the benefit of) others;[65](#) and (beware of negligence) of the fact that little remains until the coverings of affairs are lifted from you and justice is demanded from you for the wronged.[66](#)

Control the ardor of your pride, the violence of your strength, the force of your hand and the edge of your tongue. Be on thy guard against all these by restraining impulses and delaying force until your anger has subsided and you have mastered (your own) power of choice. But you will not gain control over that from your soul until you multiply your concern for remembering the return unto your Lord.

Incumbent upon you is to recall the just governments, the excellent customs, the Sunnah of our Prophet–may God bless him and his household and give them peace–and the obligations (promulgated) in the Book of God, which preceded you among those of earlier times. Take as the model for your action

what you have observed us to perform of them, and strive to your utmost to follow what I have instructed you in these my instructions. I trust in them to act as my argument against you so that you shall have no cause for your soul's hastening to its caprice.⁶⁷

I ask God by the amplitude of His mercy, and His tremendous power to grant every desire, to bestow upon me and you in that wherein is His pleasure success in presenting Him and His creatures with a clear justification (for our actions). (May He bestow) excellent praise from among His servants, fair influence in the land, completion of blessings and manifold increase in honor. And (I ask) that He seal (the lives of) me and you with felicity (*al-sa'adah*) and martyrdom (*al-shahadah*). **"Unto Him we are returning" (2: 156)**. Peace be upon the Messenger of God—may God bless him and his good and pure household and grant them abundant peace. *Wa-l-salam*.

- ¹. See the article "al-Ashtar" in the new Encyclopedia of Islam.
- ². The division into parts and the headings of parts two, three and four are taken from the commentary of Ibn Maytham.
- ³. The land tax (kharaj) was collected on the basis of the land's produce. See the Encyclopedia of Islam (new edition), vol. 3, pp. 1030–s6.
- ⁴. Fara'id wa sunan. The first very often refer to those acts which are commanded by God—such as the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, etc.—in which case they are contrasted with the sunan, meaning the commands of the Prophet, which are divided into the commands he gave orally (qawl), the acts he performed (fi'l) and the acts he allowed others to perform without criticising or protesting (iqrar). Here, however, since both kinds of acts are said to be mentioned in the Quran, the meaning is as translated.
- ⁵. "With his heart", or through firm belief; 'with his hand', or through holy war and exertion in His path; and 'with his tongue', or through speaking the truth, commanding the good and forbidding the evil" (Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 31)
- ⁶. Cf. Quran (47: 7), "O believers, if you help God, He will help you and confirm your feet", and other similar verses, such as (22: 40).
- ⁷. Nearly a direct quotation from Quran (12: 53): "Surely the soul incites to evil, except inasmuch as my Lord has mercy."
- ⁸. "I.e., oppose Him not through acts of disobedience" (Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, vol 17, p– 33)
- ⁹. "I.e., Perform for Him the worship which He has made incumbent upon you and the requirements of intelligence and tradition" (Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, vol. 17, p– 35)–
- ¹⁰. Cf. Quran (89: 14): "Surely the Lord is ever on the watch."
- ¹¹. Awsatuha fi-l-haqq, reference to the "golden mean". Here some of the commentators mention Aristotle and refer to such hadiths of the Prophet as "The best of affairs is their middlemost." See for example T. al-Fakiki, al-Ra'i wa-l-ra'iyyah, vol. 2, Najaf, 1940, pp. 108–11.
- ¹². According to Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, this sentence is based upon the following Quranic verse: "The devil promises you poverty and bids you unto indecency; but God promises you His pardon and His bounty" (2: 268). He explains that the commentators of the Quran say that here "indecency" (*al-fahsha'*) means "miserliness" (*al-bukhl*), and that the meaning of "promises you poverty" is that he makes you believe you will become poor if you are generous with your wealth (vol. 17, p. 41)
- ¹³. Ibn Abi-l-Hadid comments that if man trusts God with certainty and sincerity, he will know that his life–span, his daily provision, his wealth and his poverty are foreordained and that nothing occurs but by God's decree (vol. 17, p. 41). Ibn Maytham points out that "distrust in God begins with lack of knowledge (*marifah*) of Him."

A person ignorant of His generosity and bounty will not know that He rewards what is expended in His path; hence he will be miserly in order to avoid poverty. He makes similar remarks concerning the qualities of cowardliness and greed.

- ¹⁴. According to Ibn Maytham this sentence is part of the description of those favorites who should be most influential. It means that the ruler "should train and discipline them by forbidding them from praising him lavishly or trying to make him

happy by a false statement in which they attribute to him an act which he did not do and by this attribution cause him to be blameworthy." He then quotes the following verse of the Quran: "Reckon not that those who rejoice in what they have brought, and love to be praised for what they have not done—do not reckon them secure from chastisement" (3: 188).

[15.](#) "The evil-doer has imposed upon himself worthiness for punishment and the good-doer worthiness for reward" (Muhammad 'Abduh, vol. 3, p. 98).

[16.](#) Ibn Abi-I-Hadid comments on this passage as follows: "Whoever does good toward you will trust you and whoever does evil will shy away from you. This is because when you do good to someone and repeat it, you will come to believe that he likes you, and this belief will in turn lead to your liking him, for man by his very nature likes anyone who likes him. Then when you like him, you will feel secure with him and trust him. The reverse is true when you do evil toward someone . . ." (vol. 17, p. 47).

[17.](#) "He commands him to multiply his study with the men of knowledge, i.e., he should increase his study of the injunctions of the Shar'iah and the laws of religion; and he should increase his discussions with sages, or those whose knowledge is from God Himself (al-'arifun billah) and who know the secrets of His servants and His land" (Ibn Maytham).

[18.](#) The secretaries (kuttab) are "those who are in charge of the ruler's own affairs and who write letters for him to his administrators and commanders. They take care of making arrangements and running the government administration (diwan)" (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 76).

[19.](#) Qudat al-adl, i.e. judges.

[20.](#) Administrators ('ummal) are government officials concerned with the affairs of "the general public, alms, religious endowments, the common interest, etc." (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 69). For the meaning of the term 'amil (singular of 'ummal) throughout Islamic history see the Encyclopedia of Islam (new edition), vol. I, p. 435.

[21.](#) Jizyah is the head tax upon "People of the Book"—followers of revealed religions other than Islam—who live under Muslim rule.

[22.](#) Ahl al-dhimmah. In other words the "People of the Book" who live in Muslim lands and are accorded hospitality and protection by Islam on condition of acknowledging Islamic political domination and paying the jizyah.

[23.](#) The covenant between man and God ('ahd) is frequently mentioned in the Quran and plays a central role in Islamic thought. Some representative Quranic verses are the following:

"Only men possessed of minds remember, who fulfill God's covenant. . ." (13: 20);

"And fulfill the covenant; surely the covenant shall be questioned of" (17: 34);

"Made I not a covenant with you Children of Adam, that you should not serve Satan . . . and that you should serve Me?" (36: 59–60).

[24.](#) One commentator remarks as follows: "Land tax is only paid in accordance with an agreement between the owners of the land and the ruler, so it is necessary that the documents be drawn up. Furthermore officials have to collect the land tax from the land owners according to the terms of the contract. Here it is possible that disputes arise between the government officials and the landowners, so it will be necessary to refer to judges to solve these disputes." Mirza Habiballah al-Hashimi, Minhaj al-bara'ah fi sharh nahj al-balaghah, Tehran, 1389/1969–70, vol. 20, p. 200.

[25.](#) I.e., Imam 'Ali himself.

[26.](#) "Of the soldiers" is a translation of the pronoun "their", and some question remains as to whether the pronoun does not in fact refer to the commanders. "If you say, 'But the soldiers of the army are not mentioned in the preceding section, only the commanders,' I will answer, 'On the contrary, they were mentioned where he says "The weak and the strong" ' " (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 53)

[27.](#) Khuluf (plural of khalf) are the women, children and weak left behind when the men go on a journey

[28.](#) Kind inclination toward the army means choosing for them the best of commanders, which will in turn cause them to love the ruler (Ibn Maytham).

[29.](#) According to Ibn-I-Hadid, the context indicates that the word "subjects" refers in particular to the army. Al-Hashimi disagrees and states that 'Ali does in fact mean all the subjects. He mentions them in the section on soldiers because the soldiers have to keep order in the land among the subjects (vol. 20, p. 222–2).

[30.](#) See above, p. 56, note 48.

[31.](#) The commentators explain this as meaning that people should follow that part of the Sunnah of the Prophet upon which all are agreed, not that concerning which there is a difference of opinion.

[32.](#) Tamhakuḥu-l-khusum. According to Ibn Abi-l-Hadid the verb here means to "make cantankerous or obstinate" (vol. 17, p. 59). Ibn Maytham, however, interprets the passage to mean that the judge should be someone "who is not overcome in his attempt to ascertain the truth by the obstinacy of the litigants. It has been said that this is an allusion to the person with whom the litigants are satisfied."

[33.](#) Muhammad 'Abduh explains that when the judge is given an elevated position, the ruler's favorites as well as the common people will be in awe of him and no one will dare slander him, out of fear of the ruler and respect for the person held in such high esteem by him (vol. 3, p. 105).

[34.](#) Ibn Abi-l-Hadid: "His words refer to the judges and rulers appointed by 'Uthman, for during his reign they did not judge rightfully but in accordance with caprice and in order to seek this world. Some people say that this happened because 'Uthman—may God's mercy be upon him—was weak and his relatives were able to gain mastery over him. They disrupted the affairs of state without his knowledge, so the sin is upon them and 'Uthman is guiltless of what they were doing" (vol. 17, p. 60). See Shi'ite Islam, pp. 46–48.

[35.](#) Ibn Abi-l-Hadid reads hum for hum'a, i.e.: "For they (the administrators) are embraced by different kinds of oppression and treachery", and he interprets the sentence to refer to the administrators who served under the three caliphs before 'Ali. Al-Hashmi offers a number of arguments in support of this interpretation, Minhaj al-barā'ah vol. 20, pp. 246–9.

[36.](#) "Experience (tajribah) alone is not sufficient if the administrator is not endowed with modesty (haya'), for modesty is the basis of manliness (muru'ah). As the Prophet said, 'Modesty brings only good', and 'Whoso has not modesty has not religion and will not enter Paradise' . . ." (al-Fakiki, al-Ra'iwa l-ra'iyyah, vol. 2, p. 38).

[37.](#) I.e., those families who were first to enter Islam. "This is because.... righteousness of family determines the way men are raised, and being foremost in Islam indicates nobility of character . . ." (Ibid., p. 39).

[38.](#) Whether as the result of the land tax itself or the oppression of the taxcollectors (Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 72).

[39.](#) Ibn Abi-l-Hadid offers two possible explanations of this clause. According to the first the words "su' zannihim bi-l-baqa'" would have to be translated "they think wrongly about endurance", which means that they think their own existence will endure and they forget death and dissolution. In the translation however, I have followed the second interpretation, which he explains as meaning "They imagine they will be deposed and replaced, so they seize upon opportunities, appropriate wealth and show no concern for the prosperity of the land" (vol- 17v p- 73)

[40.](#) "Know that the secretary alluded to by the Commander of the Faithful is he who nowadays is commonly called the 'vizier', for he is entrusted with the management of the affairs of the ruler's person and in all of them is his deputy. The letters of the administrators come to him and their answers are issued by him.

He puts the (affairs of the) administrators in order and is supervisor over them. In fact he is the 'secretary of the secretaries' and for this reason is known as the vizier in the absolute sense. It is said that the secretary has three prerogatives before the king: to remove the veil from him (i.e., he has access to his personal affairs, even in the harem), to accuse traitors before him and to make secrets known to him . . ." (Ibn Abi-l-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 79).

[41.](#) Ibn Abi-l-Hadid explains that the first two of these groups are merchants –those who have shops and those who travel with their wares—and the third group are the craftsman (vol. 17, p. 84).

[42.](#) The translation of this sentence is rather free and follows Ibn Abi-l-Hadid's first interpretation. He adds that it is also permissible to read the sentence as follows: "Accept counsel (from me) for the good of merchants and craftsmen and counsel (others) concerning them" (vol. 17, pp. 83–4).

[43.](#) This is a literal translation of a passage which Ibn Abi-l-Hadid explains as follows: "Than the Imam says, 'Surely they are a gentleness', that is to say, merchants and craftsman are so. He seeks Malik al-Ashtar's sympathy and favor for them and he says they are not like tax-collectors and commanders of the army, for they have to be sustained, protected and taken care of, the more so since there is no fear of calamity from them, neither in property where they might be disloyal (as in the case of the tax-collectors) nor in the government where they might work corruption (as in the case of the commanders of the army)" (vol. 17, p. 84).

44. "According to the Sixth Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq (founder of the Ja'fari, i.e. Twelve-Imami Shi'ite, school of law), 'It is reprehensible (makruh) to hoard and to leave men with nothing. And it is said that it is forbidden (haram), and this latter view is more correct. As was said by the Prophet of God, 'Mercy is upon him who imports, and curses upon him who hoards'. Surely hoarding is forbidden under two conditions: First, that food—i.e. wheat, barley, dates, raisins, clarified butter, or salt—be held back seeking an increase in price. Second, if there is no other distributor to be found . . .'" Quoted in al-Fakiki, *Al Ra'i wa-Ira'iyyah*, vol 2, p. 165.
45. Cf. Quran (83: 1-2): "Woe to the stinters who, when they measure against the people, take full measure, but, when they measure for them or weigh for them, they skimp."
46. Reference to the principle alluded to in the following verse of the Quran (8: 41): "Know that, whatever booty you take, the fifth of it is God's and the Messenger's and the near kinsman's and the orphan's and for the needy and the traveler".
47. "In other words, all poor Muslims are equal in their shares, there is no 'farthest away' or 'nearest'. Prefer not him who is near to you or to one of your favorites over him who is far from you and without any connection to you or reason for you to turn toward him. It is also possible that he means that the produce of the land taken as booty in a certain area should not be distributed only to the needy of that area, for the right to the produce of the land is the same whether a person is far from that land or resides in it" (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 17v pp. 86-7)
48. The "meeting with God" is mentioned in a number of Quranic verses, such as the following: "They indeed are losers who deny their meeting with God" (6: 31).
49. "The breasts of aides are straitened' by expediting the removal of grievances. They love to postpone attending to them, either in order to seek personal gain or to demonstrate their own authority" (Muhammad 'Abduh, vol. 3, p- 114)
50. i.e. the obligatory acts such as the five daily prayers.
51. The references to the body are due especially to the particularly physical nature of the daily canonical prayers. Ibn Abi-I-Hadid explains the last clause as meaning, "Even if that wearies you and impairs your body and your strength" (vol 17, p. 90).
52. The words "acquisition of a landed estate" (i'tiqad ;uqdah) might be translated literally as the "binding of a contract". The commentators, such as Ibn Abi-I-Hadid (vol. 17, p. 97) Ibn Maytham and Muhammad 'Abduh (vol 3, p. 11) explain it as translated (iqatina' day'ah or tamlik day'ah).
53. "His words . . . explain the methods of cutting off the causes referred to: the bestowal of a fief upon one of the entourage or a relative, and his desire to acquire a landed estate which will harm those people bordering upon it in terms of the water supply or a common undertaking—such as a building, etc.—while he imposes the burden of the undertaking on man, are the causes of the above- mentioned situations . . ." (Ibn Maytham).
54. Or "whether near (qarib) to you or far away (ba'id)." i.e., whoever he might be, bring the person who has committed a wrong to justice.
55. i.e., realize that you will be rewarded in the next world.
56. "That is, even if you yourself should perish, act without treachery" (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 17, p. 107).
57. The importance of observing covenants and agreements is referred to frequently in the Quran. See for example, (16: 91): "Fulfill God's covenant, when you make covenant, and break not the oaths after they have been confirmed . . .". See also (6: 153); (17: 34 et al).
58. According to Ibn Abi-I-Hadid (vol. 17) p. 109)) "in whose proximity they may spread forth" means "while dwelling in its proximity they may disperse in search of their needs and desires". 'Abduh explains the verb translated here as "spread forth" (yastafid'un) to mean "swiftly take refuge" (vol. 3, p. 118), but the first interpretation seems more likely.
59. Lahn qawl, "color of words". Ibn Maytham explains this expression as meaning "ambiguity, dissimulation or allusion." Ibn Abi-I-Hadid's explanation is similar: "He forbids him when making an agreement between himself and his enemy to break it by relying upon a hidden interpretation or the tenor of the words, or by saying, 'Surely I meant such and such, I did not have the apparent sense of the words in mind' " (vol. 17, p. 109).
60. Ibn Abi-I-Hadid cites the following hadith of the Prophet: "On the Day of Resurrection the first thing which God will judge upon among the servants is blood which has been spilled" (vol. 17, p. 111).
61. "Then he advises him that intentional killing involves retaliation, and he says 'bodily retaliation'. In other words, intentional killing makes the destruction of the physical body necessary, just as you have destroyed the body of the person

killed. The Imam's intention is to frighten him with these words, and they are more effective than if he had merely said, 'surely in that there is retaliation'" (Ibn Abi-I-Hadid, vol. 173 p. III).

[62.](#) Like retaliation in cases of intentional murder, compensation in cases of unintentional killing are determined by the Shari'ah. Cf. Quran (4: 92-3): "It belongs not to a believer to slay a believer, except it be by error. If any slays a believer by error, then let him free a believing slave, and bloodwit is to be paid to his family unless they forego it as a freewill offering. If he belong to a people at enmity with you and is a believer, let the slayer set free a believing slave. If he belong to a people joined with you by a compact, then bloodwit is to be paid to his family and the slayer shall set free a believing slave . . . And whoso slays a believer wilfully, his recompense is Gehenna . . .".

[63.](#) Ibn Abi-I-Hadid cites several sayings of the Prophet, including the following: "There are three mortal perils: yielding to niggardliness, following caprice and being pleased with oneself" (vol. 17, p. II4).

[64.](#) Cf. Quran (2: 264): 'O believers, void not your freewill offerings with reproach and injury."

[65.](#) Ibn Abi-I-Hadid comments: For example, if it is pointed out to the commander that one of his favorites is performing a reprehensible act in secret, and if he then ignores that act, this will be to the benefit of the person doing the act, but not to his own benefit (vol. 175 p. II6).

[66.](#) Cf. Quran (40: 19-22): "And death's agony comes in truth; that is what thou wast shunning! . . . 'Thou wast heedless of this; therefore We have now removed from thee thy covering, and so thy sight today is piercing'." Ibn Maytham remarks that when the veils of affairs are lifted from man at death, he sees the reality of these affairs and what God has prepared for him of good and evil: "The day every soul shall find what it has done of good brought forward, and what it has done of evil . . ." (Quran 3: 30).

[67.](#) Cf. Quran (79: 40-1): "But as for him who feared the Station of his Lord and forbade the soul its caprice, surely Paradise shall be the refuge."

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