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IBN KHALDUN AND THE MODERN SOCIAL SCIENCES:
A COMPARATIVE THEORETICAL INQUIRY INTO SOCIETY, THE STATE, AND
REVOLUTION

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Douglas H. Garrison

June 2012

Advisor: Dr. Nader Hashemi

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ABSTRACT

This thesis represents a link in a long chain of recent Western scholarship that has attempted to bring the work of Ibn Khaldun, the late 14th century Tunisian jurist and historian, into the mainstream of historiographic, political, and sociological learning. Why Ibn Khaldun? What makes his work stand out among the classics of pre-modern and early-modern political and social theory? Why are his ideas still relevant to the study of politics and societies today? My thesis attempts to answer these questions through the lenses of comparative political theory and theoretical reinterpretation.

The study hinges on a thematic comparison of Ibn Khaldun's major ideas to those authors considered mainstays in the pantheon of Western social science: Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, and Hegel. Such comparison is necessary, I believe, to emphasize the vast contextual differences among the authors while simultaneously highlighting their many theoretical similarities. By doing so, I demonstrate both the surprisingly contemporary relevance and lasting theoretical value of Ibn Khaldun's conceptualization of political power, the state, and social change.

Through careful comparison, this study attempts to simultaneously deepen and strengthen extant understandings of Ibn Khaldun's ideas while unearthing additional aspects either marginalized or neglected by the predominant scholarship. Moreover, it seeks to demonstrate Ibn Khaldun's lasting contribution and value to the modern social sciences—especially as it relates to the study of political rebellion and social change

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Why Ibn Khaldun?	3
Why Comparative Political Theory?	5
Reading Ibn Khaldun in a Modern Comparative Perspective: Some Initial Concerns	7
Structure of the Thesis	8
CHAPTER TWO: IBN KHALDUN – HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT	11
Life and Times	11
The <i>Muqaddimah</i> and Ibn Khaldun’s Historical Method.....	17
CHAPTER THREE: HUMAN NATURE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION.....	23
CHAPTER FOUR: ‘ASABIYYA AND THE STATE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE ...	34
In Theory.....	34
In Practice	43
CHAPTER FIVE: THE INEXORABLE DECAY OF ‘ASABIYYA AND STATE COLLAPSE	46
Economy	50
Society.....	55
CHAPTER SIX: REIMAGINING STATE COLLAPSE IN <i>THE MUQADDIMAH</i> – A CASE FOR ETHICS, REBELLION, & REBIRTH	62
Ibn Khaldun “In Spite of Himself”	62
Reclaiming the Ethical Significance of Ibn Khaldun’s Thought	67
The Khaldunian Cycle in Action? An Interpretive Reading of Modern History..	69
Concluding Remarks.....	72
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the winter and spring of 2010-2011, multiple states in the Middle East and North Africa began a process of radical sociopolitical transformation. After decades of forcibly suffering the rule of foreign-backed autocrats, exploitative economic policies, and social humiliation, a multi-class, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional majority stood up to voice their anger and demand immediate reform. From Morocco in the West to Bahrain in the East, few—if any—Arab states were left untouched by the infectious political protests initiated by rural Tunisians in mid-December.

The popular narrative of the process goes something like this: on 17 December 2010, a desperate young fruit vendor from the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire outside the provincial government building to protest the rampant corruption and injustice endemic to the local and national governments. In so doing, Mohamed Bouazizi unwittingly sparked multiple waves of mass protest across the Middle East that have, to date, successfully unseated Tunisian President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and Libyan “Brother Leader” Muammar Gaddafi. Popularly referred to as the “Arab Spring” among Western media outlets, these waves of political uprising had and will continue to have far-reaching implications for democratic activism and agitation throughout the region.

Interestingly, though perhaps unsurprisingly, the waves of popular discontent made their way to Europe and North America where, disgusted by the continued immiseration of the middle

and lower classes of society, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in opposition of their governments—some to protest, others to ‘occupy’. Although dramatically different in scope and substance from their Arab cousins, these Western protest movements share with them an important underlying concern: potential social collapse driven by the predation of the ruling class and systemic injustice. How can we better understand this unity?

For, as government officials and social activists seek to chart new ways forward, we in the academy are charged with looking backward in hopes of making some kind of sense of the still ongoing phenomena. While many political scientists are busy building their models, designing multivariable matrices for their large- or small-N regressions, or constructing parameters for their case studies, I suggest an alternative strategy: comparative theory. But then we must ask, which theories and why?

While watching events unfold in the Middle East in January 2011, I asked these same questions. Are there figures from the past to whom we can look to make better sense of ongoing events? Do the insights of ancient or modern thinkers still apply in the fast-paced, high-tech world of our self-proclaimed ‘post-modernism’? The answer at which I arrived remains, unequivocally, yes. And the ideas of one thinker in particular struck me as especially deserving of a contemporary rereading and reappraisal: those of Ibn Khaldun.

Ibn Khaldun was a 14th century Islamic jurist, scholar, and politician whose ideas on society, politics, social change, and the philosophy of history have influenced thinkers the world over for the past eight centuries. From Montesquieu in the 18th century to Ernest Gellner in the 20th, Ibn Khaldun’s ideas exert considerable force within blocs of the social sciences, but they are seldom considered in contemporary contexts. I therefore intend to reexamine Ibn Khaldun’s

major work of theory, *The Muqaddimah* (literally, ‘introduction’), in light of the recent global upheavals.

Why Ibn Khaldun?

This study represents a link in a long chain of recent Western scholarship that attempts to bring the work of Ibn Khaldun into the mainstream of political and sociological thinking—particularly within Anglophone academe. But why Ibn Khaldun? What makes his work stand out among the classics of ancient, medieval, and modern political theory? Why are his ideas still relevant to the study of politics today?

As this study will attempt to illuminate, Ibn Khaldun occupies a unique place not only among the thinkers of his time, but among the most powerful and compelling thinkers in recorded history. The complex system of examining and understanding human society he lays out in preface to his ‘world history’ remains among the greatest achievements of individual genius yet written. To briefly summarize: Ibn Khaldun fused the extant knowledge of his time—Islamic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, natural science, historiography, and Islamic ethics—with a self devised science of “human civilization and social organization” that incorporated the study of politics, economics, and sociology to construct what he hoped would be a holistic account of the social processes underlying the rise and fall of “civilized” societies.¹ The dialectically cyclical system of historical social change he developed, and the socio-philosophical mechanisms that drive it, stood unmatched in their intellectual complexity and force until the philosophies of history developed by Hegel and Marx.

¹ *Muqaddimah*, I Preliminary Remarks, pp. 38-39. All references to the *Muqaddimah* are given by Book, Section, and Page Number, and are found in: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: an Introduction to History*, translated and edited by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

History, however, is replete with theories of cyclical power shifts, civilizational evolution, and imperial implosion in regional and international affairs. What makes the ideas of Ibn Khaldun any more interesting or convincing than these? Some contemporary scholars point to the “broad similarities” between Ibn Khaldun’s time and our own, noting that he lived in a “twilight world of transition between the rise and fall of dynasties which he sought to understand.”² Therefore, the logic follows, “lessons” can be “extracted” from his thinking to generate “alternative conceptualizations of historical change in our time.”³ Indeed, many similarities do appear—at least on the surface—between the modern era and his, and, combined with a morbid fascination with imperial decay (particularly rampant in U.S. foreign policy circles, e.g.), may explain the steadily growing appeal of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas. Although tempting, this line of inquiry tends more often than not to be self-fulfilling: we see too much of ourselves in the work of the author, instead of letting the ideas speak.

While I agree lessons can be drawn from the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, I propose an alternative means of “extraction.” Whereas some authors are simply content to find the cookie-cutter temporal and ideational parallels, I argue we must first get a solid grip on the ideas themselves. We must understand what Ibn Khaldun means and why. To get there requires systematic comparison and differentiation to the ideas with which we are most familiar.

Therefore, we must ask questions like, ‘How do Ibn Khaldun’s conceptions of “man,” the “state,” and history compare to those of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, or Hegel?’ ‘What do comparisons between Ibn Khaldun’s theories of popular revolt and those of leading modern scholars of revolution?’ By engaging these questions within the broader context of

² Seifudein Adem, “Decolonizing Modernity: Ibn Khaldun and Modern Historiography,” in *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Jaffary Awang, Ahmad Sunawari Long, and Kamaruddin Salleh (Bangi: Department of Theology and Philosophy, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2004): 570.

³ Ibid.

contemporary political change, I intend to demonstrate Ibn Khaldun's lasting contribution and value to the modern social sciences.

Why Comparative Political Theory?

A comparative examination of political theory gives us the tools we need to begin asking the best questions of sociopolitical phenomena. But, comparative political theory is tricky—if for no other reason than the texts and ideas often investigated have been discussed, debated, and critiqued for decades, centuries, or even millennia. To conduct comparative political theory is to jump into the deep end of the history of human ideas, hoping not to drown. Therefore, it is imperative that I spell out exactly what I intend to do in this study, how I intend to do it, and why I think it important, before taking the plunge.

In a somewhat recent *Review of Politics* article, Andrew F. March makes the case that, “Comparison must be, in the first place, a method, not just an expedient term vaguely suggesting the focus of one’s research interests (e.g., non-Western texts) or substantive concerns and commitments (e.g., critiquing Western hegemony).”⁴ To conduct comparative political theory, there must be a visible process that traces, links, and critiques the ideas we seek to illuminate. Moreover, there must be a goal—an understanding—we seek to achieve through comparison, rather than simply throwing concepts into matrices to see how they relate to one another. March proposes five methods of comparative political theory fit these criteria, two of which I employ here.

⁴ Andrew F. March, “What is Comparative Political Theory?” *The Review of Politics* 71 (2009): 535.

The first of these methods is the history of political thought, which, for March, includes “intellectual history, Begriffsgeschichte, and the study of important thinkers.”⁵ Fancy German terms aside, the method is one of tracing the ideas of “important thinkers” through historical research. In this process, we ask questions like, ‘How did the author’s sociopolitical and intellectual milieus shape his/her ideas?’ or ‘What does the author’s personal and professional biography tell us about his/her thinking?’ The process is part historical-contextual and part intellectual-biographical. In the case of Ibn Khaldun, for example, the method necessitates an extensive examination of the man’s social, political, familial, and intellectual contexts within the broader perspective of the time and place in which he lived.

The second of March’s methods I use is critical analysis and interpretation, which attempts to unearth “the hidden, denied, unrecognized, or unacknowledged underneath the visible, the apparent, or the hegemonic.”⁶ This aspect of my study is by far the most important, for it represents an attempt at epistemic inclusivity. That is, through extensive comparative analysis with the ‘Great Books’ of the Western political and social canons, I strive to bring the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, a pre-modern Muslim thinker from North Africa, back into the conversations of contemporary political theory. In doing so, I follow the advice established by Roxanne Euben who argues,

The project of political theory introduces non-Western perspectives into familiar debates about the problems of living together, thus ensuring that “political theory” is about human and not merely Western dilemmas. It is perhaps best understood as a hybrid of the contemporary disciplines of political theory and comparative politics, for it entails the attempt to ask questions about the nature and value of politics in a variety of cultural and historical contexts...This approach builds upon the possibility that disparate cultures are not worlds apart, morally and cognitively incommensurable, but exist in conversation with one another.⁷

⁵ Ibid, 534.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism, a Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999): 9-10.

Thus, through the process of close comparison with the giants of the Western canon, I hope to establish Ibn Khaldun as a central figure in political and social theory—a figure whose ideas still have much to teach us about the dynamics of contemporary society and the process of social change.

Reading Ibn Khaldun in a Modern Comparative Perspective: Some Initial Concerns

The potential dangers inherent to a study like this are many. In reading political theory, particularly a work from a distant past and place, many temptations leading to spurious conclusions and self-reflective interpretations arise. It is easy, for example, to become mesmerized by Ibn Khaldun's seemingly 'modern' arguments and therefore interpret and ascribe wildly anachronistic ideas to him. In our fascination with his supposed 'modernity', we don't realize that the attempt to take his ideas and stuff them into categories that fit our modern concerns does irreparable violence to the original oeuvre and its meanings.⁸ We cannot 'update' Ibn Khaldun to suit our own times.

Another pitfall is to paint Ibn Khaldun as an island of proto-Western rationality in a sea of religious backwardness or the precursor of some modern academic discipline like sociology, as many do.⁹ In either case, Khalid Chaouch writes, readers "tend to 'forget' that he was a fourteenth century historian."¹⁰ More importantly, Ibn Khaldun was a fourteenth century Islamic scholar and jurist. No matter how irreligious—even anti religious at times—his writing may

⁸ Khalid Chaouch, "Ibn Khaldun In Spite of Himself," *The Journal of North African Studies* 13 (2008): 288.

⁹ See, for example, Ernest Gellner, "Cohesion and Identity: the Maghreb from Ibn Khaldun to Emile Durkheim," *Government and Opposition* 10 (1975): 203-218.

¹⁰ Chaouch, "Ibn Khaldun In Spite of Himself," 285.

appear, it is impossible to divorce Ibn Khaldun's thought from the realities of his life, his time, or his social milieu. In the introduction to his classic work, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, Mushin Mahdi sums up these concerns perfectly. Madhi argues that one cannot understand or explain Ibn Khaldun's thought by:

Summarizing and paraphrasing [his] conclusions; or through the method of explaining them as the product of certain historical conditions; or by interpreting them as the product of an unconscious desire to create a 'positive', 'historical', or 'truly scientific' science of society; or by studying Ibn Khaldun as a 'precursor' of modern social science, and considering his concern with philosophic and religious matters as residues of the prejudices and dogmatisms of the Middle Ages from which a Muslim thinker in the fourteenth century could not liberate himself.¹¹

Considering these cautions, I make every attempt to read Ibn Khaldun as he was, not as I might consciously or subconsciously wish him to be. Moreover, the lessons I glean from the text are collected with an emphasis on contextual skepticism: just because it sounds good doesn't mean it is good.

Structure of the Thesis

Understanding the necessity of providing a rich contextual foundation to Ibn Khaldun's central ideas, this study begins with a discussion of the man and his times. The chapter (Chapter Two) takes great care to describe the social, political, and economic conditions in the fourteenth century Maghreb that shaped the life, career, and thought of Ibn Khaldun. I trace the major events in the medieval Western Islamic world that produced the social and political realities Ibn Khaldun analyzed in his *Muqaddimah*, and I examine how his religious training and political career affected that analysis.

¹¹ Mushin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1957): 9.

Chapter Three begins the investigation of Ibn Khaldun's political thought by delving into the foundational assumptions he makes about human beings and how those assumptions relate to his conception of sovereignty and government. To make his points more accessible and poignant, I compare and contrast them to the ideas of Thucydides and Thomas Hobbes. This discussion lays the foundation for the following explication of Ibn Khaldun's core theoretical proposition.

Chapter Four deals exclusively with Ibn Khaldun's concept of *'asabiyya* (social cohesion and solidarity). Through careful comparison to the heuristic concepts of social organization and mobilization developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and G. W. F. Hegel, this chapter digs at the essence of the uniquely human construct Ibn Khaldun considers to be the *sine qua non* of social change and historical progress. Specifically, I trace the roots of *'asabiyya* and chart its social development from inchoate tribalism to institutionalized nationalism.

In Chapter Five, the discussion of *'asabiyya* shifts its focus from development to decay. In this section, we confront the harsh realities of what Ibn Khaldun considers to be the fate of all nations: slow, degenerative collapse. To better grasp this concept of state collapse and the inexorable process of social decay, I compare Ibn Khaldun's 'vicious cycle' analysis of *'asabiyya* and "royal authority" to the economic and social ideas of Niccolo Machiavelli and John Locke. I conclude with an assessment of Ibn Khaldun's social prognoses relative to the contemporary world.

Building upon these comparative readings of *The Muqaddimah*, Chapter Six presents the major problems of contemporary interpretations in Khaldunian scholarship and seeks to amend them. I argue that popularized understandings of Ibn Khaldun miss a great deal of his complexity by (1) attempting to secularize his views on politics and social change, and (2) focusing exclusively on external actors as the harbingers of dynastic collapse. By reclaiming Ibn

Khaldun's Islamic ethics and bringing domestic forces back into the picture, I conclude that Ibn Khaldun's ideas gain substantially greater weight in offering compelling philosophical lenses through which to examine modern and contemporary history.

CHAPTER TWO: IBN KHALDUN – HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Life and Times

Abu Zayd ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun al-Hadrami, known to the world simply as Ibn Khaldun, was born in Tunis in 1332 CE. He came from a wealthy and politically prestigious family, the Banu Khaldun, which had emigrated from Al-Andalus after the fall of Cordoba and Seville during the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula from Islamic rule in the mid-13th century. His family’s status emanated first from its long history of political and military service to the Umayyad, Córdoba, Almoravid, and Almohad dynasties in Al-Andalus.¹² Second, the Banu Khaldun’s Arab and Berber pedigree cemented its status among the Andalusian and, later, Hafsid Tunisian elite. In his autobiography, for example, Ibn Khaldun traces his paternal roots back to the first days of Islam in the southern Hadramut region of Yemen.¹³ More important than his family’s status and station in Tunis, however, were the social, cultural, and political contexts into which he was born.

Historical accounts of the political, economic, social, and intellectual conditions in the 14th century Maghreb vary greatly depending on the source. As Bruce Lawrence writes, for example,

¹² Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World* (London: Verso, 1984): 36-37

¹³ Allen J. Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 42-43.

At the intersection of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim influences, heir to Greek science and Arabic poetry, and connected by trade and history to Asia, the Mediterranean Sea had become the nexus of Muslim cosmopolitanism by the fourteenth century.¹⁴

Yves Lacoste agrees, seeing Islamic North Africa as a political sphere “fully independent” from the political centers of Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, though culturally and economically inseparable from the greater Islamic Middle East.¹⁵ Contrary to popular assumptions, he writes, “It [the Maghreb] was neither a remote outpost of the Muslim world nor a sort of backward ‘wild west’.”¹⁶ For both Lawrence and Lacoste, Ibn Khaldun’s time appears to be one of relative commercial prosperity, technological advance, and intellectual achievement.

A more circumspect analysis comes from Marshall Hodgson. In the second volume of *The Venture of Islam*, Hodgson argues that the collapse of the Almohad Empire in 1269 CE created isolated and unstable emirates throughout North Africa and the remnants of Muslim Spain whose ingenuity was forced to shift from social, economic, and intellectual endeavors to defending themselves from constant external threat.¹⁷ Hodgson writes, “As compared with India or Rûm (southeastern Europe), the whole Maghrib [*sic*] was relatively isolated from the central Islamic lands,” and, by extension, removed from the ongoing advances in learning, science, and technology taking place in the budding Ottoman Empire and Persia.¹⁸

Indeed, to Ibn Khaldun the time and place could hardly have looked bleaker. As Mushin Mahdi puts it, “The picture of the Islamic world during the fourteenth century as depicted by Ibn

¹⁴ Bruce Lawrence, “Introduction to the 2005 Edition,” in *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005): vii.

¹⁵ Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁷ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in World Civilization, Volume Two, The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 477.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 478.

Khaldun...is one of general decline and disintegration.”¹⁹ Ibn Khaldun had been born within living memory of Mongols’ sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE. Arguably the most collectively traumatizing event in pre-modern Islamic history, the allied Mongol army under Hulagu Khan spent one week obliterating the city’s infrastructure and systematically exterminating its inhabitants; among the numerous casualties was the last caliph of the Abbasid Empire, Al-Mustasim, executed by being wrapped in a carpet and trampled to death by Mongol horsemen.²⁰ The catastrophe shattered the four-century old Sunni political order throughout the Middle East and marked the end of the so-called ‘Golden Age of Islam.’

While the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate loomed large in the collective memory of Muslims throughout the medieval Islamic world, Baghdad and Abbasid politics were far removed from the social, cultural, and political milieu of Ibn Khaldun’s family. Instead, for nearly five centuries the sociopolitical epicenter of the Banu Khaldun lay within the westernmost outpost of the Islamic world: Al-Andalus. Therefore, the lingering trauma that most affected Ibn Khaldun’s worldview and work was not the collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate, but rather the continuing Spanish *Reconquista* and steady decline of Muslim Spain.²¹

In his extensive genealogical research, Ibn Khaldun had traced his family’s presence in Al-Andalus back to the Umayyad conquest of Iberia in the early-8th Century. For the better part of five centuries, the Banu Khaldun had distinguished itself both in battle and statecraft, rising to prominence as one of the most powerful families in Seville.²² According to Lacoste, “many historians” in medieval North Africa and Al-Andalus noted the fame of the Banu Khaldun in Andalusian political, military, and intellectual history; the male members of the family were

¹⁹ Mushin Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History: A Study in the Philosophic Foundation of the Science of Culture* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957): 26.

²⁰ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 7.

²¹ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 479.

²² Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun*, 36-37.

well-regarded political advisors, religious scholars, and generals.²³ But no matter how gifted in battle or political negotiation the family may have been, they could do nothing to stop the glacial progress of the *Reconquista*.

Against the backdrop of sporadic warfare and growing internal political division, the Banu Khaldun found themselves—like most Muslims in Al-Andalus—under increasingly mounting pressure at the beginning of the 13th century. Although the Christian kingdoms of Leon, Castile, Aragon, and Navarre could rarely agree on anything, they combined their military strength with the singular intent of driving the “Moors” back across the Straits of Gibraltar.²⁴ By around 1230 CE, they appeared poised to make significant territorial gains as their armies moved south and their politicians worked to spread factional chaos among the steadily disintegrating Almohads. Like many others, the Banu Khaldun read the proverbial ‘writing on the wall’ and left Seville several years before its capitulation to the Spanish coalition in 1236 CE.²⁵ Not long afterwards, in 1248 CE, Cordoba fell to the Christians, leaving only Granada as “the last outpost” of Muslim Al-Andalus.²⁶ The Almohad dynasty imploded soon thereafter in 1269 CE, thus creating the fractured political landscape into which Ibn Khaldun was born.

The Almohad dynasty had at one point united North Africa from Marrakesh to Tripoli and controlled Al-Andalus from Gibraltar to Barcelona.²⁷ By the time Ibn Khaldun reached adulthood, however, little remained of the Almohads’ legacy. North Africa was divided into three incessantly warring dynasties: the Marinids in what is now Morocco, the Zayyanids in western Algeria, and the Hafsids in eastern Algeria and Tunis.²⁸ Each vied for power over the

²³ Ibid, 37.

²⁴ R. A. Fletcher, “Reconquest and Crusade in Spain, c. 1050-1150,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 37 (1987): 35.

²⁵ Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun*, 37-38.

²⁶ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 69.

²⁷ Ibid, 11-15.

²⁸ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 477.

others, but none ever truly achieved it. It was an era of internecine warfare, political intrigue and opportunism, when alliances were made, broken, and remade in rapid succession. It was an era of slow internal decay, when even intense domestic disputes could not overshadow the constant threat of nomadic Arab and Berber raiders and the steady advance of Christian Europe towards political ascendancy.²⁹ Furthermore, it was the era of the Black Death.

Ibn Khaldun was a sixteen year-old student when the plague reached Tunis in 1348. Over the course of one year, it infected and killed his parents, all of his teachers, and many of his extended relations. Of his immediate family, only he and his two brothers survived the Black Death.³⁰ According to Fromherz, the effects of the plague dramatically impacted Ibn Khaldun's thinking on public sanitation, urban life, and urbanization for the worse, and even inspired him to write the *Muqaddimah* later in life. While this latter-day psychoanalysis is something of an analytical stretch, one cannot deny the trauma such compounding losses must have inflicted on the young man.

In spite of the tragedies wrought by the plague, Ibn Khaldun continued his education, determined to master the subjects he had studied from an early age before embarking on a career in politics. Thanks to his family's wealth, privilege, and political status, Ibn Khaldun had received the best education available, studying under the sharpest minds in North Africa and developing a remarkably diverse academic vita. As Fromherz argues, Ibn Khaldun was among the last and privileged few educated in such manner—outside the watchful eye of the newly created state sanctioned and controlled school system.³¹ The relative intellectual freedom given by his teachers may, for example, explain both the astonishing disciplinary breadth of Ibn

²⁹ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, 22-23.

³⁰ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 53-54.

³¹ *Ibid*, 46.

Khaldun's education as well the emphasis he later placed upon critical thinking and intellectual creativity in his work.

As a child, Ibn Khaldun undertook his initial Qur'anic training (rote memorization and recitation) under the tutelage of his father, a practicing Sufi and Maliki scholar.³² As a young man, he expanded his religious studies through his teachers, studying Qur'anic *tafsir* (exegesis), its multiple *ahadith* (traditions of the Prophet) collections, learning the fundamentals of Maliki *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and studying the theosophy of Sufi mysticism.³³ This extensive training had a profound effect on Ibn Khaldun, who would later assert that, in spite of humanity's capacity for reason and critical thought, only the "phenomenon of prophecy" offered people a legitimate source of social values and institutions.³⁴

Beyond his religious studies, Ibn Khaldun received instruction in literature, poetry, Arabic linguistics, foreign languages, biographical and historical sciences, and scholarly writing. Furthermore, he was schooled in the "modern" Hellenistic fields of mathematics, logic, natural philosophy, and metaphysics.³⁵ In addition to reading Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, Ibn Khaldun was also well versed in Islamic philosophy, studying the works of al-Farabi, al-Razi, al-Tusi, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn Sinna, among others.³⁶ This wide-ranging exposure to Classical Greek and Islamic philosophy inspired both his academic pursuits and his penchant for critical, rationalist inquiry. It was Ibn Khaldun's career in royal politics, however, that would provide him the unique perspective and insight with which to critically analyze history, authority, and social change.

³² Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, 23.

³³ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 45-47.

³⁴ This point, which Ibn Khaldun returns to repeatedly throughout the *Muqaddimah*, reminds us that no matter how "modern" his ideas appear in print, he was a product of his time and place, and cannot be divorced from his deeply Islamic context. Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History*, 85.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 27-28.

³⁶ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 45.

At the age of twenty, Ibn Khaldun entered his first position in Hafsid politics: apprentice to the court calligrapher. Although he later described the job as both menial and mind numbing,³⁷ it placed him on a career trajectory that, today, reads like a political thriller. If, indeed, western North Africa and Muslim Spain were, as Mahdi suggests, “border-countries where political adventurers and sectarian visionaries sought their fortunes,”³⁸ Ibn Khaldun must have played politics in a league unto himself. Over the course of his thirty-year career, Ibn Khaldun shifted his allegiances frequently and moved from one court to another with little or no regard for the particular ruler or his policies.³⁹ He served primarily in the capacity of vizier—a close political advisor—to various rulers and princes of the Marinid, Hafsid, Zayyanid and Granadan emirates. Twice he was imprisoned for allegedly (and likely) conspiring to overthrow his patrons; twice he barely avoided execution. Every new position brought new intrigues, new political maneuvers, and, most importantly, new opportunities to study the dynamics of human social interaction and the inner mechanics of inter- and intrastate politics.⁴⁰ In a comparative perspective, Ibn Khaldun’s political career is in many ways reminiscent of Niccolo Machiavelli’s over a century later.⁴¹

The *Muqaddimah* and Ibn Khaldun’s Historical Method

Combined with his thorough understandings of Classical and Islamic history, Ibn Khaldun’s direct involvement within the fractious sphere of North African and Andalusian politics provided him with the data necessary to begin synthesizing and documenting his

³⁷ Ibid, 60.

³⁸ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 38.

³⁹ Lacoste even labels him a political “*Condotierre*,” or mercenary captain. See Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun*, 57.

⁴⁰ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 37-52.

⁴¹ For a lengthy, well-written, historically detailed, and fastidiously researched description of Ibn Khaldun’s political career, consult Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 60-96.

experiences. Like Machiavelli after him, he hoped to use the knowledge accrued over a thirty-year career to discern general principles of history, society, and politics as a means of providing lessons and offering advice to contemporary and future political leaders.⁴²

In order to accomplish this task, Ibn Khaldun intended to explain the steady political dissolution of Islamic North Africa and Spain well under way in his time. He wanted to understand how the Islamic peoples⁴³—more specifically, the Islamic political associations—of the Maghreb had disintegrated so completely over the course of several hundred years. Why were the North African states so unstable? Why were attempts at unification so few and, when attempted, so catastrophic?⁴⁴

These locally concerned questions naturally led Ibn Khaldun towards the meta-historical, structural, and philosophical: what is the nature of history? Why and how do empires rise and fall? What is politics and the purpose of government? What is the mobilizing force in a given society? How are civilizations built? Like the early-modern Western political philosophers and historians who would follow him, Ibn Khaldun found himself confronting questions that dealt with the essence of human nature, social organization, and social change.⁴⁵

To begin this ambitious task, Ibn Khaldun first required some semblance of peace and solitude that his political occupation and reputation had denied him throughout his career. He paradoxically found that peace while on the run from the Zayyanid emir, Abu Hammu II, in 1375. For four years, Ibn Khaldun and his family were housed and protected by the “fiercely

⁴² Ibid, 9. It is worth noting that Ibn Khaldun specifically notes his history’s purpose, uniqueness, and intended potential for practical application, see *Muqaddimah*, Foreward, p. 9.

⁴³ Whom he classifies into two “races” – “Arabs” and “Berbers.” See *Muqaddimah*, Foreward, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun*, 63.

⁴⁵ One modern scholar goes so far as to claim Ibn Khaldun’s work represents “an Islamic phenomenology” of society, though I am highly skeptical of how far one can take the analogy. See Aliah Schleifer, “Ibn Khaldun’s Theories of Perception, Logic and Knowledge: An Islamic Phenomenology,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 2 (1985): 225-231.

independent” Awlad ‘Arif tribe in their fortress, the Qal’at Ibn Salama.⁴⁶ It was during this brief exile from Maghrebi politics that Ibn Khaldun began writing his *Muqaddimah*, or “introduction,” to what would become his *Kitab al-‘Ibar*, the Book of Lessons.⁴⁷

In the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun intended to establish new theories and methods of examining and explaining history, society, and politics. His purpose in doing so was to ground and contextualize his subsequent voluminous histories of the Arabs, Berbers, Persians, and Turks,⁴⁸ while simultaneously distancing himself from the established methods of historical research. In spite of his extensive training in Islamic jurisprudence and scholarship, Ibn Khaldun found two aspects of history to be intertwined: that to “understand the causes and nature of historical events, one must start from correct information; but in order to be able to rectify information about events and distinguish the correct from the false, one must know their nature and causes.”⁴⁹ Thus, as Lenn Goodman argues, we find in Ibn Khaldun a demand for clarity, realism, and critical thinking in opposition to the “*naïveté* or *fausse naïveté* of traditional and sacred history.”⁵⁰ Ibn Khaldun therefore eschewed traditional methods of historical research and interpretation.

Much like the judges and scholars within the four recognized ‘schools’ (*madahib*) of Islamic jurisprudence, medieval Islamic historians relied overwhelmingly on the method of personality criticism in determining the veracity of historical accounts through their chains of

⁴⁶ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 84.

⁴⁷ The full title of Ibn Khaldun’s “world history” is, *Kitab al-‘ibar wa-diwan al-mubtada’ wa-l-khabar fi ayyam al-‘Arab wal-‘Ajam wal-Barbar wa-man ‘asharhum min dhawi as-sultan al-akbar*, or: The Book of Lessons and Archive of Early and Subsequent History, Dealing with Political Events Concerning Arabs, non-Arabs, and Berbers, and with Their Contemporary Supreme Rulers. See Lawrence, “Introduction to the 2005 Edition,” in *The Muqaddimah*, xix.

⁴⁸ Despite Ibn Khaldun’s original intention to limit his study to the Arabs and Berbers, his later travels to Egypt and the Levant forced him to reconsider and amend the position. See *Muqaddimah*, Foreward, p. 8-9.

⁴⁹ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 49.

⁵⁰ Lenn Goodman, “Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92 (1972): 250.

oral transmitters (*isnad*).⁵¹ While Ibn Khaldun found this method suitable for Hadith scholarship, he thought it intellectually lacking and prone to distortion when applied to factual historical research. Reliance on transmitters and personality criticism, he argued, fails on several levels:

1. The method fails to account for qualitative and quantitative anomalies in “accepted” transmissions that defy logic, critical thought, or knowledge of “the nature of events and the circumstances and requirements in the world of existence.”⁵² Ibn Khaldun gives several examples of such problems, one being a story related by al-Masudi describing a city in the Western Sahara built entirely of copper. The story, according to Ibn Khaldun, is factually absurd, because the details “contradict the natural facts that apply to the building and planning of cities.”⁵³ The task of the historian, therefore, is to “investigate whether it is possible that the (reported facts) *could* have happened. This is more important than, and has priority over, personality criticism.”⁵⁴
2. The method does not account for the changes that naturally occur within societies over time, a “hidden pitfall” Ibn Khaldun finds especially problematic when scholars attempt to interpret history for contemporary application. He writes, “The condition of the world and of nations, their customs and sects, does not persist in the same form or in a constant manner. There are differences according to days and periods, and changes from one condition to another. Such is the case with individuals, times, and cities, and it likewise happens in connection with regions and districts, periods and dynasties.”⁵⁵ He therefore finds it unconscionable to seek, as some of his contemporary religious scholars did, to recreate the exact conditions of the time of the Prophet based upon oral history.⁵⁶

⁵¹ There were, of course, many exceptions to this rule: the 11th century comparative religious history of al-Biruni, for example, relies extensively on direct consultation with primary source material, and al-Biruni chastises his fellow scholars for refusing to follow his example.

⁵² *Muqaddimah*, I Preliminary Remarks, p. 36.

⁵³ *Muqaddimah*, I Preliminary Remarks, p. 37.

⁵⁴ *Muqaddimah*, I Preliminary Remarks, p. 38.

⁵⁵ *Muqaddimah*, Introduction, p. 25.

⁵⁶ *Muqaddimah*, Introduction, p. 26.

Considering these problems with the extant methods of historical investigation, Ibn Khaldun argued in the opening of the *Muqaddimah* that for history to have any bearing on contemporary life—if people wished to comprehend the *true* lessons history teaches—the methods of historical inquiry and understanding had to change. A qualitative shift had to be made away from rote memorization of events, oral history, and personality criticism of their transmitters towards a method that took a critical stand on historical inquiry, employed reason in its examination of “facts,” and sought to discern the underlying realities or “essences” of events, cultures, and civilizations. To this end, he wrote:

The normative method for distinguishing right from wrong in historical information on the grounds of inherent possibility or absurdity is to investigate human social organization, which is identical to civilization. We must distinguish the conditions that attach themselves to the essence of civilization as required by its very nature; the things that are accidental and cannot be counted on; and the things that cannot possibly attach themselves to it...Such is the purpose of this first book of our work. (The subject) is in a way an independent science with its own peculiar object—that is, human civilization and social organization.⁵⁷

Developing this “science of culture,” as Mahdi⁵⁸ labels it, became Ibn Khaldun’s sole project while he and his family remained at the Qal’at Ibn Salama.⁵⁹ It took him two years to complete the first draft of the *Muqaddimah*’s first two volumes, which contain the bulk of this new science. The remainder of the project, including his *Kitab al-‘Ibar*, kept him occupied for the rest of his life, which he spent serving as the Maliki Grand Qadi (judge) of Mamluk Egypt.⁶⁰ Turning, then, to Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah*, we will spend the following three chapters engaging the foundational assumptions that ground his political philosophy and science of

⁵⁷ *Muqaddimah*, I Preliminary Remarks, p. 38-39.

⁵⁸ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 49.

⁵⁹ Fromherz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 84.

⁶⁰ Again, a wonderful source to consult for a further, detailed account of Ibn Khaldun’s later years can be found in Fromherz’s *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*.

culture—namely, his understanding of human nature, his concept of *‘asabiyya* (social cohesion), and his theory of state collapse.

CHAPTER THREE: HUMAN NATURE, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE BIRTH OF CIVILIZATION

All theories of politics and governance base their conclusions on, and derive their prescriptions from, implicit or explicit assumptions and observations about human nature. Ibn Khaldun's theories are no different. However, unlike many of his contemporaries⁶¹ in the Western political tradition, his conception of a human's "natural disposition" is neither uniform nor universal.⁶² Moreover, it is neither static nor essentially intrinsic. Instead, Ibn Khaldun offers a vision of human nature that is highly nuanced, layered, and all but impossible to neatly categorize.

For Ibn Khaldun, human nature is a deeply complicated force, at one and the same time intrinsically molded by God's will and extrinsically shaped by environment and custom. In the first case, Ibn Khaldun makes clear that God grants all people the natural capacity for reason, but helps or hinders that capacity according to His will—he cites the Qur'anic verse, "God guides with His light whom He will,"⁶³ as evidence. In addition to the intrinsic machinations of God, Ibn Khaldun argues that environment and custom play the largest roles in shaping a population's "natural disposition." He writes,

⁶¹ I use the term very loosely to describe the political thinkers of early-modern Europe who, with Machiavelli, began the revolution in Western political thought more than a century after Ibn Khaldun's death in 1406.

⁶² *Muqaddimah*, II 5, p. 95.

⁶³ Qur'an 24:35. *Muqaddimah*, Preliminary Remarks, p. 42.

The soul in its first natural state of creation is ready to accept whatever good or evil may arrive and leave an imprint upon it. Muhammad said: 'Every infant is born in the natural state. It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a heathen.'⁶⁴

In his third and fourth prefatory discussions of human civilization, for example, Ibn Khaldun asserts that the natural dispositions and temperaments (as well as the skin colors) of people are, in many ways, forged by their regional climates. He suggests that a people's "condition" moves along a spectrum between extremity and temperance relative to its climatic setting.⁶⁵ Hence, he argues the peoples of the three central zones (including Western Europe, the Maghreb, and China, among others) are the most temperate in body, spirit, and "natural disposition"; whereas, the peoples of the outer zones to the north and south (he specifically mentions sub-Saharan Africans) are prone to the extremes of emotion, have little capacity for rational action, and are practically incapable of reasoned, "temperate" thought.⁶⁶

While the oversimplified generalizations of these observations offer little insight into Ibn Khaldun's political thought *per se*, they do emphasize the fluidity of his ideas concerning human nature. Being an environmental-material argument only, there is nothing to suggest that a given population *could not* change their "natural dispositions" over time by migrating from an "extreme" end of the spectrum towards the "temperate" center. This fluidity is further discussed at length in Ibn Khaldun's treatment of Bedouin nomads, which we will come back to later, and underscores the importance of "custom and habit" in his understanding of human nature.

For Ibn Khaldun, "custom" is the principal force by which human nature changes over time. As he argues, "Man is a child of the customs and things he has become used to. He is *not* the product of his natural disposition and temperament."⁶⁷ Instead, changes in habit necessitate

⁶⁴ *Muqaddimah*, II 4, p. 94.

⁶⁵ *Muqaddimah*, I Third Prefatory Discussion, p. 57.

⁶⁶ *Muqaddimah*, I Third Prefatory Discussion, pp. 57-59.

⁶⁷ *Muqaddimah*, II 5, p. 95. My emphasis.

changes in temperament. This position generates important implications for Ibn Khaldun's theory of political organization. Notably, it imbues his thought with skeptical—even pessimistic—conservatism. This aspect of Ibn Khaldun's ideas then begs the question, how do the evolving kinds of human nature affect the construction of sovereignty and political organizations? An initial comparison between Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides⁶⁸ is both useful and instructive when considering this question.

Like Ibn Khaldun, Thucydides' understanding of human nature informs his understanding of social action, interaction, and disintegration. Furthermore, Thucydides argues, like Ibn Khaldun, that the inherent qualities of human kind necessarily affect and direct the formation, consolidation, ascension, and destruction of "states." This somewhat deterministic⁶⁹ position is not surprising when one considers both the historical, political, and social milieus in which both authors lived and wrote. Each played seminal roles in the politics of their "states," each watched with horrified fascination as their respective societies steadily collapsed, and each was well placed (in exile) to reflect at length on the historical forces that caused and propelled the collapse.

Thucydides, a one-time Athenian general, has a generally pessimistic—indeed, tragic—view of human nature, but his pessimism is qualified. While both individual and collective fear, honor, and interest play the dominant roles in determining the course of human action⁷⁰, Thucydides recognizes that for every ambitious demagogue like Cleon⁷¹ and every self-

⁶⁸ All citations from Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* are in: Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Translated by Rex Warner (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

⁶⁹ Goodman argues effectively that while both authors place heavy emphases on the role human nature plays in the unfolding of history, they *do not* argue that history itself is reducible to the "law, patterns, forces, and inertias of human nature." See Goodman, "Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides," 255.

⁷⁰ Thucydides, I 76, p. 80.

⁷¹ Thucydides, III 37-40, pp. 213-217.

interested traitor like Alcibiades⁷² there are honest, honorable, and loyal citizens like Pericles⁷³ and Brasidas.⁷⁴ However, for Thucydides, such people are the exceptions that prove the rule, and throughout *The Peloponnesian War*, he repeatedly asserts the primacy of blind ambition, self-interest, and greed in animating society and driving it towards war and eventual destruction.⁷⁵

This dualistic tension in Thucydides' characterization of human nature is likewise found in Ibn Khaldun. Throughout the *Muqaddimah*, we observe in Ibn Khaldun's thought something of an internal conflict over the basic qualities of human "temperament." In many ways, this dualism is a reflection of the conflict between an Islamic view of human nature and one based solely upon observational experience and reasoned deduction.

On one hand, for example, Ibn Khaldun asserts that (all things being equal) people are inherently inclined towards justice and goodness. These inherent qualities exist, first and foremost, because God formed humankind thus.⁷⁶ In addition, Ibn Khaldun adds, humankind's capacity for reason and logic is able to override the base animalistic traits of aggression and lust—even more so when buttressed by religion—thereby orienting human nature towards good.⁷⁷ On the other hand, he suggests that *evil* is, more often than not, the primary character of the human condition, writing:

Evil is the quality that is closest to man when he fails to improve his customs and when religion is not used as the model to improve him. *The great mass of mankind is in that condition...* Evil qualities in man are injustice and mutual aggression. He who casts his eye upon the property of his brother will lay his hand upon it to take it, unless there is a restraining influence to hold him back.⁷⁸

⁷² Thucydides, VI 89-93, pp. 466-470.

⁷³ Thucydides, II 34-46, pp. 143-151.

⁷⁴ Thucydides, IV 85-87, pp. 315-317.

⁷⁵ Goodman, *Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides*, 254.

⁷⁶ Qur'an 40:64, 95:4.

⁷⁷ *Muqaddimah*, II 19, p. 111.

⁷⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 7, p. 97.

This internal conflict brings us to Ibn Khaldun's conception of social construction and political development, which is itself somewhat conflicted. Whereas the political thinkers of early-modern Europe base their theories of politics upon unchanging universal ideal typologies of human nature and "Natural Law," Ibn Khaldun fuses human nature and human necessity with a *telos* of power particular to time and place.

In the first place, Ibn Khaldun argues that people need each other to survive and prosper. In his development of the theory, there is strong evidence of what we might call "thick" sociability.⁷⁹ That is, Ibn Khaldun stresses the fact that humans build communities not simply out of self-interested self-preservation, but because they are naturally communal, cooperative, and sociable creatures. He writes,

human beings have to dwell in common and settle together in cities and hamlets for the comforts of companionship and for the satisfaction of human needs, as a result of the natural disposition of human beings towards co-operation in order to be able to make a living.⁸⁰

Furthermore, he cites Aristotle claiming, "Man is 'political' by nature," and can therefore not exist without "social organization" in the form of the "town or 'polis'."⁸¹

An interesting echo of this inherent need for social cooperation is found in Samuel Pufendorf's concept of "that *mutual Help* Men afford one another," which alone accounts for the advantages of organized human society.⁸² One could also look to John Locke for a similar conception of human sociability, where, in his *Second Treatise on Government*, he famously writes,

⁷⁹ For a lengthier, deeper treatment of "sociability" in the early-modern context, see Richard Tuck, *The Rights of War and Peace: Political Theory and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸⁰ *Muqaddimah*, Introduction, p. 43.

⁸¹ *Muqaddimah*, I First Prefatory Discussion, p. 45.

⁸² Samuel Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man, According to the Law of Nature*, edited by Ian Hunter and David Saunders (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003): 53-54. Author's emphasis.

Every one, as he is *bound to preserve himself*, and not to quit his station wilfully [sic], so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, *to preserve the rest of mankind*, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another.⁸³

An additional echo of this thick sociability can be found in Locke's discussion of mutual assistance and association for the protection of property rights. Like Locke, Ibn Khaldun makes implicit assumptions about human nature when discussing property rights, protecting those rights, and the role government plays in the process. Locke, for example, argues that the "chief end" of the social contract, leading people out of the "state of nature" into a commonwealth under government, is the desire to protect individual property under the rule of law.⁸⁴ That people have the reason, desire, and trust to do so with one another highlights Locke's more favorable and/or optimistic view of human nature. Ibn Khaldun, arguing from an alternate perspective, likewise asserts the trusting, cooperative nature of people in entrusting "their property and their lives to the governor or ruler who rules them."⁸⁵

This is not to say that Ibn Khaldun neglects or diminishes the basic human need for self-preservation and defense.⁸⁶ Indeed, there is an equally strong instrumentalism in his portrayal of society. He goes to great lengths, for example, to enumerate the various physical disadvantages of defense that make human monadic life all but impossible, and therefore asserts, "Human

⁸³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Edited by C. B. Macpherson (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Inc., 1980): 9. Author's emphases.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

⁸⁵ *Muqaddimah*, II 5, pp. 94-95.

⁸⁶ *Muqaddimah*, I 1, p. 45.

social organization is something necessary;”⁸⁷ for, otherwise, “the human species would vanish.”⁸⁸

Politics arises out of this necessary organization, which Ibn Khaldun defines as being “concerned with the administration of home or city in accordance with ethical and philosophical requirements, for the purpose of directing the mass toward a behaviour [*sic*] that will result in the preservation and permanence of the species.”⁸⁹ For Ibn Khaldun, the preferred—indeed, *necessary*—method of this preservation is undisputed, autocratic royal authority.

Ibn Khaldun begins his discussion of political sovereignty with a simple premise: “Not everyone is master of his own affairs...As a rule, man must by necessity be dominated by someone else.”⁹⁰ There are rulers and there are the ruled. Moreover, people need rulers; civilization *requires* them. This requirement is borne out of the need for an authority to repress the base tendencies of humanity as a means of keeping the peace and ensuring social stability. As Ibn Khaldun elaborates,

People need someone to exercise a restraining influence and keep them apart, for aggressiveness and injustice are in the animal nature of man...The person who exercises a restraining influence...must dominate them and have power and authority over them, so that no one of them will be able to attack another. This is the meaning of royal authority.⁹¹

To any student of Western political theory, this argument will sound strikingly familiar. It is therefore useful, in order to further our understanding of Ibn Khaldun’s theory of sovereignty, to consider it in juxtaposition to that of Thomas Hobbes.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *Muqaddimah*, I 1, p. 46.

⁸⁹ *Muqaddimah*, Introduction, p. 39.

⁹⁰ *Muqaddimah*, II 6, p. 95.

⁹¹ *Muqaddimah*, I 1, p. 47.

In *Leviathan*⁹², Hobbes asserts the need for a “common power,” apart from and above the masses, to keep the people “in awe,” i.e. pacified and obedient.⁹³ This need stems from Hobbes’ understanding of human action as being more inclined towards self-interested and competitive individualism than communal altruism or cooperation. The endemic conflicts among people in a “state of nature” that Hobbes deems unavoidable arise because no one person can ever truly be secure until he or she perceives no threat to his or her life.⁹⁴ Reaching such an ideal state engenders a constant power struggle, or war of all against all.⁹⁵ To break this cycle of violence, a unitary and absolute sovereign must somehow contractually emerge in order to shepherd the masses and prevent a regression and collapse back into anarchy.

Much like Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides, Hobbes’ ideas are deeply rooted in and influenced by his time, place, sociopolitical and intellectual contexts. Writing in the wake of the Thirty Years War and in the midst of the English Civil War, Hobbes bore witness to the crippling effects domestic and international anarchy had on the social fabric of the European state.⁹⁶ Furthermore, as the first person to translate Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* into English, the lessons Hobbes drew from the ancient historian on democracy, war, diplomacy, and human nature resonated deeply when he sought to make sense of the chaos engulfing England.⁹⁷

Leviathan, published in 1651, therefore emerged as Hobbes’ response to the philosophical and political incoherence he saw around him. First, *Leviathan* represented a critique of liberal natural law and natural rights philosophy—notably that espoused by Hugo Grotius. To Hobbes, Grotius’ vision of human sociability as naturally “peaceful and organized”

⁹² All citations from Hobbes’ *Leviathan* taken from Book I and given by chapter, section, and page number from: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edited by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁹³ *Leviathan*, XIII 8, p. 84.

⁹⁴ *Leviathan*, XIII 4, p. 83.

⁹⁵ *Leviathan*, XIII 3, p. 82.

⁹⁶ *Leviathan*, Introduction, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁹⁷ *Leviathan*, Introduction, p. xiv.

and his following conclusion that such inherent sociability establishes “objective moral principles” in the form of natural rights was severely misguided.⁹⁸ Given his high regard for Thucydides and firsthand experience with dynastic overthrow, civil war, and political exile, it is little wonder Hobbes had neither time nor tolerance for Grotius’ neo-Ciceronian views of human nature, natural law, natural rights, or “laws” of nations. *Leviathan* therefore served as Hobbes’ rebuttal to the Grotian project.

Second, like Ibn Khaldun, Hobbes turned his otherwise philosophical writing into social commentary with practical political lessons. By identifying the chief problem afflicting mid-17th century England (political anarchy, civil war), explaining its most salient causes (dysfunctional liberal parliamentarianism, unchecked human nature), and providing its ultimate solution (coercive absolutism), Hobbes sought to influence future English rulers and lawmakers, whether Parliamentarian or Monarchist.

Like Thucydides and Hobbes, Ibn Khaldun is deeply suspicious of liberalizing trends in politics.⁹⁹ Ibn Khaldun’s construction of sovereignty as a means of internal conflict prevention therefore appears in many ways similar to the view of Hobbes. Consider, for example, Ibn Khaldun’s assertion that, “By the dint of their nature, human beings need someone to act as a restraining influence and mediator in every social organization, in order to keep its members from fighting with each other.”¹⁰⁰ The need arises out of a natural acquisitiveness Ibn Khaldun, like Hobbes, sees in humanity: people naturally seek power—political *and* material—over others. A coercive authority is therefore required to squelch the more pernicious effects of unchecked human greed. Ibn Khaldun writes, “Evil qualities in man are injustice and mutual

⁹⁸ Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr., “The Grotian Vision of World Order,” *The American Journal of International Law* 76 (1982): 483-484.

⁹⁹ Maurice Pope, “Thucydides and Democracy,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 37 (1988): 276.

¹⁰⁰ *Muqaddimah*, II 16, p. 107.

aggression. He who casts his eye upon the property of his brother will lay his hand upon it to take it, unless there is a restraining influence to hold him back.”¹⁰¹ That influence is “governmental authority.”¹⁰²

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun finds that politics, in addition to human nature, “requires that only one person exercise control,” because “were various persons, liable to differ among each other, to exercise it, destruction of the whole could result.”¹⁰³ Indeed, a recurring theme throughout the *Muqaddimah* is the need to maintain intrastate order against the prospect of internal anarchy. In the context of 14th century North Africa—as in 17th century England—unitary “royal authority” represents the best choice.

Of further interest is the method by which both Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes arrive at their political prescriptions. Hobbes, like all the notable social contract theorists of early-modern Europe, places his theoretical human subjects in a “state of nature,” which exists *a priori* to civic society/commonwealth/civilization. Contrary to popular interpretation, however, Hobbes does not consider this natural state merely a heuristic device; he offers (like John Locke after him¹⁰⁴) the example of Native Americans as, in fact, living in such a state.¹⁰⁵

Likewise, Ibn Khaldun uses the example of Bedouin nomadic tribes to represent a case study of people living in a state prior to civilized, sedentary society. According to Ibn Khaldun, the Bedouin are “the most savage human beings that exist.”¹⁰⁶ They are hardy, toughened by their environment, and prone to violence with other groups of people. They always carry weapons, seldom rest in the open, and are untrusting of people outside the familial clan. They

¹⁰¹ *Muqaddimah*, II 7, p. 97.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Muqaddimah*, III 10, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ “Thus in the beginning all the world was *America*.” Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 29.

¹⁰⁵ *Leviathan*, XIII 11, p. 85.

¹⁰⁶ *Muqaddimah*, II 2, p. 93.

have no government or established political order, depending instead upon the leadership of the strongest man in the group.¹⁰⁷ However, what little social structure there is in Bedouin groups cannot make up for the overall instability of their existence. As Ibn Khaldun explains,

A nation dominated by the Bedouins is in a state no different from anarchy, where everybody is set against the others. Such a civilization cannot last and goes quickly to ruin, as would be the case in a state of anarchy.¹⁰⁸

Ibn Khaldun makes clear, however, that Bedouins, like the Hobbesian state-of-nature population, actively aspire to sedentary civilization. They find nothing noble in their savagery and seek the means to escape their hardship. In doing so, Ibn Khaldun recognizes a singular quality endemic not only to the Bedouin, but to all groups of people who actively work to secure social and political change. He calls it *'asabiyya*, and it is the subject to which we now turn.

¹⁰⁷ *Muqaddimah*, II 3-5, pp. 93-95.

¹⁰⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 27, p. 121.

CHAPTER FOUR: 'ASABIYYA AND THE STATE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

In Theory

Ibn Khaldun's greatest contribution to the study of politics—indeed, of human social action generally—is his concept of *'asabiyya*. For Ibn Khaldun, *'asabiyya* represents the principal driving force behind all collective, “civilizing” social activity. More than simply an explanatory heuristic device, Ibn Khaldun describes *'asabiyya* as simultaneously a shared human bond, an identifying social construct, and a force unto itself; it is a blind will to power and impetus for conscientious right action, a mobilizing process and, in the end, its own *telos*. It is, as Lenn Goodman argues, the substrate of political change and the engine of history.¹⁰⁹ However, before engaging in a lengthy hermeneutical discussion of *'asabiyya* and its application to contemporary political theory, we must first deal with how both the word and the idea are and have been defined in translation by modern scholars.

The word, *'asabiyya*, has its roots in pre-Islamic Arab tribal societies, where it was used to signify unity in “thought and action, and social and economic cohesiveness among members of the same tribe.”¹¹⁰ The word's root, *'asaba*, means “kin” or “blood relation,” and is also related to the words *isaba* and *usba*, both meaning “group.”¹¹¹ As simply a word, then, *'asabiyya*

¹⁰⁹ Lenn Goodman, “Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides,” *Journal of American Oriental Studies* 92 (1972): 256.

¹¹⁰ Fida Mohammed, “Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A Comparison with Hegel, Marx and Durkheim,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15 (1998): 36.

¹¹¹ Barbara F. Stowasser, “Religion and Political Development: Comparative Ideas on Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli,” *Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University* (1983 and 2000): 8.

already had deeply familial and tribal connotations among Arabs before Ibn Khaldun appropriated it for his use. Upon doing so, Ibn Khaldun added multiple layers of theoretical complexity to word, thereby making it extremely difficult to translate adequately—particularly into English.

Franz Rosenthal, the first (and, thus far, only) scholar to translate the entire *Muqaddimah* into English, interprets *‘asabiyya* in a simultaneously vague and unsatisfying manner, rendering it as “group feeling.”¹¹² Being the first full English translation of the *Muqaddimah*—by itself a momentous accomplishment—it seems perhaps too much in hindsight to have expected Rosenthal to produce the definitive interpretation of *‘asabiyya*. Nevertheless, “group feeling” leaves much to be desired.¹¹³ The phrase captures little of the concept’s deeply embedded sociopolitical characteristics and therefore lacks sufficient strength.

Ernest Gellner takes a different approach to the interpretation of *‘asabiyya*, and tries to link it to Durkheim’s theory of organic and mechanical solidarities.¹¹⁴ Perhaps reading too much of Durkheim’s thought into *‘asabiyya*, Gellner labels it “social solidarity,” although the translation by itself connotes a stronger sense of group unity in thought and action than Rosenthal’s. Allen J. Fromhertz similarly links *‘asabiyya* to the Durkheimian concepts of solidarity, translating the term as “tribal solidarity.”¹¹⁵ Eschewing any potential association with

¹¹² Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, translated by Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹¹³ Even Hodgson recognized the deficiencies of Rosenthal’s translation, writing in 1961: “While not so bad on the arts and crafts, it is quite unusable for the more general viewpoint of Ibn-Khaldun, which it misrepresents radically time and again. Technical terms are almost regularly misrendered...But far worse than this, because less easily remediable, is the steady distortion of sentence after sentence through incomprehension.” See Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 481-482.

¹¹⁴ Ernest Gellner, “Cohesion and Identity: the Maghreb from Ibn Khaldun to Emile Durkheim,” *Government and Opposition* 10 (1975): 204.

¹¹⁵ Allen Fromhertz, *Ibn Khaldun, Life and Times*, 2-3.

Durkheimian language, Akbar S. Ahmed uses “social cohesion” as the translation of choice.¹¹⁶ Still, neither “solidarity” nor “cohesion” truly get at the multiple meanings Ibn Khaldun packs into *‘asabiyya*.

These four brief examples illustrate the relative inadequacy of the English language when trying to encapsulate the historical-contextual meanings of *‘asabiyya* in translation. Ultimately, what matters most is not the translation, but the interpretation and definition. We should therefore find it more useful for our purposes to leave Ibn Khaldun’s term in the original Arabic transliteration, and concern ourselves instead with unpacking its multiple layers of meaning.

First, we must establish the constituent characteristics of *‘asabiyya*. What exactly is it? What isn’t it? Are there extant works of Western political and social theory to which it can be usefully compared? Mohammed Talbi provides a compelling point of departure, arguing that *‘asabiyya* is “at one and the same time the cohesive force of the group, the conscience that it has of its own specificity and collective aspirations, and the tension that animates it and impels it ineluctably to seek power through conquest.”¹¹⁷

Talbi states first that *‘asabiyya* is the cohesive force of the group, the bond needed to sustain and propel the group toward its goal. In this narrow sense, *‘asabiyya* does somewhat resemble the mechanical solidarity of Durkheim. That is, it acts as the singular social norm/value upon which all group members agree; it represents the “strong, well-defined [state] of collective consciousness” that binds them to each other.¹¹⁸ Ibn Khaldun claims this bond is strongest among blood relations, but, importantly, is not restricted thereto. In his view, “clients and allies” also share in a group’s *‘asabiyya*. He writes, “[*‘Asabiyya*] results only from blood relationship *or*

¹¹⁶ Akbar S. Ahmed, “Ibn Khaldun’s Understanding of Civilizations and the Dilemmas of Islam and the West Today,” *Middle East Journal* 56 (2002): 25.

¹¹⁷ Lawrence, “Introduction,” in *The Muqadimmah*, xv.

¹¹⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1997): 39.

something corresponding to it.”¹¹⁹ That last phrase is significant, particularly when examining Ibn Khaldun’s relevance to the study of 21st century world politics. For, in the context of the modern world, we can see ‘*asabiyya* as an object of collective identification to which people willingly subordinate their personal interests and, when necessary, their lives.¹²⁰

This voluntary individual subordination to a collective interest highlights Talbi’s second characteristic of ‘*asabiyya*. He argues that ‘*asabiyya* is the conscience the group has of its uniqueness and its collective aspirations. Such a consciousness evokes a corporeal image of ‘*asabiyya*—of something more than a group *qua* group of individuals, but of a single self with its own interests, kinetic force, and *telos*. In this specific regard, it is not unlike Rousseau’s General Will. Consider, for example, Ibn Khaldun’s argument that ‘*asabiyya* “gives protection and makes possible mutual defense, the pressing of claims, and every other kind of social activity,”¹²¹ that it represents “one common accord,”¹²² juxtaposed to Rousseau’s characterization of the General Will in his *Social Contract*:

As long as a certain number of men consider themselves to be a single body, they have but one will, which relates to the common security and to the general welfare. In such case all the forces of the State are vigorous and simple, and its principles are clear and luminous; it has no confused and conflicting interests.¹²³

Rousseau, like Ibn Khaldun, also stresses the societal significance of his theoretical construct, arguing that political stability depends entirely on strict adherence to the General Will:

But when the social bond begins to fail and the State is weakened, when private interests begin to make themselves felt and small factions to exercise influence on the State, the common interest is

¹¹⁹ *Muqaddimah*, II 8, p. 98. My emphasis.

¹²⁰ Goodman, “Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides,” 256.

¹²¹ *Muqaddimah*, II 16, p. 107.

¹²² *Muqaddimah*, III 5, p. 126.

¹²³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, edited by Susan Dunn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002): 227.

harmed and finds opponents; unanimity no longer reigns in the voting; the general will is no longer the will of all.¹²⁴

Furthermore, both Ibn Khaldun and Rousseau emphasize the monism of their constructs. There can be only one ruling *'asabiyya*, only one governing General Will.¹²⁵ In this sense, *'asabiyya* assumes a competitive force and naturally intrinsic will to power. As there can be but one superior *'asabiyya*, a struggle between or among competing *'asabiyyas* is inevitable and will end only when the strongest has subordinated the rest to its will.¹²⁶

While Rousseau's characterization of the General Will speaks to the political attributes and aspirations of *'asabiyya*, it misses the broader social and moral forces endemic to its nature. For such considerations, a very useful comparison can be made between *'asabiyya* and two oppositional aspects of Hegel's conception of social *Geist*. As Hegel explicates in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Geist* (spirit) develops dialectically at varying social levels—from the personal micro, but more importantly, to the social and universal macro—and changes over time through the reconciliation of dichotomous understandings of the world and their correspondingly antithetical truth claims.¹²⁷

Considering Hegel's evolutionary, emergent model of human consciousness, we can juxtapose *'asabiyya* to *Geist* by looking at the internal conflict embedded in Hegel's conception of *Geist*-as-Ethical Consciousness and action. Much like Ibn Khaldun, Hegel argues that the Ethical Consciousness of *Geist* sublimates individualistic particularisms and familial relationships within a society or polity, binding it together with a shared veneration for

¹²⁴ Ibid, 227-228.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 228.

¹²⁶ *Muqadimmah*, II 16, p. 108.

¹²⁷ G.W.F., Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Selections translated and annotated by Howard P. Kainz (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994): xx.

“Truth”¹²⁸ as realized in “Law”¹²⁹ and providing it with a distinct identity. For Hegel, this “ethical substance” represents a “schismless orientation toward law,”¹³⁰ providing society’s *Geist* both a moral compass and a defined enemy: the “other.”

The “other” can be either internal or external and is recognized by its alternative, antithetical truth claims. According to Hegel, the Ethical Consciousness orients itself either to “divine law” or “human law,”¹³¹ and it is this difference that breeds tension and conflict among the ethically conscious. Like *‘asabiyya*, Ethical Consciousness is competitively monistic and cannot tolerate pluralism: society’s *Geist* is either oriented towards the divine or the human, in which case the alternate “other” must be subdued and eliminated. Hegel writes:

The ethical, being absolute *power* as well as absolute *essence*, can tolerate no subversion of its content. If it were just absolute *essence* without power, it could experience a subversion through individuality; but individuality as ethical consciousness has renounced subversion, in conjunction with its surrender of one-sided existence-for-self. And conversely, power bereft [of essence], if it were still this sort of one-sided existence-for-self, could be subverted by the essence.¹³²

In this passage, Hegel not only highlights the dichotomization of divine and human law, but makes clear the individual’s sublimation of his or her “one-sided existence-for-self” to the greater Ethical Consciousness of society. Like *‘asabiyya*, Ethical Consciousness of the social *Geist* requires total fealty and unwavering support towards the advance and defense of the Law’s goals.¹³³ It thereby animates the populace forward in its conflict with the “other.”

¹²⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 5, p. 126.

¹²⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 132.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

¹³¹ For Hegel, these positions are exemplified and personified by Sophocles’ tragic characters, Antigone and Creon, and their respective, conflicting positions towards Truth and Right—whether what is right is defined by the law of the Polis (Thebes) or the law of the Gods. The difference is one of authority and loyalty, not “reason” and “irrationality.”

¹³² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 112. Author’s emphases.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 120.

Thus, we approach Talbi's third characterization of *'asabiyya*: that it is, itself, the dialectic tension animating and propelling the group to seek power through conquest. Of this fact, Ibn Khaldun leaves no doubt. Throughout the *Muqaddimah* he repeatedly describes the one goal of *'asabiyya* as "royal authority."¹³⁴ By royal authority, Ibn Khaldun means social and political hegemony. He argues that the competitive dynamism inherent in the collective conscience of the group necessitates, instigates, and sustains the drive for political ascendancy. Being the substrate of political change—change predicated upon the relative strength of the group—*'asabiyya* is therefore naturally compelled to seek power. It is not the stuff of mere activists, but of revolutionaries.

Having established what *'asabiyya* is, we must now explain its mechanics: how it comes into being, grows, and succeeds through conquest. As noted earlier, Ibn Khaldun understands *'asabiyya* as originating among blood relations and extended family units, namely, the clan or tribe.¹³⁵ From the familial unit, *'asabiyya* may expand over time to include others; for, as Ibn Khaldun writes, "If the direct relationship between persons who help each other is very close, so that it leads to close contact and unity, the ties are obvious and clearly require the (existence of a feeling of solidarity) [*sic*]."¹³⁶ Among those he sees sharing in a dominant group's *'asabiyya* are family servants, personal friends, political allies, and any who share the mutual interests of the group.¹³⁷

Beyond the scope of this circle, Ibn Khaldun argues that the infusion of religion with the group's *'asabiyya* acts as a means of increasing not only the group's numerical strength, but the level of its prestige and legitimacy of its claims as well. Writing in the context of medieval Islam

¹³⁴ *Muqaddimah*, II 16, p. 108; II 21, p. 115; III 1, p. 123.

¹³⁵ *Muqaddimah*, II 8, p. 98.

¹³⁶ *Muqaddimah*, II 8, p. 98.

¹³⁷ Fida Mohammed, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A Comparison with Hegel, Marx and Durkheim," 37.

and the history of the Muslim conquests, Ibn Khaldun understands that religion plays an enormous role as a unifying force and catalyst for change. He therefore argues that religiously infused *'asabiyya* is substantially stronger than kinship-based *'asabiyya* alone.

Drawing upon the Christo-Islamic traditions of martyrdom, Ibn Khaldun explains how religion inspires a “concentration on the truth” among group members and eliminates their fear of death. Instead, members become *willing* to die for the group.¹³⁸ This willingness of self-sacrifice trumps any numerical advantage the group’s opposition may have. Furthermore, it legitimizes the group’s claim-making abilities and inspires others outside the group to join or support it.¹³⁹ Thus, the group builds strength and momentum.¹⁴⁰ Ibn Khaldun writes:

Dynasties of wide power and [great] royal authority have their origin in religion based on prophethood or on truthful [messages¹⁴¹]. This is because royal authority results only from superiority. Superiority results from [*'asabiyya*]. Only by God’s help in establishing His religion do individual desires come together in agreement to press their claims, and hearts become united. The secret of this is that when hearts succumb to false desires and are inclined toward the world, mutual jealousy and widespread differences arise. When they are turned toward the truth and reject the world and whatever is false, and advance toward God, they become one in their outlook. Jealousy disappears. Mutual co-operation and support flourish. As a result, the extent of the state widens, and the dynasty grows.¹⁴²

Given this understanding, it can be argued that religion is the cohesive force of a group’s *'asabiyya*—the ideational/emotional glue of the social glue, as it were.¹⁴³ That is, while kinship, friendship, and mutual interest may bind a group together and animate it towards sociopolitical

¹³⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 5, p. 126.

¹³⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 6, p. 127.

¹⁴⁰ Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of religion as it relates to and affects *asabiyya* has important consequences for our study of contemporary politics and social change, which we will discuss at length further. Suffice it to say that there is substantial overlap between what Ibn Khaldun understands as religion and what modern political scientists, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists understand as nationalism.

¹⁴¹ Rosenthal uses the English translation, “propaganda,” here, which I find both unhelpful and unsuitable thanks to its contemporary political connotations. Given the character of Ibn Khaldun’s argument here, I thought it apt to replace “propaganda” with “messages.”

¹⁴² *Muqaddimah*, III 4, pp. 125-126.

¹⁴³ Barbara F. Stowasser, “Religion and Political Development: Comparative Ideas on Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli,” 11.

gain (royal authority), only religion can serve as the supra-human substrate that eliminates potentially divisive and destructive elements of contention among members. Moreover, it is religion—more than any other human/material incentive—that causes a group’s ranks to swell.¹⁴⁴

Regardless of the group’s numerical strength and popular legitimacy, however, Ibn Khaldun stresses that unless the group’s *‘asabiyya* is stronger than that of its opponents, it will not succeed. How then does one tell if a given group’s *‘asabiyya* is stronger or weaker than that of its opponents? Ibn Khaldun gives us three externally dependent variables upon which to base our calculations:

- (1) Religion: As noted above, the relative religiosity of a group plays a substantial role in unifying the group, giving it divine guidance and inspiration, legitimizing its claims to power, and generating additional strength through conversions. A group whose *‘asabiyya* is based purely on political or material grounds is considerably weaker than one bolstered by religious fervor and guidance.
- (2) Homogeneity: Ibn Khaldun argues that a given *‘asabiyya* will be successful in overthrowing an entrenched political order and establishing firm, lasting royal authority (read: state) only in relatively homogenous territories. He states that the social and political differences inherent in heterogeneous societies indicate the presence of numerous oppositional *‘asabiyyas*; therefore, “at any time...there is much opposition to a dynasty and rebellion against it, even if the dynasty possesses [*‘asabiyya*], because each [*‘asabiyya*] under the control of the ruling dynasty thinks that it has in itself enough strength and power.”¹⁴⁵ Hence, an insurgent *‘asabiyya* will be successful in establishing lasting royal authority only within largely homogenous territories.

¹⁴⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 6, p. 127.

¹⁴⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 9, p. 130.

- (3) Stage of Oppositional 'Asabiyya: This last variable, to be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, greatly influences the chances a group has in achieving its rise to power. Briefly, Ibn Khaldun compares the vitality of the state to that of a human being, suggesting that any given political order goes through successive stages of birth, growth, adulthood, senility and death.¹⁴⁶ The younger the order, the stronger its 'asabiyya; therefore, the timing of a challenge to the order's authority helps determine the challenger's chances of success.

Given these variables, we can surmise that a group whose 'asabiyya is (1) infused with religious zeal, (2) based in a largely homogenous society, and (3) targeted against an older, "senile" regime has excellent prospects of realizing its political goals and overthrowing the established political order. However, Ibn Khaldun does not end his discussion of 'asabiyya on such a positive note. Instead, he asserts the realization of 'asabiyya must simultaneously sow the seeds of its future collapse. The implications of these contentions carry enormous weight relative to the study of contemporary global political movements. Still, the question remains: while Ibn Khaldun's theoretical understanding and construction of 'asabiyya may appear intriguing, even convincing, in the abstract, how does he see 'asabiyya operating in reality? Are there concrete examples to which he points?

In Practice

Ibn Khaldun presents numerous evidentiary 'case studies' throughout the *Muqaddimah* to illuminate 'asabiyya's foundational role in human history. Of these, one stands out in particular: the history of the Arab Muslim conquests. Ibn Khaldun uses the history he is most intimately

¹⁴⁶ *Muqaddimah*, III 12, p. 136-138.

familiar with to prove the case that *'asabiyya* is the genuine engine of history.¹⁴⁷ Throughout his thematic discussions of the rise and fall of states, Ibn Khaldun repeatedly returns to the Arab Muslim conquests as examples of *'asabiyya* in action.

He first notes the condition of the Arab tribes before the arrival and spread of Islam, calling them “the most savage human beings” that existed.¹⁴⁸ He claims this savagery came about thanks to the early Arabs’ desert nomadism and tribalism. In turn, the physical hardship and social brutality of their lives forged internally close-knit and externally aggressive communities based on blood kinship. To Ibn Khaldun, the pre-Islamic Arabs embodied both the most primitive and most feared form of *'asabiyya*.¹⁴⁹ Only after the arrival of Muhammad’s revelation and the infusion of “the religious law,” he argues, did the Arab’s *'asabiyya* coalesce into a *civilizing* force capable of urbanizing, expanding through conquest, and, more importantly, governing an empire.¹⁵⁰

Hence, Ibn Khaldun asserts that the adoption of religion paves the way for *'asabiyya*’s ascension. Only through religion or a “turn towards the truth,” he argues, can internal disputes and jealousies be replaced by “mutual co-operation and support,” thereby creating the social unanimity necessary for conquest.¹⁵¹ It is therefore self-evident to Ibn Khaldun why Arab Muslim expansion occurred so rapidly and so successfully: the Arabs’ *'asabiyya* was stronger in its nomadism, more violent in its tribalism, and legitimized in its “service of good,”¹⁵² i.e. Islam. In Ibn Khaldun’s view, opposing dynasties stood little chance—even against (initially) numerically weaker Arab armies—because of the strength of Arab Muslim *'asabiyya*. He writes:

¹⁴⁷ Djamel Chabane, “The Structure of ‘Umran al-’Alam of Ibn Khaldun,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 13 (2008): 341

¹⁴⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 2, p. 93.

¹⁴⁹ *Muqaddimah*, II 7, p. 97.

¹⁵⁰ *Muqaddimah*, III 4, p. 125.

¹⁵¹ *Muqaddimah*, III 4, p. 126.

¹⁵² Djamel Chabane, “The Structure of ‘Umran al-’Alam of Ibn Khaldun,” 341.

Therefore, they [opposing states] do not offer resistance to (the people with religious [zeal]), even if they themselves are more numerous. They are overpowered by them and quickly wiped out...This happened to the Arabs at the beginning of Islam during the Muslim conquests. The armies of the Muslims at al-Qadisiyah and at the Yarmuk numbered some 30,000 in each case, while the Persian troops at al-Qadisiyah numbered 120,000, and the troops of Heraclius, according to al-Waqidi, 400,000. Neither of the two parties was able to withstand the Arabs, who routed them and seized what they possessed.¹⁵³

Here we see *'asabiyya* in its purest form: on the move, in permanent conflict.¹⁵⁴

Moreover, Ibn Khaldun argues that the initial strength of Arab *'asabiyya* accounted for the extent and might of the early Islamic empires. He argues, first, “Religion cemented their leadership with the religious law and its ordinances, which, explicitly and implicitly, are concerned with what is good for civilization...As a result, the royal authority and government of the Arabs became great and strong.”¹⁵⁵ Second, he notes how the power of Islam both legitimized the Arab conquerors and drew numerous societies into their ranks, writing:

The expansion and power of a dynasty correspond to the numerical strength of those who obtain superiority at the beginning of the rule. The length of its duration also depends on it...If the [*'asabiyya*] is strong, the (dynasty's) temper likewise is strong, and its life of long duration...This may be observed in the Arab Muslim dynasty. It lasted the longest of (all Muslim) dynasties, counting both the 'Abbasids in the centre and the Umayyads far away in Spain. Their rule collapsed only after the fourth [tenth] century.¹⁵⁶

Through Ibn Khaldun's example of the Arab Muslim conquests, we see the mechanics of *'asabiyya* at work. However, this is only half of the picture. For, as Ibn Khaldun makes clear, the political ascension of *'asabiyya* directly corresponds to the moment it begins to decay.

¹⁵³ *Muqaddimah*, III 5, p. 126.

¹⁵⁴ Djamel Chabane, “The Structure of ‘Umran al-’Alam of Ibn Khaldun,” 341.

¹⁵⁵ *Muqaddimah* II 27, p. 121.

¹⁵⁶ *Muqaddimah*, III 8, p. 130.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE INEXORABLE DECAY OF 'ASABIYYA AND STATE COLLAPSE

Ibn Khaldun develops an intricate relationship between *'asabiyya* and royal, or what we might call 'state,' authority. As has already been established, he endows *'asabiyya* with an intrinsic and immutable will to power. All things being equal, this will is strongest when *bereft* and *in pursuit* of political power. Here we see Ibn Khaldun's metaphorical allusion to the strength of Bedouin nomadism¹⁵⁷, for *'asabiyya* is most potent when in constant motion. When that motion towards power ends following the group's political ascension, *'asabiyya* loses its *telos*, becomes sedentary, and slowly but steadily begins to decay.¹⁵⁸ The moment *'asabiyya* becomes sedentary necessarily corresponds to the founding moment of authority vested in the state. In this moment, *'asabiyya* is both fulfilled and irrevocably set upon the path to extinction. So, too, is the state.¹⁵⁹

Here again we find an interesting comparative correspondence with Hegel. In his dialectic of Ethical Substance, Hegel posits that the struggle between the divine and human orientations toward Law necessarily ends in the destruction of both—even when one side “defeats” the other—and the emergence of a new, distinct form:

The victory of one of the powers and its corresponding character, and the defeat of the other side, would thus be only the partial and incomplete work that progresses ineluctably to an equilibrium between both powers and characters. It is only with the simultaneous defeat of both sides that

¹⁵⁷ *Muqaddimah*, II 15, p. 107.

¹⁵⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 13, p. 138.

¹⁵⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 2, p. 123-124.

absolute right is fulfilled and that the Ethical Substance has emerged as the negative power, that is, as the almighty and just Fate, which swallows up both sides.¹⁶⁰

Thus, to borrow Hegel's classical allusion, Creon ("human law") at last realizes his damnation in victory over Antigone ("divine law") with the consequent deaths of his wife and son, crying, "So senseless, so insane...my crimes...I don't even exist—I'm no one. Nothing."¹⁶¹ Resolution—synthesis—comes only in the destruction of both competing forces.

Although Ibn Khaldun's dialectic is considerably less pronounced than Hegel's and lacks either its temporal immediacy or philosophical immanence¹⁶², he nevertheless envisions a similar fate for 'asabiyya upon the creation of a territorial state. *Asabiyya's* erosion takes time—indeed, generations—but it is the necessary consequence of one 'asabiyya's victory over another.

Ibn Khaldun argues that the process of decay generally takes three or four generations (between 120-160 years) to complete, but can occur earlier or later under certain conditions.¹⁶³ The decay begins with the group's settlement and steady urbanization, moving periodically through five distinct stages. According to Ibn Khaldun, these stages correspond to various points during the lifecycle of a human being: birth, maturation, senility, and death.¹⁶⁴

Following the birth of the state, the new ruling dynasty, headed by a single ruler appointed by virtue of strength and birth, claims all glory for himself and begins the process of building and expanding a stable and prosperous state. Ibn Khaldun argues that this first stage is

¹⁶⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 119.

¹⁶¹ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, translated by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984): 124-126.

¹⁶² George Katsiaficas, "Ibn Khaldun: A Dialectical Philosopher for the 21st Century," *New Political Science* 21 (1999): 54. Katsiaficas argues that Ibn Khaldun's dialectic is "external rather than immanent," where "fixed assumptions and widely held propositions are made to totter by reasons external to them."

¹⁶³ *Muqaddimah*, III 12, p. 136. Although Ibn Khaldun states that "as a rule" dynasties last no longer than three generations, or 120 years, he nevertheless makes numerous allowances for the state to either collapse earlier or linger on, clinging to power, for a number of years after the supposed deadline. While this 'loophole' may seem incongruous, theoretically weak, and even intellectually dishonest, Ibn Khaldun's elasticity grants us considerably more empirical wiggle room when discussing the rise and fall of modern states.

¹⁶⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 12, p. 137-138.

“that of success.” He states, “In this stage, the ruler serves as model to his people by the manner in which he acquires glory, collects taxes, defends property, and provides military protection.”¹⁶⁵

This generation of the dynasty is that which brings the state into maturity: although its *‘asabiyya* is weaker because of its sedentary establishment, members of the new polity still share the memories of their struggles, still pull together in common purpose, and still honor one another. It is in the second stage of the state’s development that the cracks in solidarity begin to show.

In the second stage, the ruling dynasty consolidates its power. Where before the ruler acted in consideration of and consultation with his people, he now excludes them and seeks to subdue their interests. He seeks to acquire more power and wealth for his own “house” (royal family) as a means of distancing himself from all others.¹⁶⁶ Once accomplished, he settles into the luxurious lifestyle of the dynasty his displaced.¹⁶⁷ Ibn Khaldun claims this shift to be only natural, given the new dynasty’s nomadically Spartan roots. He writes,

From the necessities of life and a life of austerity, they [the new dynasty] progress to the luxuries and life of comfort and beauty...When this purpose is accomplished, all efforts cease...They prefer rest and quiet and tranquility.¹⁶⁸

Such changes cause a pronounced fissure in *‘asabiyya* as the ruling elite grows accustomed to peace and wealth, separates itself from the mass of society, and no longer shares a common purpose. Where competition once existed in pursuit of martial glory, Ibn Khaldun argues that, once sedentary, the ruling elite “vie with other nations” and one another “in delicacies, gorgeous raiment, and fine mounts” instead. In an argument Thorstein Veblen would certainly appreciate, Ibn Khaldun states this competition among the elite to outdo one another in luxury extends to the following generations, with each subsequent generation attempting to

¹⁶⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 15, p. 141.

¹⁶⁶ *Muqaddimah*, III 15, p. 141.

¹⁶⁷ *Muqaddimah*, III 10, p. 132-133.

¹⁶⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 10, p. 133.

eclipse its predecessor in opulence. However, in doing so, each generation removed from the founding dynasty grows weaker, increasingly disinterested in good governance, farther removed in manners and mores from its people, and more corrupt.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the group's former unity, strength, and purpose—its *'asabiyya*—steadily disintegrates.

Once such decay sets in, Ibn Khaldun argues that the dynasty approaches senility and its final three stages. It is during senility that *'asabiyya* all but disappears and the popular perception of the rulers and their dynasty gradually shifts from one of respect and awe to one of contempt, disgust, and eventual hatred.¹⁷⁰ This shift corresponds to the increasing incidence of injustice and maltreatment at the hands of the dynasty. Compounded by the growing political and military weakness of the elite, recurring injustices bring about the collapse of the state—either internally or externally.

As Ibn Khaldun explains, state collapse is made possible by two systemically linked factors: mishandling of the economy and degeneration of society. In examining both aspects, it is extremely useful to compare Ibn Khaldun's assessments to those of Machiavelli and Locke. Machiavelli, for example, wrote extensively on the subjects of sociopolitical disintegration in *The Prince* and his *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*. Locke, in addition, wrote extensively on economic predation (specifically on taxation and property) in his *Second Treatise of Government*. To compare Ibn Khaldun to both authors, we break down their arguments thematically into two categories: economy and society.

¹⁶⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 11, p. 134.

¹⁷⁰ *Muqaddimah*, III 15, p. 142.

Economy

Ibn Khaldun devotes considerable space to discussing the economic ills that befall a state in decline and how their compounding effects act, in a sense, like a positive feedback cycle, beginning, then perpetuating, a downward spiral that leads to economic ruin and precipitates state collapse. The roots of the problem lie in elite overconsumption and predatory taxation naturally endemic to politically established, sedentary, decaying *'asabiyya*.¹⁷¹ Ibn Khaldun begins his discussion with the problem of over-taxation.

As previously noted, Ibn Khaldun asserts that, “By its very nature, royal authority claims all glory for itself and goes in for luxury and prefers tranquility and peace.”¹⁷² Sustained luxury requires revenue and sustained revenues require domestic income generation. Thus, for Ibn Khaldun, taxation is merely a natural byproduct of royal authority’s endemic demands. This is not to say he approves of them. Indeed, he is quick to differentiate between legitimate taxation and arbitrary, predatory taxation. Legitimate taxation is based upon the laws of Islam, which, according to Ibn Khaldun’s Maliki reading of *fiqh*, demand the payment of *zakat* (annual charitable ‘tithes’)¹⁷³, the land tax, the poll tax, and no more.¹⁷⁴ Even these, he seems to view as necessary irritations.

Like Locke, who, according to Dunn, denies the state’s right to demand *any* form of financial or proprietary imposition upon the individual¹⁷⁵, Ibn Khaldun vociferously denounces

¹⁷¹ *Muqaddimah*, III 36, p. 230.

¹⁷² *Muqaddimah*, III 10, p. 132.

¹⁷³ The only tax specifically required by the *Qur’an*.

¹⁷⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 36, p. 230.

¹⁷⁵ John Dunn, “Consent in the Political Theory of John Locke,” *The Historical Journal* 10 (1967): 170. Dunn cites the *Second Treatise*, Ch. XI para. 138: “Men therefore in society having property, they have such a right to the goods, which by the law of the community are their’s, that no body hath a right to take their substance or any part of it from them, without their own consent: without this they have no *property* at all; for I have truly no *property* in that, which another can by right take from me, when he pleases, against my consent. Hence it is a mistake to think,

taxation as “a sign of oppression and meekness that proud souls do not tolerate.”¹⁷⁶ However, like Locke, Ibn Khaldun nevertheless recognizes the government’s requirement to raise revenue¹⁷⁷, and instead shifts his denunciation of taxation in all forms to that which is either overly burdensome, arbitrary, or both. Such taxes he deems illegitimate, but sees no way around. The proliferation of illegitimate taxes upon the citizenry is an inescapable historical fact, for as ‘*asabiyya*’ decays, ordinary people can no longer defend themselves against elite oppression: “They have submitted to meekness, and...meekness is an obstacle [to defending oneself through ‘*asabiyya*’].”¹⁷⁸ This imposition, Ibn Khaldun argues, contributes to the steady smothering of free enterprise, immiseration of the poor and alienation of the ruled from the rulers, thereby hastening the collapse of society.¹⁷⁹ Just as the declining stages of royal authority progress slowly, however, so too does this feedback cycle of taxation and immiseration/alienation.

Ibn Khaldun notes, for example, “at the beginning of a dynasty, taxation yields a large revenue from small assessments. At the end of the dynasty, taxation yields a small revenue from large assessments.”¹⁸⁰ This is because at the time ‘*asabiyya*’ becomes invested in a sedentary state, the elites’ appetite for luxury is nascent, unrefined, and relatively small. Dynasties initially maintain their “Bedouin attitude” and therefore have few needs beyond subsistence. Thus, Ibn

that the *supreme or legislative power* of any common-wealth, can do what it will, and dispose of the estates of the subject *arbitrarily*, or take any part of them at pleasure.”

¹⁷⁶ *Muqaddimah*, II 18, p. 111.

¹⁷⁷ Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, 74. The obvious and important distinction between Ibn Khaldun and Locke on the point of arbitrary taxation concerns the role of individual consent in the process of raising taxes. Whereas Locke sees individual consent to financial and/or proprietary imposition as a natural right and the only legitimate means of raising state revenue, Ibn Khaldun cannot, given his sociopolitical and intellectual context, even begin to conceive of individual “consent” as a factor in political life—much less a naturally inherent “right.”

¹⁷⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 18, p. 111.

¹⁷⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 39, p. 236.

¹⁸⁰ *Muqaddimah*, III 36, p. 230.

Khaldun argues, “revenue from taxes pays for much more than necessary expenditure, and there is a large surplus.”¹⁸¹

Once some time passes¹⁸², however, the old “Bedouin”¹⁸³ habits of the elite give way to the tranquil and luxurious customs of sedentary culture.¹⁸⁴ It does not take long for these customs to become routinized within the dynasty as the Bedouin “attitude of simplicity” and “qualities of moderation and restraint” disappear.¹⁸⁵ In their place, dynamics of “conspicuous consumption” become the primary driving force behind increasing government expenditures.¹⁸⁶ The result, according to Ibn Khaldun, is a steady rise in overall expenses, especially on the part of the ruler and the dynastic elite, with a correspondingly negative impact on society generally.¹⁸⁷ At length, he writes:

At first, the amounts of individual imposts and assessments are increased; then, as expenses and needs increase under the influence of the gradual growth of luxury customs and additional allowances for the militia, the dynasty is affected by senility...the revenue from taxes decreases, while the habits (requiring money) increase. As they increase, salaries and allowances to the soldiers also increase. Therefore, the ruler must invent new kinds of taxes. He levies them on commerce. He imposes taxes of a certain amount on prices realized in the markets and on the various (imported) goods at the city gates...In the (later) years of a dynasty, (taxation) may become excessive...Business falls off, because all hopes (of profit) are destroyed, permitting the dissolution of civilization...This (situation) becomes more and more aggravated, until the dynasty disintegrates.¹⁸⁸

According to Ibn Khaldun, a correlative relationship exists between levels of government expenses/taxes and levels of civilian (“subject”) productivity. Therefore, if increasing

¹⁸¹ *Muqaddimah*, III 37, p. 231.

¹⁸² Ibn Khaldun does not specify how long, only notes it is “soon” after the dynasty’s establishment. See *Muqaddimah*, III 37, pp. 231-232.

¹⁸³ Rough, unrefined, and simple. For a “Western” audience, one could just as easily substitute “Spartan” here for a more culturally and contextually relevant analogical adjective.

¹⁸⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 37, p. 231.

¹⁸⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 36, p. 230.

¹⁸⁶ Laurie Simon Bagwell and B. Douglas Bernheim, “Veblen Effects in a Theory of Conspicuous Consumption,” *The American Economic Review* 86 (1996): 349.

¹⁸⁷ *Muqaddimah*, III 37, p. 231.

¹⁸⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 37, p. 232.

government expenditures drive taxes too high, fiscal pressures upon merchants become too great, profit and capital disappear from the marketplace, and the incentive to work vanishes.¹⁸⁹ Because the government cannot reduce spending and can no longer rely on taxes upon private businesses or individuals, it is forced to “nationalize” enterprises, thereby monopolizing market sectors and eliminating competitors. Fiscal revenue decreases further and the state must continue to nationalize in order to maintain itself, pursue its interest, and sustain the opulence of its elite.¹⁹⁰ For Ibn Khaldun, this positive feedback cycle represents an irreversible mechanism of dynastic economics—one in which an initial “fiscal optimum” balancing state expenses and revenues is steadily but inexorably replaced by crippling fiscal policies and economic collapse.¹⁹¹

Exacerbating this fiscal malaise, Ibn Khaldun sees a concomitant rise in the unjust state appropriation of private property. Like Locke, Ibn Khaldun places a high premium on the role property (and the drive for its acquisition) plays in building and sustaining civilization. Although he doesn’t go quite as far as Locke, who argues that the natural desire to protect property is the *sine qua non* of all civil society¹⁹², Ibn Khaldun imbues the concept of property with strong economic and social values.

First, property rights, like tax levels, are directly related to individual economic productivity. Ibn Khaldun writes, “The extent and degree to which property rights are infringed upon determines the extent to and degree to which the efforts of the subjects to acquire property slacken.”¹⁹³ The logical implication here is that, if governed by a ruler or state that respects individual private property, people will naturally seek to acquire more, thereby stimulating

¹⁸⁹ Jean David C. Boulakia, “Ibn Khaldun: A Fourteenth-Century Economist,” *Journal of Political Economy* 79 (1971): 1113.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 1116.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 1117.

¹⁹² Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, 66. “The great and *chief end*, therefore, of men’s uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the *preservation of their property*.”

¹⁹³ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 238.

increased economic activity and growth. In addition to their economic value, property rights carry significant social weight as a measurement of an individual's value in society vis-à-vis his or her sovereign. That is, Ibn Khaldun believes a just society to be a “welfare-oriented” society in which individual rights—such as property—are respected by the state.¹⁹⁴

The major (and inevitable) conflict that arises in his concept of history, however, is between the normative demands of (Islamic) society and the natural demands of royal authority. Among the outcomes of this conflict is the arbitrary expropriation of property by the state, which initiates the fifth and final stage of dynastic rule. Ibn Khaldun describes this stage as one of “waste and squandering,” in which the ruler systematically alienates himself from his people by wasting the wealth accumulated by his forbearers on “pleasures and amusements,” seeking to destroy the elite ruling class out of fear of usurpation, and—most importantly—unjustly expropriating private property to pay for his frivolities, vanity projects, and mercenary protection.¹⁹⁵ Combined with excessive and overbearing taxation, Ibn Khaldun sees this practice as the final injustice committed by a degenerate state whose *'asabiyya* is gone:

Injustice should not be understood to imply only the confiscation of money or other property from the owners, without compensation and without cause. It is commonly understood in that way, but it is something more general than that...People who collect unjustified taxes commit an injustice. Those who infringe upon property commit an injustice. Those who take away property commit an injustice. Those who deny people their rights commit an injustice. Those who, in general, take property by force, commit an injustice. It is the dynasty that suffers from these acts, inasmuch as civilization, which is the substance of the dynasty, is ruined.¹⁹⁶

The picture Ibn Khaldun therefore presents is one of naked state exploitation at the expense of its citizenry. But the economic side is only one side of coin. To grasp a fuller understanding of how

¹⁹⁴ M. Umer Chapra, “Socioeconomic and Political Dynamics in Ibn Khaldun’s Thought,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 16 (1999): 24.

¹⁹⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 15, p. 142.

¹⁹⁶ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 240.

Ibn Khaldun envisions the decay of *'asabiyya* and, with it, the state, we must now examine its social effects.

Society

Ibn Khaldun grounds his discussion of *'asabiyya*'s social deterioration in his concept of *'umran*, or human society through time.¹⁹⁷ In his lengthy treatment of *'umran* (a thesis topic in its own right), Ibn Khaldun argues that the concept of a society through time, or society-as-dynamic-process, needs to be differentiated into two distinct categories: nomadic *cum* rural society (*'umran badawi*) and urban, “civilized” society (*'umran hadari*).¹⁹⁸ He does this along material and, interestingly, normative lines. In so doing, Ibn Khaldun prefaces his social analysis of *'asabiyya*'s decay and state collapse.¹⁹⁹

Ibn Khaldun first locates *'umran badawi* and *'umran hadari* within environmental typologies. *'Umran badawi*, which he associates with Arab Bedouins and Berber mountain dwellers (among others), is characterized by its attachment to the “desert.”²⁰⁰ This single component both determines and defines all aspects of the “Bedouin” lifestyle and character:

¹⁹⁷ Laroussi Amri, “The Concept of *'Umran*: the Heuristic Knot in Ibn Khaldun,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 13 (2008): 359. *'Umran* is defined in different ways by different scholars. Rosenthal, for example, simply labels it ‘civilization,’ while others scale it back to ‘society.’ Regardless of the definition, the *idea* behind it imparts a static quality to the term, where ‘society’ simply ‘is’. Amri contests there is persuasive linguistic and philological evidence to expand the idea of *'umran* beyond this static vision of ‘society,’ and therefore defines it as ‘the social’ in an effort to give *'umran* the quality of ‘process’. In my opinion, these points talk past each other. I have therefore attempted to synthesize the ideas of these scholars in an effort to give *'umran* simultaneous qualities of social-temporal fixity and social-conceptual process by calling it the “society through time.” Whether this definition works or not, I leave to the reader.

¹⁹⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 1, p. 91.

¹⁹⁹ Stephen Frederic Dale, “Ibn Khaldun: The Last Greek and the First *Annaliste* Historian,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006): 440.

²⁰⁰ *Muqaddimah*, II 3, p. 93. Ibn Khaldun uses the term ‘desert’ literally and metaphorically. In the former case, he refers to those Bedouin tribes whose livelihoods are based on camel husbandry and desert trade. In the latter case, he means ‘desert’ to represent the life of hard deprivation that characterizes the ‘wilderness’ beyond the recognizable boundaries of urbanity.

hardiness, simplicity, bellicosity, courage, loyalty, and religiosity²⁰¹—all of which Ibn Khaldun normatively associates with a virtuous society.²⁰² It is this combination of qualities, Ibn Khaldun argues, that produces the strongest *‘asabiyya* and enables such societies to conquer wealthier, numerically larger, and militarily superior urban societies.

The polar opposite of this rugged character is that of *‘umran hadari* or sedentary, “civilized” society. Again, locating his conception within an environmental framework, Ibn Khaldun associates *‘umran hadari* with the great urban civilizations of the world—the Persians, Arabs, Turks, and, to a lesser degree, the “Franks and Spaniards.” While Ibn Khaldun sees the initial establishment of sedentary, urban societies as beneficial, the benefits do not last long. Positing a degenerative property inherent to urbanity, he argues that the chief characteristics of sedentary society morph from those of *‘umran badawi* into luxury, weakness, cowardice, gluttony, treachery, vice, and irreligion. This degenerative process in society is unavoidable and corresponds to Ibn Khaldun’s “five stages” of civilization.

To make his point, Ibn Khaldun points to the two great “civilizations” with which he is most familiar: Al-Andalus and the Maghreb under the Umayyads, and Abassid Arabia. He argues that the establishment of urban empires following the Arab Muslim conquests led inexorably to their destruction.²⁰³ Concomitant luxury and peace hastened the decay of once strong tribal-Islamic *‘asabiyyas*, thereby breeding weakness, irreligion, vice, and moral debasement. This debasement irrevocably led to the collapse of social and governmental cohesion. Having all but destroyed itself from within, each empire stood helpless when confronted by internal and external challenges to its rule. The Umayyads succumbed to the

²⁰¹ Not unlike Rousseau. *Muqaddimah*, II 1-9, pp. 91-100.

²⁰² Stowasser, “Religion and Political Development,” 11.

²⁰³ *Muqaddimah*, III 2, p. 124.

internal division of their empire by competing clans²⁰⁴ and the Abbasids crumbled under the Mongol invasion.²⁰⁵ In one lengthy passage, Ibn Khaldun describes the process of how these Arab empires dissolved. As the dynasty progressed from one generation to the next,

...they neglected religion. Thus, they forgot political leadership and returned to their desert. They were ignorant of the connection of their [*‘asabiyya*] with the people of the ruling dynasty, because subservience and lawful (government) had become strange to them. They became once again as savage as they had been before. The epithet ‘royal’ was no longer applicable to them, except in so far as it applied to the caliphs who were (Arab) by race. When the caliphate disappeared and was wiped out, governmental power passed altogether out of their hands. Non-Arabs took over their power, and they remained as Bedouins in the desert, ignorant of royal authority and political leadership. Most Arabs do not even know that they possessed royal authority in the past, or that no nation had ever exercised such (sweeping) royal authority as had their race...When the Arabs forgot their religion, they no longer had any connection with political leadership, and they returned to their desert origins. At times, they achieve superiority over weak dynasties, as is the case in the contemporary Maghrib [*sic*]. But their domination leads only to the ruin of the civilization they conquer.²⁰⁶

In Ibn Khaldun’s view, the Arabs of his era are too far removed from *‘asabiyya* and royal authority, too much debased in manner and temperament, to reclaim their past glories of conquest. Through his analysis of history, he implicitly argues that his contemporaneous generations have forgotten the legacies and lessons of their ancestors, and are, therefore, incapable of forging a strong, renewed *‘asabiyya*.²⁰⁷ It is a decidedly pessimistic view that offers “no possibility of renewal from within.”²⁰⁸ Interestingly, Niccolo Machiavelli and Edward Gibbon echo this essential argument in their histories on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic and Roman Empire. Gibbon’s famous fifteenth and sixteenth chapters in *The Decline and Fall of*

²⁰⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 2, p. 124

²⁰⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 17, p. 147.

²⁰⁶ *Muqaddimah*, II 27, pp. 121-122.

²⁰⁷ Diana Wylie, “Decadence? The Khaldunian Cycle in Algeria and South Africa,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 13 (2008): 401.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

the Roman Empire discuss precisely this Khaldunian idea of irredeemable internal decay.²⁰⁹

Similarly, in his analysis of the Roman Republic's collapse Machiavelli makes the case that:

In the beginning, all states command a certain amount of respect, so popular government survived for a while, but not for long, especially once the generation that had established it passed away. It quickly degenerated into anarchy... Usually, while a state is torn apart by internal dissent, and as a result is weakened and deprived of good leadership, it is conquered by a neighboring state better organized than it is.²¹⁰

Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* is replete with passages like this describing the process of sociopolitical disintegration through growing state corruption and irreligion. In the first case—that of state corruption—Machiavelli and Ibn Khaldun share similar views. As noted earlier, Ibn Khaldun sees corruption arising from royal authority's inherent aspiration to luxury combined with the steady decay of *'asabiyya*. As Stowasser argues, "When *asabiyya* goes, all personal and political virtue goes with it. This is true for the individual ruler as well as for the nation. The presence of *asabiyya* is indicated by and calls forth good and virtuous deed whereas its absence calls forth and is indicated by vice and evil deeds."²¹¹ Like Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli also worries about the rise of corruption among state rulers and the ruled.

Corruption presents several challenges to good governance for Machiavelli. First, corruption among both rulers and the ruled renders civil law useless, which, in turn, breeds popular chaos and state tyranny.²¹² Second, once routinized, the cycle of corruption makes any kind of social, legal, or political reform all but impossible, for, "just as good habits need good

²⁰⁹ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: a One-Volume Abridgement*, ed. Dero M. Saunders (New York: Penguin Books, 1983): 585-691, specifically the subsection of Chapter XV on the "Manners of the Romans."

²¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, Translated and edited by David Wooton (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 1994): 90-91.

²¹¹ Stowasser, "Religion and Political Development," 11-12.

²¹² Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, 125.

laws if they are to survive, so good laws will only be obeyed if the subjects have good habits.”²¹³

This concern leads both Machiavelli and Ibn Khaldun to the topic of religion and the role it plays in society.

In the case of religion and the state, Machiavelli’s arguments from *The Discourses* bear striking similarity to those of Ibn Khaldun. Consider, for example, Machiavelli’s admonishment,

Those rulers and those republics who want to keep their political systems free of corruption must above all else prevent the ceremonies of their religion from being corrupted and must keep them always in due veneration. For one can have no better indication of the prospective ruin of a society than to see that divine worship is held in contempt...rulers of a republic or of a kingdom should uphold the basic principles of the religion to which they are committed. If they do this it will be easy for them to keep their state religious and, as a consequence, law-abiding and united.²¹⁴

compared to this from Ibn Khaldun:

...injustice ruins civilization, which has as its consequence the complete destruction of the dynasty...Injustice should not be understood to imply only the confiscation of money or other property from the owners...Those who deny people their rights commit an injustice...This is what Muhammad actually had in mind when he forbade injustice. He meant the resulting destruction and ruin of civilization, which ultimately permits the eradication of the human species. This is what the religious law quite generally and wisely aims at in emphasizing five things as necessary: the preservation of (1) religion, (2) the soul (life), (3) the intellect, (4) progeny, and (5) property.²¹⁵

Like Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli sees religion as both a unifying, cohesive force in society, and a significant legitimizing force in politics. He uses an example from the Conflict of the Orders²¹⁶ to demonstrate the point. Machiavelli describes how the senate used a call to religious principle to convince Roman plebeians, then in open conflict with the patrician socioeconomic and political establishment, to set aside their differences and unite against the Volsci and Aequi

²¹³ Ibid, 126.

²¹⁴ Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, 115-116.

²¹⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, pp. 239-240.

²¹⁶ For further reading, see Jerzy Lindersky, “Religious Aspects of the Conflict of the Orders: The Case of Confarreatio,” in *Social Struggles in Archaic Rome: New Perspectives on the Conflict of the Orders*, Ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2008): 223-238.

tribes, with whom Rome was at war. He writes that, in doing so, “religion made it possible for the senate to overcome problems that, without its assistance, they would never have been able to overcome.”²¹⁷ For both authors, then, religion represents the sociolegal adhesive that keeps civil society civil and sustains the legitimacy of the politically enforced order. Combined with the loss of *‘asabiyya* (which Stowasser speciously ties to Machiavelli’s concept of *virtú*²¹⁸), the lack of religious belief and practice steadily undermines the ruling dynasty’s ability to successfully reproduce itself, thereby leading to its ultimate demise and potential overthrow.

Among the leading symptoms of this phenomenon that both Ibn Khaldun and Machiavelli recognize is a ruler’s choice to employ mercenary troops as the chief instrument of state defense. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli warns against using mercenaries for two reasons: they are both useless and dangerous.²¹⁹ On the first count, mercenaries have no motive to fight beyond financial gain, which makes them easy traitors. On the second count, they have no vested interest beyond their persons, which makes them quick cowards in the field. Thus, Machiavelli argues, “Anyone who relies on mercenary troops to keep himself in power will never be safe or secure, for they are factious, ambitious, ill-disciplined, treacherous.”²²⁰

Likewise, Ibn Khaldun states that a dynasty employs “partisans” only after it has reached “senility.”²²¹ He argues that the generations succeeding the dynasty’s founders, having grown up in luxury and peace, are too lazy and weak to defend themselves:

they forget the customs of desert life...Their military defence [*sic*] weakens, their energy is lost and their strength is undermined...Eventually, they come to depend upon some other militia.²²²

²¹⁷ Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, 120-121.

²¹⁸ Stowasser, “Religion and Political Development,” 24.

²¹⁹ Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings*, 38.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Muqaddimah*, III 11, p. 134.

²²² *Muqaddimah*, III 11, p. 135.

The implication Ibn Khaldun makes is that a dynasty employing mercenaries is *already* vulnerable to internal and/or external attack. Its *'asabiyya* is long dead. Were it still intact, the defense of the dynasty would equate to the defense of society as a whole. Instead, the dynasty has fallen victim to a “chronic disease” for which no cure exists.²²³

²²³ *Muqaddimah*, III 17, p. 147.

**CHAPTER SIX: REIMAGINING STATE COLLAPSE IN *THE MUQADDIMAH* – A
CASE FOR ETHICS, REBELLION, & REBIRTH**

Ibn Khaldun “In Spite of Himself”

The preceding comparative treatments of Ibn Khaldun’s thought on human nature, sovereignty, and *‘asabiyya* lead us to two potential conclusions regarding the fate of civilizations or, in the contemporary world, states. The first, inferred by many readers past and present—particularly in times of economic, social, and political decline or depression—is that there is simply no stopping the vicious Khaldunian cycle of rise, decline, and violent collapse. The ride goes on and we can’t get off. This profoundly pessimistic assessment, which many label ‘realistic,’ is seen time and again in the work of modern historians and political scientists from Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* to Robert Gilpin’s *War and Change in World Politics*.²²⁴ It is noteworthy in this context, for example, that Ottoman academics and statesmen only ‘rediscovered’ and translated Ibn Khaldun into Turkish in the mid 19th century, as their empire steadily crumbled around them.²²⁵ Oddly, they sought to understand only the reasons for their empire’s demise, rather than the potential remedies—and therein lies the root to discerning an alternative reading of *The Muqaddimah*.

²²⁴ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 186-211.

²²⁵ Bernard Lewis, “Franz Rosenthal: *A History of Muslim Historiography*, xii, 558 pp. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1952, 45 fl.,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 17 (1955): 169.

Most standard interpretations of the Khaldunian cycle emphasize its historical-structural components and minimize or eliminate the potential agency of humans in affecting its course.²²⁶ For many, the cycle's teleology imputes a futility to human action when confronted with the evidence of social disintegration. One scholar goes so far as to argue Ibn Khaldun's entire philosophy of history serves as "an extended commentary on the futility of human aspiration."²²⁷ This understanding belies one of Ibn Khaldun's central premises of stable civilization and responsible rulership, however. For, no matter how bleak Ibn Khaldun's final assessment, one cannot overlook his deep concern with what we might call social justice in an ethical society.

As we have seen, Ibn Khaldun believes the very reason propelling social dissolution to be a willful, continued abrogation of that justice and perversion of those ethics. The title of a later chapter in *The Muqaddimah* speaks to this point: "Injustice brings about the ruin of civilization."²²⁸ Civilization cannot survive without justice, and there is no justice without the protection of peoples' rights.²²⁹ While we might have a lengthy and fruitful debate over how one might define and constitute "rights" in a 14th century Maghrebi-Islamic context, the *intent* supporting Ibn Khaldun's proposition speaks volumes in itself.

So what do we make of this seeming contradiction? If a civilization is doomed to degenerative extinction at the moment of its founding, why should it matter whether or not it is just? But here is where we trip over ourselves in the attempt to understand Ibn Khaldun: when he discusses the "disintegration" and "ruin" of civilization, does he mean its physical eradication? Scholars like Gibbon or Gilpin would say he does—in a salted earth-like reading of hegemonic

²²⁶ Stephen Cory, "Breaking the Khaldunian Cycle? The Rise of Sharifianism as the Basis for Political Legitimacy in Early Modern Morocco," *The Journal of North African Studies* 13 (2008): 378.

²²⁷ Hayden V. White, "Ibn Khaldun in World Philosophy of History: Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (1959): 114.

²²⁸ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 238.

²²⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 240.

collapse via conquest²³⁰—but this reading is deeply flawed. It imposes a myopically simplistic interpretation of the Khaldunian cycle onto the text—an interpretation that corrupts the depth of Ibn Khaldun’s thought in two significant ways.

First, this reading either dismisses or denies the religious-ethical foundations of Ibn Khaldun’s thought.²³¹ Contemporary scholars (especially in the West) become so enamored of the ‘modern’ language throughout *The Muqaddimah*, with its emphasis on rational historical inquiry, its self-critique of society and urbanization, and its assessment of society and politics ‘as they are’ instead of ‘as they should be’ (*à la Machiavelli and Thucydides*, so goes the argument), that they either unwittingly blind themselves to Ibn Khaldun’s Islamic conceptions of ethical life²³² or, as Mahdi argues, treat those realities as

residues of the prejudices and dogmatisms of the Middle Ages from which a Muslim thinker in the fourteenth century could not liberate himself.²³³

In either case, by unconsciously or deliberately secularizing Ibn Khaldun’s ideas, contemporary scholars miss the important normative commitments he makes in his sociopolitical analyses.

To secularize Ibn Khaldun denies, for example, the principal place he gives religious law in guaranteeing the protection of popular rights²³⁴ or the position he takes on social justice and the role government *must* play in upholding it if civilization is to survive.²³⁵ How does one reconcile the following premise, that

²³⁰ Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 12-13.

²³¹ Katsiaficas, “Ibn Khaldun: A Dialectical Philosophy for the 21st Century,” 48.

²³² Chaouch, “Ibn Khaldun in Spite of Himself,” 280.

²³³ Mahdi, *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 9.

²³⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 23, pp. 154-155.

²³⁵ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 238.

Anything (done by royal authority) that is dictated by force, superiority, or the free play of the power of wrathfulness, is tyranny and injustice and considered reprehensible by (the religious law)...Likewise, anything (done by royal authority) that is dictated by considerations of policy or political decisions without supervision of the religious law, is also reprehensible, because it is vision lacking the divine light.²³⁶

with the popularly shared image of Ibn Khaldun as a hard political realist who either directly opposes religious coloring in social inquiry or simply pays religion lip service as a means of placating the censors and state officials of his time?²³⁷ The simple answer is that one can't. To divorce Ibn Khaldun from his Islamic intellectual milieu and ethical foundation is akin to reading only books One and Two of *Leviathan*, conveniently neglecting Hobbes' third book on the moral obligations of a "Christian Commonwealth." The same could be said for reading Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* without acknowledging the author's German Protestant commitments. To read Ibn Khaldun outside the context of Islam eliminates the potential for seeing in the cyclical process of state collapse a potential for social reconstitution and rebirth, which brings us to the second aspect misinterpretation.

The popular reading of the Khaldunian cycle focuses heavily—if not exclusively—on the role external actors play in cementing a state's downfall through conquest or forced capitulation and 'regime change'. This reading both ignores Ibn Khaldun's complete understanding of the dialectic cycle and denies the potential agency of a society's lower strata in reconstituting and reconstructing a new *'asabiyya* to overthrow and supplant their degenerate rulers from below.

Ibn Khaldun specifically notes the potential of internal insurrection unseating a dynasty after it grows "senile." In his treatment of how prestige and royal authority decrease through subsequent generations, for example, Ibn Khaldun writes that the ruler begins to alienate himself

²³⁶ *Muqaddimah*, III 23, pp. 154-155.

²³⁷ Chaouch, "Ibn Khaldun in Spite of Himself," 280-283.

from those in whose [‘*asabiyya*] he shares, thinking that he is better than they. He trusts that (they will obey him because) he was brought up to take their obedience for granted, and he does not know the qualities that made obedience necessary...Therefore, he considers them despicable, and they, in turn, revolt against him and despise him. They transfer leadership from him and his direct lineage to some other related branch, in obedience to their [‘*asabiyya*], after they have convinced themselves that the qualities of the (new ruler) are satisfactory to them.²³⁸

In addition to the potential revolt of disgruntled subjects, Ibn Khaldun argues that domestic factions and former allies originally subsumed under the dynasty’s ‘*asabiyya* are just as likely to rise against a ruler who falls prey to the established “chronic disease” of “senility”.²³⁹ He argues,

Time gets the upper hand over the original group (in power). Their prowess disappears as the result of senility...Time feasts on them, as their energy is exhausted by well-being and their vigour [*sic*] drained by the nature of luxury. They reach their limit, the limit that is set by the nature of human urbanization and political superiority. At that moment, the [‘*asabiyya*] of other people (*within the same nation*) is strong. Their force cannot be broken...Their superiority is recognized, and, therefore, no one disputes their claim to royal authority. They seize power.²⁴⁰

Why modern scholarship largely overlooks these rather clear passages is the subject for another study. Suffice it to say that a great deal of additional explanatory force is lost as a result. By placing the locus of social and political change exclusively on external actors, scholars eliminate the possibility of internal renewal through rebellion. Combined with the neglect of Ibn Khaldun’s normative concerns like social justice and good governance, this externalized reading strips *The Muqaddimah* of its ethical substance and imposes a modern, Western version of *Realpolitik* upon Ibn Khaldun’s conception of historical social change. As we will find, reclaiming that substance alters this understanding considerably.

²³⁸ *Muqaddimah*, II 14, p. 106.

²³⁹ *Muqaddimah*, III 17, p. 147.

²⁴⁰ *Muqaddimah*, II 21, pp. 114-115. My emphasis.

Reclaiming the Ethical Significance of Ibn Khaldun's Thought

What, then, are the implications of rereading *The Muqaddimah* with these two additional criteria in mind? How does the incorporation of a domestically oriented reading of the Khaldunian cycle combined with the recognition of Ibn Khaldun's normative Islamic principles alter our perception of his theory of cyclical social change? In a word, his ideas become subversive. With the combined lenses of domestic unrest and normative ethics we see a new way of interpreting and understanding Ibn Khaldun, the implications of which are manifold.

In the first place, we see that not only does Ibn Khaldun accept the possibility of internal state revolt during a dynasty's final ruling stages, but, following the logic of his normative commitments, he also legitimizes and tacitly (but conditionally) supports such rebellion. Consider these four premises understood either implicitly or explicitly by Ibn Khaldun:

1. There is no higher power than God and no higher authority than God's law. All human moral/ethical standards are derived from God's guidance.²⁴¹
2. For civilization to survive certain ethical standards must be upheld by the dynastic government, which is composed of both an administrative elite and the single authoritative ruler;²⁴²
3. These ethical standards of government protected rights, unabridged social justice, and the ruler's obligation to his/her people²⁴³ create a kind of sacred bond between ruler and ruled;²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Qur'an, 92:1-21, for example.

²⁴² *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 238

²⁴³ *Muqaddimah*, III 22, p. 153.

²⁴⁴ *Muqaddimah*, III 41, p. 240.

4. When repeatedly violated during the later degenerative stages of the dynasty's rule, this bond naturally dissolves²⁴⁵ along with the subjects' original requirements of subordination, obedience, and allegiance; for, as God instructs in the Qur'an, "persecution is more serious than killing;"²⁴⁶
5. A true Muslim fights persecution and oppression until it is no more and God's law is restored;²⁴⁷

Therefore, protestations from al-Mawardi, al-Ghazali, and H. A. R. Gibb²⁴⁸ aside, we can infer that a rebellion to overthrow a morally decrepit and unjust government is both legitimate and favorable in the thought of Ibn Khaldun *if and only if* its ultimate purpose is to restore God's guiding principles as the ruling principles of the state, thereby saving civilization and reestablishing ethical governance.

By reincorporating Ibn Khaldun's ethical substance into our understanding of *The Muqaddimah*, we get a much richer perspective on what he considers to be legitimate governance, how he sees it dissolve, and how he believes it can be potentially restored. In an ironic twist, Ibn Khaldun's religious conservatism and pessimism regarding the human "temperament" logically lead him to a position condoning political insurrection—if only to reestablish the state's original moral order.

Of course, while Ibn Khaldun's ideas give this proposition normative weight—in the sense that, *if possible it would be* preferable to social extinction—it is nevertheless considerably more circumstantial and speculative in nature than the dialectical cycle of historical change that

²⁴⁵ *Muqaddimah*, II 14, p. 106 and III 22, p. 153.

²⁴⁶ Qur'an, 2:191.

²⁴⁷ Qur'an, 2:193.

²⁴⁸ Gibb (in)famously attributes the Islamic history of and assumed adherence to 'Oriental Despotism' to the medieval proscriptions of rebellion given by the Sunni jurists al-Mawardi and al-Ghazali in the 11th and 12th centuries respectively. For further reading, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 10-13.

dominates his thought. Ibn Khaldun might think a rebellion to restore justice legitimate, but, relative to the odds of internal social implosion and external conquest, his emphasis on collapse and transition suggests serious doubts of its probability. Nevertheless, its granted potential in Ibn Khaldun's thought adds a flickering ray of hope to an otherwise dismal assessment of human civilization.

The Khaldunian Cycle in Action? An Interpretive Reading of Modern History

What does a domestically concerned ethical reappraisal mean for our understanding of *The Muqaddimah*? It means, first, that Ibn Khaldun's brilliance goes far beyond sociology and philosophy of history, extending to the realm of normative political theory—limited as it may be by the contexts of time and place. More interestingly, it lends Ibn Khaldun's ideas even greater philosophical depth and generalizability when we consider modern and contemporary history. Among other phenomena, this interpretation offers an intriguing rereading of the recent popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, their historical roots, social processes, and current trajectories. How might we frame such a narrative?

We could start by looking at how the former regimes of Tunisia and Egypt came to power. In each case, the group that ascended did so under the guidance of a strong leader who sustained and strengthened his group's *'asabiyya* relative to that of his competitors. Furthermore, Nasser²⁴⁹ and Bourguiba²⁵⁰ initially seized power with substantial popular support legitimized by the infusion of nationalism (what Ibn Khaldun might call a modern equivalent to religion in

²⁴⁹ Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010): 42.

²⁵⁰ Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Government* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965): 44.

terms of its socially unifying capacity²⁵¹) with their groups' political acumen and will to power. This combination—strong leader, strong group 'asabiyya relative to the status quo, popular support legitimized²⁵² and cemented by nationalism—allowed each party to assume and retain power for decades. It did not take long, however, for ruler and/or his successors to destroy their groups' 'asabiyyas and alienate a majority of their citizens.

Looking at the rapid decay of group 'asabiyya relative to the Arab uprisings makes a Khaldunian interpretation particularly fascinating. For when we examine the four to five decade histories of each country following the establishment of the Nasserist and Neo-Destour regimes, we see how clearly the process of decay follows Ibn Khaldun's line of argument. In each case, the ruler was at first popular. Through public works projects, economic restructuring, industrialization, and welfare programs, he sought to simultaneously better the lives of his people and increase the stature of his state.²⁵³ This initial "stage" lasted no more than a decade.

After the first stage in which the ruler successfully established himself, his party, and his ideology as the living, righteous embodiment of the state, his 'asabiyya began to fade and popular support with it. Habits of luxury, corruption, cronyism, and repression became entrenched as governing norms among elites while the veneer of nationalism and the cult of the leader slowly eroded among the citizenry and gave way to the realities of socioeconomic

²⁵¹ For a thorough understanding of this central argument equating Religion to Nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Modernization, Protest and Change* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1983); Carlton J. H. Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1960); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Anthony D. Stevens, *Theories of Nationalism* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1983); and David Stevens, "Nationalism as Religion," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science* 86 (1997): 248-258.

²⁵² Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 47 and Norma Salem, *Habib Bourguiba, Islam, and the Creation of Tunisia* (London: Croom Helm, 1984): 132.

²⁵³ Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 47-49 and Moore, *Tunisia Since Independence*, 41-70.

exploitation.²⁵⁴ In Tunisia, the social, economic, and political policies articulated by “*Bourguibisme*” lost their allure.²⁵⁵ In Egypt, the project of Arab Nationalism crumbled under its own weight and the demoralizing defeat at Israeli hands in 1967.²⁵⁶ The loss of their nationalist facades gradually exposed each regime for what it was: autocratic, elitist, repressive, and exploitative.

Over the years and down the lines of succession, these characteristics became more and more pronounced. What remnant of ‘*asabiyya*’ there might have been largely disappeared among the masses. As income gaps between rulers and ruled increased, as political opposition became increasingly intolerable, and as regimes became more interested in their own self-perpetuation and replication than the well being of their people, popular resistance rapidly took shape. Egypt experienced massive student demonstrations and growing opposition among devout—sometimes ‘radical’ and violent—Muslims.²⁵⁷ Tunisia saw mounting pressure from labor unions and lawyers’ organizations.²⁵⁸ In each case, ruling ‘*asabiyya*’ had extinguished by the turn of the century; justice ceased to function, people were preyed upon rather than protected, and force alone kept the regime in power.²⁵⁹ As Ibn Khaldun would argue, such conditions signified the regime’s senility and paved the way for its overthrow.

Thus, we approach the historical aspect of change that our new understanding of Ibn Khaldun renders both timely and necessary: overthrow from below. In the rebellions that swept across Arab states—and, in some cases, continue to rage—we saw how the reconstruction of social ‘*asabiyya*’ around the desire to reestablish justice and end state exploitation united

²⁵⁴ Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 67-74.

²⁵⁵ Nicola Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2007): 60-64.

²⁵⁶ Steven A. Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 92-94.

²⁵⁷ Pratt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, 69-71.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 99-112.

hundreds of thousands against their erstwhile autocrats. Instead of a foreign power forcing the regime into submission by strength alone, a majority of citizens stood together in the belief that they had right on their side, strength in their numbers, and the willingness to die for their cause.²⁶⁰ As Goodman (and Ibn Khaldun) would argue, they needed little else to unseat a long degenerate regime.²⁶¹

Of course, the reality is more complex—Tunisian and Egyptian citizens had help from their non-intervening militaries, constant scrutiny from the international press corps, and mounting pressure from the ‘international community’.²⁶² Nevertheless, in states once written off by the West as potentially perpetual havens of authoritarianism, average people proved that ‘*asabiyya* rebuilt on the commitment to social justice and reform cannot be placated or pacified when standing against oppression and corruption. In each case Ibn Khaldun might argue that, through just rebellion, “civilization” earned a new lease on life.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the difficulties imposed by the historical-contextual limits of time and place, Ibn Khaldun’s work remains a testament to individual intellectual genius. His ideas inspire new questions and bring new meaning to the study of political theory, long dominated and suffocated by an overreliance on Western thought. Through careful comparison to that canon, this study has sought to simultaneously deepen and strengthen extant understandings of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas while unearthing additional aspects either marginalized or neglected by the predominant scholarship. Moreover, it has attempted to demonstrate Ibn Khaldun’s lasting contribution and

²⁶⁰ Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, 291.

²⁶¹ Goodman, *Ibn Khaldun and Thucydides*, 260.

²⁶² Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt*, 286-287.

value to the modern social sciences—especially as it relates to the study of political rebellion and social change. While I leave the final verdict of the project to my readers, I hope at least to have raised awareness and elicited questions that will continue to drive work on Ibn Khaldun’s ideas forward.

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