

Three-Toed Sloth

Slow Takes from the Canopy (My Very Own Internet Tradition)

September 15, 2007

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The Khaldun Option

If James Wimberley can [invoke Timur-i-Lang](#) for a discussion of climate change, I feel free to resurrect his old interlocutor, the great historian and pioneering social scientist [ibn Khaldun](#), in regards to our strategy in Iraq.

Ibn Khaldun's theory of culture and society was appropriately complicated; it was, in fact, a *science* in the proper Aristotelian mode, starting from certain premises regarded as secured by other sciences, observation, etc., and concerning itself with the formal, material, efficient and final causes of human societies, especially their growth, their decay, and their built-in drives to attain certain ends. (I refer the reader curious about this notion of *entelechy* to the brilliant [two-part exegesis](#) due to G. Clinton.) This is not the place for a full discussion, which I'm not really qualified to give, anyway, but for the present purposes what concerns us is the core of the historical cycle ibn Khaldun thought he had observed. This concerns the inter-relationships between economic life, social solidarity, cultural refinement, and military effectiveness.

The goal of human society, ibn Khaldun thought, was the development of culture and the sciences. For the arts and sciences to become developed and refined, specialists must train and practice for long periods of time, in order to develop the necessary habits to a high pitch. (Ibn Khaldun, a noted poet in his time, nicely described poetry as "a technical habit of the tongue".) For these specialists to be able to make a living while doing so, they must live in cities, and those cities must be flourishing economically, so that there is enough demand for their specialties, and so that there is a surplus to pay for such luxuries

as poetry, craftwork and astronomy. This is only possible if there is government and the state --- ibn Khaldun, rather more realistically than Weber, defined the state as that institution whose function is to suppress all such injustices as it does not itself commit. For the state to be able to do this, it must be militarily effective. Military effectiveness, he thought, depends not just on individual courage, but also the solidarity (*'asabiyya*) of the soldiers with one another and with their leaders. People raised in conditions of luxury do not (reliably, or for the most part) have such feelings of solidarity, nor do ordinary townsmen and peasants, since their safety and survival is guaranteed for them by the state. It is only barbarians living in mountains and deserts, whose survival is crucially dependent on mutual support against the elements and against other tribes, who will develop the feelings of solidarity on which military power rests.

Fortunately enough, men are naturally ambitious for power, wealth and a life of ease. Thus, the leaders of tribal groups which possess the necessary size and solidarity to have military power will desire to seize control of cities and their states, and become governing powers. The size of the state they will be able to found will depend on their degree of solidarity and the size of their armies. Initially, the rulers will be vigorous, expansive, and uncultured. Gradually their descendants, raised in the luxury and security of cities, will grow more refined and improve their patronage of the arts and sciences; this condition, at the peak of a dynasty, is in ibn Khaldun's view the natural end (*telos*) of human society. Everything that grows must decay, however, and for ibn Khaldun this decay takes the conjoined form of the dynasty losing the feelings of tribal solidarity which was the basis for its power, owing to the dynasts' new, softer mode of life, and at the same time hastening their economic decline through corruption and excessive taxation. This sets the stage for a new dynasty to emerge from the hills or deserts.

Why is the United States government unable to impose its will on Iraq? It is because it has too few soldiers, too far from home, among too alien a population. (If our army of occupation was a million soldiers strong, the fact that almost none of them can make themselves understood would be much less of a problem.) Some have suggested that the problem is insufficient will or solidarity on the American side, but this seems implausible; assuming we actually want there to be an Iraqi population to govern, simply killing more

of them is unlikely to work (never mind the moral issues). What ibn Khaldun would advise, I think, is to find an *Iraqi* group which is numerous, has the solidarity needed to dominate the rest of Iraqi society, and can be brought into alliance with us; and he would advise us to look at either the deserts or the mountains. I submit that there is exactly one group which fulfills the necessary conditions: the Kurds.

They comprise a reasonable fraction of the Iraqi population; their effective *'asabiyya* is demonstrated by the fact their militias, a.k.a. *peshmerga*, already control Iraqi Kurdistan militarily; and they have, notwithstanding the unpleasantness of the 1970s and 1980s, a by-now long-standing alliance with us. Our strategy, then, should be to offer them our support in a bid for military and political domination over the rest of Iraq — with the understanding that they are to leave Turkey *strictly alone*. That is, they not only get Kirkuk, they get Baghdad and Basra, and not just the north's oil but *all* of Iraq's oil. Of course, this will be horribly undemocratic and bloody, and it will make anyone even remotely sympathetic with Arab nationalism hate us even more, but I suspect many in Washington would view those attributes as features rather than bugs in any policy.

Update (25 September): No, I am not actually advocating this. (Note the "modest proposal" category below.) No, I do not expect to see this happen. Yes, I agree that if this did happen it would be very bad for just about everyone in Iraq. Yes, I am seriously saying that Iraq has long since run out *merely* bad options. Yes, there are more direct ways to make that last point.

Manual trackback: [Egregious Moderation](#); [MetaFilter](#); [Paperpools](#) (I am not worthy!)

[Writing for Antiquity](#); [The Continuing Crisis](#); [Modest Proposals](#)

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