

## The Mode of Politics and Labor: A Running Commentary on Labor in Islamic Thought

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**Abstract:** Although the interpretation of labor in the thinking of Islamism, which emerged at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries, was generally based on the provisions in the Qur'an and hadiths that must be applied, one subtle variation made Islamism somewhat different from the scholars of the classical period. Islamism, which carried the state and religion's concern of becoming lost, incorporated additions from the modern Western thought that it addressed at the same time as it opposed. Islamism's effort at overcoming the difficulties it faced in its challenges with modernism, which can be described as the struggle to exist as a Muslim in the modern age, brought Islamism a little bit closer to modernity, or brought about being affected by it. Islamism's discourse on labor based on the provisions of the Qur'an and hadiths brought with it the reinterpretation of the concept of sa'y [labor] or sa'y u amel [work force]. Islamism's discourse on labor, which embodied itself in the framework of Islam and being underdeveloped, had been established on the claim that Islam would be of assistance in Islam reigning anew thanks to the value that would be given to work. Although this research, which has been performed exclusively on the *Sırat-ı Müstakim*, *Sebillürreşad*, and *Beyan'ül-Hak* journals, expresses the use of Islamist thought's ideas corresponding to labor not as a goal but as a means, the applied method has imposed an essential duty on labor in the process of modernity and made it one of the founding elements.

**Keywords:** the ideas of Islamism • Islamist publications • *Sırat-ı Müstakim* • *Beyan'ül-Hak* • labor • social change

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Although Islamism, which appeared at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, had ideas on the interpretation of labor that were generally based on the provisions mandated in the Qur'an and hadiths, one subtle variation made Islamism a little different from the scholars of the classical period. Islamism, which had the state and religion's concern of becoming lost, incorporated additions from the modern Western thought that Islamism was the object of and which Islamism simultaneously opposed. Islamism's effort at overcoming the difficulties it faced in its challenges with modernism, describable as *the struggle to exist as a Muslim in the modern age*, brought Islamism a little bit closer to modernity, or brought about Islamism being affected by modernity. Islamism's discourse on labor based on provisions from the Qur'an and hadiths brought about the reinterpretation of the concept of *sa'y* [labor] or *sa'y u amel* [work force] that had been handled in a broad framework into the Islamic creed's context of working life. Islamism's discourse on labor, which embodied itself in the framework of Islam and how it had fallen behind, had been established on the claim that Islam would of assistance in Islam reigning anew thanks to the value that would be given to work. Although this research, which has been performed exclusively on the *Sirat-ı Müstakim*, *Sebillürreşad*, and *Beyan 'ül-Hak* journals, expresses the use of Islamist thought's ideas corresponding to labor not as a goal but as a means, the applied method has imposed an essential duty on labor in the process of modernity and made it one of the founding elements.

Islamism's interpretation of labor, which has been compiled from the leading journals of Islamist publications, is clustered around a series of nested concepts. Although it has the common features of reviling laziness and lauding those who work, one can say these approaches have discourses with backgrounds in belief, economics, and politics. Concepts such as *sa'y* [labor], *kanaat* [frugality], and *atalet* [laziness] were found in the magazine columns for many reasons in the last period of the Ottoman Empire. While one reason for this was to encourage the public to work, another reason was that it would enable Islamic societies to develop in the face of the West, corresponding to the operation that would protect its independence. The most important reason aimed at proving that Islam is not an obstacle to progress, as Islam is capable of responding to the claims originating from the West. An important aspect of the progress-decline contention made improving the previously mentioned creed that had been deemed corrupt in Muslim societies possible. Two opposing concepts were used together for this purpose. *Sa'y* [labor] and *atalet* [laziness] are the opposing concepts at both ends of this measure. While trying to clean the religious creed from superstition by disapproving of laziness, the possibility of having what was legitimate endure was attempted through the opportunity that labor provided.

When looking at those thinkers who issued writings and led the period, such as Muhammed Abduh, Ferid Vecdi, Şeyhülislam Musa Kâzım, Manastırlı İsmail Hakkı,

and Mehmet Atif, they are seen to have established a link between labor and faith. These approaches, which diagnosed the reasons why Muslims had fallen behind in the framework of faith-labor, addressed the concept of labor (*sa'y*) as sympathetic to the purpose of eliminating the reasons that had corrupted Muslim societies and the administration.

The starting point for the writings in Islamist magazines was comprised of the premise that *Muslims had fallen behind*. The analyses divided into two sections (diagnosis and treatment) after determining the situation and presented labor as the active agent in reclaiming the creed.

In fact, neither Abduh's nor Ferid Vecdi's commentaries on labor have different claims than those of Ibn Kemal, who lived in the 16th century or other Islamic thinkers. A succession present in the local experiences (customs) was followed, starting from the sources of the Islamic information paradigm based on the Qur'an and Hadiths in both pre-modern and modernization processes. However, the situation that formed the difference here is the context in which the idea had been put forth. These answers, which had been produced in the context of confronting the modern West, were based on explaining the legitimacy of religious thought using practical reasons. Namely, enabling the disapproval of *atalet* [laziness] and fundamental understanding of the approaches on earnings or understanding of destiny was attempted through the findings obtained from the practical field.

If giving a trail of the Islamist journals' approaches on labor is necessary, the determination that *Muslims had fallen behind* forms the point of departure. Because of the fall from power in terms of both economics and politics, they would come under the molestation of another or face this risk. The 19th century in particular was a century when the Islamic world looked out for this. The publication journalists who sought protective remedies diagnosed *atalet* as the reason for having fallen behind. Laziness had emerged with the deterioration of how the peoples' view of the pureness of religion had deteriorated. According to this, the many invalid and superstitious beliefs Muslims had that were not in Islam had caused their false understanding of destiny. Society and state had also been corrupted as a result of the corruption that occurred in the creed.

After identifying the source of the corruption as the superstitious religious contradiction, the method that was applied for correcting it was modern. The attempt was made to ensure both the claim that was in part of the diagnosis as well as the accuracy of the proposal being presented by turning what could be tested in a person's own life experience into concrete cases. The inductive method and observations, being important elements of the modern information paradigm, were used on this point. Additionally, being able to reproduce the applied samples also provided quantitative certainty to the topic. The application area of the modern methods that

had been borrowed appeared as *saha-i sa'y u amel*, or the field of labor related to sustenance and earnings.

While trying to eliminate superstition in religious faith through examples/testimonies of work life, humans were staged as an active subject. According to the result that had affirmed this idea, the Muslim who understands that both the effort and earning from labor are not contradictory to the divine will be freed from the inertia causing the laziness by working harder. As an example in the field of labor, while looking at that as a remedy for Muslims to be freed from the vileness afflicting them, at the same time this also strengthened the idea of the need for renewal and correction. In other words, while the field of *sa'y u amel* [work force] was noted as a cure for political and social corruption, at the same time it was presented as an area that made improving the religious faith possible. Therefore, *sa'y u amel* transformed into an essential element in re-establishing the ontology and in improving and reviving religious thought. Labor thus gains an existential meaning in the Islamist tradition of thought represented in Islamist publications.

The Islamist journals' interpretations on labor in the period coinciding with the last days of the Ottomans were able to extract several important points as a result. Aside from the sources in these approaches remaining the same, where the traces of the traditional and modern periods coexisted and remained the same, the context of the expression is what had caused differences to emerge in thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors.

Labor, considered to be a source of sustenance, possesses worldly and other worldly qualities due to Muslims possessing characteristics that encircle the world and the afterlife. However, other functions were also imposed along with modernity. In this process, labor was the expression of remonstrance in the *religion-science* debate that formed the focal point of the debates on *progress-falling behind* in the form of religion not being an obstacle to progress. When looking at the objections loaded around the issue of not looking at religion as the reason why Muslim people or countries had fallen behind, the approaches to labor can be said to have been used for the purpose of criticizing the Orientalist perspective. Because of this feature, although labor had gained a political aspect, talking about a class policy was not possible in terms of Islamist publications. Still, saying that labor had a political aspect in Islamist publications is possible. However, the political feature of labor in Islamist publications sourced from its use against colonialism. The anti-imperialist use of labor in Islamist magazines was one of the most important changes in the modern period. When evaluating all these differences together, Islamism's labor discourse at a time of fast and sharp social change can be said to have also varied from the discourse of the traditional era.

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