

Rational and Scriptural Foundations of Oversight of Power in Islam

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Received: 05 August 2026, Accepted: 19 August 2026, Online First: 04 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Oversight of power is a key concept in Islamic political thought, one that is supported both by sound reason and rooted in scriptural texts. This article, employing a descriptive-analytical approach, examines the rational and scriptural foundations of oversight of power within the Islamic intellectual framework. In the section on rational foundations, arguments such as the rational obligation of justice, the conceptualization of power as a trust, the necessity of preventing despotism, and the requirement for rulers to be accountable are explored. The scriptural foundations include an analysis of verses from the Holy Quran, the conduct (Sirah) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), particularly the Covenant of Malik al-Ashtar, as well as authoritative hadiths concerning enjoining good and forbidding wrong, advising rulers, consultation (Shura), and auditing state officials. The findings indicate that in Islam, oversight of power is not merely a political right but a universal and multi-layered duty to safeguard justice and human dignity. This oversight manifests a synthesis of rationality and devotion through mechanisms such as Hisbah, Shura, the judiciary, and the Guardianship of the Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih).

Keywords: Oversight of Power, Rational Foundations, Scriptural Foundations, Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong, Consultation (Shura), Hisbah, Justice.

INTRODUCTION

Political power is a necessary yet critical phenomenon in human social life. On one hand, without a centralized authority, order, security, and the administration of justice are impossible. On the other hand, the concentration of power in the hands of individuals or groups invariably carries the risk of deviation, corruption, and despotism. Lord Acton, the renowned thinker, offered a thought-provoking remark: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." In Islamic political thought, this duality is clearly acknowledged, and a comprehensive solution has been proposed: "oversight of power".

Supervision (or oversight), linguistically, means monitoring, inspecting, scrutinizing, and caring for. In political terminology, it refers to the set of mechanisms and processes through which the behavior of those in power is examined for compliance with law, justice, and public interest, and corrective action is taken in case of deviation. In Islamic discourse, oversight of power is a multi-faceted concept encompassing both an internal dimension (piety and self-monitoring) and an external dimension (institutions and the public).

The main question of this article is: What are the rational and scriptural foundations of oversight of power in Islam? In other words, what rational arguments and which texts from the Quran and Sunnah

establish the necessity and quality of this oversight? Our hypothesis is that both sound reason, by understanding the nature of power and human disposition, and religious texts, through explicit injunctions, emphasize a multi-faceted supervisory network whose ultimate goal is to secure justice and prevent tyranny.

To answer this question, the concepts of power and oversight in Islam will first be clarified. Then, in two main sections, the rational and scriptural foundations of oversight of power will be examined in detail. Subsequently, the integration of these foundations in concrete mechanisms will be addressed, and finally, a conclusion will be presented.

1. Conceptual Framework: Power and Oversight in Islamic Political Thought

1-1 .The Nature of Power in Islam

In the Islamic intellectual system, power ultimately belongs to God: "Say, 'O Allah, Owner of Sovereignty, You give sovereignty to whom You will...'" (Quran, Al-Imran: 26). Any form of human power is a divine loan and trust that must be exercised within the framework of Sharia and ethics. This conceptualization of power as a trust is the primary source of its limitations and the necessity of accountability. The ruler is not merely a "trustee" or "agent" of the people but the "trustee" of God and the "trustee" of the

Ummah in executing divine laws and securing their welfare. Hence, power is not an end in itself; it is a means to establish justice and provide service.

1-2 .The Concept of Oversight in Islam

In Islamic literature, oversight is expressed through terms such as *riqabah* (watchfulness), *muraqabah* (self-examination), *hisbah* (accountability/enjoining good), *tafaqqud* (inspection), *'ard* (presentation/scrutiny), and *nush* (sincere advice). Two primary levels are envisioned for it:

Self-monitoring (Muraqabah): Rooted in individual piety, this is a fundamental concept in Islamic ethics. God is the Watcher over deeds ("Indeed, Allah is ever, over you, a Watcher" - Quran, An-Nisa: 1), and the ruler, above all, must see himself in the divine presence.

External Oversight: This includes oversight by the people (enjoining good and forbidding wrong, consultation, criticism, and protest), oversight by official institutions (judiciary, *Hisbah*, the Court of Grievances - *Diwan al-Mazalim*), and oversight by elites (scholars and jurists).

This dual structure creates a deterrent and corrective system that prevents power from descending into despotism and autocracy. Let us now examine the theoretical foundations of this system.

2. Rational Foundations of Oversight of Power

Reason is the inner prophet and internal proof for humanity. In Shi'a theology, reason is referred to as the internal messenger, and its authority is accepted alongside transmitted texts (*naql*). The rational foundations of oversight of power are a priori arguments, independent of religious texts, that establish the necessity of limiting and inspecting power through rational analysis.

2-1.The Rational Obligation of Justice and the Intrinsic Wrongness of Injustice

The first and most fundamental rational basis is "the goodness of justice and the wrongness of injustice," which are considered self-evident rational truths (*al-mustaqillat al-'aqliyyah*). Reason, without the need for divine law, perceives that justice is good and oppression is wrong. If political power is left unchecked and uncontrolled, it will naturally lead to injustice. Human history bears witness that absolute governments, even when initiated with good intentions, ultimately fall into various forms of tyranny. Therefore, reason dictates that to prevent potential injustice, a mechanism must exist to limit power and scrutinize its performance. In other words, oversight is a rational prerequisite for the realization of justice; for without continuous examination, justice remains merely a slogan.

2-2. Power as a Trust and the Principle of Accountability

Logically, whenever someone takes possession of property or a position as a trust, they must be accountable for how they dispose of it. Political power is also an aspect of social life entrusted to the ruler by society (whether through divine designation or popular consent). This delegation constitutes a social contract or a divine-popular trust. Reason dictates that the trustee must be under the supervision of the trust's owners to be safeguarded against betrayal. In other words, the "principle of accountability" is a universal rational principle that operates in all human interactions, and political power is no exception. If the ruler is not accountable to the people and to God, they are no different from a usurper.

2-3. The Necessity of Preventing Despotism and Tyranny

By analyzing the nature of power, reason concludes that power is inherently "expansionist" and "corrupting." Ibn Khaldun, in his *Muqaddimah*, correctly notes that natural human kingship inclines towards autocracy. From the perspective of Islamic political philosophy, the Caliph or Imam, if left to their own devices, may succumb to "Pharaonic" tendencies. The Prophet (PBUH) also alluded to this reality, stating, "Whoever is appointed as a ruler over you, and then you find him committing acts of disobedience to God..." This indicates that the possibility of deviation exists even for a ruler divinely appointed. Preventive reason dictates that to prevent power from transforming into despotism, a system of comprehensive and institutionalized oversight must be designed. This is the logic of "separation of powers" and "checks and balances," rooted in political rationality, which Islam has also confirmed through its legal instruments.

2-4 .The Insufficiency of Self-Monitoring and the Need for External Oversight

Sound reason recognizes that while ethical self-monitoring (piety) is valuable and necessary, it is never sufficient on its own. Man is a being with diverse inclinations, and carnal desires and satanic temptations can overcome his reason. The Quran also points to this weakness: "Indeed, the soul is a persistent enjoiner of evil" (Quran, Yusuf: 53). Therefore, merely relying on the ruler's piety is irrational. As Martyr Motahhari put it, it leads to the "ruler's self-will." Hence, reason establishes the need for external oversight by the people and institutions, so that even if the ruler lacks individual piety, power remains constrained.

2-5 .The Rational Basis for Consultation (Shura) and Deliberation

Human reason has well understood that collective decisions based on consultation are more immune to major errors. Islam also confirms this rational principle

by emphasizing "And their affair is [conducted] by consultation among themselves" (Quran, Ash-Shura: 38). Shura itself is a form of both prior and subsequent oversight of power: by participating in decision-making, it prevents the monopolization of power, and by reviewing performance, it enables correction. Reason dictates that the ruler is inevitably required to consult with experts and people's representatives in public affairs, and this itself serves as a channel for oversight.

2-6 .The Rational Necessity of Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong

From the perspective of practical reason, if an individual witnesses improper conduct in society, their silence amounts to tacit approval and complicity in its consequences. In the realm of power, this principle becomes doubly important because the ruler's error harms not just one person but the entire community. Thus, reason dictates that members of society must have the right and duty to monitor and protest to prevent systemic corruption.

3. Scriptural Foundations of Oversight of Power

Alongside reason, religious texts, including the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Infallibles (AS), are replete with evidence and indications pointing to the necessity, obligation, and mechanisms of oversight of power. These texts can be analyzed in several main categories.

3-1 .The Holy Quran and Oversight of Power

The Quran, as the primary source of Sharia, provides foundational concepts in this area:

a) Trustworthiness and Justice in Power:

The famous verse, "Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice" (Quran, An-Nisa: 58), directly commands rulers to fulfill trusts and judge with justice. The term "trusts" (amanat) includes positions of political power, and fulfilling them necessitates transparency and accountability.

b) Conditional Obedience to Those in Authority:

"O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you" (Quran, An-Nisa: 59). While emphasizing obedience, it conditions it on not disobeying God. Commentators, citing hadiths, maintain that "those in authority" refers only to the infallibles or just rulers who adhere to the Book and Sunnah. This condition itself is a regulatory criterion: if the ruler deviates from the path of justice, obedience to them is not obligatory, and this very non-obedience constitutes a form of oversight and control from below.

c) The Obligation of Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong:

Numerous verses, such as "And let there be from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong" (Quran, Al-Imran: 104) and "You are the best nation produced [as an example] for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong" (Quran, Al-Imran: 110), form the basis of universal oversight. According to commentators, these verses address all believers generally. The greatest good is the ruler's justice, and the greatest wrong is tyranny and oppression. Therefore, every Muslim is duty-bound to be sensitive to the performance of leaders and, upon observing deviation, to react with speech and action (according to its levels).

d) The Necessity of Consultation and Participation:

"And their affair is [conducted] by consultation among themselves" (Quran, Ash-Shura: 38) introduces consultation in affairs as a prominent characteristic of believers. The verse, "And consult them in the matter" (Quran, Al-Imran: 159), also commands the Prophet (PBUH) to consult with people. Shura, in addition to decision-making, has a supervisory function and prevents the ruler's arbitrary actions.

e) Testimony and Bearing Witness to Deeds:

Verses emphasizing testimony and bearing witness, like "And bring to witness two just men among you" (Quran, At-Talaq: 2) and the general principle "Be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah" (Quran, An-Nisa: 135), can be extended to oversight of power, as "standing firm for justice" is impossible without testifying to the performance of rulers.

f) Desacralizing Rulers:

The Quran negates any inherent infallibility for non-infallible individuals and, by recounting the story of Pharaoh and other tyrants, warns of the danger of power intoxication. Even the Prophet (PBUH) is described as a worshipper and a human being, merely a warner, not an owner or despot over people ("You are not over them a controller" - Quran, Al-Ghashiyah: 22). This perspective provides the psychological groundwork for oversight.

3-2 .The Prophetic Sunnah and Oversight of Power

The conduct (Sirah) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is replete with teachings and supervisory behaviors:

Hadith on Universal Responsibility: "All of you are shepherds, and all of you are responsible for your flocks..." (Bukhari, Sahih, Kitab al-Jumu'ah). The ruler is the shepherd of the people and must be accountable. This hadith affirms the rational basis of responsibility and transforms it into a religious principle.

The Prophet's Oversight of Officials: Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) appointed governors and tax collectors and would hold them accountable. The famous story of Ibn al-Lutbiyyah, a collector of charity

who had amassed gifts, shows the Prophet's strict oversight of officials' financial conduct. He said, "Why did you not sit in your father's and mother's house so that gifts would come to you?" (Sahih Muslim). This behavior establishes the principle prohibiting the abuse of position.

Encouraging Criticism and Advising Rulers: The Prophet said, "Religion is sincere advice (naseehah)... We said, 'For whom?' He said, 'For Allah, His Book, His Messenger, and for the leaders of the Muslims and their general masses'" (Muslim). "Advising the leaders of the Muslims" implies the people's right and duty to counsel rulers and prevent their errors. This concept precisely means compassionate and critical oversight.

Bay'ah (Allegiance) as a Supervisory Covenant: Bay'ah with the Prophet was not merely a declaration of loyalty but a mutual pact. The people pledged allegiance to the ruler on the condition that he establish justice and uphold God's Book. If the ruler violated this, the people were permitted to break the allegiance. This same structure is seen in the Saqifah and later in the Bay'ah with Imam Ali (AS).

3-3 .The Alawite Conduct and the Covenant of Malik al-Ashtar

Imam Ali (AS), as a model of Islamic governance, provided a treasure trove of supervisory foundations. The Covenant of Malik al-Ashtar (Letter 53 of Nahj al-Balaghah) is a comprehensive charter of management and oversight:

Continuous and Covert Oversight: "Then inspect their affairs, and send out men of truth and faithfulness to watch over them..." This directive designs an internal governmental intelligence and oversight apparatus.

Transparency and Public Access: Imam Ali (AS) himself would sit among the people and address their grievances. He tells Malik: "And appoint for those in need a time when you can personally attend to them..." This means the ruler should not hide in an ivory tower but should be exposed to public view and criticism.

Equality in Oversight: "... and give them of your clemency and pardon what you would love Allah to give you..." This golden ethical principle is the basis of a just and accountable relationship between ruler and people.

Criticizing the Ruler and the Right to Protest: In his sermons, the Imam repeatedly invited people to criticize him: "So do not refrain from speaking the truth or offering just counsel" (Sermon 216). He explicitly stated, "Do not speak to me as you speak to tyrants..." thus legitimizing an open space for oversight.

3-4 .Hadiths from the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) and the Institution of Hisbah

Numerous hadiths from the Infallible Imams (AS) explicitly address oversight. For example:

Imam Sadiq (AS): "Whoever takes charge of any of the affairs of the Muslims must be just in his judgments, equalize the people in his gatherings, and

keep his door open to the weak..." (Bihar al-Anwar, v. 75).

These teachings provided the religious basis for the institution of Hisbah. In Islamic jurisprudence, Hisbah was a state-people institution responsible for overseeing the market, public morality, and the behavior of state officials. The Muhtasib (inspector) was appointed by the judge or ruler but was required to act independently. This institution was the concrete embodiment of enjoining good and forbidding wrong at the political and social level.

3-5 .The Jurisprudential Rule of "La Dharar" (No Harm) and Oversight of Power

The rule "La Dharar wa la Dhirar" (No harm shall be inflicted nor reciprocated), based on a Prophetic hadith, is a governing principle in Islamic political jurisprudence. Any decision or action by the ruler that harms public interests constitutes harm and must be prevented according to this rule. This rule provides a scriptural basis for scrutinizing government legislation and executive actions, empowering oversight and judicial bodies to annul harmful measures.

4. Integrating Rational and Scriptural Foundations and Supervisory Mechanisms

From all the above, it becomes clear that in Islam, reason and transmitted texts not only complement each other but also affirm and interpret one another. Reason establishes the necessity and general principles of oversight, while transmitted texts detail its dimensions, instances, and religious obligations. This integration is clearly observable in classical and contemporary Islamic mechanisms:

Shura (Islamic Parliament): Its rational basis is collective wisdom, and its scriptural basis is the verse on Shura and the Prophetic Sirah. Shura constrains the executive branch through legislative oversight, questioning, interpellation, and budget approval.

Institutions of Hisbah and Diwan al-Mazalim (Court of Grievances): Based on enjoining good and forbidding wrong and the rational principle of public petition. These institutions handled people's complaints against the government and are reproduced today as "Courts of Administrative Justice" and "Inspector General Organizations".

Judicial Oversight: In Islam, the judge is independent and can even rule against the Caliph. The rational principle of separation of powers is reinforced here by the text, "Be persistently standing firm in justice".

Oversight by Jurists (Fuqaha) and Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist): In Shi'a thought, the qualified jurist, in addition to issuing rulings (ifta), has the duty to oversee the implementation of Sharia and prevent the government's deviation from Islam. This supreme oversight is based on reason (the necessity of continuing the Imamate in the Occultation era) and transmitted texts (e.g., the accepted tradition of Umar ibn Hanzalah and the Noble Tawqi'). As Martyr

Beheshti stated, the jurist is a "supervising ideologue," not an unbridled absolute ruler.

Universal Oversight (Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong): Reason deems it the guarantor of society's health, and verses and hadiths have made it a religious duty whose abandonment incurs divine punishment. Today, this duty manifests in free press, political parties, and civil society organizations (within religious limits).

Thus, Islam designs an intricate, layered supervisory network that begins within the individual (piety), extends to civil institutions (Hisbah, Shura), and culminates in supreme jurisprudential and judicial oversight. The axis of all these is "justice" – the common essence of reason and revelation.

5. Implications of Oversight of Power in an Islamic Government

The logical conclusion from the mentioned foundations yields several fundamental principles that must be observed in any government claiming to be Islamic:

1. The Ruler is a Servant and Trustee, Not an Owner or Despot: Therefore, they are responsible to God and the people and must be accountable.
2. The People Have the Right and Duty of Oversight: Oversight is a citizen's right and simultaneously a religious obligation (wajib), and cannot be suspended under pretexts like "preserving the government's dignity".
3. Supervisory Institutions Must Be Independent and Authoritative: Dependence of inspectors on rulers defeats the purpose. The independence of the judge and the Muhtasib is an accepted principle in Islamic jurisprudence.
4. Transparency and Free Flow of Information: Without public access to information about the rulers' performance, oversight is impossible. The Alawite Sirah (e.g., financial reporting by officials) supports this principle.
5. Horizontal and Vertical Accountability: Rulers must answer to supervisory institutions (horizontal), and the public can directly protest (vertical). This duality confines power.

CONCLUSION

The foundations of oversight of power in Islam have deep roots in both reason and revelation. Sound reason, through arguments based on the obligation of justice, the trust-like nature of power, the corrupting influence of concentrated power, and the insufficiency of self-monitoring, establishes the necessity of a supervisory system. In response, religious texts from the Quran and Sunnah, with passages like the Verse of Trusts, the Verse of Shura, the Verses on Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong, the Hadith on Universal Responsibility, the Prophetic Sirah, and the Covenant

of Malik al-Ashtar, transform this necessity into a religious duty and delineate its mechanisms.

Islam is neither optimistic about autocracy nor does it agree with political chaos. Instead, relying on a realistic anthropology and profound theology, it designs a middle path where power is a restrained servant, not an arbitrary master. Oversight of power in this system is the manifestation of "trustworthiness," "justice-seeking," and "understanding responsibility," and is considered the guarantor of the survival of religious government and the health of society.

Today, with the increasing complexity of government structures, revisiting and operationalizing these foundations is an undeniable necessity. Establishing transparent, independent, and efficient supervisory institutions based on Islamic political jurisprudence can offer an effective model in contrast to oversight-averse democracies or despotic systems.

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