

Recep Şentürk

WHAT IS THE STATE? PYRAMID OR CIRCLE

A new perspective from
Ibn Khaldun



IBN HALDUN
UNIVERSITY

P R E S S

Edition Number: 1

**Ibn Haldun University
Press**

Ulubatlı Hasan Cd. No:2 34494 Başakşehir/İstanbul
Sertifika No:35493

Executive Editor

Savaş Cihangir Tali

Graphic Design

Furkan Selçuk Ertargin

**publication@ihu.edu.tr
ihu.edu.tr**

Istanbul/2019

WHAT IS THE STATE? PYRAMID OR CIRCLE

A new perspective from
Ibn Khaldun

Recep Şentürk



IBN HALDUN
UNIVERSITY

P R E S S



Recep Şentürk is a professor of sociology and the President of Ibn Haldun University (IHU) in Istanbul, Turkey. Professor Şentürk holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Department of Sociology, and specializes in civilization studies, sociology and Islamic studies with a focus on social networks, human rights, and modernization in the Muslim world. Among his books are in English, *Narrative Social Structure: Hadith Transmission Network 610-1505*, and in Turkish; *Open Civilization: Towards a Multi-Civilizational Society and World*; *Ibn Khaldun: Contemporary Readings*; *Malcolm X: Struggle for Human Rights*, *Social Memory: Hadith Transmission Network 610-1505*. *Human Rights in Islam*, *The Sociology of Turkish Thought*, *Modernization and Social Science in the Muslim World*. Dr. Şentürk's work has been translated to Arabic, Japanese, and Spanish.

receptenturk.com
president@ihu.edu.tr

WHAT IS THE STATE? PYRAMID OR CIRCLE

A new perspective from
Ibn Khaldun

Recep Şentürk

What is the state? If you are asked to answer this question with a drawing what would you draw? Most people draw a pyramid. Six centuries ago, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) answered this challenging question by drawing a circle. By doing so he utterly opposed the commonly prevalent image of the state as a pyramid. He grounded this idea on the work of the most prominent ancient Indian, Persian, Greek and Arab thinkers and just rulers. He named it Circle of Politics (dâirah al-siyâsah).

Later, Ottomans also commonly adopted the circular concept of the state until their collapse but they usually referred to it as Circle of Justice (daire-i adliyye) because, in their view, politics was the process of good governance while justice was its outcome. The difference between these two opposite images of



Depiction of the State as monster in
Thomas Hobbes' (1588-1679) book *Leviathan*

دائرة السياسة
CIRCLE OF JUSTICE
SİYASET DAİRESİ

ابن خلدون
Ibn Haldun

Stimmet (hukuk) bir yönetimdir (siyasettir),
Devlet (veya devlet başkanı) onu yönetir.

Tradition is what is put into practice
by the sovereign

السنة ميامنة
يسومها الملك

Devlet bir güçtür,
Sünnet (hukuk) onunla yaşar.

The state is authority sanctioned
by tradition

الدولة ملكان
تحيا به السنة

Älem (dünya, toplum) bir baltacedir,
Duvar devlettir.

The world is a garden whose
walls are the state

العالم بيتان
ساحة الدولة

Devlet (veya devlet başkanı) bir yöneticidir,
Ordu onunun destekçisidir.

The sovereign is the origin
of order, supported by the army

مقصد الأمير
الملك راع

Ordu bir topluluktur,
Ekonomi (mal) onunun besleyicisidir.

The army are helped
sustained by taxes

الجنود يربون
على ما يجمعون

Taxes are sustenance provided
by the subjects

الملك يربون
على ما يجمعون

البرصية عتية
تسومهم المال

Justice brings balance
to the world

Adalet, herkesin sevdiği, bir sevdirir ve
Älem (dünya, toplum) onunla ayakta durur.

Halk yönetilendir,
Adalet onunun sadık vatandaşlar eylet.

Hazine bir riziktir,
Halk onu toplar.

البرصية عتية
تسومهم المال

the state organization is that one is based on “vertical hierarchy,” with the ruler at the top and the people at the bottom, while the other is based on “circular hierarchy” with the ruler and the people around the same circle with equal importance.

Yet, today there is no state in the world built on the idea of circular hierarchy. Pyramid state structure prevails everywhere in the world which causes many problems from that humanity suffers today, such as perpetual inequality, injustice, oppression, and exploitation. I argue that some of the current social, political, legal and administrative problems we face today may be solved if the circular concept of the state is revived to replace the worldwide dominant concept of the state as a pyramid.

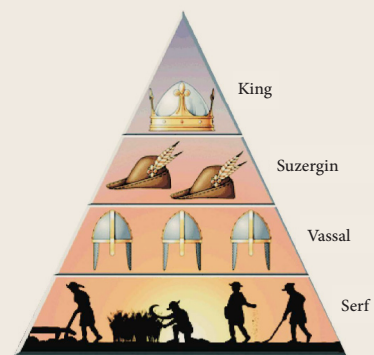
Furthermore, the circular model of administration and management may not be limited only to the state system. It has much broader implications as it offers an alternative to those of pyramidal administrative systems we have built which presently control our lives completely in every sphere of life in particular in the family, education, politics, and business. We may consider changing these systems also to circular management systems. This revolutionary paradigm shift may have much wider and deeper positive consequences on our lives, relations and organizations as circular systems facilitate more equality and participation through circular hierarchy in every sphere of life in contrast to pyramid-like systems which generate unfair inequality, excessive levels of hierarchy and hinder flow of information through organizational levels and reduce participation in decision making.

The circle of the state Ibn Khaldun drew six centuries ago composed of eight components or rings linked to each other. It represents

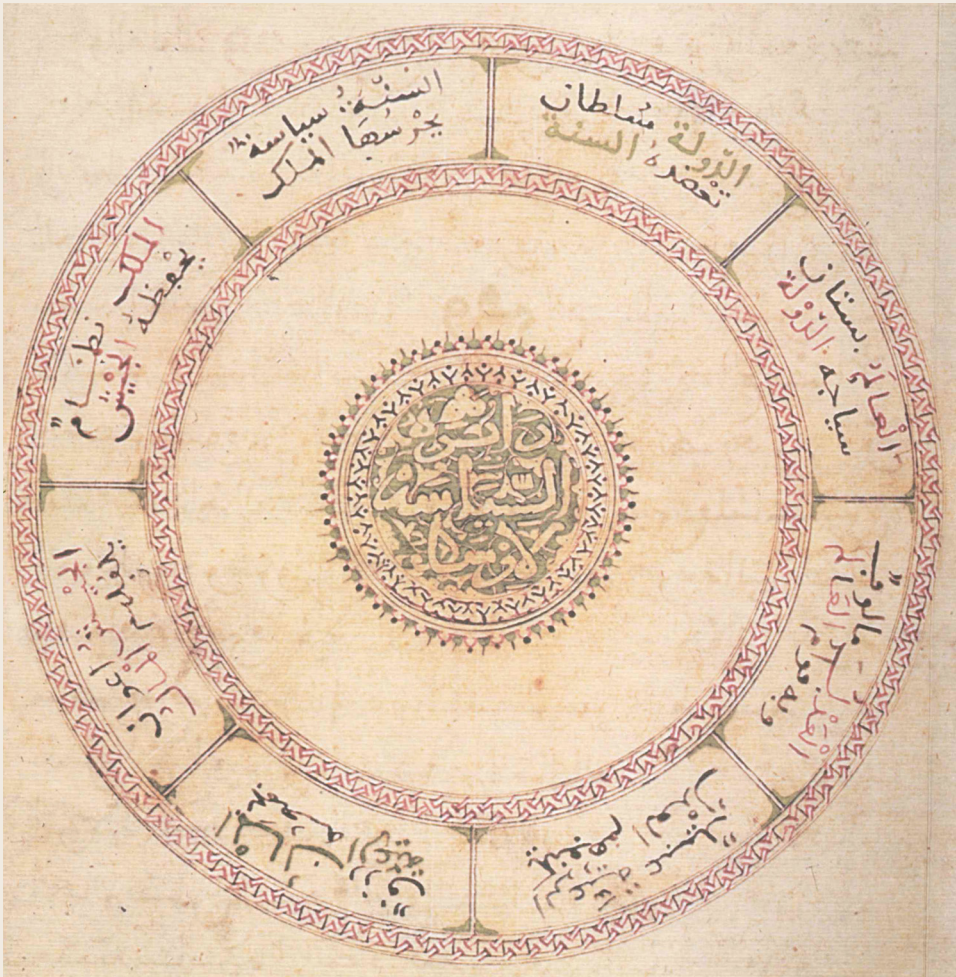
“

For Ibn Khaldun and the generations of Muslims and Ottomans-especially for Kinalizâde (1516-1571)-who followed in his footsteps, the circular shape is an integral feature because it is understood to indicate the Islamic concept of the state. The circular shape is divided into eight equally formed components that are inextricable from each other; in the event that one ring is missing, the circle will be completely ruined.

”



Pyramidal State Description



“Dairah al-Siyasah” Ibn Khaldun, *al-Muqaddimah*,
15th c. MS, British Library Add. 9574, s. 29v.

“
Political power is
illegitimate unless
it ensures justice,
if it does not, it loses
legitimacy.”

an understanding of the state that differs significantly from those wherein the state is depicted as a pyramid, or even as a monstrous giant as is the case in Hobbes’s (1588-1679) *Leviathan*. Basically, the circle and the pyramid represent two different conceptions of the state. For Ibn Khaldun and the generations of Muslims and Ottomans—especially for Kinalızâde (1516-1571)—who followed in his footsteps, the circular shape is an integral

feature because it is understood to indicate the Islamic concept of the state. The circular shape is divided into eight equally formed components that are inextricable from each other; in the event that one ring is missing, the circle will be completely ruined. In effect, we see an important manifestation of an approach to politics and society: while the pyramid manifests linear hierarchy and inequality, the circle of politics or justice operates with a circular hierarchy and manifests an egalitarian and pluralistic approach to society and civilization.

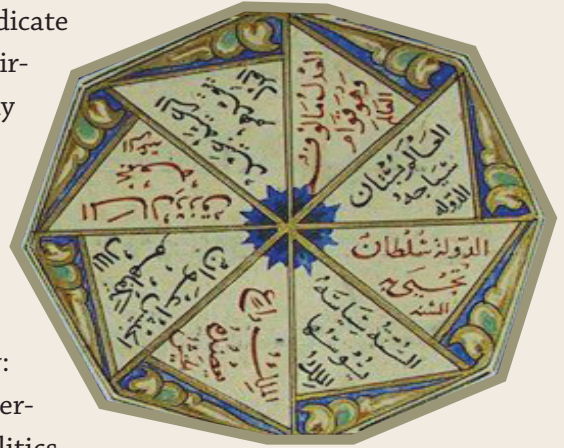


Illustration of the circle of justice

Ibn Khaldun’s approach to politics and society was adopted by Muslim statesmen and political thinkers who came after him. The circle of justice was adopted by the Ottomans in particular, and they drew different versions of the circle. Each of these versions should be regarded as a work of art that reflects a unique artistic interpretation of the concept.

What runs through all these drawings on a permanent basis, however, is the underlying awareness that the aim of political and social processes is to ensure justice. To strengthen this awareness, Ottomans have also called it the circle of justice (dâire-i adliyye) to mean that politics refers to process and justice refers to the outcome¹.

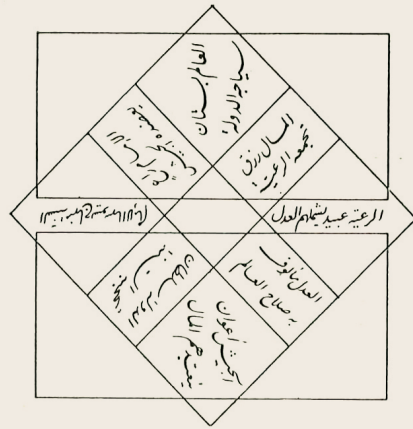
“
Justice brings peace to society; society is a garden whose wall is the state; the state is organized by law; law cannot be protected unless there is a ruler; the sovereign cannot maintain order unless he has an army; the army cannot be formed unless there is capital; citizens collect the capital; justice binds citizens to the ruler of society.
”

1 Justice constitutes the legitimate foundation of authority or the state, what is called “mülk” in Turkish. Authority or sovereignty (mulk) in this context means government and administration, as opposed to the prevalent misunderstanding that it means ownership. The word “melik” (ruler or king) is from the same etymological root. We must avoid being misled by the contemporary Turkish definition of mülk as owned property. The two diverging meanings of “mülk” become clear once it is remembered that the word shares the same root with “mâlik”



(شكل رقم ١)

Figure 1



(شكل رقم ٢)

Figure 2

The depiction of the circle of justice in the book of Knalzâde Âhlâk-ı Âlâi

The circle of justice visually presents a social and political theory. It also reflects a striking example of how Muslims approach to the other civilizations. In fact, Ibn Khaldun indicates that he drew the main idea for the circle of justice from Indian, Persian, and Greek political theories, and developed on the idea in the light of Islamic values. However, he takes care to note that even in the absence of these influences, Muslims would have been able to put forth the same ideas in a more refined manner. Ibn Khaldun’s treatment of other civilizations, in this case, is noteworthy. The fact that he accepts the intellectual influence of other civilizations—regardless of their religious beliefs—and that he synthesizes them within an Islamic moral framework so as to produce an advanced line of thought, is a clear indication that Islam is an open civilization. This open approach serves as a strong example of how Muslims today should interact with the political ideas and institutions established by other world civilizations while retaining Islamic values. Moreover, it has a precedent in the time of Omar’s caliphate, when Muslims benefitted

and the afore mentioned “melik.” mâlik means owner, while melik means the sovereign ruler or sultan. When it is said that justice constitutes the foundation of government and administration, it is meant that ensuring justice is what legitimates political power; it is not meant that justice constitutes the foundation of ownership. Political power is legitimate only so far as it defends justice, and loses its legitimacy in the case that it can no longer be sought.

from learning the art of regulating the state treasury from the Persian state tradition. The open approach rests on two principles: (1) Islam provides us with the basic principles of government, leaving the construction of systems and the methods of the application up to each society. (2) Some constitutional elements of justice and institutional operation are universal; Muslims should be open to learning and benefitting from the experiences of other civilizations.

The eight rings composing the circle of justice begin and end with justice. Actually, there is no beginning and end in the circle. Each ring represents an institution, and all institutions that compose the circle are equal in value. They are not arranged in a descending order as is the case in a pyramidal model; i.e., the sovereign or head of state is not placed over his subjects. Instead, both sovereign and subjects appear to be seated around a roundtable as equals.

“

The main idea that the circle of justice conveys is the interdependence between the governing authority and justice, a relationship in which the manipulation of power is illegal

”

دائرة السياسة:

العالم بستان سياجه الدولة
الدولة سلطان تحيا به السنة
السنة سياسة يسوسها الملك
الملك راع يعضده الجيش
الجيش اعوان يكلفهم المال
المال رزق تجمععه الرعية
الرعية عبيد يتعبدهم العدل
العدل مألوف وبه قوام العالم

1. The **society** is a garden whose wall is the state.
2. The **state** is authority which survives the Tradition (Sunnah).
3. The **Tradition (Sunnah)** is a political system, administered by the sovereign.

4. The **sovereign** is an administrator supported by the army.
5. The **army** is a staff financed by the economy.
6. The **economy** is sustenance; put together by the citizens.
7. The **citizens** are subjects who are made loyal to the state by justice.
8. **Justice** is loved by all, with which survives the social order.

It should be noted here that the numbers above do not mean any order or priority as they do not exist in the circle drawn by Ibn Khaldun. I have put them for the sake of convenience while referring to them.

“

Social order
(Nizâm'ul-âlem) is
what the circle of
politics and justice
ultimately aims to
explain.

”

In his famous work, *Ahlâk-ı Âlâî*, Kınalızâde Âli (1516-1571) draws a circle of justice which is similar to that drawn by Ibn Khaldun in the *Muqaddimah*, and translates the eight Arabic principles into Ottoman Turkish as follows:

‘Addir mûcib-i salâh-ı cihan; cihan bir bağdır dıvarı devlet; devletin nâzımı şeriattır; şeriata hâris olamaz illâ melik; meliki zapteylemez illâ leşker; leşkери cem’ edemez illâ mal; malı cem’ eyleyen reâyâdır; reâyâyı kul eder padişah-ı âleme adl.

Translated into contemporary language:

- (1) **Justice** brings peace to society;
- (2) **Society** is a garden whose wall is the state;
- (3) **The state** is organized by law;
- (4) **Law** cannot be protected unless there is a ruler;
- (5) The **sovereign** cannot maintain order unless he has an army;
- (6) The **army** cannot be formed unless there is capital;
- (7) **Citizens** collect the capital;
- (8) **Justice** binds citizens to the ruler of society.

Again, the numbering does not mean any order or priority because they do not exist in the original drawing by Kınalızâde. It should be noted that



An example of the circle of justice. Illuminator: F. Zehra Durmuş. Calligrapher: Aydın Ergün

the circle begins with justice and ends with justice. The main idea that the circle of justice conveys is the interdependence between the governing authority and justice, a relationship in which the manipulation of power is illegal. As many Islamic scholars have observed, the state can reject religion and still survive, but it can never survive by oppressing its people. They repeatedly said: “A state can survive without religion but never without justice”

Kinalizâde’s full adoption of Ibn Khaldun’s concept and its integration in his work is important because it is representative of the Ottoman investment in the circular conception of the state.

“

The most striking element in the circle of politics, from my point of view, is the Tradition, or the sunna. Ibn Khaldun’s usage of the term “Sunnah,” instead of law as used by Kinalizade, is very significant.

”

The eight rings of the circle are composed of the following core values:

1. Society: Âlam
2. State: Dawla
3. Tradition or law: Sunna or Sharia
4. Sovereign: Malik
5. Army: Jaysh
6. Capital or economy: Mâl
7. Citizens: Ra'iyah
8. Justice: 'Adl

The terms used in the circle of politics may be divided into four categories: Institutions, processes, products, social and political actors. The examples are as follow:

(1) Institutions: state, law (sharia), Tradition (sunna), presidency (malik), army, economy

(2) Processes: power, survival of law or Tradition, politics, protection of citizenry, support of the state, financing the state and army, collection of wealth, gaining loyalty through justice, obedience to the state.

(3) Products: justice, survival of society, property-wealth, loyalty, social order or world order.

(4) Social and political actors: society, president, army and citizenry.

At this point, it is useful to highlight the concept of "nizâm'ul-âlem," used frequently in Islamic and Ottoman intellectual traditions, with such meanings as "world order," "social order," "social structure," "social system" and "social organization."

“
State is power, the
sunnah thrives by it;
The sunnah is a govern-
ance (politics), the so-
vereign implements it.”

Ibn Khaldun



ings as “world order,” “social order,” “social structure,” “social system” and “social organization.” Social order (Nizâm'ul-âlem) is what the circle of politics and justice ultimately aims to explain. The above classification of terms demonstrates that world order consists of institutions, processes, actors and desired products or outcomes. The most important outcome is justice on which depends on the perpetuation of the whole social system and the state.



Muqaddima, Ibn Khaldun. Âtîf Efendi No: 1936. Süleymâniye Library.

There is a difference between citizenry and society. The word ‘âlam’ has two meanings: the physical world and society. In social discourse, it is generally used to mean the social world or society. In the circle of politics, we observe that Ibn Haldun makes a distinction between society (âlam) and citizens or subjects (ra'iyya).

The word “m-l-k” in the circle of politics may be read as *mulk* or *malik*. Arabic script allows both readings. I prefer to read it as *malik* which means the sovereign. This is because the words *mulk* (literally means the sovereignty) and *dawla* (state) are generally used as synonymous and the difference between state (*dawla*) and *mulk* is not as so explicit. Reading it as *mulk* would be redundant as the word *dawla* has also used. Therefore, I read it as *malik* and translated as sovereign.

The most striking element in the circle of politics, from my point of view, is the Tradition, or the Sunna. Ibn Khaldun’s usage of the term “Sunna,” instead of law as used by Kinalzade, is very significant. Ibn Khaldun was a specialist in law (*faqih*); he served as a

“
Ibn Khaldun’s aim is to defend a political system that is grounded on the principles and application of the sunnah.
”



Instances of the circle justice

Maliki judge in Cairo and penned a work on fiqh. We must ask why the term sunnah was his choice despite sharia which was his own professional field. Centuries later, the Ottoman scholar and philosopher Kınalîzâde used the word “sharia” (law) to describe the same component in the circle of politics. Three reasons come to mind. First and foremost, the sunnah is a wider concept than sharia: law encompasses the rules enforceable by the state, while sunnah refers to the rules that are enforced by the state as well as to moral rules that are enforceable by society and the social conscience. Secondly, sunnah is the sharia law as applied by the Prophet (SAW) in a broad and inclusive sense but not strictly law according to the abstract legal principles, thereby indicating the concrete foundation of religious law in Islam. Thirdly, the meaning of the word sunnah includes a society’s traditional laws and customs. Accordingly, the written law in many societies is the result of the oral transmission of customs through the generations.

“
 Abu Bakr (RA) was
 the first head of
 state in world his-
 tory who relied on a
 salary.”

Ibn Khaldun’s emphasis on the state as the means of keeping the sunnah alive is significant: “State is power, the sunnah thrives by it; The sunnah is a governance (politics), the sovereign implements it.” It is clear from these lines that the purpose of the state’s power is to uphold the sunnah and that it is the head of state’s responsibility to exercise the sunnah, which is presented as the manda-

tory means of political and administrative governance. Ibn Khaldun's aim is to defend a political system that is grounded on the principles and application of the sunnah. Namely, he sets forth a model of state and politics that follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s in his role as head of state. In this respect, Ibn Khaldun's approach is more broad and comprehensive. It transcends the narrow scope of sharia as law by foregrounding the importance of historical practice by Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Given the fact that Ibn Haldun wants to analyze the state in general but not the state in Islamic civilization, *tradition*, which in Islam means the sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), may not mean the same if other civilizations are concerned. In Islam tradition goes back to the practice of Prophet of Islam. Yet in other civilizations there are different dynamics, be they religious and secular, which play significant roles in the formation of the tradition of those societies.

Likewise, Ibn Khaldun's usage of objective language as a social scientist is highly significant. The discursive style in the circle of justice is one that expresses "what it is," but not "what it should be." In other words, rather than take a normative approach, and say, "this is how it should be," Ibn Khaldun says "this is how it is" in an objective approach to the subject². This is because Ibn Khaldun's purpose is to perform an objective analysis of the state.

Yet, the objective analysis provides a ground for policy making and normative analysis. Thus, it appears that Ibn Khaldun intends for the conclusions that may be drawn from his analysis to influence the way politics is done. This intention may be evidenced by how the circle of justice was used as a tool of criticism and opposition in Ottoman politics, especially to critique state decisions that did not comply with the principles outlined in the circle of justice. When Ottomans wanted to criticize a state decision, they stated that it was a deviation from the circle of justice and asked for a return to it.

“

He is the first leader in world history who made the the distinction between himself as the head of state and the institution of the state as a corporate legal person.

”

2 If we are to understand this distinction in terms of Islamic intellectual tradition, we may say that Ibn Khaldun uses "ikhbârî" (informative mood) rather than "îshhâî" (constructive mood) expression in his work.



The highest building in the Topkapı Palace: Tower of Justice

Ibn Khaldun: The State Gives Life to, and Thrives by, the Sunnah

In order to better understand what is meant by the sunnah specified in the circle of justice, it will be useful to remember the Prophet (SAW)'s contributions to politics.

The formative period in Islamic political history, thought and institutions encompass the rule of the Prophet (SAW) and his Rightly Guided Successors (Khulafa al-Rashidūn). This is the time when Islamic civilization came into being with the development of its institutions and political values; it was nonexistent before the Prophet (SAW), the Qur'an, and the Sunnah. In other words, Islamic civilization was born of the Qur'an and sunnah, whereas Western civilization predates Christianity. In a way, Christianity was assimilated into the then dominant political system and became one of its colors. On the contrary, the practice of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the Qur'an constituted the foundations of a completely new civilization with a political system. Thus there was only one color, and that was the color of the Qur'an and the practice of Prophet Muhammad (SAW).

Islamic civilization carries rich political heritage, and the main reason for this is that the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) was the Head of the State in ad-

dition to being a religious authority. The same cannot be expected from the Christian religion as Jesus Christ, for example, was not a politician or ruler nor was he a civil servant working for the state. Neither can it be expected from Buddhism, as Buddha was also not a politician or servant of the state. In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)'s measures and actions as the Head of State may be said to constitute part of the political sunnah, and he serves as a role model for the statesmen and politicians who come after him.

The ideal statesperson in the West is modeled on the idea of a philosopher king. In turn, in Islam the ideal model consists of specific examples set by the Prophet (SAW) and the Khulafa al-Rashidūn; this model can be named the “wali-amīr” or “saint-ruler,” intended to mean “virtuous ruler” or “virtuous leader.” The foremost examples of the virtuous leader in Islamic civilization are Abu Bakr (RA), Omar (RA), Uthman (RA), Ali (RA), and Omar ibn Abdulaziz.

As the Head of State, the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) made numerous deep-rooted contributions to the development of a model for state and to political philosophy. He is the first leader in world history who made the distinction between himself as the head of state and the institution of the state



An Iznik Pottery with Ibn Khaldun's The Circle of Justice

as a corporate legal person. Previously, the two concepts were seen as inseparable, a perspective that lasted until the establishment of the modern state in the West³.

The Prophet Muhammed (SAW) granted the state its moral character; i.e., its legal personality and corporate identity, and made sure to separate the state as an independent institution from his own private person. An illustrative example of this distinction can be seen in the Prophet (SAW)'s separation of the state treasury, known as “baytu’l-mâl,” from his private property. He openly declared that it is unlawful (haram) for him or his family to extract funds from the treasury, and, considering that state treasuries at the time were normally accepted to be at the disposal of the heads of state to use as they saw fit for both personal and public purposes, this declaration is highly significant. To reiterate, the Prophet (SAW) made it clear that he—as Head of State—did not have the right to use state property for his own private ends.

By voluntarily releasing himself from his authority to dispense with state property as he pleased, the Prophet (SAW) furthermore demonstrates that the power exercised by heads of state cannot be absolute. Such voluntary action on the part of a leader is unprecedented, considering the general reality that heads of states more often attempt to increase their power and only back down as a result of social and political backlash.

In process of establishing the state as a corporate legal person or entity and of assigning the state treasury to that legal entity, the Prophet (SAW) was simultaneously drawing the boundaries of the head of state’s authority and setting limits to the obedience owed to that authority. He asserted that obedience can only be expected in face of laws and decrees that are socially as well as religiously recognized as good⁴; i.e., morally acceptable as well as beneficial to humanity and society. This encouraged restraint in obedience presented a stark contrast to the expectation of absolute obedience during

3 The statement, “I am the State” (*l’État c’est moi*), by the French King, Louis XIV (1635-1715), is clearly illustrative of this point.

4 Evidence may be provided from hadeeth in which it is related that “obedience is only due where there is a common good,” and “Obedience to a creature (a human leader) ends where revolt against the Creator begins.”

the period, and this restraint continued to be upheld during the times of the Khulafa al-Rashidün and of later Islamic societies and states. As an illustrative part of this practice of restraint, Abu Bakr (R.A) was the first head of state in world history who relied on a salary. Like the Prophet (SAW), Abu Bakr (R.A) barred himself from free access to the state treasury, and by doing so, set the example for the khulafa who followed him. Instead, living on a salary dispersed from the state treasury allowed Abu Bakr to avoid having to engage in commercial interactions with his subjects, and thus allowed him to devote all of his time to state affairs. The salary system likewise applied by Ottoman sultans, who were themselves state officials. Just as the grand vizier and other servants of the state had fixed sources of income, so the sultans undertook their jobs on a salary and were held accountable for withdrawing even the smallest sum from the state treasury⁵.

Another revolutionary change brought to the system by the Prophet (SAW) is his institution of justice and public benefit as the joint sources of political legitimacy. In line with the boundaries the Prophet (SAW) set on the exercise of authority, these principles were later formulated in the precept, “the legitimate exercise of authority on the subjects is contingent on their benefit”⁶ that illegalizes arbitrary political action taken towards citizens. As a result, actions that served socially beneficial purposes were exclusively recorded as legitimate in *Fiqh*.

An even more significant revolutionary change is the Prophet (SAW)’s abolishment of hereditary succession, a common custom whereby state leadership would pass from the head of state to his children and grandchildren. This means that the Prophet (SAW) did not establish a dynasty. Instead, he transferred the custody of state to capable, knowledgeable individuals who possessed excellent morality and who were proven to have a firm grasp of their responsibilities. The first such custodian of state (khalifa) was Abu Bakr (RA), and the second was Omar (RA), none from his family.

5 The sultan’s salary was saved in the “hazine-i hassa;” i.e., private treasury, and state funds were saved in the “hazine-i amme;” public treasury.

6 Article 58 in the *Mecelle* (*Mecelle-i Ahkâm Adliyye*), “Raiyye yani tebaa üzerine tasarruf maslahata menüttur,” is recorded as a maxim, and means that the legitimacy of actions taken towards citizens depends on the benefits of these actions to them.

When we consider Western civilizations from a similar perspective, we see that the separation of the head of state from the state occurs much later, during the modern era formation of nation states. Placing limits to authority likewise occurs in the modern era; this only goes to demonstrate how the rules set by the Prophet (SAW) fifteen centuries ago were so open-minded and visionary in scope. Due to his exemplary application of those rules, political governance later became one of the central issues in Islamic Studies. There was much written on the subject, but, unfortunately, not much of that writing is known today.

The Quest for an Ideal State and Politics Today

Contemporary Islamic political thought and discourse are generally out of touch with the tradition. Not one theory engages with the circle of justice as envisioned by Ibn Khaldun or Kınalızâde, and, similarly, there is no reference to political sunnah as emphasized by Ibn Khaldun. Rather, there is only reference to sharia as law and a universal adherence to the pyramid model of political governance.

The history of Islamic political theory undoubtedly consists of more than Ibn Khaldun and offers a rich, comprehensive store of literature written from different perspectives by philosophers, fiqh scholars, theologians, Sufis, historians, statesmen, and bureaucrats. However, even a brief literature scan is enough to show that contemporary Islamic political theory texts do not belong to any of these centuries-old intellectual traditions. It may even be said that there is an intentional avoidance, or, rejection of the intellectual heritage offered not just by Ibn Khaldun and Kınalızâde, but by political thinkers ranging from Al-Farabi to Al-Mawardi, Al-Ghazali to Koçibey, Dedecöngi to Katip Celebi, Nizam-ul-Mulk to Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, and Ebussuud Efendi to Said Halim Pasha. Modern Islamic political theories seem to converge on an effort to build a system of political thought from scratch, paradoxically bringing about the phenomenon of “tradition-alism *sans* tradition.”

The solution to the gap in current scholarship is to reclaim Islamic political heritage, to accept its wealth so as to reconstruct it in the light of current developments, through an approach that may be termed “innovation grounded in tradition.” What will help us make the transition is the circular understanding of politics as put forth by Ibn Khaldun and the Ottoman intellectuals and statesmen who followed in his footsteps; this understanding is designed to uphold the practice inherited from Prophet Muhammad, i.e. the Sunnah, and rests on the foundations of egalitarianism and pluralism. In our age of open civilization, the pyramidal model of politics no longer answers the needs of humanity and has become outdated. The world needs a circular understanding of management, administration, politics and good governance.

In the case that Muslims today adopt “applied Ibn Khaldunism” as methodology, they will achieve a new understanding of politics that, through the perspective of the circle of politics, will allow them to generate solutions to issues inherent to both their local political systems and also to global political systems that affect humanity in general.



Taliq Zerendud Levha.
(Ibn Khaldun. The Circle of Justice. Calligraphist: Ahmet Kutluhan)

Namely, Ibn Khaldun's circle of politics, founded on the intellectual heritage of ancient civilizations, offers both Muslims and humanity alike the potential to create a new political alternative. Contemporary Islamic political discourse, in particular, must grow back its roots in tradition, and, through an approach best described as "innovation grounded in tradition", must revive Ibn Khaldun's legacy so as to present to the world an alternative political methodology. The term "circle of politics" should not be misleading in its specificity; the model embodies an egalitarian and pluralistic approach to social organization that is more universal than local.