



## **IBN KHALDUN'S CONCEPT OF 'ASABIYYAH: SOCIAL COHESION, POLITICAL CYCLES, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF CIVILIZATION**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the life, intellectual legacy, and social philosophy of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), a prominent Arab-Muslim thinker considered a forerunner of sociology and the philosophy of history. Particular attention is given to his seminal concept of 'asabiyyah (social solidarity), which he employed to explain the rise and decline of civilizations. Drawing on Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah, the study highlights the dual function of 'asabiyyah: its positive role in fostering cooperation, cohesion, and state formation, as well as its limitations when compared to the Islamic notion of brotherhood. The article reviews both classical and contemporary scholarship—from Rosenthal's philological analysis to modern sociological reinterpretations—demonstrating that Ibn Khaldun's theory remains relevant for analyzing political cycles, demographic change, and social dynamics across civilizations. The discussion concludes that 'asabiyyah serves as a universal principle of collective action and historical transformation, with enduring significance for modern social sciences.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldun, Muqaddimah, Asabiyyah, social philosophy, social cohesion, political cycles, Islamic thought, sociology of history, civilization, group solidarity.

### **Introduction**

Walid al-Din Abhid Zayd Abd ar-Rahim ibn Muhammad ibn al-Aram (1332 – 1406), a statesman, historian, and philosopher who closes the chain of outstanding thinkers of the classical Arab-Muslim Middle Ages, is considered by

many researchers as one of the main predecessors of modern sociology and the theory of history.[1.p.5] Ibn Khaldun's life is most fully presented in his Autobiography [2.p.13]Certain periods of Ibn Khaldun's life are described by his friends and students.

For example, a valuable, though, in F. Rosenthal's words, rather "superficial," account of Ibn Khaldun's life from 1382 onward is contained in Ibn al-A'ba's "History of Granada." [3.p.43] Ibn Khaldun received a classical education: he studied the Qur'an and Qur'anic sciences, as well as Islamic law, logic, and Arabic philology. A great significance for Ibn Khaldun's life was the Marinid conquest of Tunis in 1347. At that time, together with the new rulers, a large number of scholars arrived in the city, delivering public lectures. Ibn Khaldun had the opportunity to study with the most famous and authoritative litterateurs, jurists, and historians [5.p. 42-43].

He obtained his first official position at the age of twenty, becoming a secretary in the chancery of the sultan in Tunis [3.p.39 ]. Later, after moving to Fez, he married the daughter of the prominent military commander Muhammad al-Hakim, who came from a noble and educated family. [3.p.63]

Subsequently, during his frequent relocations from one city to another, Ibn Khaldun would send his family to Constantine to his wife's brother, referring to the instability of his new appointments. However, it often happened that by doing so he exposed them to danger at a time when he himself was not threatened [4.p.868].

The rise of Ibn Khaldun's political career took place in the 1360s. He held the highest posts under the sultans and emirs of Granada, Bougie, and Fez. For instance, under Emir Abu 'Abdallah Muhammad, Ibn Khaldun became hajib (1365), thereby acquiring unrestricted administrative power [5.p.47]. During these years, Ibn Khaldun also had to act as a diplomat and a military commander. [5.p.46-50]

Throughout his service, Ibn Khaldun was constantly engaged in scholarly pursuits. While living in Fez, he used every opportunity to attend the lectures of his fellow scholars and met with the most prominent representatives of the intellectual elite of that time. He also studied the finest libraries in the cities where he resided: Granada, Bougie, Biskra, and Tlemcen [5.p.54]. However, biographers of Ibn Khaldun admit that he did not study any single discipline systematically, and perhaps for this reason he did not become an outstanding

theologian or man of letters. “His rare gift,” writes F. Rosenthal, “was destined for the creation of a new science” [3.p.61].

Subsequently, the knowledge he gathered during his interactions with philosophers, men of letters, theologians, jurists, and even astronomers in Fez, Ibn Khaldun employed in writing the *Muqaddimah*, which he completed by 1375. Interestingly, he never mentions his scholarly works composed before the *Muqaddimah*.

The scholar’s position became precarious when he fell into disfavor with Ibn ‘Arafa, the leading authority in theology and law not only in Ifriqiya but throughout the Maghreb and al-Andalus of that time. Ibn ‘Arafa succeeded in convincing the sultan that Ibn Khaldun posed a danger. This compelled the scholar in 1382 to leave the Maghreb forever. Under the pretext of performing the Hajj, he sailed to Alexandria [5.p.56-57].

In 1383, upon his arrival in Cairo, Ibn Khaldun devoted himself entirely to the study and teaching of Maliki law. At al-Azhar he delivered a course of lectures on this subject, in which he also presented his doctrine on society. A year later, Ibn Khaldun became head of the al-Kamhiyah madrasa, the oldest center of Maliki jurisprudence. At that time, he was also appointed as the chief Maliki qadi; subsequently, Ibn Khaldun held this post five times, since his political standing in Egypt was not always stable. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that during all twenty-three years of his life in Cairo, Ibn Khaldun was consistently in demand by the authorities and enjoyed the full recognition and respect of the scholarly elite. Ibn Khaldun died in 1406 [5.p.58-65]

### **Literature Review and Methodology**

The legacy of Ibn Khaldun, particularly his seminal work *al-Muqaddimah*, has been widely studied by both Eastern and Western scholars. Early studies, such as those by F. Rosenthal (1958), provided a detailed philological analysis and established a critical foundation for the interpretation of Ibn Khaldun’s ideas. In the Soviet and post-Soviet academic tradition, S. M. Batsieva (1965) played a significant role in examining Ibn Khaldun’s philosophy of history, highlighting his contributions to the development of social thought in the medieval Islamic world. A. A. Ignatenko (1980) further expanded this discourse by analyzing Ibn Khaldun’s socio-political concepts in comparison with modern theories of society. Contemporary scholars, including P. Turchin (2003), have employed Ibn

Khaldun's theory of political cycles in the field of cliodynamics, demonstrating its applicability to demographic and socio-political processes across different civilizations. Similarly, S. Nefedov (1999, 2003) attempted to reconstruct historical dynamics of medieval Iraq and Iran using demographic models that echoed Ibn Khaldun's cyclical approach. A. V. Korotaev (2006) proposed modern sociological and economic terminology for Ibn Khaldun's concepts, emphasizing the compatibility of his theories with contemporary social science frameworks. These studies indicate that Ibn Khaldun's thought continues to inspire researchers not only in the domains of history and philosophy but also in sociology, political science, and even mathematical modeling. However, despite this extensive scholarship, gaps remain in contextualizing Ibn Khaldun's methodology within broader Islamic intellectual traditions and in assessing the universal applicability of his *asabiyya* theory to modern societies

## **Discussion and Results**

When discussing the concept of *ʿaṣabiyyah*, Ibn Khaldūn relates it more to social interaction than to the individual. He interprets *ʿaṣabiyyah* in a positive sense, in contrast to many Western approaches that emphasize individuality. For Ibn Khaldūn, the essence of history lies in collective solidarity and the influence of group cohesion. Although he does not disregard the nature of the human being as an individual, he underlines that man is, by nature, a social creature. Human beings are endowed with desires, intellectual capacity for reasoning, and divine revelation to guide them [6.p.2]. In order to exercise these capacities, however, social involvement becomes essential, since only through cooperation can individuals share, exchange, and develop their ideas. In other words, because individuals in isolation are limited in their intelligence and virtues, they require society to strengthen and transform them. This is precisely the meaning of *ʿaṣabiyyah* in Ibn Khaldūn's thought [6.p.3].

As explained in the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn defines *ʿaṣabiyyah* as “the group feeling with which a human being feels most closely connected to his relatives—primarily, those of common descent.” Yet, he also notes that such group solidarity can extend beyond kinship ties to encompass people who share affiliation as members or followers of a collective. [7.p.4]

Ibn Khaldūn thus presents *ʿaṣabiyyah* as a multifaceted concept. He emphasizes that cooperation on a broad social scale cannot exist without it. By adopting a

traditional term and giving it a renewed, positive meaning, Ibn Khaldūn reframed a notion often viewed negatively by others. His reinterpretation was aimed at explaining how ‘aşabiyyah unites people politically, even when no blood relations exist. Ultimately, his theory highlights group cohesion as the basis of societal strength. Moreover, it may also be described as a natural human instinct that functions as a defensive mechanism when members of one’s group face injustice. [8.p.5]

Although the notion of ‘aşabiyyah is often associated with negative implications that have been criticized within Islamic tradition, Ibn Khaldūn also highlighted its constructive potential. Nevertheless, it should not be equated with the Islamic principle of brotherhood, since the latter is founded on faith and spiritual ties, while ‘aşabiyyah primarily reflects social and group affiliations based on race, justice, language, and other physical or cultural distinctions. Thus, both concepts serve different functions and convey different meanings. [8.p.6]

Ibn Khaldūn’s theory of ‘aşabiyyah emerges from his distinction between two modes of life: the Bedouin (rural or nomadic) and the sedentary (urban) societies, which he considered essentially opposed to each other. In this framework, ‘aşabiyyah is strongly linked to Bedouin communities because their simple lifestyle required them to unite in order to safeguard their families and clans from external threats [7.p.1]. According to Ibn Khaldūn, the constant struggle for survival in such conditions gave rise to a strong sense of solidarity and mutual defense, which he identified as ‘aşabiyyah. [7.p.2] Nomads, as a result, displayed greater courage and resilience compared to urban populations—traits shaped by the harsh environment of the desert. [9.p.4] By contrast, city dwellers relied on established legal systems and political order, thus minimizing the need for personal struggle. However, when conflicts did occur between tribes, they frequently resulted in wars, with the stronger and more cohesive group prevailing over the weaker one. [9.p.5]

From this process, the institution of kingship (mulk) emerged, functioning as a stabilizing authority to prevent internal strife and to consolidate social cohesion. Religion, in turn, enhanced ‘aşabiyyah by eliminating jealousy and fostering unity, thereby creating the foundation for a more perfect form of civilization. [9.p.4]

In essence, Ibn Khaldūn employed the concept of ‘aṣabiyyah to explain the unifying bond observable at every stage of social development—from nomadic groups to organized states—while emphasizing its particular strength in the nomadic phase[11.p.5] He argued that the vitality of a civilization is directly tied to the strength of its ‘aṣabiyyah: when solidarity is robust, societies rise and flourish; when it weakens, decline follows, and ultimately, a new group with stronger ‘aṣabiyyah replaces the old order. Thus, Ibn Khaldūn outlined a cyclical pattern of growth, maturity, decline, and collapse that governs the course of civilizations.

### **Conclusion**

Ibn Khaldun’s intellectual contribution, embodied in the Muqaddimah, demonstrates a unique synthesis of historical observation, social theory, and political analysis. By reinterpreting the notion of ‘aṣabiyyah, he provided a framework for understanding how solidarity functions as the driving force of state formation, cultural development, and the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations. His distinction between nomadic and sedentary societies illustrates how environmental, social, and political conditions shape collective cohesion. Although ‘aṣabiyyah should not be confused with the Islamic principle of brotherhood, Ibn Khaldun emphasized its constructive potential in fostering unity and resilience. Modern scholarship—from historical sociology to mathematical modeling—confirms the applicability of his ideas beyond medieval Islamic contexts, revealing their relevance for global patterns of social and political transformation. Thus, Ibn Khaldun’s theory of ‘aṣabiyyah stands not only as a cornerstone of Islamic intellectual heritage but also as a timeless contribution to the social sciences.

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