

Habilitation Evaluation Report

I have examined with great care Dr. Gökhan Bacık's habilitation submission, centred on his monograph *The Birth and Evolution of Islamic Political Theory: Political Rationalism from Ibn al-Muqaffa to Ibn Khaldun*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2025. My assessment is unambiguously positive. This work represents a major scholarly achievement that meets—and in my judgement exceeds—the standards expected of a habilitation in political science, comparative political theory, and related interdisciplinary fields.

The central contribution of the book lies in its successful reconstruction of Islamic political theory as an analytically autonomous field of inquiry, distinct from Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam), and political philosophy narrowly defined. Bacık advances the compelling argument that Islamic political theory should be understood as a tradition of political rationalism grounded in the realities of power, governance, legitimacy, and state survival. This intervention is both conceptually original and methodologically robust, addressing a long-standing gap in the literature where political ideas have too often been read through normative, theological, or teleological lenses.

Rather than approaching classical texts as repositories of abstract ideals, Bacık situates political thought firmly within historical context. He treats political theory as a response to concrete crises—imperial fragmentation, bureaucratic expansion, elite competition, and challenges of authority—thereby restoring the political dimension to texts that have frequently been depoliticised. This move is not merely corrective; it enables a more precise understanding of how political reasoning emerged, evolved, and adapted across different periods of Islamic history.

Methodologically, the book is exemplary. Bacık explicitly rejects approaches that privilege doctrinal coherence over political function. Instead, he develops a framework centred on what he terms “autonomous variables” of politics, including power, legitimacy, coercion, group solidarity, and institutional endurance. These variables allow him to analyse political texts as instruments of governance rather than as purely normative treatises. This approach demonstrates intellectual independence and theoretical maturity, aligning the study of Islamic political thought with core concerns of modern political theory without collapsing historical specificity.

The empirical and analytical structure of the book is particularly strong. Bacık's selection of thinkers, ranging from Ibn al-Muqaffa and al-Mawardi to Nizam al-Mulk, Ibn Tufayl, and Ibn Khaldun, is neither canonical by default nor arbitrary. Each figure is carefully positioned within a shifting political order, and each chapter contributes cumulatively to a coherent narrative about the emergence and consolidation of political rationalism. Importantly,

Bacık avoids treating these thinkers as isolated intellectuals. Instead, he reconstructs them as political actors embedded in bureaucratic, imperial, and elite structures, whose ideas responded directly to the demands of governance.

One of the book's most impressive features is its treatment of power as a constitutive element of political life. Bacık convincingly demonstrates that power in Islamic political theory is neither an embarrassment to be moralised away nor a residual category subordinate to law or ethics. Rather, it is an organising principle through which legitimacy is negotiated and authority stabilised. In this respect, the book places Islamic political theory in productive dialogue with broader traditions of political realism and institutional analysis, while avoiding the pitfalls of anachronism or conceptual overreach. The chapter on Ibn Khaldun deserves particular mention. Bacık's reading situates Ibn Khaldun not as an isolated proto-sociologist but as the culmination of a long tradition of political reasoning attentive to power, group cohesion, and state decay. This interpretation is both persuasive and innovative, reframing Ibn Khaldun as an integral figure within Islamic political theory rather than an exceptional outlier. The analytical payoff of this move is substantial, allowing Bacık to demonstrate continuity and transformation within the tradition he reconstructs.

From a scholarly standpoint, the book displays an impressive command of both primary sources and secondary literature. Bacık engages critically with a wide range of scholarship, identifying conceptual blind spots and methodological limitations with precision and fairness. His interventions are never polemical for their own sake; rather, they are carefully reasoned and grounded in close textual and historical analysis. The prose is disciplined, clear, and accessible without sacrificing analytical depth—a quality that significantly enhances the book's impact and usability. Beyond its historical and theoretical contributions, the monograph has clear implications for contemporary political analysis. Bacık explicitly reflects on how the conceptual grammar of Islamic political theory continues to inform modern debates on state authority, legitimacy, secularism, and political Islam. These reflections are carefully framed to avoid presentism, yet they underscore the relevance of the work for scholars of contemporary Middle Eastern politics, comparative governance, and international relations. The book thus bridges historical inquiry and contemporary relevance in a manner that is rare and commendable.

In the context of habilitation criteria, this work clearly demonstrates Dr. Bacık's capacity for independent, agenda-setting scholarship. The monograph is not an incremental addition to an existing debate; it is a field-defining intervention that reconfigures how Islamic political thought can and should be studied. It evidences theoretical originality, methodological sophistication, and a sustained capacity to produce high-impact research—hallmarks of scholarly maturity at the professorial level. Moreover, the publication of this monograph with a leading international academic press further attests to its quality and significance. The book is positioned to become a key reference point in political theory, Islamic studies, and comparative politics, and it will likely shape future research trajectories across these fields.

In conclusion, I consider *The Birth and Evolution of Islamic Political Theory* to be an outstanding scholarly contribution of international significance. It fully satisfies the intellectual, methodological, and substantive expectations of a habilitation submission. I therefore express my very strong and unequivocal support for Dr. Gökhan Bacık's habilitation. In my view, this work confirms him as a scholar of the highest calibre, capable of shaping debates, mentoring future generations of researchers, and contributing meaningfully to the advancement of political science and political theory.

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