

al-Mubāḥ wa-al-lā-Mubāḥ: Fuṣūl min al-Turāth al-Islāmī
(The Permitted & The Non-Permitted:
Chapters in Islamic Heritage)[†]

FAWZI ABDULRAZAK
CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Introduction

In this brief introduction I will present some biographical information about the author, Rasheed Bandar al-Khayyun, and make a few comments about his book: *The Permitted and The Non-Permitted*, its scope and the methodology he utilized to write the book.

The author is currently a British citizen. He was born in the southern Iraqi city of al-Jibāyish in the early 1950s. Unlike most of the population around al-Jibāyish, which is predominantly Shi'ite and historically underprivileged, the author came from a family of local tribal leaders which afforded him more opportunities than the average individual of his community. He was educated in the local primary and high school and moved on to Baghdad where he earned a diploma from the Teacher's College. After graduating, he was hired as a primary school teacher.

During the author's early adulthood (the mid-70s), Iraq's political and social conditions were going through a critical period. In the northern region, the prolonged military campaign begun in the early sixties by Iraq's armed forces against the Kurds, was increasing in intensity. At this time, the government's policy of Arabization, ethnic cleansing, and assassinations became more heavy-handed and brutal.

In poverty-stricken, southern Iraq, where the Army had recruited the bulk of its foot soldiers for decades, living conditions were further deteriorating under the Ba'athist regime. The Government's strategy was to subdue the population and isolate or prevent religious and intellectual leaders from acting as agents for neighboring Shi'ite revolutionaries in Iran. This strategy was accomplished through oppression of the local population, elimination of all government critics from holding

[†] The author wrote this essay originally as the introduction to *al-Mubāḥ wa-al-lā-Mubāḥ : Fuṣūl min al-Turāth al-Islāmī* by Rashīd al-Khayyūn. Mundus arabicus ; [v. 7] Cambridge, MA : Dar Mahjar, 2005.

sensitive positions, and by “cleansing” the educational system from the resources and personnel that were critical of the Government’s policies and actions.

In 1979, when al-Khayyun learned that he was being sought by Iraq’s secret police, he fled Iraq. His first stop was Yemen, where he worked and earned his BA in philosophy in 1984. He then went to Bulgaria where he obtained his Ph.D. also in philosophy in 1991. A year later he moved to London where he continues to live with his wife and two daughters.

In the fall of 1995, I met the author in London. Over the next several years I became very impressed by the depth of his knowledge and understanding of Iraq, its cultural heritage and multiple ethnic groups, and his dedication to educating the public about Iraq’s complex, diverse and rich history.

As a result of our discussions about Iraq’s intellectual and cultural history, we agreed to include his latest research as part of the ongoing *Mundus Arabicus* series so that specialists in the U.S., Europe, and many parts of the Arab World could benefit from his insights about Iraq.

The Permitted & The Non-Permitted, by Dr. Rasheed B. al-Khayyun, consists of four main chapters. Each chapter includes three to seven sub-chapters. The subject matter revolves around Iraq, specifically its medieval Islamic cultural and religious heritage. Among the themes covered are love, women, children, food, Islamic sects and intellectual groups, sultans, dictators, abuse of power, and Iraqi boundaries throughout history. The book is indexed with an extensive bibliography. Additionally, the author provides a few sub-chapters on ancient Mesopotamia which he discusses in the context of current socio-political issues in Iraq.

Although Dr. al-Khayyun’s book is lively and stimulating, his method of a heavy reliance on citations and repetition makes his central argument somewhat hard to grasp. The underlying theme of this work is that the causes of Iraq’s socio-political disorder stem from three historical roots: the country’s religious leaders, political leaders, and its tribal roots and culture.

1) The religious establishment in Iraq, especially the fundamentalists, have purposely slowed down or aborted progress towards modernization through their rigid and inflexible interpretation of Islam. Just as this sector of the society suppressed intellectual groups like *al-Muʿtazilah*

during the medieval period, they continue to suppress contemporary thinkers. The present-day intellectuals see Islamic laws and regulations as man made and thus adaptable to changing circumstances, while the fundamentalist Islamists interpret religious laws as fixed for all times.

2) The political leaders of Iraq, Califs, Sultans, and Heads of State have all had a complete monopoly of power. According to the author, “a Calif who prevented his subjects from enjoying roses on the basis that roses are fit only for Califs” is no different from a dictator who deprives his citizens of basic freedoms. Both historical and current leaders have abused their powers at the expense of their citizens.

3) The strong tribal structure of Iraqi society has led to centuries of internal struggles for ethnic and/or economic control among extended families. This strife, which has been exploited repeatedly by the political and religious leadership, has further hindered Iraq’s ability to emerge as a modern and democratic country for the benefit of all its citizens.

It should be noted, however, that while the author makes many good arguments to interpret the current social and political problems in Iraq, he has not provided any vision for the future of Iraq, even though one can assume he favors a democratic and secular country. In addition, the author’s discourse is directed to an Arab audience, which is already familiar with the underlying arguments. This “understanding of his readers” allows him to avoid being explicit and making direct accusations. His approach reflects fear that is common among Arab intellectuals who are afraid for their lives and the lives of their families if they are openly critical of current affairs, especially when the criticism concerns both the State and religion.

Dr. al-Khayyun’s research was extensive, and his book, *The Permitted & The Non-Permitted*, will stand out as an important contribution to Iraqi studies. He is to be congratulated for having the courage to present his ideas in an open forum. Hopefully his effort will pave the way for many others to present their ideas for helping Iraq to rise from the ashes of tyranny and social strife to become an open society where all of its citizens can live with dignity in peace and freedom.

