

**ESSAYS IN LATE OTTOMAN  
TO POST-OTTOMAN  
INTELLECTUAL HISTORY  
VOL. I**

**SON DÖNEM OSMANLI'SINDAN  
OSMANLI SONRASINA  
ENTELEKTÜEL TARİH ÜZERİNE  
MAKALELER  
I. CİLT**

**Edited by / Derleyen  
Hasan Aksakal**



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BEYOĞLU KİTABEVİ

37

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**POLITICAL TYRANNY AND ETHICS:  
INSIGHTS FROM THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF  
AL-KAWAKIBI AND TAHA ABDURAHMAN**

**FADI ZATARI\***

**INTRODUCTION**

Many Western scholars, especially Orientalists, have equated the notion of tyranny with the East,<sup>1</sup> perpetuating a solid association between tyranny, despotism, and authoritarianism with certain regions of the world.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Oriental despotism’ is frequently repeated, often with the assumption that there is a natural relationship between the Orient, Islam, and the oppres-

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1. See, for instance, Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 4, 203, 346.

2. John M Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

sive governance.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, democracy and its associated values are mainly attributed to the West and its countries,<sup>4</sup> with democracy and tyranny being highlighted as the most pronounced distinctions between the Western and the non-Western realms.<sup>5</sup> The discussion of tyranny and democracy is relevant to societal ethics, as tyranny is seen as a symbol of evil and immorality, while democracy is generally perceived as the embodiment of righteousness and virtue.

Political theorists and philosophers have emphasized democracy and its principles, preferring it to all possible alternatives, but they have often overlooked how to address the underlying problem of tyranny.<sup>6</sup> In other words, tyranny is understudied and undervalued.<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that addressing the underlying problem of tyranny fundamentally is necessary to facilitate the participation and representation of people's voices. The paper emphasizes the importance of understanding the problem of tyranny within one's own cultural and traditional context rather than solely relying on the Orientalists discourse. By examining the

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3. Ivan Kalmar, *Early Orientalism: Imagined Islam and The Notion of Sublime Power* (Routledge, 2013).

4. Salman Sayyid, *Recalling the Caliphate: Decolonization and World Order* (Hurst Publishers, 2014) 70.

5. Norberto Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship: The nature and Limits of State Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

6. Jason Brennan mentioned why democracy is preferred, the reasons are varied such as 'Democracy is necessary to express that all citizens are equal.' 'Democracy is necessary for proper social recognition or recognition of one's agency.' 'Democracy is necessary as a social basis for self-respect.' 'Democracy is necessary as a social basis for being respected by others.' 'Democracy is necessary for proper inclusion as a full member of society.' and 'Nondemocratic structures, regardless of how well governed they are, are an affront to citizens' dignity.' See Jason Brennan, *Against democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2016)115.

7. There are a lot of studies on ancient tyranny but not modern tyranny. See for instance, Toivo Koivukoski and David Tabachnick, *Confronting Tyranny: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

perspectives of two Muslim theorists, who have made outstanding contributions to this issue, this paper contends that tyranny has tendency to corrupt individual and collective ethics, and absolute tyranny can significantly deteriorate the ethical fabric of society. Moreover, eliminating tyranny means improving the moral system in society at both the individual and collective levels, thereby promoting greater participation and expression of people's will and freedom.

This paper aims to compare two influential scholars on the moral critique of tyranny. The first is the Syrian social theorist Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1854-1902). The second is the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abdurahman (1944-). Both analyzed the problem of tyranny and its ethical implications in society. Through an extensive exploration of the relationship between tyranny and ethics, it was found that al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman were found to address this relationship, albeit in different ways. While al-Kawakibi focuses primarily on the political and material aspects of tyranny and how it degenerates individual and collective ethics, Taha Abdurahman sheds light on the spiritual and philosophical aspects of what he calls *Tasayyud* (psychological Tyranny) and proposes overcoming it through *tazkiyat* (self-purification or self-discipline). Methodologically, this paper analyzes and compares these scholars' concepts of tyranny and ethics. The first part scrutinizes the concept of *istibdād* (tyranny) by al-Kawakibi and how it affects ethics in society, while the second part delves into the *tasayyud* and its relation to ethics in society. Finally, this paper examines the contributions of both scholars in addressing the issue of tyranny and improving morality in society.

## THE CONCEPTION OF *ISTIBDĀD*: AL-KAWAKIBI

Al-Kawakibi<sup>8</sup> is one of the outstanding Muslim social theorists of the 19th century, who made profound contributions to understanding the nature of tyranny and its multifaceted relationships with key social elements such as religion, knowledge, pedagogy, and ethics, as well as proposing solutions for its eradication. Al-Kawakibi's major contribution in this regard is his well-known book (*Taba'i' al-istibdad wa-masari' al-isti'bad*)<sup>9</sup> published in 1899, which is considered as a scholarly exploration of political philosophy, as noted by Itzchak Weismann.<sup>10</sup> After more than three decades of research and reflection on what al-Kawakibi calls 'the great question,' which indicates the main problem of the social issues facing Muslims and even the East face, he reaches one main conclusion that '[...] the origin of this disease is political tyranny, and its management should be guided by constitutional shura (consultation).'<sup>11</sup> However, what is tyranny from al-Kawakibi's point of view? How does he associate tyranny to ethics? How does tyranny destroy the individual and collective ethical system in society?

Notably, al-Kawakibi uses the Arabic term *istibdād*, which encompasses a spectrum of English equivalents, such as 'tyranny,' 'despotism,' 'persecution,' 'authoritarianism,' and 'oppression'.<sup>12</sup>

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8. For more about al-Kawakibi's life, background, family, politics, and society at his time, see Itzchak Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival*, (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 9-25.

9. After more than a century, Amer Chaikhouni recently translated the book into English for the first time. See, Abdul Rahman Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2021).

10. Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival*, 102.

11. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 1.

12. For a comprehensive meaning of the concept of *istibdād* in the Arabic language, see Fadi Zatarī, "al-Istibdād [Tyranny]", In 'Mawsū'at al-muṣṭalahāt al-Islāmiyah: ta'ṣīl wa-ḍawābiṭ' [The Islamic Terminology Encyclopedia: Etymology and Discipline] edited by 'Abd al-Majīd al-Najjār et al., vol. I, Dār al-aṣālah, (Istanbul, 2023), 167-179.

While al-Kawakibi applies primarily this concept to authoritarian governments and tyrannical leaders,<sup>13</sup> For consistency, this paper predominantly adopts the term ‘tyranny.’ Al-Kawakibi defines tyranny on several levels. First, he defines tyranny linguistically as ‘egotism and arrogance about one’s own opinion and refusal to accept advice, or self-conceit in making decisions and opinions about public rights.’<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, in the realm of political science, al-Kawakibi reminds the readers that tyranny is ‘the management of the rights of a people or a nation by an individual or a small group according to personal wishes and desire without regard to any political consequences.’<sup>15</sup> As anticipated, al-Kawakibi associates tyranny with the government, particularly emphasizing despotism as its most prominent manifestation. He explains this as ‘A government that manages people’s affairs as it desires without any concern or fear of any consequences or punishment by investigators.’<sup>16</sup> That denotes an absolutist government unrestrained by legal constraints or the will of the governed.

Tyrannical governments can take several forms, including ‘an elected ruler’ who is not accountable to his constituents. Al-Kawakibi extends the concept of authoritarian governance to include ‘an elected government’ or ‘a constitutional government,’ regardless of a complete separation of powers, as long as there is a lack of accountability and popular oversight. To al-Kawakibi, tyranny is inevitable and expected at all levels and in its various forms. Itzchak Weismann explains that according to al-Kawakibi, every government ‘[...] is prone to lapse into tyranny when left

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13. Stephen Sheehi, *Al-Kawakibi: From Political Journalism to a Political Science of the “Liberal” Arab Muslim*, (Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics 37, 2017), 87.

14. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 9.

15. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 9.

16. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 10.

unchecked by the use of two principal means: the ignorance of the people and military service.<sup>17</sup> Thus, al-Kawakibi advocates for absolute responsibilities and accountability as the only means to prevent such lapses.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, he contends that the tyranny of a small group can be even more harmful to the nation than an individual tyrant as one single tyrant oppresses and persecutes the people to sever his interests; however, the more tyrants there are, the more intimidation and oppression there will be, since each will have different interests, and this will create inevitably more abuse and persecution.

Al-Kawakibi claims that the worst form of political tyranny is a tyrant king, who inherits the throne and has full religious authority while commanding the army.<sup>19</sup> Such a tyrant king utilizes religion to justify his rule over the spiritual aspects of the people and employs the military to monopolize their material lives by means of power. Al-Kawakibi goes on to identify what he calls 'self-*istibdād*' as one of the wretched types of tyranny. He articulates, 'One of the worst types of tyranny is the domination of ignorance over knowledge and the control of selfishness over reason, which is called 'self-despotism.'<sup>20</sup>

As a scholar of Islam, al-Kawakibi elaborates on why God (The Utterly Just) allows a tyrant and a tyrannical government to prevail, asserting that 'He [God] does not impose tyrants except upon tyrants. [...] Every individual subjected to tyranny is a little tyrant himself who will subject his wife, family, and all mankind

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17. Itzhak Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival*, 105.

18. Mohammed al-Ghazali (1917–1996) says that tyrants put themselves above responsibility; they make big mistakes and make others the scapegoat. See Mohammed al-Ghazali, *al-Fasād al-siyāsī fī al-mujtama'āt al-'Arabiyah wa-al-Islāmiyah* [Political Corruption in Arab and Islamic Societies], 10th edition, (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr lil-Nashr, 2015), 66.

19. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 10.

20. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 14.

[...].<sup>21</sup> Consequently, al-Kawakibi sees tyranny as God's punishment, aimed primarily at those who tolerate or enable it; as he states, 'Tyranny is the fire of God's anger on Earth [...]. Tyranny is the worst curse. God rushes it to punish lazy subservient people [...].'<sup>22</sup> Besides, al-Kawakibi reports a famous Arabic idiom saying, 'The Tyrant is the sword of God, He uses him to revenge, and then he revenges from him.'<sup>23</sup> This underscores al-Kawakibi's belief in God's absolute justice, attributing the imposition of tyrannical rule to the actions and deeds of the people.

Al-Kawakibi asserts the critical relationship between good ethics and good government. According to him, good ethics are the consequences of good government. He claims, ' Good ethics are fruits of seeds planted by inheritance, in the soil of discipline, watered by education, and supervised by good government. Subsequently, politics can affect people's ethics in the way cultivation affects plants and trees.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, people in society are analogous to wild gardens. They need a proper gardener, and if they are not tended by a 'good gardener' (a metaphor here for good government), the gardens will be abandoned and worthless. Many parts of the garden will dry up and wither; even sturdier branches may overpower the fragile ones. Likewise, maintaining good ethics in society requires a just government to oversee that mission.

The link between ethics and *istibdād* is worth discussing because it dramatically affects the ethical fabric of society. Al-Kawakibi maintains that tyranny corrupts, weakens, exploits, and destroys ethics in society.<sup>25</sup> Individuals, who are an integral part of

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21. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 16.

22. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 15.

23. Cited in Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 15.

24. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 80.

25. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 77.

society, typically experience sentiments of love, trust, and belonging; however, under tyranny, these feelings give way to hostility toward one's own people, feelings of insecurity, and a desire to emigrate and leave one's country. Moreover, the natural affection for one's family and friends diminishes as one sees one's own nation and people contributing to the oppression of tyrants, resulting in a loss of trust and confidence within the society, including among family and friends. Consequently, he points out that tyranny takes away the joys of life, and even the intellectual pleasures evaporate under a tyrannical government, ultimately leading to mental distress and agitation of natural feelings. These combined concerns leave people at a loss to distinguish between what is morally right and what is wrong.<sup>26</sup>

According to al-Kawakibi, tyranny has the capability to distort reality, turn truths upside down, and misrepresent perceptions.<sup>27</sup> For example, people initially establish a government to serve them, but tyranny turns everything upside down and makes people completely subservient to authoritarian rulers. In other words, tyranny manipulates people's power and will against their own interests and benefits. The distortion of facts, truths, and realities extends to ethical and social terminologies, where what is considered decent ethics can be twisted into immoral characters and qualities and vice versa.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the one who seeks truth and demands rights will be considered obscene and indecent. But, the one who gives up his rights is considered obedient. The one who complains about oppression is a spoiler. The intelligent and conscious are to be considered as infidels. The lazy and poor are

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26. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 77-78.

27. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 78.

28. C.f. Mohammed al-Ghazali, *al-Fasād al-siyāsī fī al-mujtama'āt al-'Arabīyah wa-al-Islāmīyah*. 67.

decent and safe. Moreover, some concepts are completely transformed, such as 'hypocrisy being deemed as intelligent politics,' 'manipulation as politeness,' 'servility as kindness,' and 'pettiness as good behavior.'<sup>29</sup>

According to al-Kawakibi, an individual living under despotism does not have precise guidelines and moral clarity in his life and does not have regulations that conceivably control his ethical system of distinguishing between good and evil. Consequently, he expresses that such individuals are subject to manipulation and leads lives characterized by confusion and disorder, devoid of clear objectives and ethical framework. Even decent individuals are pushed to engage in insincerity and hypocrisy under tyrannical circumstances due to societal norms.<sup>30</sup> The proliferation and prevalence of unethical features in society enslave the subjects to prolong the authoritarian system and maintain the most flawed ethics.<sup>31</sup> This is all to assert that tyranny undermines ethical behavior, and leads to confusion and chaos as individuals practice immorality as if it were ethical without being aware of mixture of evil and decent attributes.

### **THE CONCEPTION OF TASAYUD: TAHA ABDURAHMAN**

Taha Abdurahman is one of the significant and productive Arab-Muslim philosophers in the contemporary age. His philosophical project is sophisticated, inventive, and well-structured.<sup>32</sup> For

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29. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 79.

30. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 81.

31. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 84.

32. For more about Taha Abdurahman's educational background and philosophical

such reasons, in his book ‘Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha,’ Wael Hallaq describes Taha Abdurrahman as ‘[...] one of the most significant philosophers that the world of Islam has produced since colonialism set foot in Afro-Asia.’<sup>33</sup> Hallaq’s statement is not an exaggeration. Taha Abdurrahman has produced several philosophical projects; however, they all have one thing in common: their ethical orientation.<sup>34</sup> Ethics is the main focus of all his works. In one of the major books ‘*Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Ḍīq al-‘Almāniyya ilā Si‘at al-‘Itimāniyya*,’<sup>35</sup> He examines the relationship between religion and politics and introduces the concept of *tasayud*. This section tries to answer the question: What is *tasayud* from Taha Abdurrahman’s perspective? How does he associate it with personal ethics? Besides, it delves into the question of how *tasayud* destroys the individual and collective ethical system in society.

According to Taha Abdurrahman, the concept of *tasayud* (which can be translated as domination,<sup>36</sup> dictatorship, tyranny, and supremacy) reflects the psychological composition of the tyrant, especially a political tyrant. *Tasayud* indicates the prac-

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contributions, see Mohammed Hashas, “The Trusteeship Paradigm: The Formation and Reception of a Philosophy.” In *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane’s Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, (Brill, 2020) 37-61.

33. Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. (Columbia University Press, 2019), xiii.

34. Fadi Zatari, “Entrustment Ethics and Secularism: Taha Abdurrahman’s Perspective”. *Darulfunun Ilahiyat* 33, no. 1 (June 2022): 303-310. <https://doi.org/10.26650/di.2022.33.1.1077851>, 304.

35. Taha Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Ḍīq al-‘Almāniyya ilā Si‘at al-‘Itimāniyya* [The Spirit of Religion: From the Narrowness of Secularism to the Openness of Trusteeship] (Beirut and Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-‘Arabī, 2012)

36. In one of his footnotes, Taha Abdurrahman says that the concept of *tasayud* can precisely match the Latin word ‘Dominium.’ In English, ‘Domination.’ Since it combines the two meanings of possession and domination. See Taha Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 94.

tice and exercise of domination over people.<sup>37</sup> Taha Abdurahman states, 'the instinct to have *tasayud*,' or 'desire and lust for *tasayud*,' is a tendency that is inherited in the human soul. The concept of *tasayud* or psychological tyranny is based on the fact that the human soul is inclined to possess and attribute to things, and this endless desire constantly increases and develops until it dictates and dominates the personal psychosocial of the tyrant, making a tyrant believe that he is sole owner and leader. The tyrant may even ascribe to himself the attributes of God, such as claiming absolute sovereignty in judgment and decision-making.

Taha Abdurahman argues that the more a person penetrates and engages in political work, the more his love for practicing *tasayud* increases and becomes evident. This inclination no end and is limited to the desires and lust of *tasayud*. When this person rises to the political zenith as ruler of the state, for him, society must become as a single melting pot, with no possibility of political blocs, alternatives, or diversity. So, the man of *tasayud* rules the state and its institutions single-handedly. *Tasayud* makes him desire to be the only leader who has all the state's powers in his hands.<sup>38</sup> Taha Abdurahman distinguishes between three groups of tyrants. Firstly, *al-Ḥākim al-Tāghiyah* (an unjust ruler) has an unbridled desire to practice total domination or totalitarianism. This tyrannical ruler strives to eliminate the will and power of people through intimidation and domination. Secondly, *al-Ḥākim al-Mustabid* (a tyrant ruler) rules according to, his whims and desires, and his decisions and rulings are above the law and accountability. Lastly, *al-Ḥākim al-Muḥīṭ* (the all-encompassing tyrant) is the most pernicious type of ruler mentioned above. He elevates himself to the

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37. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 511.

38. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 96.

deification of the only God. He exalts himself as the absolute ruler with whom no one can or should share authority. Such a tyrant sees himself as an impeccable leader whose position and decisions are indisputable.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, as maintained by Taha Abdurahman, *tasayud* is an instinct instilled in the human soul, and it leads to enslavement and monopolization people's minds. Therefore, the man of *tasayud* or the tyrant does what reason and commonsense renounce. Consequently, the tyrant does not stop using all possible forms of violence and intimidation to consolidate the foundations of his rule. The tyrant is controlled by his love of *tasayud* as if it were his worship of God.<sup>40</sup> The man of *tasayud* seeks it without end. Whenever he gains new strength, property, or power, he desires to have more due to his infinite greed and lust for domination, implying that *tasayud* will end only with his death. In other words, the tyrant does not stop oppressing, intimidating, and persecuting people.

*Tasayud* is an evil character that leads to injustice and oppression. The deeper *tasayud* goes, the more a person breaks off his spiritual connection with his ethics. Taha Abdurahman argues that the love of possession psychologically becomes the source of evil. Because of this, flawed ethical characters will be normalized, reflected in personal desires such as 'show-off,' 'love of fame,' 'love of prestige,' and 'love of self-praise.' Also, other personal traits include greed, avarice, narcissism, vanity, arrogance, hypocrisy, deceit, envy, hatred, insolence, temptation, and indifference to values and morals. Taha Abdurahman observes that some, instead of

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39. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 96.

40. Abdurahman, *Bu's al-Dahrāniyya: al-Naqd al-l'timāni li-Faṣl al-Akhlāq 'an al-Dīn* [The Misery of Secularism: Trusteeship Critique of the Separation of Ethics from Religion] (Beirut: al-Shabaka al-'Arabiyya lil-Abḥāth wa-l-Nashr, 2014) 82.

warning against such evil characters and behaviours, see such evil attributes as ‘political realism.’ Some scholars (Taha Abdurahman mentioned Nicolas Machiavelli) even advocate for such evil traits and advise their leaders to continue practicing *tasayud*.<sup>41</sup>

As noted above, al-Kawakibi believes that tyranny and tyrants turn facts upside down. Likewise, Taha Abdurahman contends that political actors change the meanings of moral behaviors with unethical behaviors, giving the terms meanings other than their original connotations. For example, ‘sycophancy’ is a sinister psychological conduct that brings disdain to the sycophant and those being sycophantic, making the sycophant a hypocrite. The political actor, however, reframes this behavior, renaming it ‘getting close to him’ thereby obscuring its true nature and perpetuating a culture of deception and flattery.<sup>42</sup>

Taha Abdurahman demonstrates that politics characterizes its practitioners by what he calls ‘ethical dualism,’ wherein outward morality differs from inner morality. If this difference increases, political actor’s behavior becomes closer to practicing hypocrisy and duplicity, exemplified by the greed for power, the pursuit of self-interest, and the desire for vanity. The political practitioner seems to be the exact opposite of these qualities. The political actor calls these qualities by other names, such as ‘establishing justice,’ ‘fighting injustice,’ ‘spreading freedom,’ and ‘eradicating slavery.’ Taha Abdurahman asserts that this ethical dualism gives legitimacy and popularity to decisions and actions with questionable motives, even if they appear to serve public affairs.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 101.

42. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 103.

43. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 103-104.

The tyrant employs innovative and creative methods of oppression and intimidation to perpetuate his authority and control over the populace. Over time, fear becomes ingrained in society to the extent that individuals themselves participate in and contribute to the atmosphere of fear, by mirroring the tactics of the tyrant. As a result, people become afraid of what should otherwise make them feel safe, such as 'fear of justice' or 'fear of freedom.'<sup>44</sup> In such an environment, society's ethical system suffers, and individuals cannot distinguish between decent and immoral behavior. Decency becomes muddled, and unethical traits may be mistakenly perceived as virtuous.

### OVERCOMING TYRANNY

It should be noted that al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman did not specify any particular tyrant or government, state, or nation in their contributions. Al-Kawakibi even begins his book by emphasizing this point in the preface, distancing himself from associating his contribution with any tyrannical government or tyrant.<sup>45</sup> Taha Abdurahman did not explicitly target any specific tyrant or government in his discussions. The focus of both scholars was to clarify the problem of tyranny and show its negative effect on ethics on individual and collective levels without politicizing their analyses. Moreover, both al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman wanted to propose solutions that could be applied worldwide. In other words, their objective was to theoretically diagnose the problem of tyranny and oppression and its negative

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44. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 124.

45. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 3.

effects and propose ethic-oriented solutions. This section will discuss how to overcome *istibdād* and *tasayud* from al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman perspectives. Both believe that tyranny tends to corrupt the ethics of individuals and collectives, and absolute tyranny absolutely corrupts the ethical system in society. Thus, both scholars mention different factors in suggesting solutions to eradicate tyranny.

As a scholar of Islam, al-Kawakibi confirms the significant role of religious teaching as well as the models of the prophets in eliminating tyranny. He emphasizes that ‘great prophets start saving nations from corrupted ethics by starting initially with releasing the minds from glorification and worshipping anyone else but God. [...] They enlighten people with the principles of wisdom and alert them to the means of controlling their will and freedom of thought and freedom of choice, thus destroying the prisons of tyranny and blocking the origin of all corruption.’<sup>46</sup> In other words, the eradication of tyranny begins with elimination of fear from the minds of people, which is often fueled by ignorance. When ignorance vanishes, fear disappears, and tyranny will be eliminated.<sup>47</sup>

Al-Kawakibi outlines three fundamental principles for a practical strategy to eradicate tyranny. Firstly, he emphasizes the importance of people experiencing the suffering inflicted by tyranny, asserting that if the people do not feel the suffering of tyranny, they cannot truly value freedom and liberty. When a nation endures prolonged intimidation and humiliation over generations, its ethical standards decline. Such people may lose their agency and autonomy over time, resembling passive followers or worse.

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46. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 87.

47. Hicham El Haddaji, “The Congruent Critique of Despotism in ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and Shaykh Ali Abdel-Raziq,” *AlMuntaqa*, 1, no. 3 (2018), 94.

They may then neglect the pursuit of freedom and justice altogether, undermining the significance of independence and order. Al-Kawakibi asserts that the people who feel the misery of tyranny should enlighten others in society. Still, before taking the role of enlightening people, one must improve his skills and knowledge. Al-Kawakibi suggests several commandments for the young intellectuals to play an essential role in eliminating tyranny: 'To be keen about good reputation and high ethical standards, especially about honesty, integrity, fidelity, and constancy of principles.'<sup>48</sup>

Secondly, tyranny cannot be eliminated by force or violence; it must be removed by peaceful means and in gradual stages. The only proper method to eradicate tyranny to improving people's awareness and education.<sup>49</sup> Al-Kawakibi maintains that tyranny should not be resisted with violence, which could lead to mass killings and destruction. Thus, he warns against the revolutionary approach to overthrowing tyranny. Al-Kawakibi uses the metaphor that revolution can only cut the tree of despotism, but it does not uproot it. He asserts that the resurgence of tyranny is inevitable, drawing a parallel with a tree whose deep and firm roots enhance its potency.<sup>50</sup> He stresses the role of knowledge and consciousness in fighting the evil nature of tyranny, which is better than a violent reactionary revolution.

Last, al-Kawakibi emphasizes the fact that there must be a prepared political strategy before one begins to resist tyranny. If the goals are not planned and explicit and the tactics are not precise,

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48. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 134.

49. Abu Sulayman argues that weak awareness leads to tyranny, which leads to corruption, and that tyranny and corruption go hand in hand. See Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, *Ishkālīyat al-istibdād wa-al-fasād fi al-tārikh al-Islāmi* [The Problem of Tyranny and Corruption in Islamic History], 2nd edition, (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2012), 17.

50. Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Tyranny and the Devastating Results of Oppression*, 133.

confusion and disputes will arise along the pathway, disrupting the action and turning it into chaos, revenge, and disorder. Tyranny cannot be removed simply by removing a tyrant ruler because tyranny is a system, not a single person.<sup>51</sup> To do otherwise, would be replace chronic disease with another more acute illness. So, the purpose must be to uproot tyranny as a whole, starting from the minds of people through pedagogy, education, and engagement in decision-making, reaching the point where *shura* (consultation) is well established in society.

Taha Abdurahman does not stop at portraying the *tasayud* and the tyrants' personalities and dispositions and how *tasayud* becomes more and more lethal, with injustice and brutality without an end. Instead, he proposes *tazkiyat*<sup>52</sup> (self-purification or self-discipline) to resist the desire<sup>53</sup> for *tasayud*. Through to *tazkiyat*, man strives to attain moral values and to spiritually please his Almighty Creator. The goal of *tazkiyat* is educational, which provides development on the collective and individual levels to overcome new challenges and crises in human values. In other words, *tazkiyat* determines moral values by enabling individuals to enact them accordingly.

Taha Abdurahman outlines the essential features of resistance to *tasayud*, beginning with deep action that is not merely superficial. This action should not be limited to affecting the individual's outward appearance only, but it should also affect the individual's

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51. Weismann, *Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: Islamic Reform and Arab Revival*, 103.

52. *Tazkiya* is from *Tasavvuf*; it was part of a political discourse developed by scholars against oppression throughout Islamic history. For instance, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī, *Kitāb Ādāb al-Dunyā wa-l-Dīn*, edited by Yāsīn al-Sawwās. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr. 2012).

53. Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī says that the determined politician disciplines his desire until it becomes entirely suppressed; consequently, he becomes a true leader. See, Ibn Nubāta al-Miṣrī, *Al-Mukhtār min Kitāb Tadbīr al-Duwal*, [The Selection from the Book of Governing States] edited by Salwā Qandīl (Beirut: Ibn al-Azraq Center for Political Heritage Studies, 2012) 111.

inner behavior and consciousness of individual. Second, it is a comprehensive action, not a partial one. It includes all of a person's actions and is not limited to any part of them. Third, it is a transformative act and not just a partial change, and the change here is for the better - one that elevates the person to a better ethical level. Fourth, the action should ethically enhance all people's behavior at all levels. Finally, it is a continuous action and not sporadic one.<sup>54</sup> In addition, *tazkiyat* has two prominent attributes: gradual and peaceful.<sup>55</sup> Taha Abdurahman emphasizes that the primary objective must be self-reformation and discipline, not the elimination of tyranny or replacement one tyrant with another. When one completes the process of self-reformation, there will be no opportunity for tyranny to arise; however, if one eliminates tyranny and does not reform himself, there is no guarantee that tyranny will be eliminated.<sup>56</sup>

Both al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman believe that successful resistance to tyranny requires that it be peaceful; otherwise, a violent resistance to *tasayud* will not eliminate it. Taha Abdurahman explains that resistance to authority by force can take three forms to gain power: 'revolution,' 'rebellion,' and 'coup,' which can be combined into one word: 'turmoil.' Taha Abdurahman does not accept this method as appropriate for elimination of tyranny. Of course, there is also another way come to power, which is through 'elections.' Nevertheless, Taha suggests resistance with conscience, which he calls resistance with *al-Iz'aaaj* (propel).<sup>57</sup>, which is the only method to remove *tasayud*.

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54. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 264-266.

55. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 267.

56. Issam Eido, "al-I'tirāf fī al-Majāl al-Āmm: Naqd l'timānī li-Mafhūm Fūkū 'al-I'tirāf wa-l-Sulṭa'" (Confession in the Public Sphere: Trusteeship Critique of Foucault's "Confession and Power") in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, 128.

57. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 296.

*Al-Iz'aaaj* means a change from one state to another, but this change is only for the better. It frees the person from attachment to worldly desires, and fosters a sense of devotion to justice and humility instilled by God.<sup>58</sup> Taha Abdurahman shows the differences between the rebel and the revolutionary on the one hand and the practitioner of *al-Iz'aaaj* on the other hand. The rebel revolts against the ruler, not against himself. The rebel revolts against authority and does not rebel against himself. The leader overthrows the corrupt regime and does not turn against himself. However, the one practicing *al-Iz'aaaj* focuses primarily on himself predominantly.<sup>59</sup> *Al-Iz'aaaj* brings out the good in man, returning him to the sound human nature he was born with. Therefore, for Taha Abdurahman, *al-Iz'aaaj* is more capable of eliminating the injustice of tyranny. Because *al-Iz'aaaj* comes from inner moral behavior, using justice and mercy to build society.<sup>60</sup>

To conclude, al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman emphasized the significance of eradicating tyranny; both consented to some principles, such as peaceful and ethical means, starting from the self, and the focus must be on removing tyranny as a system, not just the tyrant ruler(s). Nevertheless, both did not mention essential principles in this regard, such as getting rid of tyranny should not be through any intervention of external states or that at the individual and collective levels, there must be awareness of risk of 'the tendency to tyranny,' which means the impossibility for an individual to accept the idea of living under tyranny in his mind even as an imagination.<sup>61</sup>

58. Adil Et-Tahir, "al-Mumārāsa al-Siyāsiyya al-Diyāniyya: al-Naqd al-Tazkawī wal-Badīl al-ʿīmānī" (Religious Political Practice: Spiritual Critique and the Trusteeship Alternative), in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, 147.

59. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 296-297.

60. Abdurahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 302-303.

61. Zadari, *al-Istibdād* [Tyranny], 178.

## CONCLUSION

Political order and stability depend on moral clarity and an ethical system that organizes society's political, social, and economic relationships. Nevertheless, political tyranny in all forms and types creates injustice and confusion and corrupts human consciousness. Thus, elimination of tyranny contributes to stability and political order, and rulers can last longer and avoid collapse. This is the reason why Ibn Khaldūn aptly states that 'injustice ruins civilization.'<sup>62</sup> This paper sheds light on the concepts of *istibdād* and *tasayud*, which refer to tyranny and domination in the Arabic literature, while examining their ethical implications on society. The two leading Muslim theorists, al-Kawakibi and Taha Abdurahman, are taken as scholarly references for this work.

As ethics play a significant role in society, this paper showed how, under *istibdād* and *tasayud*, moral clarity in society disappears at both the individual and collective levels, leading to the blurring of the lines between good from evil. Consequently, the mixed meanings of moral and immoral qualities are turned upside down. Al-Kawakibi proposes a politically oriented solution to eliminate *istibdād* in society. However, Taha Abdurahman focuses more on the psychological and philosophical aspects of the individual, emphasizing the role of purification of the self from the love of power and possessive desires as well as *tasayud*. Finally, this paper demonstrates how Muslim thinkers consider the subject of tyranny and proposes solutions to reject tyrannical governments and rulers. This article aims to illustrate that the pursuit of freedom and liberty is not limited to Western thinkers, as some Orientalists might assume.

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62. Abdurahman Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah*. Edited by 'Alī 'Abd al-Wāḥid Wāfi. vol. 3. (Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr, 1981),741.

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