# Dawla and Leviathan:
# *Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes in Defense of State Authority*

## *Dawla and Leviathan:*
## *Devlet Otoritesinin Savunmasında İbn Haldun ve Hobbes*

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**Abstract:** Ibn Khaldun and Thomas Hobbes both present the pre-political state as characterized by intolerable violence, and view the establishment of a strong political authority as the best hope of stability. Yet they differ in tracing the origin of this authority. For Hobbes, sovereignty arises due to universal consent and agreement inspired by a collective desire for peace, while for Ibn Khaldun it is consolidated only through the overwhelming power of a tribal feeling known as *asabiyya*. Modern politics inevitably combines the emphasis on popular consent and law so characteristic of Hobbes, and the tribal feeling, patronage, and special interests so characteristic of Ibn Khaldun.

**Keywords**: Politics, Royal Authority, Asabiyya, Domination, Consent

*Öz: İbn Haldun ve Thomas Hobbes siyaset kurumu öncesi durumu tolere edilemez cebir ile tasvir etmekte ve sağlam bir siyasi otoritenin kurulmasını istikrar için en önemli umut olarak görmektedir. Ne var ki, bu otoritenin kaynağını tespit noktasında ikisi ayrılmaktadır. Hobbes açısından egemenlik, toplu bir barış arzusundan ilham alan umumi bir rıza ve muvafakat ile ortaya çıkarken; İbn Haldun, bunun ancak "asabiyya" olarak bilinen, kapsamlı bir kavmiyet duygusundan gücünü alarak pekiştiğini söylemektedir. Modern siyaset, yaygın rıza ve hukuka vurgu yapan Hobbes'un yaklaşımını, kavmiyet duygusu, himaye ve özel çıkarlara vurgu yapan İbn Haldun'un yaklaşımı ile kaçınılmaz olarak birleştirmektedir.*

*Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyaset, Kraliyet otoritesi, Aşabiyya, Hakimiyet, Rıza*

## 1. Introduction

The field of Comparative Political Theory has become so fashionable in North America that universities now advertise jobs reserved exclusively to it. Scholars such as Farah Godrej, Fred Dallmayr, and Roxanne Euben have each produced books explaining the theories, methods, and objectives behind the new field in copious, up-to-date

terminology. Given the global, multicultural sphere in which so many contemporary events and conferences take place, this is a necessary and encouraging development. What seems less common, as far as I can discern, are detailed studies comparing the greatest classics of Western and non-Western thought.[1] The obstacles to this kind of scholarship are twofold. First, it can be difficult to compare thinkers that never had any contact, first or even second-hand, with one another, and who wrote in hermetically separate cultures and milieus. Second, the required amount of scholarly preparation, including the mastery of two distinct languages and cultures, can seem daunting.

The comparison I propose, between Thomas Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun, is hardly immune to these challenges. The physical lives of the two men were separated by more than 250 years, two thousand kilometers, and two oceans, yet one feels that these numbers do not begin to fathom the vast distance between them. Each wrote in the context of his own distinct religion and civilization, which were generally hostile to each other. Each was a masterful stylist in his respective language, but these languages had almost no mutual contact or shared vocabulary. It goes without saying that neither author was familiar with the other's work. Far from fully meeting these challenges, this article should only be viewed as a small first step in a larger project. It will suffice, I hope, to demonstrate its long-term potential.

In perusing Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, one notices striking similarities in their general understanding of politics that echo across the cultural and historical divide, and should more than justify a comparison between them. Both thinkers argue forcefully for a strong, even despotic, political authority, as the only way to escape the perils and insecurity of our pre-political state. This is the crucial point of agreement around which my comparison turns. At the same time, their respective descriptions of both the intolerable pre-political state and the effective political authority that overcomes it diverge considerably. My purpose here is to compare Hobbes with Ibn Khaldun on these points, and then briefly argue for the enduring significance

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[1] Of the three authors mentioned above, Roxanne Euben is the most exegetical. Her influential *Journeys to the Other Shore* contains substantial discussions of Herodotus, Montesquieu, Ibn Batuta, and Tahtawi, among others, Still, the main purpose of the book is the exploration of certain themes, such as voyages and intercultural encounters, rather than the thorough interpretation of texts. For Euben's view of Ibn Khaldun, see Euben, 2006: 75, 113.

of both understandings. In deference to the theme of this journal, I will devote somewhat more time to Ibn Khaldun.[2]

## 2. Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun on Life without Political Authority

Both Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun consider the pre-political state intolerable, on account of the absence of a commonly accepted authority to curb the actions that often follow from natural human passions. As Hobbes puts it "men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company when there is no power able to overawe them all" (Hobbes, 1994: 75). Ibn Khaldun weighs in:

> There needs to be something else that protects [human beings] from each other's aggression…and this restraint will be one of them, who will have over them domination, control, and a strong hand, so that they do not commit aggressive acts against one another (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.69).[3]

The need to subdue human excess by means of overpowering political authority is keenly felt by both thinkers, and expressed in eloquent, unambiguous terms.

The two thinkers also display considerable agreement on the character of the actions that need to be restrained. For Hobbes, men in the state of nature "endeavor to destroy or subdue one another" Hobbes, 1994: 75), the result being a "time of war, where every man is enemy to every man" (Hobbes, 1994: 76). Ibn Khaldun speaks of "injustice and mutual aggression…leading to tumult, bloodshed, and death," which arises when one person lays his hand on the property on another, and the other person angrily seeks revenge (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.321). Both thinkers believe that life without political authority exposes humans to so much violent death as to put the well-being or even survival of the species into question.

While Ibn Khaldun's prognosis for our pre-political state is nearly as gloomy as Hobbes's, he nevertheless lends greater weight to natural human sociability. Hobbes argues that "nature…dissociates" man, so that our disruptive, unsocial passions should be viewed as part of "man's nature" and therefore beyond sin (Hobbes, 1994: 76–77). In

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[2] The best extant comparison between Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes may occur in Abdessalam Cheddadi's magisterial book on Ibn Khaldun (Cheddadi 2006: 493–96). In attempting to prove how remote Ibn Khaldun is from modern European thought, Cheddadi provides a strong summary of the differences between the two thinkers but downplays their similarities.

[3] All translations from Ibn Khaldun are my own.

implied contradiction to Aristotle, Hobbes does not place humans among the more sociable types of animals, such as bees and ants, on the grounds that humans do not naturally agree about whom should rule them and are unique in their tendency to engage in destructive quarrels with members of their own species (Hobbes, 1994: 96, 108). Many of the disruptive passions that Hobbes so brilliantly discusses, such as vainglory, are quintessentially human (Hobbes, 1994: 75-76). Animals have no role whatsoever in Hobbes's account of the state of nature, as if the anarchy that pervades it is caused by human behavior alone. Ibn Khaldun also emphasizes the destructiveness of human passions, but classifies them as part of our "animal nature of injustice and aggression" (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.321, cf. 1.69). While Ibn Khaldun does not appear to believe that the animal part of our nature can be completely overcome, his association of injustice and aggression with it alone leaves the door open for a more sociable, human part of our nature as well.[4]

This disagreement between the two thinkers concerning natural human sociability is reflected in their descriptions of the pre-political state. Hobbes's state of nature has "no arts…[and] no society" whatsoever, and only a very primitive form of social organization, such as "small families" (Hobbes, 1994: 76-77). Ibn Khaldun does not go so far. He does not so much reject the claim, inherited from Aristotle, that "humans are political by nature," as reinterpret it to mean that not political authority as such, but "human society (*ijtima*') is necessary." Human society, in turn, is equated with both cities and settlement (*'umran*).[5] The distinction between city, society, and settlement is clearly and consciously blurred (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.69). And while Ibn Khaldun agrees with Aristotle about the need for some sort of cooperation, he departs starkly from both Aristotle and his Muslim successor Alfarabi in tracing this need to reasons that are not moral but purely physical (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.67-68).[6] Ibn Khaldun's reasoning on the physical need

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[4] Ernst Gellner argues bluntly that "Ibn Khaldun knew full well that the state of nature is not individualistic, but tribal," with the context indicating that the mistaken individualist is Hobbes (Gellner 1981: 24). This overstatement nonetheless has the virtue of bringing the difference between our two thinkers into focus.

[5] An in-depth discussion of the meaning of this term, whose root essentially means "living" and which might also be translated as "culture" or "civilization," lies beyond the scope of this article. Luckily, Waseem al-Rayes has written a deeper exploration of its meaning and significance. Note especially the definition of the term (El-Rayes, 2013, 211 ff.) and the author's conclusion: "In establishing a standard for how individuals and nations *ought* to live, one must fully understand how nations and individuals *actually* live." El-Rayes, 2013: 225.

[6] As Charles Butterworth puts it, "Ibn Khaldun's recognition of the simple truth that 'the human being is political by nature' leads to no reflections about human perfection or how it is attained" (Butterworth, 2004: 454). Even if we may safely assume that Ibn Khaldun had no access to Aristotle's *Politics*, he would certainly have been familiar with the work of Alfarabi, who thought that humans must enter *ijtima*' not only for fulfilling physical needs, but for pursuing virtuous (*afḍal*) ends as well (Alfarabi, 1993: 69, Alfarabi, 1985: 229).

for society is relatively straightforward. Humans need to produce enough food to live on and enough weapons to protect themselves from the depredations of the numerous species of wild beasts that are bigger, stronger, and sturdier than they are. Only by pooling their built-in advantages, namely the art (*sina'a*) of the hand and thought of the mind, can humans hope to accomplish these goals (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.68). As a result, even the pre-political state involves a fair amount of cooperation, civilization, and art. The "aggression and injustice" that renders this state so miserable is said to occur "after society has arisen among humans, as we have set down, and the settlement of the world has been completed" (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.69). Ibn Khaldun evidently does not believe that art and reason alone can induce humans to curb the brutish part of their nature, in the absence of a coercive political authority. If anything, art alone appears to worsen the disorder, by introducing dangerous new weapons while overcoming the poverty and physical necessity that tend to keep human passions under wraps (Mahdi, 1957: 188–89). The pre-political state may not be as primitive as Hobbes's state of nature, but it remains subject to intolerable outbreaks of violence. The need for a powerful sovereign therefore appears as urgent to Ibn Khaldun as it does to Hobbes.

## 3. Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun on Families and Politics

The path from the insecure isolation of the pre-political state to life in highly organized society would seem to run through smaller, sub-political forms of association, such as the family. Both Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun agree that families of some sort exist in our pre-political state, but they differ somewhat with regard to their character and authority. These differences will ultimately inform their respective understandings of the origin of political society.

Hobbes's most thematic statement on the family occurs in his discussion of paternal power. In a state of pure nature, this power has no basis other than the nebulous "natural inclination" of sex and procreation (Hobbes, 1994: 129). In keeping with this assessment, Hobbes invokes the families that are said to exist in a state of near nature in many parts of America, held together only by "natural lust," and living in the "brutish manner" of a state of nature devoid of both society and art (Hobbes, 1994: 76–77). Hobbes later speaks of another, somewhat stronger type of pre-political family, which possesses some form of art and property, including "instruments of husbandry." Subject only to certain "laws of honor" rather than "the laws of nature" on which political society is founded, the people living in small families view piracy and theft as profitable

occupations (Hobbes, 1994: 106–07). The ties that bind families are neither tight enough nor broad enough to become an effective political force.

Hobbes makes certain comparisons between kingdoms and families: none of them, however, suggest genuine equivalence. He describes kingdoms as "greater families," but the context concerns external war, not internal peace. Just as rival kingdoms will inevitably settle their differences on the field of battle, so will feuding families (Hobbes, 1994: 107). But only the state offers adequate protection in such situations. The family, no matter how large or well-governed by its chief, would be less likely than the kingdom to survive in combat without suffering intolerable losses. On this point, Hobbes does not appear to distinguish between a family, clan, or tribe. Institutions based on common blood could at best temper the battle of all against all that consumes the state of nature by redefining it as the battle of family against family. But since the latter is likely to be nearly as destructive as the former, no one could prudently rely on his family alone for protection. Hobbes therefore argues that all family ties are dissolved by armed conflicts, in which every person has the right to look out for his own safety, even if that means betraying his family (Hobbes, 1994: 132). The only exception, illustrated more clearly in *De Cive* than in Leviathan, is when a family acquires enough servants to become a commonwealth on its own, but this follows at least as much from success in battle as from natural fertility (Hobbes 1991, 217, cf. Hobbes 1994, 132). The members of this family-turned-commonwealth are no longer linked primarily by blood ties.

Ibn Khaldun's initial description of the pre-political condition does not explicitly mention the family. But since it treats the emergence of society and settlement as necessary, one wonders whether humans could ever unite on so large a scale without first uniting in families. This question is gradually answered in subsequent accounts of the formation of government. The development of society and settlement of the world leave human beings at an impasse. Their original motives for cooperation, namely nourishment and protection against animals, are insufficient to protect them against the aggressiveness and injustice arising from the bestial nature of their own species. This nature can be curbed only by a human who restrains them (*wazi'*), but Ibn Khaldun does not immediately elucidate how such a human comes into being and seizes control. He offers only a small hint, by introducing a somewhat mysterious quality called *asabiyya*, which apparently does more than prophecy and divine law to reduce human beings to obedience (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.70). It is only in the subsequent discussion of *asabiyya* later in the work that the significance of families, clans, and tribes becomes evident.

In introducing his first lengthy treatment of *asabiyya*, Ibn Khaldun explains how the injustice and aggressiveness inherent in animal nature may be counteracted by qualities existing only in "human natures," such as zeal and compassion for one's own (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206). These elements of human psychology do not so much mitigate as respond to animal aggressiveness: when an injustice is committed against a close relation, humans have always had a natural inclination to come to defense of the victim (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.207). It is through this mixture of compassion and righteous indignation that "mutual help and assistance will emerge," filling their enemies with fear (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206). As various individuals and groups exchange grievances, a cycle of vengeance develops, so that war arising mainly from *asabiyya* is a natural and inextricable part of human life (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.55). Although *asabiyya* animates war in between groups, it provides solidarity within them, and thus representing a crucial component of the *wazi'* that humans need (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206, see Jabiri, 1979: 245–49).

The extent and authority of any given *asabiyya* depends on the breadth and depth of the human sympathy that generates it. Ibn Khaldun is quite sure that such sympathy does not extend to all humankind, but only to the small group with whom each person is familiar. Ibn Khaldun begins by identifying its objects as the family, mentioning only "kindred" (*dhu arham*) and "relatives" (*qurba'*). Yet the Qur'anic example that he urges his readers to consider does not unambiguously uphold this assertion. Yusuf's brothers assure their father Yaqub that they will guard Joseph from harm, since their entire family group (*'uṣba*) would suffer if he were eaten by a wolf (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206, Qur'an, 12.14). Ibn Khaldun must have known, along with all of his Muslim, Jewish, and Christian readers, the flagrant mendacity of this promise, since the brothers were already scheming to throw Yusuf into a well (Qur'an, 12.14). Ibn Khaldun thus tacitly undermines his initial claim about the solidarity of the family unit. He implies that family members often hate one another, a fact of life to which no persuasive theory of *asabiyya* can be oblivious. As Ibn Khaldun notes elsewhere, the human need for cooperation gives rise to quarrels as well as friendships on both the individual, tribal, and national level (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.55, 2.341). He also suggests that families may be too small to guarantee protection against wolves, let alone human predators. The example of large-scale war that immediately follows the citation of Yusuf finds an unconscious echo in Hobbes: both an individual and small family will be tempted to flee a pitched battle involving whole nations due to their small chance of escaping its perils by other means (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206, Hobbes, 1994: 132). An *asabiyya* stronger than that of a mere family is therefore required for consistent military success. While the central role

played by *asabiyya* introduces a dimension to Ibn Khaldun's argument that **is** absent in Hobbes's, on the level of a small family the two thinkers do not greatly diverge. Neither regards this primitive institution as capable of building a larger society or settling violent disputes.

The example of the family is nevertheless not put forth in vain. The passions discussed in conjunction with it remain the key to the establishment of large-scale political society, as becomes clear in the next section, where Ibn Khaldun expands his discussion of *asabiyya* well beyond the family. He traces the primordial inclination to defend our friends from injustice and aggressiveness to "close contact" (*iltiham, lahma*), and proceeds to define this contact, as well as kinship (*nasab*), in a broad way that includes neighbors, partners in oaths, and clients as well as family members (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.207–08). Mutual affinity and concern between humans are consolidated not by half-forgotten blood ties or imaginary genealogies, which may stretch back generations without having any clear relation to contemporary reality, but by continuous social interaction in life-and-death matters among larger human groups (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.208, 1.314).[7] Unlike Yaqub's fractious clan, but quite like his large tribe of descendants, groups formed in this way may become large enough to both fend off enemies and overcome inevitable rivalries and disputes among individual members. Natural human sociability leads, over long periods of intimacy, to the consolidation of tribal groups. A select few of them become powerful enough to acquire royal authority, which will be considered in the next section.

In Ibn Khaldun, primordial human sociability gives rise to arts and settled life, but does not induce the mutual support and defense necessary for strong political society. These bonds are eventually forged, but only by close and prolonged social experience and interaction. In Hobbes, no amount of shared experience or interaction can make a social animal out of one that is so fundamentally unsocial to begin with. Familiarity over time does nothing to temper the deep mutual distrust that prevents enduring human partnerships from forming. The escape from the state of nature requires not gradual evolution but a conscious political decision, which will be considered in the next section.

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[7] As Mahdi puts it, "In time, these latter factors [of common interests and experience] overshadow common ancestry" (Mahdi, 1957: 196–97]. Muḥammad Jabiri also perceives the relative insignificance of *nasab*, concluding "It has now become clear that the true and effective foundation on which *asabiyya* is built is something other than *nasab*," and that this other thing must be common interests of some sort (Jabiri, 1979: 260, see 258–61, 290–91).

## 4. Escape from Chaos: *How is Political Society Established*?

Both Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun see the establishment of an unflappable government as the best way to escape the perils of our pre-political state. Called "sovereign power" or "Leviathan" by Hobbes (Hobbes, 1994: 109) and "royal authority" by Ibn Khaldun (*mulk*, Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 69), this government is vested by both thinkers with as much authority as is needed to restrain disruptive human passions. While examining the precise arrangement of this government in each thinker lies beyond the scope of this article, reflecting on the peculiar way in which each understands its establishment can shed light on the view of politics characteristic of each thinker.

We return now to the fundamental question of natural human sociability. It is deemed to be so lacking by Hobbes, that no natural process suffices to create it. If left to their own devices, humans will continue to quarrel endlessly with one another. As Hobbes put it, somewhat paradoxically, the very "laws of nature" that command us to seek equity and peace "are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partially, pride, revenge, and the like" (Hobbes, 1994: 106). The "great Leviathan…to which we owe…our peace and defense" (Hobbes, 1994: 109) by enforcing the laws of nature is itself described as "artificial," as is the covenant that creates it (Hobbes, 1994: 3, 109). The Leviathan can only come into a being through human art and resolve. The decision to erect it is inspired less by courage or calculation than by fear: the violence of the state of nature must become so unbearable that humans agree to submit to a person or assembly who promises to put an end to it, Quite frequently, this person to whom they willingly submit for the sake of security is in fact their conqueror:

> And this kind of dominion or sovereignty [by acquisition] different from dominion or sovereignty by institution only in this, that man who choose their sovereign do it for fear of one another, not of him whom they institute. But in this case they subject themselves to him whom they are afraid of. In both cases they do it for fear. (Hobbes, 1994: 127)

The fearfulness of weak individuals, rather than the organic growth of any ruling group, is that main motive driving the decision to erect a commonwealth (Hobbes, 1994: 88, Hobbes, 1991: 113).

Ibn Khaldun accepts, in a somewhat novel way, the old premise that "humans are political by nature." Political society may not arise immediately and in all situations, but it does appear to emerge naturally. By associating with one another, humans divide over time into clans and groups, each held together by its common *asabiyya*. The number of such

groups is vast, with multiple *'asabiyyat* coexisting uneasily within every tribe. The size and strength of *asabiyya* in each group is also bound to vary considerably. While the weaker forms of *asabiyya* may not extend beyond a single household, the stronger forms establish a close-knit solidarity among a larger group. In certain cases, it becomes powerful enough to win over the rest of the tribe, resulting in rulership over them (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.213). In rarer cases, it attains enough force to subdue other nations as well, resulting in royal authority. Ibn Khaldun praises royal authority as the ultimate goal of *asabiyya*, and the only hope to unifying a large number of people in political society (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.226-27).[8] It is perhaps in light of these considerations that Ibn Khaldun eventually defines royal authority not as an artificial construct, but as "an office natural to humans" (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.321). In its absence, the various clannish and tribal rulerships will battle for power, in something resembling a continual state of war (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.55, Mahdi, M., 1957: 198). Of course, even the power of kings has its limits. Kings will continue to wage wars against their rivals, expanding their domains either until their own resources are overstretched (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.227, 273-76), or until they come up against another king equal or greater in authority (Ibn Khaldun, 2005, 2.17). The perpetual state of war between rival kingdoms is as inextricable a feature of Ibn Khaldun's understanding of politics as it is of Hobbes's (Muqaddima, 3.37, Hobbes, 1994: 78, 107). Both Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun agree that even though royal authority promises neither universality nor peace, the larger and more lasting governments established by it shelter human civilization, permitting it to flourish in a way that weaker forms of authority do not (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.111, Hobbes, 1994: 78). According to Ibn Khaldun's memorable formulation, royal authority is the form that protects the matter of *'umran* (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.233), while according to Hobbes, healthy competition among large kingdoms is the best way to "uphold…the industry of their subjects" (Hobbes, 1994: 78).

Both Hobbes and Ibn Khaldun emphasize the sovereign's great power and authority, yet only Hobbes emphasizes the role of consent in its formation. According to Hobbes, a "*multitude* of men…must *agree and covenant*" to erect a commonwealth and sovereign power (Hobbes, 1994: 110). Since Hobbes later acknowledges that fear of violence, at the hands of either the presumptive sovereign or quarrelsome neighbors, plays a vital role in inducing this consent (Hobbes, 1994: 127), he is not so naive as to think that any people would establish a government entirely without constraint. Be this as it may, the

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[8] Mahdi explains: "The solidarity that proves itself in war becomes the source of the various types of civilized rule" Mahdi, 1957: 263

lip service that Hobbes pays to the consent of the ruled in the midst of fear remains highly significant, as it establishes a principle that would shape emerging democratic attitudes toward politics. No such rhetoric exists in Ibn Khaldun, for whom the acquisition of royal authority requires total defeat of rivals, and the preservation of it the total domination of them (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.226, 1.259). The term used by Ibn Khaldun to describe this power, *taghalub*, had been used by Alfarabi to render the Greek term *tyrannos*, connoting the worst kind of regime (Alfarabi, 1993: 94 ff.). So while Hobbes attempts to whitewash the sovereign's power, or at least the manner in which it is set up, Ibn Khaldun paints it in the brightest of colors, in a way that would have been quite shocking to readers familiar with earlier Muslim political philosophy.

For Hobbes, individuals consent, usually out of fear, to the rule of the sovereign, for the sake of their comfort and preservation; for Ibn Khaldun, clans and tribes yield to royal authority only once they have been soundly defeated. The result is in both cases quite similar, namely, a ruler who possesses the overwhelming power necessary to guarantee security and prosperity. Yet the process by which the result is obtained already implies certain differences in the duties of subjects and longevity of government, to which I will now turn.

## 5. Stability and Obedience in Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes

Hobbes's Leviathan is an artificial entity established by a collective decision of individuals; Ibn Khaldun's royal authority is a natural institution that coalesces due to the overwhelming might of one group. It might seem as if the mutual cooperation inspired by *asabiyya* would provide stickier glue for the state than tepid individuals, yet the opposite is ultimately the case. While authority rooted in *asabiyya* may be stronger at first, it unravels much more quickly, leading to the inevitable decline of the dynasty.

The Leviathan is meant to endure. Hobbes does not set any limit on the longevity of commonwealths, suggesting that one constructed on the solid foundation of scientific rules and a proper understanding of the duties of both ruler and subjects could last a very long time (Hobbes, 1994: 135, 221). Hobbes later cautions that all things made by men must perish, but hopes that a commonwealth ably constructed according to rational principles could at least preserve itself against death from "internal diseases" (Hobbes, 1994: 210), although not necessarily against death from "external violence" (Hobbes, 1994: 218–19, 221). The patient, fearful consent to power that Hobbes demands of subjects will pay off in the form of long term stability and prosperity.

Ibn Khaldun is able to promise no such thing. He glorifies the initial strength of royal authority, only to display its subsequent fragility. It is no different from other human and natural things, all of which are subject to the law of generation and decline (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.221, 287–89). The inevitable ebb and flow of politics follows from the uneasy relationship between royal authority and *asabiyya.* No sooner has asabiyya attained its ultimate end of royal authority, than it gradually begins to dissipate. Large sections of the *Muqaddima* are devoted to specifying the causes of this inexorable decline. To make a long story short, the great effort required to exert royal authority, or the rule of the weak many by the powerful few, cannot be sustained in the long haul. The fact that one person must ultimately seize royal authority and consolidate its power and glory for himself alone drives a wedge between the ruler and his ambitious followers, forcing him to crush the asabiyya that brought him to power and rely on less devoted clients (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 281–83). Meanwhile, enjoyment of the resources conferred by royal authority breeds luxury and complacency among the ruling class, depriving them of the spirited, martial qualities that once made them so fearsome (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.284–86). The dynasty passes through five stages, beginning with strength and ending in senility (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.296–98). Subjects may continue to obey the dynasty out of habit, but such a reflex cannot last forever (Ibn Khaldun, 1.261). There are various ways to temper or postpone this decline, such as employing competent clients in the service of the dynasty after the initial *asabiyya* has faded, but devices of this sort will merely delay the inevitable (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.219). As Ibn Khaldun eloquently puts it, "Senility is chronic disease that cannot be cured or removed, because it is natural, and natural matters do not change" (*Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.92). While Hobbes's acknowledgement that all things made by man must end feels perfunctory, for Ibn Khaldun it is fundamental to his understanding of government.

In Ibn Khaldun's understanding, royal authority as such is necessary for civilization, but no particular dynasty appears to be. Indeed, since the eventual senility of any given dynasty is inevitable, the best outcome is for a fresh *asabiyya* to emerge somewhere in the empire, forming the backbone of a new dynasty that overthrows the old. Royal authority is thereby not destroyed, but rejuvenated: indeed, it cannot flourish for more than a few generations without being periodically refreshed in this way. Many nations (*umam*), including the Arabs, Persians, and Greeks, successfully maintain their royal authority for centuries by permitting it to pass to another tribe (*sha'b*) among them whenever a given dynasty becomes senile (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.239–41). To illustrate what happens when a people no longer enjoys enough *asabiyya* to replace senile dynasties, Ibn Khaldun points repeatedly to the greatest Muslim disaster of his era,

namely the inexorable decline of al-Andalus. Bereft of asabiyya after centuries of government and civilization, the Andalusians became easy prey to the Christian reconquest (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.218, 243, 260).

The obligation of obedience to the state is clearly linked to its longevity. Commandments inscribed in bronze tend to inspire greater awe than those jotted down on tea leaves. Even Hobbes, known for equating justice with obedience to the government and laws, suggests that subjects no longer have to obey a sovereign that has ceased to offer them protection (Hobbes, 1994: 219). But in a Leviathan that resembles a well-built house in avoiding all of the structural errors that might weaken it, such a situation would arise only in the case of foreign conquest (Hobbes, 1994: 221). Hobbes is therefore famously dismissive of certain Greco-Romain attitudes that justify rebellion in the name of liberty (Hobbes, 1994: 140-41, 214-15), and certain Christian attitudes that justify rebellion in the name of the other life (Hobbes, 1994: 92). In the thought of Ibn Khaldun, dynasties are altogether less stable. The balance of power of the various 'asabiyyat is constantly in flux, and the decline of all ruling dynasties inevitable. This consideration informs Ibn Khaldun's spirited, but qualified, defense of royal authority. He rejects the doctrines of groups such as the Kharijites, who denounce royal authority as contrary to Islam, retorting that royal authority and the asabiyya that underpin it are indispensable for effectively upholding the shari'a (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.330-31). He has nothing but contempt for most of the rebels who pretend to be the expected Fatimid of Islamic lore, and devotes an inordinately long chapter to debunking the traditions that predict the appearance of this legendary figure (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.272, cf. 2.124-48 ). But Ibn Khaldun never goes so far as to say that rebellion as such is wrong. He mocks the impostors not for the rebelliousness of their actions, but for their futility, reminding his readers yet again that no political enterprise can succeed without asabiyya (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.270, 272, 2.145). Religious rebels who do obtain the support of 'asabiyya, such as the Almohads, enjoy the greatest chance of success, and are not necessarily to be blamed for their actions (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.268). The model (imam) followed throughout the work is not royal authority, but asabiyya, without which neither royal authority, nor prophecy, nor religious propaganda of any sort (da'wa) can attain its ends (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.206). If the most important political motto for Hobbes is "obey the sovereign" (Hobbes, 1994: 110-11), the parallel motto for Ibn Khaldun would be "consider asabiyya," something that many enthusiastic but doomed rebels have utterly failed to do (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.272).

We are now in a position to understand the difference between Ibn Khaldun and Hobbes. Ibn Khaldun establishes no general rule against rebellion, since successful uprisings that replace senile old dynasties with vigorous new ones are indispensable for the long-term health of royal authority. No assessment of any particular rebellion can be made without considering both the relative strength of the rebels' *asabiyya* and the relative senility of the dynasty they seek to overthrow (see Jabari, 1979: 291). Hobbes is much more willing than Ibn Khaldun to make an *a priori* judgment against rebellion as such, since in his view no well-constructed state should ever become senile.

## 6. Conclusion: Dynasty versus State

The Arabic term *dawla* has become the modern word for 'state.' It is also a common word in Ibn Khaldun, which Franz Rosenthal translates quite sensibly as "dynasty." I have followed Rosenthal in employing this translation throughout the article. While the Leviathan may be seen as the precursor of the modern state, it is harder to view Ibn Khaldun's *dawla* in that light. The original classical Arabic meaning of *dawla* is not "state," but "*turn, mutation, change*, or *vicissitude*" (Lane, 1867: vol. 3, 934). The term is often used to signify historical shifts: the Umayyad *dawla* had its turn, as did its Abbasid successor. The English term "state," in contrast, is derived from a Latin root that means "stand."[9] It is meant to be impersonal, neutral, and enduring, like the Leviathan that Hobbes attempts to construct. Ibn Khaldun's *dawla* remains far closer to the classical Arabic meaning of the term. It is impermanent and constantly in motion, as various *'asabiyyat* strengthen and diminish, as well as profoundly personal and partisan, being held by one person in the name of a group and dedicated, when strong, to preserving the power and interests of that person and group. In Ibn Khaldun's view, effective politics requires overwhelming power, without the niceties of legal mechanisms or public consent. In this respect, his political conclusions offer some support to the largely despotic empires that prevailed in his time. These empires will, of course, become senile, only to be replaced by other empires much of the same kind. Unlike his predecessors Alfarabi and Averroes,[10] Ibn Khaldun does not even mention regimes such as oligarchy or democracy, inherited from Greek sources but of questionable relevance

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[9] For a concise explanation, see the subheading 'origin' at https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/ definition/state. "Middle English (as a noun): partly a shortening of estate, partly from Latin status 'manner of standing, condition' (see status). The current verb senses date from the mid 17th century."

[10] See Alfarabi, 1993: 87–103 and Averroes, 1974: 105–45. Averroes does attempt to classify contemporary governments according to a Platonic framework (Averroes, 1974: 121, 125, 133), but Ibn Khaldun abandons this effort.

to Muslim historical reality. Looking neither backward toward antiquity or forward toward modernity, Ibn Khaldun's political thought appears deeply rooted in the medieval Islamic present. This helps to explain why many scholars regard his outlook as fundamentally conservative.[11]

Ibn Khaldun's account of the origin, flourishing, and decline of medieval Muslim governments remains unequalled to this day. Still, his focus on the politics of his own time poses challenges for those who seek to apply his theories to ours. The dynastic system described by Ibn Khaldun persevered for many centuries after his death, but by 1917 it had finally collapsed under the stress of both European colonialism and ethnic nationalism. The new states that emerged from its ashes are for the most part neither dynastic nor imperial in the traditional sense, and they are influenced, to varying degrees, by modern political ideas such as democracy and nationalism, which were unknown to Ibn Khaldun.

Hobbes, like Ibn Khaldun, is a defender of monarchy. At the same time, he developed an impersonal view of government that is more appealing to modern ears. The Hobbesian language of consent, laws, rights, public order, and was adopted by influential disciples of Hobbes such as Locke and Spinoza, and continues to pervade both political theory and practice today. If there were in fact a debate between Ibn Khaldun, one might be tempted to say that Hobbes has won it.

I would reply that the debate is in fact far from settled. The dramatic changes that have shook the Middle East and North Africa in modern times have in no way ousted Ibn Khaldun from his position as an outstanding political guide to the region. His description of politics as competition between groups, and the need for one group to prevail for the sake of stability, remains a very plausible explanation of several of its current regimes, regardless of whether the victorious group is the Alawites in Syria, the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia, the clergy in Iran, or the officer corps in Algeria and Egypt.

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[11] See El-Rayes, 2015: 226, 247 as well as For the classic statement of this aspect of Ibn Khaldun, see Gibb, 1933: 27, who says that Ibn Khaldun "never puts forward suggestions for the reform of the institutions which he describes so minutely, nor considers the possibility that they may be modified as the result of human effort and thought, but accepts the facts as they are and presents the cycle of states and dynasties as an inevitable and almost mechanical process." More recently, Ernst Gellner has concluded: "[Ibn Khaldun] wastes little time on moralizing. He tells us what political authority is, gives its natural history, and there's the end of it" (Gellner 1981: 30).

It would be equally wrong to dismiss Ibn Khaldun as antiquated in light of modern politics more generally. As he himself observes, the phenomenon of *asabiyya* is altered in an urban environment, but it does not vanish. Since extended clans no longer dwell together and the significance of ancestry becomes either weakened or blurred (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 1.217), urban *asabiyya* tends to depend more on marital alliances and personal acquaintances. Still, it is strong enough to seize control of the government whenever a power vacuum occurs (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.237–39). The influence of family and personal acquaintance on politics endures, even in modern democracies, where patronage is part and parcel of all political systems, at the local and even national level. Urban politics in America are frequently controlled by so-called political machines, and the benefits they distribute to friends and supporters: the Daley machine in Chicago was notorious, and not simply in a bad way, for keeping order and getting things done. Nor is national politics free from family intrigue. Bill Clinton sought to install his wife in the Oval Office, while Donald Trump keeps his son-in-law as a chief advisor, and is frequented suspected of advancing his family business interests. Of course, both have encountered democratic resistance, in the form of an electoral and judicial system that aims to guarantee impersonal fairness: Bill Clinton's enterprise failed, and Donald Trump remains, in this respect and others, controversial. Still, does anyone expect family appointments and patronage networks to disappear completely from any country on earth?

Ibn Khaldun also observed that merchants and other wealthy individuals need to either make use of the ruling *asabiyya* or develop some form of *asabiyya* of their own, in order to defend themselves and their fortune against the depredations of rulers (Ibn Khaldun, 2005: 2.221). This suggests that with the dispersal of the old tribal clans and flourishing of trades, guilds, and merchants in an urban setting, moneyed or professional groups may begin to develop a certain *asabiyya* of their own, based on shared interest and acquaintance.[12] In modern democracies, this has evolved into what Americans call 'special interests.' The negative connotations of this term reflect the American belief that the government should be as neutral as possible, acting in the service of all the people rather than a particular faction thereof. In Federalist 10, Madison argues that "the regulation of…various and interfering interests forms the principle task of modern legislation" (Madison, 1973: 90). But we should not summarily dismiss Ibn Khaldun's

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[12] Mahdi suggests that city dwellers eventually "tend to group themselves according to their political and economic interests rather than their blood relations" (Mahdi, 1957: 214).

view that government can never be simply benevolent or disinterested, since the people who run it are always tempted to pursue the interests of their particular group.

I conclude: To assert that the dynastic form of government described by Ibn Khaldun has become obsolete may be plausible, but to claim that the political and social phenomena which underlie it have disappeared would be absurd. As long as family connections, personal acquaintance, and 'special interests' continue to play a role in politics, Ibn Khaldun's exploration of them remains essential reading. Modern government appears destined to combine the rule of law, neutrality, and popular consent favored by Hobbes and his successors with the power, patronage, and *asabiyya* described so brilliantly by Ibn Khaldun.

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