The Arab Spring Through the Lenses of Ibn Khaldun*

İbn Haldun'un Gözünden Arap Baharı

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Abstract: The "Arab state" has also gone through phases, the five stages of the state life cycle as described by Ibn Khaldun, and it has also known many transformations. How can we analyze these political and social transformations and how are they interacting with each other from a Khaldunian perspective? How can we understand this current particular phase between the fall of the "Arab state", as we've known it until now, and the rise of a "new" one in the light of Ibn Khaldun's theory? A new phase characterized by ethnic conflicts that have taken a more apparent and obvious form in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. What are possible avenues to get rid of despotism and violence? The present paper is an attempt to answer these questions applying Ibn Khaldun's theoretical framework to the current events and context of the Arab world.

Keywords: Ibn Khaldun, Arab Spring, State, Transformation, Politics

Öz: "Arap devleti" de İbn Haldun'un betimlediği gibi devlet hayat döngüsünün beş aşamasından geçmiştir. Ayrıca birçok dönüşüme de tanık olmuştur. Bu bağlamda siyasi ve toplumsal dönüşümleri ve birbirleriyle olan etkileşimleri nasıl analiz edebiliriz? Şu zamana kadar bildiğimiz kadarıyla "Arap devletinin" çöküşü ile "yeni" olanın yükselişi arasında kalan bu mevcut özel aşamayı İbn Haldun'un teorisi ışığında nasıl anlayabiliriz? Bu yeni aşama, Arap Baharı sonrasında daha aşikâr bir hal almış olan etnik çatışmalarla nitelendirilmektedir. Despotizm ve şiddetten kurtulmak için olası çıkış yolları nelerdir? Bu makalede bu sorulara İbn Haldun'un mevcut olaylar ve Arap dünyası bağlamına ilişkin teorik çerçevesi uygulanarak cevap verme çabası bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İbn Haldun, Arap Baharı, Devlet, Dönüşüm, Siyaset

Introduction

In the last three years, the Arab world has known an unprecedented revolutionary wave sweeping through it including the seemingly most stable countries. It is not an "out of the blue" event as it might have been pictured and perceived for a while. Arab societies have undergone deep changes culminating in the so called "Arab Spring". On the other hand, the "Arab state" has also gone through phases, the five stages of the state life cycle as described by Ibn Khaldun, and it has also known many transformations.

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How can we analyze these political and social transformations and how are they interacting with each other from a Khaldunian perspective? How can we understand this current particular phase between the fall of the "Arab state", as we've known it until now, and the rise of a "new" one in the light of Ibn Khaldun's theory? A new phase characterized by ethnic conflicts that have taken a more apparent and obvious form in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. What are possible avenues to get rid of despotism and violence?

The present paper is an attempt to answer these questions applying Ibn Khaldun's theoretical framework to the current events and context of the Arab world. Ibn Khaldun was able to scientifically predict the life expectancy of the state and explain the factors behind its formation and rise and its decline and fall, these factors being interlinked with changing social dynamics driven by the force of asabiyya. This paper will examine and re-read the Arab Spring through the lense of Ibn Khaldun and provide an alternative state model for a more prosperous and peaceful society applying Ibn Khaldun's logic to the contemporary context.

Ibn Khaldun's Concept Of Asabiyya & The Arab Spring

Asabiyya is the driving force of the state life cycle. Ibn Khaldun defines it as being the sentiment of solidarity generated by blood kinship. The closer this kinship is, the stronger the sentiment.[1] Many levels of asabiyya are then to be observed. Although we can talk about a general asabiyya within a given tribe whose members share a common descent, the same tribe includes other more specific and stronger asabiyyas than the general one: asabiyyas defined by closer blood kinships. Authority would go to the most preponderant of the specific asabiyyas and would be transferred from one branch to the other, but only to the strongest ones.[2] The initial raison d'être of asabiyya, according to Ibn Khaldun is protection. Every human gathering would naturally need a 'ruler' to protect them from each other. This ruler would come from the strongest asabiyya and would aspire to absolutist rule, the ultimate goal of asabiyya being kingship, normally attained using violence.[3] Himmich defines asabiyya as being the practice of violence to take over power.[4]

Within today's context of the "Arab Spring", asabiyya can be the equivalent of communitarianism, sectarianism, the sentiment of belonging to a group or another maintained by and based, most of the times, on Mohamed Abed Al Jabiri's triangle:

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[1] Ibn Khaldun, Al-Muqaddima, p 128.
[2] Ibid, p131.
[3] Ibid, p 139.
[4] Himmich, B. Ibn Khaldun: Un philosophe de l'histoire, p84.

ideology, tribe and booty; the first to refer to religion, the second to communitarian belonging/identity and the third to economic interest.[5] The political process in the Arab world can be largely understood referring to this triangle, which to a great extent explains the dynamic of asabiyya.

Indeed, asabiyya has been maintained for long decades in the Arab world through a system of cronyism that have benefited those who were close to the ruler and those in power (who generally belong to his clan), a situation referred to by Ibn Khaldun as the "jaah"[6] (power attributed to people generally close to the ruler or to those who are close to him). Ibn Khaldun also refers to religion as a strengthening element of asabiyya providing it and the ruler with an additional layer of legitimacy.

The examples of Tunisia and Egypt, although different from one another, illustrate very well how a "group" of people could rise to power and maintain it through a system of cronyism that had kept the asabiyya strong within the ruling group. However, and as Ibn Khaldun had predicted it, this asabiyya went through its cycle of decline due to many factors, the most important one being despotism. "Injustice announces the decline of Umran [civilization]",[7] this is how Ibn Khaldun puts it in his Muqaddima, which describes to a great extent how the "Arab Spring" has been brought about. Ibn Khaldun refers to different practices of injustice leading up to to the decline of Umran. These can be summarized in the interventionism of the state in the economic life increasing taxes and limiting the margin of productivity and prosperity, which perfectly applies to the Arab Spring's context. The growing despotism/ absolutism in the Arab countries and its economic and social implications, as will be further explored within Ibn Khaldun's state life cycle, have led to the fall of most of the Arab states.
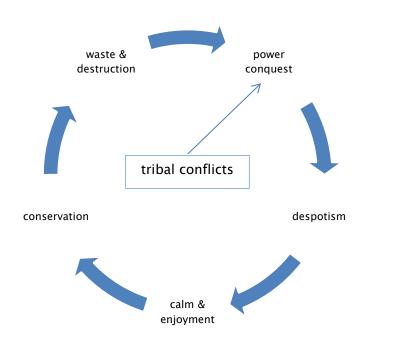
Ibn Khaldun's Life Cycle of State

Based on the concept of asabiyya, Ibn Khaldun genuinely grasps the major stages of a state life cycle especially in Medieval Maghreb, a model that can be easily extended to the Arab world and even further to the contemporary Arab world. Himmich presents this cycle in 5 stages based on Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddima. Tribal conflicts being at the center of the cycle and provoking a power conquest phase, followed by a phase of despotism, a flourishing phase, a phase of conservation, a destruction phase regenerating tribal conflicts that leads up again to the victorious asabiyya's conquest of power.

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[5] Jaberi, M. (1984). Reforming the Arab Mind.
[6] Ibn Khaldun, Al-Muqaddima.
[7] Ibid

waste & destruction

power conquest

tribal conflicts

conservation

despotism

calm & enjoyment

The First Stage: Power Conquest

Tribal conflicts, or in today's language the competition between different interest groups, is identified by Ibn Khaldun as being the initial dynamic that leads to the first stage of state formation, which is "power conquest". Each tribe/interest group would seek to defeat the other ones, supported by the sentiment of belonging/loyalty of its members. The strongest asabiyya would then get to power announcing the formation of the "general government", as Ibn Khaldun names it, a different setting that transforms blood kinships and expose them to new problems and changes.[8] Violence is an important characteristic of this stage of power conquest.

The fall of a state would lead to conflicts and violence that would end up in the rise of a new state. The current, widely-spread violence in most of the Arab countries, Syria, Egypt, Libya to mention some, can be very much understood and expected within this theoretical framework. The Arab world is undergoing the rise of a new "Arab State", whose features are yet to be defined, and this would greatly depend on the outcomes of the current conflicts and how they are managed.

The Second Stage: Despotism

"Despotism" is the second stage of Ibn Khaldun's state life cycle. The ruler would seek to acquire personal power outside of his clan. External alliances, less maintained by

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[8] Himmich, B. Ibn Khaldun: Un philosophe de l'histoire, p 85.

blood kinship and more by economic interest, would be formed. These alliances would be composed of people from the "submitted populations", other tribes/ interest groups who would enter the political scene, be it in the administration or the army. In need to finance the new system of alliance and to ensure the loyalty of the new comers, the ruler would impose more and more taxes resting his despotism on a "fiscal dictatorship".[9]

It is noticed in this stage that asabiyya plays a lesser role. Indeed, Ibn Khaldun notes that when the state is stabilized, it may not need asabiyya. The reason according to him is that "it is difficult for souls to submit to general governments at their beginning unless they are forced to." When rule/kingship is stabilized within a given group, people get used to it with time and forget about the initial asabiyya that had led to it. Submissiveness becomes then more rooted in souls in an unquestioned way.[10]

The Third Stage: Calm & Enjoyment
The ruler at this stage enjoys power acquiring goods and wealth and building monuments. The latter are a sign of the state's power and contribute to the development of civilization. Within this stage, the luxurious life of the ruler and his cronies and the expansion of the state are essentially maintained by taxes.[11]

The Fourth Stage: Conservation
To be able to cover its increasing expenditures (military, administrative and personal related to the ruler's luxurious life and his cronies'), the state intervenes in the economic life of the people in many forms. Imposing taxes is the most obvious form to conserve the domination and despotism of the ruler.

The Fifth Stage: Destruction
In this last stage of the state life cycle, the ruler and his cronies continue to monopolize power and its benefits. The ruler's relation with the army becomes weaker and a power crisis more obvious. The latter is reflected in the following: people loaded with taxes, not being able to enjoy the fruit of their work abandon their productive activities, social misery, economic slump due to the decrease of state income, troubles and riots, which all lead up to tribal/ interest group conflicts over power, the fall of the state and the beginning of a new state cycle. The question to be raised now, that the Arab world is undergoing this "inter–cycle" phase between the fall of a state and the rise of another, is the following: is there any alternative to Ibn Khaldun's cyclical model? Can it be

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[9] Ibid
[10] Ibn Khaldun, Al-Muqaddima, p 154.
[11] Ibid, pp 168, 177.

breached? Can it be designed differently? If we change one of its variables than the result of an equation would be different. Mathematically speaking, the model would look different if we change its founding dynamic.

Khaldunian Logic To Explore An Alternative State Model

Ibn Khaldun depicts the political process in medieval Maghreb using the variables of that era. Was any other alternative process, than the one driven by asabiyya, possible by then? Perhaps not given the stage of development of medieval political institutions. However, since that time, various political institutions have been devised to give birth to alternative political tools and processes that should now be accounted for.

To start with, Ibn Khaldun argues that the initial role of a ruler and raison d'être of a state is "to protect people from each other", which implies intervening in their lives only when others can be harmed from their actions. In other words, to make sure everybody's rights are protected. Ibn Khaldun also explains how asabiyya creates a system maintained by cronyism and resulting in despotism and injustice doomed to decline at the end.

However, what feeds asabiyya and keeps it alive is the yearning for absolutist power. Centralized power keeps attracting interest groups, creating conflicts and deconstructing societies. "Because of the enormous benefits that can be won from the political process, it is rational for interest groups to spend large sums on lobbying for special privileges – an activity known as 'rent seeking'."[12] Ibn Khaldun, as explained earlier, also refers to the benefits of power and how centralized power creates a system of cronyism and 'rent seeking'.

We have seen how in Ibn Khaldun's model, asabiyya is the driving force that keeps reproducing the empty circle through practicing violence to defeat the other asabiyyas and take over power. To avoid reproducing that empty circle in the Arab world, the underlying dynamic of asabiyya needs to be changed. If power is decentralized, if there are mechanisms and institutions that would monitor the ruler and the government, if there is a system of checks and balances, the ultimate end of "kingship" or absolutist rule aimed to by asabiyya becomes irrelevant, and the usage of asabiyya in politics neutralized. No matter which asabiyya rules, its rule would never be absolutist in the presence of safeguards (institutions) to prevent despotic practices from happening. We

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[12] Butler, E. (2012). Public Choice, p 16.

would move from a predetermined cyclical state model announcing the rise and fall of states to a linear model characterized by less predictable societal evolution.

Ibn Khaldun describes a given political process that would logically take place if its ingredients are gathered. Changing again one of these would lead to a different process. Limited state is, as having been argued, the underlying dynamic of asabiyya that leads at the end to the fall of state. Namik Kemal explains the Ottoman Empire's decline noting the following, "even the ministers cannot deny that today the nation is faced with the threat of extinction. One of the major reasons for this is that the country's wealth is in sharp decline. Would buildings and other expenses have plunged the treasury to its present level if we had already adopted the method of consultation and established an assembly of the people?"[13]

This summarizes and perfectly illustrates Ibn Khaldun's state cycle but at the same time raises the important question whether this could have been avoided if the state were limited, if the absolutist rule were restrained by the people. Would a ruler spend the state's wealth as he pleases exceeding its income should there be a restrainer? Would there be a "need" to impose more and more taxes on the people till preventing them from enjoying the fruits of their own efforts? Several scholars, from both the western and the Islamic world argue that this ultimate restrainer is embodied in constitutional rules. People might also play the role of a restrainer, but to avoid having settings wherein a minority is exploited by a ruling majority or the opposite, Public Choice theorists affirm that "political decision–making needs to be constrained by constitutional rules."[14] Kayr Al–Din Al–Tunusi as for him argues that that "the countries which have progressed to the highest ranks of prosperity are those having established the roots of liberty and the constitution"[15]

The peak of human progress in Ibn Khaldun's cycle coincides indeed with the stage of 'power conquest' characterized by "general government", a limited form of state that intervenes less in people's activities and lives, and consequently by a higher degree of liberty. As despotism grows, liberty shrinks down and so incentives to produce and progress.

To put all the pieces of the puzzle together now, kingship or absolutist rule is the ultimate goal of asabiyya, and this is the only state model known and affordable at Ibn

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[13] Kemal, N. (2002). And Seek Their Council in the Matter, p 147.
[14] Butler, E. (2012). Public Choice, p17.
[15] Khayr Al-Din, A. The surest path, p 49.

Khaldun's time, if modern political institutions and tools are to be implemented to limit the power of the state to its initial role of protecting the people, Ibn Khaldun's state model dynamic would change. There would be a restrainer to the rule and more room for the people to practice and enjoy their liberty, the ultimate result being more prosperous and peaceful societies.

Conclusion

The abolishment of asabiyya, not as a solidarity feeling keeping a group together but as a force that would monopolize power and use the group bonds to maintain and feed it, is the key to building a prosper civilization where everybody is equal before the law, where no particular group monopolizes power to serve their own interests and their cronies', where everybody has incentives to produce wealth and ideas, a civil state as we would call it nowadays. The Arab Spring has been a revolution against an Arab state ruled by asabiyya with all its implications. The rise of any asabiyya, be it tribal, religious, or institutional, to power to replace the declining one would induce again a cyclical state model. If 15th century Ibn Khaldun referred to the "ideal city", a city governed by "civil politics", as a hypothesis "rare and difficult to realize", 21st century Ibn Khaldun would argue, using the same rational thinking and objective analysis of today's facts and variables, that the hypothesis is perfectly realizable.

Limiting the state power would contribute to restraining or neutralizing asabiyya as a way to get to power, and would smoothen and pacify relations between the different competing groups because the stake would not be that 'absolute'. If a group does not necessarily seek to have power over the other ones, it would not mean that another group would come and force it to submit. In a framework wherein power is decentralized and the state has a limited role to play, there would be fewer reasons for internal conflicts and no room for cronyism and freeriding to pursue individual interests (a process that generally results in a despotic system generating violence at the end of each life cycle), but a climate of liberty for more individual initiative and productivity.

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