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Research article

To speak of the air is to touch desire: *Bil hawa*, *havada*, and the affective register of a promise held in the air

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Abstract

At a burnt but still-functioning ATM in northern Lebanon, Omar tried to withdraw his salary and, once he could not, called it *bil hawa* [in the air]. In northern Cyprus, Meryem Hanım said the public-sector post she sought for her daughter remained *havada* [in the air]. Following our interlocutors' lead, we read *bil hawa* and *havada* as affective registers through which the state is felt, addressed and lived as its material promises are held in the air, desired but unfulfilled. Drawing on Aretxaga's and Navaro-Yashin's accounts of political life and the phantasmatic, the paper traces this relation across northern Cyprus, a polity whose international recognition remains contested, and northern Lebanon, a region within the Lebanese state shaped by historically uneven forms of state presence and public provision. Placing the two side by side, we explore how state promises bind beyond sovereign form, state failure, or waiting alone. *Bil hawa* and *havada* reveal a shared register of inhabiting the state after conflict, where futures remain unsettled and an ever-present elsewhere sharpens desire. The relation lives in the idiom: in Arabic, *hawā* [desire] and *hawā'* [air] share a root, and to speak of the air is already to touch desire.

KEYWORDS: anthropology of the state, affect, material promises, northern Cyprus, northern Lebanon

We met Omar in Al Tal Square, in the center of Tripoli, Lebanon's largest northern city, in August 2022. Black bundles of electric wire hung low across the street, looping from one building to the next above Ottoman façades and weathered stone shops. Outside the currency exchange office, a line had formed of people waiting to convert dollars into

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Lebanese lira and vice versa, each asking the same question as they reached the counter: *addech el dollar el-yom?* [How much is the dollar today?]. Across the road stood one of the ATMs burned during the protests of winter 2021, part of the wider uprising that began in 2019.[1]

Omar explained that public-sector employees had been told that a special arrangement allowed them to withdraw their salaries despite wider banking restrictions.[2] He crossed the street, inserted his card and waited. As he came back, he shrugged and said *maachi bil hawa* [my salary is in the air].

Omar was working in a ministry in northern Lebanon; the position had been his father's before him. He described the post as something passed down through the family, carrying a sense of steadiness and continuity. He had gone to Beirut for university, but the civil war interrupted his studies. He explained that the position had given him access to health care, educational support for his children, and the prospect of retirement benefits, tying his livelihood to forms of security the private sector could not offer in the same way. He had tried to keep the same path open for the next generation, urging two of his children to study business administration so that, as he put it, the position would not "disappear in vain." Neither, he said, had followed the line. Around us, people were still waiting outside the exchange office. The burned ATM stood there, blackened but still in use. Omar looked at it, then back at us, and said again, almost lightly, "Maybe tomorrow."

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[1] The Lebanese uprising, widely referred to as the October Revolution or *thawra*, began on October 17, 2019 after the government announced new taxes, including a proposed levy on internet-based calling applications. The protests quickly exceeded this immediate trigger and became a nationwide mobilization against economic deterioration, corruption, sectarian governance and the postwar political elite. Karam and Majed (2022) frame the uprising as a countrywide moment in which economic grievances and political critique converged, bringing together demands against sectarian leaders, oligarchic power and the structures of postwar rule. Tripoli became one of the most visible centers of this mobilization. Abdul-Hamid Karameh, or Nour Square, was often represented in public and media discourse as an emblem of revolutionary vitality, although this celebratory image has also been criticized for romanticizing the city and obscuring the political and classed conditions of its mobilization (Abdo, 2022; Rønn, 2025). Abdo's account is particularly useful for understanding how the square temporarily became a site of food distribution, shelter, political debate, solidarity and collective possibility, while also remaining marked by the class divisions that structure life in the city (Abdo, 2022).
The later protests in Tripoli in January 2021 unfolded under much harsher conditions, shaped by economic collapse, currency depreciation, deepening poverty and the restrictions of the COVID-19 lockdown. Between January 25 and 31, 2021, confrontations between protesters and security forces escalated around municipal and governorate buildings. These clashes resulted in death, widespread injuries and the burning of public buildings, including Tripoli's municipality building and parts of the Serail (Osman, 2022). Rooney (2023) reads this movement from the more festive and convivial atmosphere of 2019 to the violence of 2021 as part of the way the pandemic and economic collapse disrupted revolutionary momentum and transformed the conditions of protest. For broader discussions of the 2019 uprising, see Karam and Majed (2022); for Tripoli specifically, see Abdo (2022), Osman (2022), Rooney (2023) and Rønn (2025).

[2] Basic Circular No. 162, issued by Banque du Liban on March 28, 2022, established an exceptional mechanism for the payment of public-sector salaries by requiring banks to exempt these payments from prevailing withdrawal restrictions and related charges (Banque du Liban, 2022).

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Afterwards, we went to visit Omar's father, Ammo[3] Ahmad, who was in his eighties. When we arrived, he was listening to the news, and as the headlines aired, he shouted at the television, complaining that *they* were humiliating the people. Before long, his complaints turned concrete. As a former public-sector employee, he was entitled to a particular form of health insurance, and he described how the reimbursement system had once functioned as a reliable form of state provision. Before the crisis, he would buy his medicines, keep the packaging and take the empty boxes to the office of the Cooperative of Civil Servants, where he would later be reimbursed. When the crisis began, this reimbursement chain stopped. "They stopped paying," he said, "but I did not throw the boxes away. I keep them stacked, in case they start paying again." He then turned back to the television, paused and said, "I gave my life to this state, and this is what I got in return."

About a hundred and fifty miles away, in northern Cyprus, lived Meryem Hanım[4], an interlocutor in her seventies who lost her husband in 1974 during the conflict on the island. At the time of Soğancı's fieldwork, she was trying to secure a public-sector post for her youngest daughter:

> I was pregnant with my youngest when my husband died. If they do not give "a state job" to my daughter, to whom else will they give it? My feet have fallen apart at the doors of *devlet büyükleri* [the big men of the state]. But no, *hep havada* [always in the air]. The job does not happen…. But it might one day.

Drawing on Navaro-Yashin's and Aretxaga's accounts of state power as intimate, affective and bodily—"felt close to the skin" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 396)—this paper traces how the material promises of state provision in northern Lebanon and northern Cyprus live "in the air."[5] Reading Aretxaga, Navaro-Yashin shows that politics is never encountered only as institutional structure or objective fact but sensed through "whispers, rumors, gestures, absences, murmurs and facial expressions" (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, pp. 6–7). She frames this as another way of studying political life anthropologically: one attentive to

3 Ammo, literally translating as "uncle," a common form of respectful address for an older man.

4 Hanım is a Turkish honorific placed after a woman's first name. While it may be translated as "Ms." or "Madam," the term also marks respect in Turkish forms of address. It is retained here because, given Meryem Hanım's and Ayten Hanım's ages and the respectful relationship with them, this was the form of address used in conversation.

5 Throughout this article, "northern Cyprus" refers to the territory administered by the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which was declared in 1983 following the island's division in 1974 and whose international recognition remains contested. By contrast, "northern Lebanon" names the geographical setting of our fieldwork, particularly Tripoli and Akkar, and does not refer to a separate political entity.

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how "fantasy," "dreamlike experience" and "surreal" are not outside politics, but woven into the ways politics is lived and felt (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, p. 6).[6]

Navaro-Yashin's formulation of the phantasmatic develops how "make-believe conceptualizes the phantasmatic and the tangible in unison, placing the material crafting in the making and the phantasmatic work in the believing" (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p. 5). This framework gives us conceptual ground to trace how the state is felt, addressed and lived in the air as its material promises remain desired but unfulfilled. Through the ethnography, the material promises "that might happen one day" become the very sites through which desire for the state momentarily gains form. For this, we take the lead from our interlocutors' own terms and follow *bil hawa* and *havada* as affective registers that may offer a glimpse of the "political real" in Aretxaga's terms (Aretxaga, 2005, as cited in Navaro-Yashin, 2007, p. 6). Rather than supplanting existing accounts of the phantasmatic, sovereignty, suspension or political desire, these idioms return us to our interlocutors' own words. They allow us to trace how the state binds most forcefully where its promises remain unfulfilled, still desired and still addressed.

The salary Omar tries to withdraw through a burnt ATM, Ammo Ahmad's accumulating medicine boxes, and Meryem Hanım's aching feet at the doors of the "big men of the state" become sites where this relation is lived. This relation resonates, in a different domain, with Geeta Patel's account of insurance fantasies, in which provision is desired before it arrives and attachment forms "between possible lack and certain excess" (Patel, 2007, p. 102). In Meryem Hanım's case, this interval takes the form of aching feet and repeated visits: the post is not simply unavailable but kept alive between the doors of the *devlet büyükleri* and the promise that one of them may still open.

In a similar sense, Carpi shows that, in Lebanon, the state may be condemned for neglect and coercion while still being addressed as the provider. This ambivalence gives the state what she, following Jeffrey, calls a "seductive" character: it disappoints, wounds and withholds, yet it continues to draw claims, expectations and future aspirations toward itself (Jeffrey, 2013, as cited in Carpi, 2019, p. 85). In Carpi's account, such ambivalence sharpens the "frustrated aspirations" through which people continue to relate to the state as a figure that should provide (Carpi, 2019, p. 85). Omar's words

6 The concepts build on the demystification of the state offered by Abrams (1988) and Mitchell (1991), for whom "the state" is an ideological project that imputes unity to disaggregated rule and an effect of everyday institutional practice. What a psychoanalytic vocabulary adds is an account of why such state-effects continue to grip subjects affectively even when they are recognized as effects: in the Freudian–Lacanian tradition, fantasy is not delusion but, as Laplanche and Pontalis (1967/1988) put it, a scene through which desire and the subject's relation to reality are organized (Freud, 1908/1959), and, as Žižek (1989) shows, attachment to that scene survives even cynical disbelief (cf. Rose, 1996).

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bring this ambivalence down to the burnt ATM, to the ordinary place where provision should have arrived. *Maachi bil hawa* [my salary is in the air] points to a promise withheld in the present, yet still expected from the state. The salary may come tomorrow or it may not come at all, but while it remains in the air, its possible arrival keeps desire attached to the state. At the burnt but still-functioning ATM, *bil hawa* condenses into a scene. The machine carries visible marks of violence into the ordinary. However, it keeps operating, while the inherited public-sector job that promised stability dissolves into a shrug as power and desire briefly surface in the same frame.

In this sense, building on Aretxaga (2003, 2005) and Navaro-Yashin (2002, 2007, 2012), for whom fantasy, the surreal and the phantasmatic are central to how political reality is lived, *bil hawa* and *havada* are conceptualized as affective registers through which we trace how state power is felt, addressed and lived as the state's material promises remain in the air, binding by what they promise but do not deliver. *Bil hawa* and *havada* point to a relation held in the air through which lack does not simply mark absence but becomes affectively charged. In Arabic, to speak of the air is already to touch desire as *hawā* [desire, passion] and *hawāʾ* [air] share the root h-w-y. Turkish *hava* [air] is borrowed from Arabic *hawāʾ*; while it retains the atmospheric sense, Turkish represents the Arabic sense of desire separately as *heva* rather than *hava* (Nişanyan, n.d.). The classical lexicographer al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (2011, p. 849) explains *hawā* as the soul's inclination toward appetite, so named because it can make its bearer fall in this world and into the abyss (*al-hāwiya*) of the next. Desire, in this tradition, is tied not only to inclination but to the danger of falling: to be drawn by *hawā* is, then, to be held near the possibility of falling "in the air."

In many of the Lebanese households we knew, the morning belonged to Fairouz. Ammo Ahmad's home was no exception: he kept a small radio in his kitchen to listen to each day. One of Fairouz' songs, *Nassam ʿalayna al-hawa*, refers to *hawa* as the morning air, an addressee and love implored to carry the singer home: "*Yā hawā, dakhlek el-hawā / khidnī ʿa blādī*" [O air, I beg you o love / take me to my homeland] (Fairouz, 1967). It is this *hawa*, at once atmosphere, desire and address, that the idiom *bil hawa* carries into the affective register we trace. In reading the state through the idioms of *bil hawa* and *havada*, we attempt an exploration of a dimension of political life that cannot be fully brought into speech but continues to structure how the state is sensed and addressed (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 407; Navaro-Yashin, 2007, pp. 6–7).

Sovereignty has been analyzed in our two sites through markedly different vocabularies. Scholarship on northern Cyprus has worked through the analytics of the de facto,

the suspended, the unrecognized and the make-believe (Bryant & Hatay, 2020; Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Kyris, 2018; Navaro-Yashin, 2012). Scholarship on Lebanon, by contrast, has complicated the language of state weakness by tracing how sovereignty is dispersed and mediated through hybrid arrangements of authority, postwar state-building, sectarian political economy, clientelist networks, uneven welfare provision and the expert discourse of "state failure" itself (Cammett, 2014; Fregonese, 2012; Kosmatopoulos, 2011; Leenders, 2012; Salloukh et al., 2015). The two field sites therefore cannot be considered of the same political form.

In northern Cyprus, whose international recognition remains contested, the 1974 division produced a ceasefire rather than a resolution, and the island's future has remained suspended across successive negotiations, possibilities and collapses of settlement (Bryant & Hatay, 2020). In Lebanon, the end of the civil war in 1990 inaugurated a chronically deferred order, punctuated by recurrent violence, governmental paralysis, economic collapse and an anticipation of conflict that never fully recedes (Hermez, 2017). In both settings, the aftermath of violence has produced differing but prolonged conditions of suspension.

Navaro-Yashin (2012, pp. 6, 10–11) treats the phantasmatic or "make-believe" qualities she traces in northern Cyprus not as an anomaly of its unrecognized status, but as an ethnographic lens onto dimensions of state practice that extend beyond this particular setting. Read together, our two cases allow us to ask what becomes visible when such qualities are placed alongside a region within a recognized state. This question has led us to trace a shared way of living and sensing the state through *bil hawa/havada* in the aftermath of conflict, where each site's future remains unsettled and repeatedly deferred, and an ever-present elsewhere sharpens desire. In northern Cyprus, especially after the opening of the crossing points in 2003, the south, particularly institutions and forms of provision associated with the Republic of Cyprus, became increasingly present in everyday reckonings of mobility, inequality, recognition and future possibility. In northern Lebanon, our interlocutors repeatedly situated the north in relation to Beirut, Europe, the Gulf or *al-barra* [the outside], where material and institutional forms of provision appeared differently distributed.[7]

[7] Northern Lebanon, including Akkar and the Tripoli region, was incorporated into Greater Lebanon under the French Mandate in 1920, joining a predominantly Sunni and historically Syrian-oriented hinterland to a polity whose confessional architecture was built around a Maronite-Druze balance (Traboulsi, 2012). This history matters here not as background alone, but as part of the political geography through which many interlocutors situated the north: Tripoli and the villages of Akkar were repeatedly described as peripheral to Beirut, and distant from the capital's infrastructures of power, provision and recognition.

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In both fields, comparison is not external to political life; it is one of the ordinary ways through which our interlocutors inhabit the present, measuring what has not arrived against nearby or imagined alternatives through which the state appears more complete or more capable of provision. In this ethnography, what links northern Lebanon and northern Cyprus, then, is not a shared political form but a shared way of relating to the state in the aftermath of conflict as an object of desire and address, through promises held in the air. Across the two fields, our interlocutors reached for related idioms of air to articulate this relation. We do not treat *bil hawa* and *havada* as semantic equivalents; rather, we attend to the ethnographic resonance between the ways they place uncertainty, suspension and possibility "in the air."

Sites, relations, responsibilities: A reflexive note on fieldwork and comparison

The fieldwork this article draws on was conducted across northern Lebanon and northern Cyprus. The material from northern Lebanon comes primarily from the governorate capital, Tripoli, including the adjoining neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, as well as the more mountainous and relatively prosperous Koura area, and villages in Akkar near the Syrian border. These sites differ in class composition, infrastructure, political history and everyday relations to state institutions. The interlocutors whose accounts appear here were primarily Sunni and Alawite Muslims, while the broader fieldwork also included Christian interlocutors. No claim is made that these narratives stand for northern Lebanon as a whole. The fieldwork in northern Cyprus was conducted in Nicosia, Famagusta, Kyrenia and several villages in the Karpasia peninsula and the Mesaoria plain. These areas are internally differentiated by generation, by the distinction between pre-1974 and post-1974 residents, and by urban and rural contexts. As in northern Lebanon, such distinctions shape markedly different relations to state institutions.

This research was conducted collaboratively by two researchers whose own relations to the two settings are conditioned by the same context the article analyzes. Ahmad Sultan is from northern Lebanon and has lived in northern Cyprus since 2015. Nihal Soğancı is from northern Cyprus, lived abroad for ten years and returned to the island in 2020. The research in northern Cyprus is part of Soğancı's doctoral fieldwork in social anthropology, conducted from 2016 through repeated visits and, from 2020, with extended residence on the island. The fieldwork in northern Lebanon developed later and collaboratively, as detailed below.

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As a married couple, our trajectories of movement, return, partial belonging and diasporic circulation are not external to the field; they are shaped by some of the similar histories and political conditions that our interlocutors have experienced. The comparative optic of this article is therefore a frame that emerged from a shared life across the two settings. Neither of us occupies a position that is simply "inside" or "outside" either site: our respective relations to both are mediated by language, residence, marriage and movement.

The comparison was not designed in advance as a symmetrical multi-sited research project. Soğancı's fieldwork in northern Cyprus preceded the Lebanese work and constituted the primary ethnographic grounding of the project. Material from northern Lebanon emerged more gradually through repeated periods of presence in the region, becoming a focused object of inquiry from summer 2022 onward and developing more systematically across the summers of 2024 and 2025, as well as a month of fieldwork in January 2026. Fieldwork in northern Cyprus was conducted in Turkish and translated into English; fieldwork in northern Lebanon was conducted in Arabic and likewise translated. All translations in this article are ours. Some of the more formal interviews were audio-recorded with our interlocutors' consent and later transcribed and translated. Many others, particularly those that unfolded in intimate domestic or informal settings, were not recorded; in such cases, notes were taken by hand during or immediately after the conversation and expanded into fuller fieldnotes, recording key phrases verbatim where possible. Quoted speech in this article is drawn either from recordings or from verbatim fieldnote entries; paraphrased material is presented without quotation marks. Encounters from the northern Cyprus fieldwork are attributed to Soğancı by name; "we" refers to our joint fieldwork in northern Lebanon and to the comparative analysis.

The analytical concepts at the center of this article, *bil hawa* in Levantine Arabic and *havada* in Cypriot Turkish, emerged from our interlocutors' speech. *Havada* recurred throughout Soğancı's fieldwork in northern Cyprus and is developed as an analytical concept in her doctoral thesis, at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences; *bil hawa* emerged later, in our joint fieldwork in northern Lebanon. The resonance between the two idioms shaped the comparative framework of this article, and both phrases organized our analysis as we later returned to the material. Letting our analytic categories follow our interlocutors' own speech expresses a broader commitment to an ethnography that does not stand outside the affective registers it studies but participates in them, through close attention to language, gesture and material setting.

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Access in both settings frequently emerged through existing social relations and on several occasions through mediators who became part of the encounter too. This relational mode of access made possible a depth of material that more anonymous interviewing would not have produced, but it also carried specific ethical responsibilities, particularly when mediators were relatives, family friends or people whose continued trust the research depended on. In such contexts, consent could not be treated as a single formal moment; each of us returned repeatedly to conversations with interlocutors, including after encounters, to clarify what could be included, what should remain outside the research, and how the material would be used. Most interlocutors are identified through pseudonyms and identifying details have been altered where necessary to protect anonymity in settings where the density of social relations made recognition a concern. In two cases, however, real names are retained because the interlocutors explicitly consented to being identified rather than anonymized.

What the air holds

Within Turkish Cypriot poetry, hava can take on a poetics of suspension that is bodily, spatial and political. Mehmet Yaşın gives this suspension the form of an exposed body in the image of a "strange bird, suspended in the air," neither securely perched nor in flight, but held in a posture of suspension: "tuhaf bir kuş, havada asılı" (Yaşın, 2023, p. 38). Saygın Akanyeti, on the other hand, places suspension within the divided geography of the island itself: "Güney'de kaldı yarım kalmış şiirlerim / Kuzey'de başlanmış romanlarım / Askıda" [My unfinished poems remained in the south; my novels begun in the north, suspended] (Akanyeti, 2008, p. 31). Here, askıda turns the island's division into a condition of suspended authorship, in which writing, memory and futurity are distributed across the south and north of Cyprus. Read together, havada [in the air] and askıda [suspended, hanging, on hold] name a form of life held between places, temporalities and bodies: suspended because the relation to what has been left behind and what has been begun elsewhere remains unresolved.

The Turkish title of Bryant and Hatay's (2020/2021) book, *Askıdaki Egemenlik* [Suspended Sovereignty], makes the lexical resonance explicit: *askıda* is both the predicate Akanyeti's suspended novels carry and the title Bryant and Hatay (2020/2021) use to conceptualize a sovereignty that has been structured by the same framework of suspension that the poetic field also inhabits. For Bryant and Hatay, this condition of suspended sovereignty is aporetic: one whose reality can be refused by others, a sovereignty enacted and negated at once. Following Žižek, Bryant and Hatay (2020, p. 78) describe this as a "deadlock

of desire," in which the distance between what the state is and what it could be recognized as becomes absurd. *Bil hawa* and *havada* brush against this sense of suspension, but they shift the emphasis from sovereignty itself to the affective life of promises that remain unrealized. In Arabic, *hawā* lets air and desire touch; in Turkish, *havada* gives desire a place without ground. *Bil hawa* and *havada* are attempts to trace what suspension holds but leaves unspoken.

Bryant and Hatay's (2020/2021) discussion of aporia opens onto infrastructures of movement through their elaboration on Cyprus Turkish Airlines (CTA). As Bryant and Hatay (2020, pp. 187–189) show, CTA was not simply an airline but a material form of connection, familiarity and collective belonging in a context of international constraint; its collapse "left a wound" in the community (p. 187). CTA, then, figures as a promise once materially realized and later lost, whereas, at the time of our fieldwork, Kleiat airport in Akkar appeared as a promise held in the air, repeatedly imagined but not yet realized. We visited Kleiat airport, officially René Mouawad Air Base, around four miles from the Syrian border in the north, on our way to meet interlocutors in Akkar. The airfield's history complicates the claim that it had simply "never operated."[8] Yet it had never become what many in northern Lebanon imagined it should have been: a fully functioning public airport capable of connecting the region to the rest of Lebanon and beyond. As our interlocutor Salwa put it, "they never wanted the north to prosper, so they never opened the airport." When we arrived, the perimeter was sealed with walls, barricades and barbed wire, enclosed by the Lebanese army. In the months before the writing of this article, rumors circulated that the new government would reopen it, a possibility reported later on as part of renewed plans to make Kleiat Lebanon's second airport (Salhani, 2026).

Whether the rumor was true mattered less than the attention it received as it reactivated the question of what might become possible if the airport in the north was finally opened. For years, Kleiat had existed not as an absence but as a visible and guarded materiality. The runway, buildings, walls and barbed wire were all there; what was missing was not material form but its activation. The rumors of reopening were enough to animate public conversation because the airport already existed as a promise waiting to be activated. Kleiat was *bil hawa* all the more forcefully, not because the promise had not arrived, but because it could one day arrive. This relation also recalls Berlant's (2011)

[8] The airport was established by the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1934, used for company transport, later placed under Lebanese Army control, and then served, for a time, as a domestic airport linking Beirut and North Lebanon (CAPA – Centre for Aviation, 2025; Republic of Lebanon, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Directorate General of Civil Aviation, 2023, pp. 3–23).

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cruel optimism, where people remain attached to promises that continue to organize life even after they have become damaging or impossible to fulfill, which helps explain why the promise of provision stays binding even as it repeatedly fails.[9]

Yet *bil hawa* and *havada* do not only describe attachment to a damaging object of desire. Their analytic specificity lies in the way they enable tracing how a state's material promise *that might one day happen* is lived as political form. The affective register traced through *bil hawa* and *havada* also needs to be distinguished from the anthropology of waiting, which has theorized waiting as a crucial medium through which power is exercised and endured.[10] *Bil hawa* and *havada* build on this literature but specify a different relation to non-arrival; they do not name protracted waiting toward an expected arrival, but a form of holding in which non-arrival is the very condition of desire. In our ethnography, the state promises remain close enough to be invoked, addressed, compared and desired, but distant enough never to settle into either fulfillment or abandonment. In this sense, the airport, the salary, the reimbursement and "the state job" cannot be conceptualized merely as awaited objects of the good life.

The sealed airport can also be read alongside Bryant and Knight's discussion of potentiality through Virno's formulation of the "persistent not-now: a potentiality that does not coincide with actuality" (Virno, 2015, as cited in Bryant & Knight, 2019, p. 115), which nonetheless continues to shape the present through its withholding, since potentiality carries the possibility of happening or not. The airport's force lies in this possibility: it might open or it might not; yet in both cases it continues to organize the present. For Bryant and Knight (2019), potentiality points rather to a temporal and phenomenological form of the not-yet, whereas Aretxaga's account of state power gives potentiality a more ambivalent political inflection. As she writes, exclusion is "always present as potentiality, a *sine qua non* of the law and the state as embodiments of its form" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 407). This insight is central to our argument, as for Aretxaga, exclusion is not an accidental failure of the state but one of the ways through which it sustains

9 Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism draws our attention to attachments that continue to organize life even when they no longer deliver the futures they once made imaginable. Her analysis follows the weakening of postwar promises of habitable futures as they move through cultural forms, affective atmospheres and ordinary attachments, especially in the United States and Europe. The promise we trace belongs to another postwar. In this paper, what is held in the air traces material promises of the state, and the desire attached to them has been forged through civil war, public service and sacrifice rather than through social-democratic expansion alone.

10 Waiting has been theorized as a crucial medium through which power is exercised and endured: Bourdieu (1997/2000) shows how domination works through the control of others' time; Auyero (2012) analyzes bureaucratic waiting as a form of state power through which the poor are made into "patients of the state"; Jeffrey's (2010) account of the passing of time demonstrates that waiting is not empty time but a socially inhabited condition shaped by class, stalled mobility and political possibility; Hage's (2009) work on "stuckedness" shows how waiting can become a crisis of existential movement—a condition in which life no longer appears to be going somewhere.

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its form: "those who are excluded are included through their exclusion" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 407). This sustains the state as a potential address, a relation that may injure, withhold and abandon, yet still bind. A material promise "held in the air" becomes the lead in this paper, tracing how this inclusion-through-exclusion operates through a potentiality that organizes desire, speech, expectation and claim.

The libidinal form of this binding can be specified through Lacan. Read through Lacan, the state's promise operates not simply as an object that would satisfy desire. Lacan's *objet petit a* is not the thing that is wanted, but the cause of desire, the object that "lies behind desire" (Lacan, 2014, p. 101). Desire here is organized not around possession but around a lack that the promise holds open. The promise held *bil hawa/havada* is thus not a delayed object but the form through which the state binds not by what it delivers but by what it withholds. Turning back to the airport, the potentiality it holds sustains the relation precisely because fulfillment remains withheld; that withholding becomes one of the conditions through which the relation endures.

***Rezil olduk*: "I won't even sign its papers"**

In the early weeks of her doctoral fieldwork in northern Cyprus, Soğancı visited Ayten Hanım, an interlocutor in her seventies with severe hip pain and advanced bone deterioration. When Soğancı arrived, Ayten Hanım was in bed, wanting to talk but unable to get up, and the visit took place at her bedside with her two daughters. That morning an ambulance had been called to take her to the public hospital for an MRI since she could not move easily. The paramedics arrived and explained that they could take her for an X-ray but that she would not receive an MRI on the same day. Then, they offered advice. They said that "unless she had someone inside" (someone within the hospital who could facilitate access), it would be better not to take her immediately. Otherwise, she would be left waiting in a long queue, further exhausted by the journey and the delay.

Ayten Hanım's response was immediate, loud and directed not at the staff in front of her but at the institution they represented. *Yazıklar olsun*, she shouted. "Shame on you and your hospital. No one takes care of us. I don't want anything from this state anymore." Her pain was in her words. What gave the moment its force was the way suffering translated at once into a moral accusation against the state itself. When the nurse afterwards produced a document for her to sign, confirming that the ambulance had arrived and that she had declined transport, she pushed the paper away and spoke in anger:

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> Where is the state on such a difficult day to come and relieve me of this pain? If on such a painful day the state cannot relieve my pain, I don't want anything from it anymore. I won't even sign its papers.

Lying in bed, unable to move, she refused not only the document but the administrative version of the encounter it sought to secure. The ambulance had come. The form would have recorded its arrival. But signing would have confirmed the presence of care that had not, in any meaningful sense, been delivered. After the ambulance staff left, Ayten Hanım did not calm down. Lying in bed, still in pain, she continued speaking with a mixture of anger, disbelief and exhaustion. She could not believe what she had just heard: after all these years, after everything she had given, this was what the state was telling her. She could not believe that on one of the hardest days of her life, in order to receive care, she needed to have "someone inside." As she spoke, the present opened onto the war years. Her husband had fought for years while she remained with four children, moving from house to house, trying to keep them safe. She explained that there were nights when she covered the windows with blankets and put the children to sleep with their shoes still on, so they would be ready if they had to run. Sometimes she gathered them under the bed and told them fairy tales to keep them quiet and distracted. One night, she said, a bomb fell near their house. She heard the sound from outside, woke the children and rushed them out. It was in this way, she said, that she saved them. Speaking from her bed, in pain, she folded those memories into the present accusation: "We went through all of that for what? Was it for this state?" In the end, she said they had received no house, no property, or anything else from the state.

She had lived for years in Göçmenköy in Nicosia, literally translating to "migrant village," in small dwellings originally built for those displaced in the violence of 1963 and its aftermath. When some families were later allocated houses of displaced Greek Cypriots, the Göçmenköy houses had become available, and Ayten Hanım had purchased one using her husband's *mücahit puanları* [fighter points].[11] The house was not, in her view, comparable with what others had received through the redistribution of Greek Cypriot properties.

What Ayten Hanım was assembling as she spoke was not a list of grievances. It was a ledger of what the state owed. These memories established the scale of the claim that the

11 *Mücahit* refers here to Turkish Cypriot fighters associated with the inter-communal conflict, particularly those who fought under the Türk Mukavemet *Teşkilatı* (TMT, Turkish Resistance Organization). In the post-1974 property allocation system in northern Cyprus, *mücahit puanı* [fighter points] formed part of an administratively produced points system through which military participation, loss and entitlement were translated into claims over housing and other forms of property. For a discussion of "fighter points" within the broader politics of property allocation in northern Cyprus, see Navaro-Yashin (2012, pp. 196–197).

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ambulance had just failed to honor. Beside her bed, medicine boxes had accumulated. Social Security was not reimbursing medicines at the time, yet, like Ammo Ahmad in Tripoli, she kept them in case the payments resumed. While she spoke, the television played old *Kemal Sunal* films in the background, films widely watched across Turkey and northern Cyprus, in which a poor but clever protagonist learns to navigate an indifferent bureaucracy through ingenuity rather than entitlement. Against that familiar backdrop, Ayten Hanım's words took on a sharper edge.

"I gave my life to this state, and this is what I got in return," Ammo Ahmad said in Tripoli. In northern Cyprus, in a strikingly similar register, Ayten Hanım asked whether all she endured was "for this state." One speaks in Arabic and the other in Turkish; yet both gather a whole life into the same accusing phrase, "this state," addressing and reasoning with one that has already marked their lives through war and loss. In the closing pages of *"Maddening States"*, Aretxaga describes the state as a divided presence, at once protective and injurious, desired and feared, intimate and withholding (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 407). Part of its force, she suggests, is that it cannot be fully translated into reason, even as it compels interpretation, because it has already organized the conditions of everyday life. Ammo Ahmad's and Ayten Hanım's accusations turn toward precisely this kind of power. Their address is rooted in conflict, in years spent trying to sustain a life through war, uncertainty and political violence. For both, these histories sustain an expectation that loyalty and sacrifice should have been reciprocated through care, protection and provision.

The boxes that accumulate, the ambulance, the uniform of the paramedic, and the form held out for signature are present, tangible and insistent. Following Navaro-Yashin's lead, these material forms can be read as ways through which the state becomes present and affectively felt (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, pp. 124–125). The unsigned document refuses to validate the gap between what the form recorded and what the encounter actually delivered. The ambulance arrives and leaves, yet its paper remains, along with an empty signature line and the body that still needs an MRI. Read through Navaro-Yashin's formulation, the state here is both "present and absent": present in its promises, papers and vehicles, yet absent in Ayten Hanım's experience of what those promises, papers and vehicles were able to deliver (Navaro-Yashin, 2012, p. 95).

When Soğancı visited Ayten Hanım again several days later, her fury had passed, but what she described carried a different weight: "*Rezil olduk,* I had to go to the *Rum tarafı* [the Greek Cypriot side, i.e., the Republic of Cyprus] to get treated because of them." *Rezil* is a common Turkish term which can mean wretched, degraded, shamed or

exposed. *Rezil olduk* does not mean "I have fallen into disgrace" but "we have fallen into disgrace." The pronoun names a collective condition: a community exposed together, in the shared knowledge of what should have happened but did not. *Rezil olduk* is also a register of comparison, often articulated in relation to the south of Cyprus. Ayten Hanım continued to seek a solution through the public healthcare system in the north, asking whether someone could arrange the MRI that had been refused, and at the same time she went south to receive the care that had not been immediately available. Stef Jansen (2015) shows that comparison can itself operate as a form of political reasoning. In postwar Sarajevo, his interlocutors measured the present against memories of socialist Yugoslav-era welfare, security and social provision, as well as against imagined Western European standards. These comparisons produced not only a sense of decline, but also an expectation that both lives and political formations should move toward a more viable future rather than remain "pattering in place" (Jansen, 2015, p. 162).

For Ayten Hanım too, comparison does not dissolve the sense of lack; it sharpens it. Elsewhere becomes the measure of what might have been available, making the lack she feels more intimate, more accusatory and harder to let go. Her turn to the south for care does not sever her relation to the state in the north. Instead, it gives greater force to the accusation through which she continues to address it. The south gives form to her perception that care could be otherwise, which also explains why her humiliation becomes collective: "rezil olduk," she says, not only because she is left waiting, but because "we" as a community are made to seek care elsewhere.

Flowers, photographs and the promise of "a state job"

Aysel was thirty-three when she decided she had had enough of private sector employment. She had studied business administration and worked for several years in northern Cyprus, moving through jobs that promised experience but offered little security. What exhausted her was not the low pay or the long hours, but the feeling that a single sentence from an employer could undo her life. She quit and decided to sit exams for a public-sector post. It did not matter, she said, which ministry, which office, or even which position. What mattered was "entering" the public sector itself:

> I worked long hours, sitting all day, trying to keep up with everything. It was exhausting. In the private sector, your life depends on one word from your employer. They can dismiss you whenever they want, and even when you work, you are not always properly protected. They were not paying my social security as they should. Sometimes they would show my salary lower than it actually

> was so they could pay less. Sometimes, I think, they skipped it altogether. After a while, I felt that this was not a life I could continue. I wanted something more stable. I wanted social security, a proper salary, a job that would not disappear with one word.

For Aysel, the public sector appeared as a form through which a precarious life might become less exposed, a structure that could convert work into continuity, labor into rights and time into security. The state appointment promised what her experience of private sector employment had not: a position that could not be withdrawn at the employer's discretion and a future not held in another's mouth.[12] The post Aysel pursued was a public-sector post with physical eligibility requirements, and the state's demand reached her not only through documents and exams, but through the body itself:

> When I was working in the private sector, I gained a lot of weight. But the exam entrance criteria were strict; there was a specific range I had to fit into. So, before the exam, I went on a severe diet and exercised intensely. In three months, I lost forty kilos. I was hungry all the time. I also fainted a few times.

The state did not command Aysel to suffer, yet it structured the field in which suffering became meaningful as preparation, sacrifice and eligibility. Aysel disciplined her body in order to be part of the state apparatus. The body that had accumulated the exhaustion of private sector employment now had to be remade to be accepted by the state. In Aysel's account, everyday life increasingly came to be organized around the requirements and procedures of the state: dieting, studying, enduring exhaustion and even fainting were all folded into the effort to remain eligible. The process did more than assess her. It produced her as someone who could be prepared, compared, ranked and rendered legible to the state (Foucault, 1975/1977). The promise of "a state job" thus gave suffering a direction: it turned bodily sacrifice into preparation, showing how the state operated as a form around which desire and self-remaking gathered (Aretxaga, 2003; Navaro-Yashin, 2012, pp. 84–86).

Alongside the diet, Aysel registered for a preparatory course. During Soğancı's fieldwork, such preparatory courses appeared increasingly popular in northern Cyprus. The popularity of these schools also points to how much public-sector employment has

12 Aysel's move from the exposure of private sector employment toward the security of a state post resonates with analyses of neoliberal transformations of state provision and citizenship (Brown, 2019; Harvey, 2005; Ong, 2006). Neoliberalism is not, however, treated as the primary explanation here. The question is rather how the state continues to be desired and addressed as a possible provider once its provision has become partial, delayed or withheld: held, in our interlocutors' idiom, in the air.

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become an object of desire. Aysel described her first day at the course as highly motivating:

> On the first day, they spoke about *torpil* openly. Because, you know, everyone thinks about *torpil*. People assume that to get a job you need someone inside, a political connection or someone to support you. But I was trying to do it with my own effort. The instructors told us that for permanent positions the exam could not be changed. They said the exam papers were prepared only a few days before by three senior officials and locked in a room over the weekend. They told us, "Do not think that someone can change the results. If you study, you can pass." Hearing that was important for me.

The first-day discussion of *torpil* indicates how present the concern was among candidates, without establishing that such practices determined appointments. For Aysel, however, the instructors' reassurance made the examination appear as a route that might operate differently. For several interlocutors, the possibility of securing "a state job" through an examination opened another potentiality of the state: one organized around study, bodily discipline and a corresponding confidence that effort might still matter.[13] Navaro-Yashin (2012, pp. 84–85) points to the significance of patronage networks and personal connections in access to state jobs and bureaucratic services during her early-2000s fieldwork in northern Cyprus. In Soğancı's more recent interviews, *torpil* continued to circulate as a persistent concern among several interlocutors. Alongside this, however, the interviews revealed a strong investment in the formal examination route and a corresponding confidence in it as a meaningful avenue to public employment.

On a later visit, Soğancı went to the area outside the building where the oral examinations for public posts were taking place. Families waited with flowers, some seated quietly, others watching the entrance for their child or relative to come out. When one candidate came out and said the interview had gone well, someone responded *Hayırlı olsun, artık geleceğin garanti altında* [Congratulations! Now your future is guaranteed]. The flowers, the waiting families, the published photographs of successful candidates, social-media announcements and the stories of those who "made it" helped sustain an image of the state as still reachable. Such signs of possibility mattered because they kept the desire for "a state job" from becoming entirely abstract, giving interlocutors

13 Bryant and Hatay describe these informal networks in northern Cyprus not merely as ways of accessing or navigating the state, but as constitutive of how the state itself is practiced. In Bryant and Hatay's account, public resources are distributed through personalized networks of obligation and affiliation (Bryant & Hatay, 2020, pp. 190–192).

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something around which to organize study, discipline and effort. A few weeks before the exam, Aysel described a dream she had had:

> I had passed the written exam and I had gone to the commission for the oral interview. I had my papers with me—the documents that showed I had passed and had the right to be there. But inside, I kept walking through the building, trying to explain that I had an interview—that I had a speaking exam—but no one was hearing me. They did not tell me to leave but they did not take me in either. *Tam havadaydım* [I was completely in the air].

In the dream, Aysel is neither admitted nor refused. She stands inside the building where the oral interviews are taking place with the very documents that certify her right to be there, yet no one hears her. The building does not expel her, but neither does it receive her. This is what gives *havada* its force: Aysel is not excluded from the procedure, but held in the air within it. Her papers authorize her presence, but authorization does not become recognition. The post was real enough to organize months of preparation, yet never secure enough to be trusted. Between the written examination and the interview, appointment remained possible but not assured. As she waited, Aysel's desire and fear converged: the job was close enough to organize her life around, yet still capable of slipping beyond her reach.

Al-kbīr and devlet büyükleri

Syria Street runs between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen in central Tripoli. The buildings rise tightly on both sides, their façades marked by cracked plaster, exposed concrete and clusters of small irregular holes that remain visible long after the shootings have stopped. Laundry hangs from balconies, softening the hardness of the surfaces and making clear that these are not abandoned ruins but inhabited spaces. At one corner, an armored vehicle sits partially concealed under netting—not a formal checkpoint but a reminder that the space is still monitored and still held within a framework of potential volatility. The geography of the two neighborhoods, predominantly Sunni and predominantly Alawite, is legible not through signs but through elevation and the accumulated

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texture of damage.[14] We met Abu Tarek in one of the apartment blocks off Syria Street. When we explained the purpose of our visit, he interrupted gently: "Let's not talk here. We'll go to Mina." He did not explain his decision at the time. For us, however, Abu Tarek's decision offered a glimpse of how speech in Bab al-Tabbaneh could be constrained by the density of relations and histories surrounding it. We drove to Mina, a coastal area close to the center of Tripoli, and sat at a small table by the seaside. It was there that Abu Tarek began to explain.

He began the conversation by speaking of his brother-in-arms, Ali ʿAkkawi, who had been a *munāḍil* [a fighter], though Abu Tarek was careful to qualify what that meant: "When I say he fought the state as a fighter, I don't mean like that exactly. What I mean is that he fought for the poor people. That was his struggle." Abu Tarek recalled that Ali was shot, arrested and taken to prison where he developed appendicitis. He emphasized that the state did not treat him and that he died in 1974. Abu Tarek returned to this point several times: "It wasn't a battle that killed him; it was that *they* didn't treat him." After Ali's death, Abu Arabi became the neighborhood's central figure, and Abu Tarek described him with unmistakable reverence: "Abu Arabi was *al-kbīr* [the big one], the Robin Hood of the neighborhood"; in this telling, his authority rested on precisely the obligations the state had abandoned[15]:

> There has never been another *qāʾid*, another leader like him. He helped the poor. He distributed food, sugar and flour. He collected donations for poor families. After he died, there was never another like him.

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[14] On Syria Street and the Bab al-Tabbaneh/Jabal Mohsen frontier, Gade's account is useful for situating the spatial and political history of this divide. She elaborates on how the Syrian intervention of 1976 contributed to the consolidation of Jabal Mohsen as both an Alawite stronghold and a militarily strategic site, with Syrian intelligence establishing a presence there and the hill's position above Bab al-Tabbaneh intensifying fears among residents below, particularly around surveillance and sniper fire (Gade, 2022). The topography of the neighborhood therefore cannot be separated from the militarization of Sunni-Alawite relations. Lefèvre similarly treats Syria Street not as a neutral boundary between two communities, but as a repeatedly contested and militarized urban line, especially during the clashes of the mid-1980s, when the street became a central site of destruction before the Lebanese army imposed a buffer zone (Lefèvre, 2021). The description in this section of elevation, damaged façades, armored presence and inhabited ruins should therefore be read within a longer history in which violence, surveillance and political memory have become sedimented in the built environment.

15 Abu Arabi refers to Khalil ʿAkkawi, the younger brother and successor of Ali ʿAkkawi, both of whom occupy a central place in the political memory of Bab al-Tabbaneh. Lefèvre places the brothers within the social figure of the qabaday, a locally embedded strongman whose authority is built through protection, distributive care, courage and the capacity to translate neighborhood grievances into collective mobilization (Lefèvre, 2021). Abu Arabi's authority should therefore not be understood only through the language of militia command. In local memory, he appears as a moral and affective figure of provision and is remembered as someone whose authority was associated with protection, dignity and order in the neighborhood (Lefèvre, 2021). Gade similarly identifies Khalil ʿAkkawi as the leader of the Popular Resistance in Bab al-Tabbaneh, tracing the movement's trajectory from New Left activism toward Islam, its later connection to Tawḥīd, his assassination at a Syrian checkpoint in February 1986, and the formation of the February 9 Movement around his death (Gade, 2022). In this sense, al-kbīr names more than a local big man. It names a remembered form of local sovereignty whose legitimacy rested on appearing where the state appeared primarily through neglect, imprisonment, checkpoints or force.

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When Abu Tarek turned from the past to the present, he described the neighborhood as one the state had largely left to itself:

> Bab al-Tabbaneh is very poor. The rich families left; only the poor stayed. There are NGOs that help a little, but only a little, and the hospitals are expensive. The government sees what is happening, but it does nothing. They come only during elections. Even the ones who got rich and left the neighborhood come back only at election time. They say, "I am from Bab al-Tabbaneh" but most of the time, they are not here.

Abu Tarek's account moves between two figures of the state. In his account, the state he encounters in the present is felt mainly through its withdrawal: it sees but does not act, appearing in the neighborhood primarily during election periods. Against this intermittent, performative presence stands Abu Arabi, the *qāʾid* who provided where the state did not and whose like, Abu Tarek insists, has not returned. The memory is not Abu Tarek's alone. When we mentioned Abu Arabi's name to other interlocutors in the neighborhood, it drew an immediate *Allah yerhammo* [may he rest in peace] and a moral reputation that had outlived him by decades. What circulates is a promise he came to embody: a standard of care, protection and provision by which the present state is measured and found wanting. His absence therefore does not dissolve the relation; it leaves behind an image of provision still desired, still invoked and still held *bil hawa*.

Abu Tarek had been a fighter. During our conversation, he recalled an episode from the war when he traveled to Beirut to meet important contacts, only to be taken hostage himself. For Abu Tarek, violence did not stand outside political order. It was one of the forms through which political order was made and contested. Recalling the events surrounding Abu Arabi's killing, Abu Tarek situated them within a wider struggle over power and influence:

> In 1985, there were meetings taking place between powerful actors from Tripoli, the South, Hezbollah, the Syrians and the Iranians. They were discussing questions of power-sharing. Abu Arabi was against giving power to the Syrians. About a year later, near Abu Samra, the roads were suddenly closed. Syrian men were positioned everywhere. By then, the decision to kill Abu Arabi had already been made. It happened on a Sunday. Abu Arabi was alone with his chauffeur. The Syrians opened fire. They shot him in the head and killed both him and the driver. For about an hour, no one was allowed to go near the body. The people who killed Abu Arabi were later rewarded with three rifles and two Syrian

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license plates. Syrian forces then entered Bab al-Tabbaneh and killed many other important figures.

In Abu Tarek's telling, the killing of Abu Arabi was not only the removal of a political figure. It was a scene in which the power to decide over life, death, access and mourning became materially and affectively real. Abu Arabi had been, for many, a figure of local power, provision and mediation; his killing therefore did not simply eliminate a man but violently withdrew a form of authority through which the neighborhood had imagined protection and political possibility. Abu Tarek recalled that the body was kept apart from the people for an hour. Read through Aretxaga, and through her engagement with Siegel and Taussig, the body becomes a mediating object between power and people, a scene through which the state, or state-like power, stages possession, injury, mourning and the interruption of ordinary relations between the living and the dead (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 403; Siegel, 1998; Taussig, 1997). Abu Arabi's body, held untouchable for that hour, marks the moment when a local world of mediation was violently broken and reconfigured. Power appeared not as law or administration but as the capacity to kill a paternal–protective figure and to suspend the community before his inaccessible body.

Aretxaga's reading of Schreber, drawing on Santner, moves from "fathers who knew too much about living human beings" to "states who knew too much about the bodies and lives of people" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 406). This formulation highlights what Aretxaga calls "a strange intimacy between the state and the people": the way law and state power become entangled with bodies, lives and social existence (Aretxaga, 2003, pp. 403, 406). For Aretxaga, this produces a relation characterized by "the confluence of violence and paternalism, of force and intimacy," sustaining the state as an "object of ambivalence" (Aretxaga, 2003, p. 407). The state may be resented for abandoning its subjects, yet still desired as the figure that might provide, protect, employ or recognize them. Abu Arabi's inaccessible body marks the violent interruption of paternal protection, but not the end of the desire for it. The figure is killed, yet the provision and care he embodied remain *bil hawa*: absent, unfinished and still sought in other figures.

This ambivalent intimacy is also what is at stake when Meryem Hanım says her "feet have fallen apart at the doors of the *devlet büyükleri.*" In Turkish, *büyük* carries the sense of an elder as well as of a *great man,* referring to someone of importance or standing. *Devlet büyükleri* gives senior state figures a relational quality that differs from that of an impersonal bureaucratic office, bringing them closer to the position of respected elders or paternal figures to whom one might take a request. Meryem Hanım's search for a public-sector post for her youngest daughter therefore unfolds not through institutional

channels alone but through embodied visits to doors, offices and men whose responses keep possibility alive without granting fulfillment. The door at which she is made to wait, the repeated visits and the aching feet become bodily traces of a relationality that is at once intimate and injurious. Her husband was a *şehit* [martyr], and at these doors she invokes a paternal obligation she understands the state to bear in the absence of the father her daughter lost. In her account, *devlet büyükleri* do not refuse her request; they leave it *havada.* It is precisely this non-refusal that makes the relation so binding. The state leaves her desiring by keeping her in the air. The paternal promise remains present enough to sustain desire, yet deferred enough to remain withheld.

This paternal mode of address also runs through Abu Tarek's account of Abu Arabi, although here it is carried by a different scale of attachment and another kind of loss. *Al-kbīr* in Levantine Arabic, like *büyük* in Turkish, is the great one, the elder, or a person of standing to whom requests are addressed and from whom protection or provision may be expected. What made Abu Arabi *al-kbīr* of Bab al-Tabbaneh was not formal office or institutional position but precisely what the state had failed to provide: the distribution of food, sugar and flour, the collection of donations for poor families, and the visible enactment of care in a place where the state was widely considered absent. His authority, therefore, shared a paternal logic with that of *devlet büyükleri*: he was someone who provided and to whom requests could be addressed.

Through *devlet büyükleri* and *al-kbīr*, the state becomes embodied, addressed and felt. In northern Cyprus, the *devlet büyükleri* keep Meryem Hanım's request *havada* through a refusal that never quite arrives. In Bab al-Tabbaneh in northern Lebanon, Abu Arabi remains a protective father figure whose care and provision offered a glimpse of what a protective state might have looked like. In both cases, paternal figures make the state intimate and reachable, while also locating its promise in the uncertain presence of someone who may intervene, delay, protect or disappear. Abu Arabi's death did not simply end the relation; rather, it left it *bil hawa*, preserving the sense of an interrupted possibility that might still be reactivated through another figure.

"Close to the skin": Final reflections

Standing before a burnt but still-functioning ATM in Tripoli, Omar shrugged and described his salary as *bil hawa*. Meryem Hanım, her feet worn by repeated visits to the doors of *devlet büyükleri*, said that the post she sought for her daughter remained *havada*. Aysel, preparing for a state job, woke from a dream that was *havada*—inside a building where an interview awaited her, yet where she was neither admitted nor turned away.

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Across northern Lebanon and northern Cyprus, in two different languages, our interlocutors reached for *hawa/hava* [air] to voice how they felt when the forms and material promises of the state remained desired, possible but not fulfilled. In this article, we have followed *bil hawa* and *havada* as affective registers through which the state is sensed, addressed and endured as material promises remain withheld yet still imaginable as something *that might one day happen,* offering a glimpse of what Aretxaga calls the "political real" (Aretxaga, 2005, as cited in Navaro-Yashin, 2007, p. 6).

In Ammo Ahmad's account, the state first appears as a pronoun. Watching the news, he says "*they* are humiliating the people"; only afterwards does the addressee become explicit. Abu Tarek insists that Ali ʿAkkawi was not killed in battle but died because *they* failed to treat him. The pronoun precedes the state and bears its force: "they" here is an unnamed yet intimate figure that humiliates, withholds, imprisons and neglects. The political becomes apprehensible, too, in the body: the aching feet at a paternal door, Omar's shrug, the forty kilos lost for an examination, the cry "*yazıklar olsun*" from Ayten Hanım. Omar's shrug at the burned ATM is not a response to a broken machine, or to an economic crisis alone, but can be read as a rupture in the symbolic coherence of an inherited promise embodied in the secure post and a guaranteed life he had hoped to pass on to his children. At the same time, Ammo Ahmad's stacked medicine boxes, the Kleiat airport and the forms Ayten Hanım refuses to sign make the binding force of this relation even more tangible.

Our ethnography builds on Aretxaga's and Navaro-Yashin's accounts of political life and the phantasmatic (Aretxaga, 2003, 2005; Navaro-Yashin, 2002, 2007, 2012) as we trace how the state is felt, addressed and lived through the affective register of *bil hawa* and *havada*. The article also draws on Bryant and Knight's (2019) account of potentiality and the not-yet, while foregrounding the libidinal and material investments through which a withheld promise remains binding. Finally, while the argument resonates with Berlant's cruel optimism (2011), we locate attachment here in a specifically political relation to material promises of state provision held in the air.

Sovereignty in our two sites has been analyzed through markedly different vocabularies: for northern Cyprus, de facto statehood, suspended sovereignty and non-recognition; for northern Lebanon, state weakness, hybrid sovereignty, clientelism and the discourse of "state failure." Our contribution is to shift the focus of comparison from the form of the state to the relation through which it is lived: an affective and material relation in which the state is felt, addressed and desired through material promises of provision that remain withheld, sharpened in both fields by an ever-present elsewhere.

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As Navaro-Yashin (2012) argues, the phantasmatic qualities she traces in northern Cyprus are not exceptional to its unrecognized status but offer a window onto an analysis of statecraft more broadly. In this sense, what links our two cases is not a shared political form, but an affective relation to the state in which withheld material promises organize desire, expectation and address, articulated in the two fields through *bil hawa* and *havada*.

The article is shaped by several limits and remains partial in what it can hold. The comparison is asymmetrical in terms of fieldwork duration and density: the northern Cyprus material emerged from extended doctoral fieldwork, while the northern Lebanon material developed later through shorter, repeated periods of fieldwork, each lasting no more than a month. A longer and more continuous period of fieldwork in northern Lebanon, and in Lebanon more broadly, would likely have led to different conversations and interlocutors, and may have revealed other regional inflections of *bil hawa* that this article cannot capture.

The material is also shaped by the relational conditions that made access possible. Many encounters took place in intimate domestic settings and through mediators, relatives, friends or socially familiar networks. This produced a depth of trust and a particular closeness, but it also means that the narratives cannot be treated as representative of northern Lebanon or northern Cyprus. The interlocutors that are part of the ethnography here are also differently positioned by generation, gender, class, sect, displacement history and proximity to conflict; these differences are present in the analysis but cannot be exhausted within the scope of one article. Finally, our reading of *bil hawa* and *havada* is one interpretive route through the material. Other readings could foreground political economy, sectarian mediation, patronage, gendered care or migration more centrally. The article therefore does not claim *bil hawa* and *havada* as a generalizing register of how states are lived but approaches them as an affective register that emerges through particular ethnographic encounters.

Several questions follow from this analysis. Future work might ask whether comparable idioms of promises held in the air may emerge in states considered to be facing austerity, welfare retrenchment or infrastructural withdrawal without a recent history of war. This would help analyze whether the relation we trace extends beyond the post-conflict settings in which we encountered it. A second question concerns the generational aspect. Our interlocutors inhabit *bil hawa/havada* from different points in the afterlife of conflict: for older interlocutors, withheld provision carries the force of humiliation and unanswered moral debt as Ammo Ahmad and Ayten Hanım question the life they have

given to the state, whereas for Aysel, *havada* is lived less as humiliation than as anxious attachment to a precarious future. How the register shifts across age, memory and proximity to conflict remains to be developed. On a different note, the resonance between *bil hawa* and *havada* points beyond histories of contact, translation and shared post-Ottoman worlds, and future work might follow such idioms as traces of entangled histories through which affect, sovereignty and suspension are carried in everyday speech. Two further questions exceed our scope but are worth marking: *What becomes of these attachments when a promise held in the air is finally delivered or foreclosed? How might a more sustained sensory ethnography trace the bodily life of withheld provision more closely than we have here?* What *bil hawa* and *havada* offer, then, is not a new theory of the state but a register of affective relationality that emerged through our two fields. To name this register, we have let our interlocutors' own words do the conceptual work, for in Arabic *hawā* and *hawāʾ* share a single root, and to speak of the air is already to touch desire.

AI Disclaimer

During the preparation of this paper, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) for proofreading and improving language fluency only. No generative AI tool was used to produce ethnographic material, generate analysis, fabricate citations or replace the authors' interpretation. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-assisted suggestions and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, analysis, interpretation, citations and integrity of the manuscript.

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Povzetek

Pri ožganem, a še vedno delujočem bankomatu v severnem Libanonu je Omar poskušal dvigniti plačo. Ko mu to ni uspelo, jo je označil za *bil hawa* [v zraku]. Na severnem Cipru je Meryem Hanım dejala, da delovno mesto v javnem sektorju, ki ga je želela za svojo hčer, ostaja *havada* [v zraku]. Po zgledu naših sogovornikov izraza *bil hawa* in *havada* razumemo kot afektivna registra, skozi katera ljudje državo občutijo, jo nagovarjajo in živijo, medtem ko njene materialne obljube ostajajo v zraku – zaželene, a neizpolnjene. Članek se opira na razprave Aretxage in Navaro-Yashin o političnem življenju in fantazmatskem ter temu razmerju sledi v dveh okoljih: na severnem Cipru, politični tvorbi, katere mednarodno priznanje ostaja sporno, in v severnem Libanonu, regiji znotraj libanonske države, ki jo zaznamujejo zgodovinsko neenakomerne oblike prisotnosti države ter zagotavljanja javnih dobrin in storitev. S primerjavo teh dveh okolij raziskujemo, kako državne obljube ljudi zavezujejo in vežejo nase na načine, ki jih ni mogoče pojasniti zgolj z obliko suverenosti, odpovedovanjem države ali čakanjem. Izraza bil hawa in havada razkrivata skupen register življenja v državi po konfliktu, v katerem prihodnosti ostajajo nedoločene, vselej navzoči »drugje« pa krepi hrepenenje. To razmerje živi v samem jezikovnem izrazu: v arabščini imata *hawā* [želja] in *hawā'* [zrak] skupen koren, zato govoriti o zraku že pomeni dotakniti se želje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antropologija države, afekt, materialne obljube, severni Ciper, severni Libanon

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