

## **An Islamic Approach to Studying History: Reflections on Ibn Khaldūn’s Deterministic Historical Approach**

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that patterns exist in history, and that these can — and should — be discerned. By doing this, Muslim intellectuals will only be resuming an intellectual and spiritual journey begun over 600 years ago, by Ibn Khaldūn, who invented sociology and the scientific study of history, basing himself on the methodology of the Qur’ān. This paper examines Khaldūn’s deterministic historical approach, comparing it to the secular attempt to understand history in Karl Marx’s “historical materialism.” Khaldūn’s classification of societies (as being either based on human *fiṭrah* or tending towards an animal-like existence) is examined and applied to current conditions. It is argued that Muslims need to learn how to use Khaldūn’s deterministic approach, critically applying it to today’s changed conditions, to contribute to the conscious creation of a new, Allah-centred global civilisation.

**Keywords:** Ibn Khaldūn, Marx, history, historical determinism, historical materialism

The Holy Qur’ān states: “And We did not create the heavens and the earth and what is between them in sport” (*Sūrat al-Dukhān*, 44: 38).<sup>1</sup> And it reveals the real purpose of humanity’s existence on this *dunyā*: “And I have not created the *jinn* and the men except that they should serve Me” (*Sūrat al-Raḥmān*, 55: 56). Almighty Allah thus has a purpose for His creation. There are no such things as “accidents.” Both individually and collectively, therefore, everything

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has a purpose and a place, in the divine plan of the Unique, Omniscient Allah.

Nevertheless, the question of whether or not patterns can be discerned in human history is a vexed matter for many Muslims, who cite *qadr* — the doctrine that Allah (SWT) has predestined all things. The present paper argues that patterns not only exist in history, but that these can be discerned. It is further argued that seeking to understand and utilise these forces is not in itself an exercise in *shirk*, but potentially a commendable venture. It is therefore, asserted that Muslim intellectuals both can and should pursue a scientific understanding of history's patterns. And they should do this by basing themselves on the paradigmatic Islamic source, the Holy Qur'ān. By doing so, they will only be resuming an intellectual and spiritual journey begun over 600 years ago, by a Muslim scholar named Ibn Khaldūn.

Khaldūn invented sociology and the scientific study of history, basing himself on the methodology of the Holy Qur'ān.<sup>2</sup> Sociology was not invented by the likes of Comte and Bergsson, and Arthur Toynbee; Karl Marx and Max Weber did not first develop the scientific study of history. In fact, Toynbee was under no illusions that this is indeed the case, writing that Khaldūn's book *al-Muqaddimah* was:

undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place... [T]he most comprehensive and illuminating analysis of how human affairs work that has been made anywhere.<sup>3</sup>

But all these men (Toynbee, Marx, Comte and their successors) merely stood on the shoulders of Ibn Khaldūn who in turn consciously based himself on the methodology of the Holy Qur'ān. Ibn Khaldūn called his method *'ilm al-'umrān* — the “science of civilisation.”

### **The Approach to History in the Holy Qur'ān**

Iqbal shows us that history “or in the language of the Qur'ān, ‘the days of God,’” is one of the sources of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Iqbal reminds Muslims of the repeated references in the Holy Qur'ān to the “fixed

period” assigned to every individual and every people.<sup>5</sup> *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* (7: 34), for instance, states: “There is an appointed time for every people: they cannot hasten it, nor, when their time comes, will they be able to delay it for a single moment.”<sup>6</sup> According to ‘Allama Iqbal:

It is, therefore, a gross error to think that the Qurʾān has no germs of a historical doctrine. The whole truth is that the ‘Prolegomena’ of Ibn Khaldūn appears to have been mainly due to the inspiration which the author must have received from the Qurʾān.<sup>7</sup>

The Holy Qurʾān has also given us one of the most fundamental principles of historical criticism, by establishing “that the reporter’s personal character is an important factor in judging his testimony.”<sup>8</sup> It was the adoption of this principle by Ibn Khaldūn — which as a Muslim judge he took from Islamic principles of jurisprudence — that serves as the bedrock of all scientific historical methodology to this day.<sup>9</sup> The Holy Qurʾān commands: “Believers! If a troublemaker brings you news, check it first, in case you wrong others unwittingly and later regret what you have done” (*Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt*, 49: 6).

There are four sources for the determination of legality in Islamic science as developed according to the schools of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-Jamāʿah*: the Holy Qurʾān; the Sunnah; consensus (*ijmāʿ*) and analogy (*qiyās*). This is the degree of rigour that Ibn Khaldūn introduced into historical scholarship. He openly claimed to have invented a new science of human community “which are to explain all the phenomena and conditions appertaining to [them], one after the other.”<sup>10</sup> He declared a dedication to truth and to certainty in his findings, systematically setting out both the subjective and objective conditions encountered by men with “a great deal of precision”<sup>11</sup>

### **Ibn Khaldūn’s Predecessors**

History had been written before him, of course. Yet, as he very easily proves, in his work *al-Muqaddimah*, or *Prolegomena*, these earlier attempts were chronically deficient, consisting of mere descriptions or even lists of events, and usually distorted by the need to entertain, and especially to please those funding their compilation — kings and other rulers. Not even the great ancient civilisations of India and China went beyond these types of “history.”

About 900 years before Ibn Khaldūn, the Greek Thucydides (460-395 BC) made great strides forward, by working on history that was based on facts — not myths and legends. Thucydides was the first historian whom we know of, who attempted to understand historical events — by seeking the truth. Yet even his work is distorted by the perceived needs to be entertaining and to put high-flown literary rhetorics in the mouths of his protagonists. In contrast, Ibn Khaldūn denounces this approach, writing: “people as a rule approach great and high-ranking persons with praise and encomiums. They embellish conditions and spread the fame of great men.”<sup>12</sup>

Thucydides, Khaldūn shows, is also too concerned about the deeds and thoughts of great men, instead of seeing also the trends moving great groups of men into action. Thucydides’s contemporaries did not continue his struggle for truth and it was not until the Roman Polybius (203–120 BC) and St. Augustine (354-430 CE) that we find again a genuine struggle for facts. Yet neither of these two followed this road to its end; each became diverted from their course, by limiting themselves to describing events, rather than explaining why they occurred.

Facts are only a beginning for the historian; we have to know how to link the facts together, so as to understand and explain events. And St. Augustine saw the Fall of the Roman Empire in some sense as a consequence of “original sin.” But it was not all bad. St. Augustine — whose work was tremendously important for the West, when he declared that time was not an eternal circular movement, but a continuous and irreversible continuum “stretching from original sin to the last judgment,” thus, emphasising the decisive historical role of human actions.<sup>13</sup>

### **History in the Muslim World and Islam**

In the Muslim world, meanwhile, history writers tended to ascribe the Will of Allah (SWT) as the sole factor determining why events occurred. Obviously, this was not wrong in itself. Muslims believe passionately that Allah (SWT) is the sole real power in the Universe, given that everything else is mere creation, and hence imperfect, limited and finite. Allah (SWT) states that “Should He not know what He created? And He is the Subtile, the Aware’ (*Sūrat al-Mulk*, 67: 14).

But the Qur'ān makes it quite clear to Muslims, that “there are signs ... for those who use their minds” (*Sūrat al-Baqarah*, 2: 164). Muslims are supposed to use their reason and Allah (SWT) has endowed man with free will. Man develops a scientific understanding of history for the same reason that he develops all the other sciences in order to survive and advance on this planet.

There is nothing wrong with this; it is not a form of *shirk* - or ascribing false partners to Allah (SWT), as Wāhhabīs seem to believe. It all depends on the intention one has in studying history. If Muslims study history like Hitler and Stalin did (for the sake of learning how to achieve world domination), then it clearly is evil - not the least because it seeks to counterpose the absolute authority of mere men to that of Allah (SWT). But if Muslims study history so as to better understand how Allah (SWT) has unfolded His plan for humanity, or to learn how to serve Allah (SWT) more effectively - as a tool to assist Muslims in opposing evil and promoting good - then it is surely a very praiseworthy act.

It was very rare for “historical” accounts before Ibn Khaldūn to link events together, so that they could be analysed, so that they might be understood, by discerning the principal causal factors and historical patterns. And there are a couple of other important points to note, about simply ascribing all causation to Allah (SWT), in the matter of the early Muslim historians, - as if Allah (SWT) has not designed this world in such a manner that He expects humans to play a conscious, practical role in it.

First, Islam teaches that life in this world is a series of trials and tests for all human beings, which determine our future status in the next world. All Muslims accept this. Yet, if Allah (SWT) does not permit Muslims the ability to influence events, that is, if He has imposed an iron destiny (or fatalism) upon us this is a hopeless task, because some people will be born with the destiny to fail these tests. The consequences of this are an abomination to Islam, for it means that Allah (SWT) cannot be All Merciful. This is not true, for the reasons that have already been stated, that we are given a free will and an intellect by Allah (SWT) and are expected to use them. Second, narrowly ascribing all causation to Allah (SWT), in the manner of certain Muslim scholars leaves out completely any consideration of internal causes for change.

So far, we have looked at what history is and what it is not. We have touched on the contributions and shortcomings of Ibn Khaldūn's predecessors and on his attempt to use the methodology of the Holy Qur'ān to tease out the patterns of history and the great forces or groups moving these into action. Next, we shall compare Ibn Khaldūn's contributions to those of both modern Western secular scholars and contemporary Muslim thinkers. We shall examine how these scholars might help us to understand contemporary events and what to do about them.

### **A Natural Approach: Historical Determinism**

Ibn Khaldūn claimed in his *al-Muqaddimah* to begin with general causes, moving from these to detailed historical information. Thus, this work contains an exhaustive history of the world, as known to him at the time. *Al-Muqaddimah* sets out to understand why his society was structured in the particular way that it was. Ibn Khaldūn attempts to uncover this by starting with the actual facts on the ground.

His text is a literally encyclopaedic study of medieval Maghrebi society and the two main types of human civilisation existing there: nomadic Bedouins and sedentary city dwellers. He comments that "both Bedouins and sedentary people are natural groups."<sup>14</sup> He looks at all the factors that determine how people live, work and think in terms of race, geography, climate, religion, economics, etc. Of course, as we saw above, a mere catalogue of facts does not tell us terribly much. And knowledge of a region's race, geography, climate, religion, and economics can even be a source of confusion, if no distinction is made between causal factors and their effects.

Ibn Khaldūn understood this very well, indicating that "It should be known that differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living."<sup>15</sup> With this simple statement, he laid the foundation for the modern scientific historical method — what we can call today historical determinism. He compared different societies, showing that it was their mode of production that determined their structures and their historical limits.

His comparative approach, richly illustrated by factual evidence, allowed him to draw general conclusions and develop a template

for how states develop and change. Using the example of the evolution of Bedouin society into sedentary city life, he was able to show that human society became more or less steadily more complex, as production techniques became more sophisticated and the division of labour more extensive.

Without drawing all the conclusions that we can today (because he lived in a society with a comparatively unsophisticated mode of production), he argued that the forms taken by the social psychology, religion, juridical and social structures of a given society, are linked to its economic mode of production.

Unlike the atheistic distortion of his historical method by Karl Marx and others who developed the theory of “historical materialism,” Ibn Khaldūn had no illusions that everything obediently follows economics as the Marxists claim. Ibn Khaldūn conceived the spiritual realm as existing prior to and influencing the physical world:

There is something that exercises an influence and is different than bodily substances. This is something spiritual. It is connected with the created things, because the various worlds must be connected in their existence. This spiritual thing is the soul, which has perception and causes motion. Above the soul ... is the world of angels.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Allah (SWT) precedes the economies built by men, that is, they only come into being and evolve with the permission of Almighty God. And, because Ibn Khaldūn was not an atheist, but a practising Muslim, he was a dedicated monotheist, believing firmly in one underlying and unifying reality that preceded even the universe — Allah (SWT).

Unlike today’s “postmodernists” (men such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, Ihab Hassan, Jean Baudrillard), Ibn Khaldūn did not see the world as a confusing array of disconnected objects, with no relation to each other. He stressed the interconnection of phenomena, groups and objects in the world. He was convinced that the world could be understood — but only by looking at it as a whole, whose various parts interact with and influence each other, so that the parts are determined by the whole. This means that the world is in a process of constant change. This approach is also strongly evocative of the

methodology of the Holy Qur'ān, which stresses that the entire universe is an interconnected unity, emanating from and totally dependent upon a unique, omniscient Sustainer - Allah (SWT). Ibn Khaldūn is in no doubt about the source of all knowledge:

‘And He knows more than any scholar.’ God is the ultimate repository of (all) knowledge. Man is weak and deficient. Admission (of one’s ignorance) is a specific (religious) duty. He whom God helps, finds his way (made) easy and his efforts and quests successful. We seek God’s help for the goal to which we aspire in this work. God gives guidance and help. He may be trusted.<sup>17</sup>

In his “Introduction” to the *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn notes that a destructive plague had “devastated nations and caused populations to vanish.”<sup>18</sup> Commenting upon this, he observed that “a general change of conditions” is akin to “a world brought into existence anew.”<sup>19</sup> He concludes that “The life span of a dynasty corresponds to the life span of an individual; it grows up, passes into an age of stagnation and thence into retrogression.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, every society ultimately experiences “senility” — which “cannot be cured or made to disappear, because it is something natural, and natural things do not change.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, societies have cycles of development. But these cycles are not all identical in all societies, since all societies — like all of creation — are undergoing very dynamic processes of continual change, due to a range of influences.

Yet this was neither mere chance, nor the blind working of what we would today call “Nature,” but rather as if “the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world has responded to its call. God inherits the earth and all who dwell upon it.”<sup>22</sup>

### **The Tragedy of Historical Determinism**

Although invented by a Muslim, this historical approach was not developed further by later generations of Muslims, due to the deepening crisis of an *ummah* crippled by an increasingly impotent dynastic system.<sup>23</sup> This is nothing short of a tragedy, for if historical determinism is used intelligently — and renovated to take account of the whole development of human, political and social evolution — it allows isolated facts and phenomena to be considered as part

of an understandable pattern. As well as describing phenomena, it places these events within a specific framework - a given social system.

This method, thus, traces and exposes both a social order's inner contradictions and the inner connections of the different forms it takes over time and space. It can also permit us to discover the laws governing the transition from one social formation into another, that is, the general laws of development. Because of the absence of most Muslims from the struggle for this knowledge, the field was left open for this historical method to be developed one-sidedly by other scholars. One consequence of this was that the invention of historical determinism (in the distorted and limited form of "historical materialism") is usually attributed to Karl Marx.

While it is indisputable that so-called "historical materialism" reached a highly developed form in the work of Marx, neither Marx nor his colleague Frederick Engels were actually the originators of this methodology. The Marxist James Connolly concedes:

Here let us say that no Socialist claims for Marx the discovery or original formulation of the doctrine of the materialistic conception of history - indeed, the brilliant Irish scholastic, Duns Scotus, taught it in the Middle Ages ...<sup>24</sup>

As a Marxist (albeit one who never gave up his belief in God), living in his place and time, James Connolly - like the conservative Catholic Church scholar Duns Scotus (1266 CE-1308 CE) - would most probably have been unaware of Ibn Khaldūn's work. Connolly asserts that Marx was merely the "clearest expositor" of this historical methodology - although he adds that "the Irish economist William Thompson of County Cook in 1826 had pointed it out before Marx was in swaddling clothes."<sup>25</sup> And, just as scholars before Marx made use of rudimentary versions of historical determinism, so, too, have several avowed non-Marxists since Marx.

### **Weber, Marx and Historical Materialism**

Others - most notably Max Weber, whose writings are sometimes seen as an alternative to Marx's - also attributed much weight to economic factors. Unlike Marx, he did not necessarily consider them ultimately decisive in all circumstances, believing that ideas could

have more force in certain circumstances. Weber considered that, overall, each of these two factors (economics and ideas) accomplishes equally little in the interest of economic truth.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Weber's procedure is sufficiently connected to economic factors to reach a number of conclusions (for instance on the transition from feudalism to capitalism), which are analogous to or overlap those reached by Marx.

For this reason, the Iraqi scholar, Hanna Batatu, writes of "the classic sociological class analysis ... that draws essentially upon the insights of Karl Marx and Max Weber."<sup>27</sup> Marx developed this methodology, to take account of the range of different types of human societies throughout history, but, as he did this, he simultaneously ripped out its spiritual heart.

At this point, two things need to be clarified, before proceeding further. First and foremost, this paper does not advocate Marxism. And, second, most of the "Marxists" who followed Marx understood his method very badly, in a very static, narrow manner. It will, therefore, be necessary for us to restore what Marx actually advocated, before we can assess his method against that of Muslims such as Ibn Khaldūn and 'Alī Sharī'atī.

### **Marx versus the "Marxists"**

Unlike Marx, almost all the "Marxists" were what is known as "vulgar materialists," that is, their understanding lacked any dynamism. For that reason, they were also known as "mechanical materialists," since they saw only external action along predetermine times, rather than a dynamic interaction between external and internal changes. So, if an economic exchange occurred, they tended to assume that it would automatically affect political and social life. That is, to much more of an extent than Marx himself, most of them ignored the influence of non-economic factors.

According to the rigid formulas of especially Stalin and subsequent "Marxist-Leninists," historical materialism was reduced to a lifeless, prefabricated set of four historical epochs, which every single society "must" experience in turn. Stalin's attempt to frogmarch history, thus, outlawed discussion or teaching of the state form known variously as "oriental despotism" or the "Asiatic mode

of production,” since this contradicted his rigid, Eurocentric, dogma of an unvarying set of modes of production on a strictly Western European model. Yet Marx himself left the door open to the vulgar materialist interpretation of his theory, through his own materialist insistence on economic factors, which excluded consideration of spiritual and ideological factors.

This was recognised by his closest colleague, Engels, late in his life, who admits that “many of the more recent ‘Marxists’” had produced “the most amazing rubbish” by crudely overstressing the economic side of His and Marx’s theories. Even more amazingly, Engels concedes that, while “the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life,” economics was definitely not the sole determining factor. Economics was the basis of historical materialism, but the various elements of the superstructure — including political and juridical forms of the class struggle “and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views”<sup>28</sup> — were also influential, if not determining factors. Engels emphasises that “an interaction of all these elements” permits “the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.” “Otherwise,” he concludes wryly, “the application of the theory to any period of history would be easier than the solution of a simple equation of the first degree.”<sup>29</sup>

Turning now to what Marx actually advocated during his lifetime, we see that Marx treated the many and varied aspects of reality as part of an ongoing historical process, which only make sense if seen as part of that reality — instead of as individual isolated “facts,” lacking any living connections to reality. Basing himself partially on Hegel’s dialectical notion that the “Truth is Concrete,”<sup>30</sup> Marx asserts that “objective truth ... is a practical question.”<sup>31</sup>

The dynamic (or dialectical) character of Marx’s approach also deserves to be emphasised. Marx’s historical materialism does not interpret all human history as the mindless, more or less automatic, product of economic change. As we have seen, he insists that social phenomena depend on the economic structure of society, which, in turn, is determined by the state of the given society’s productive forces. So, for example, the low level of development of productive

forces in, say, a pre-feudal slave society such as ancient Rome, would preclude the appearance and development of modern theories of nationhood.

According to Marx's historical methodology, the mode of production of material life, i.e., the class structure of a given society that determines how production is carried out, ultimately determines the general social, political and intellectual basis of society. This standpoint of his is crucial for grasping his approach. This is a dynamic, constantly changing relationship, which every so often results in the appearance of a new mode of production (and, consequently, new social, political and intellectual bases), as each society reaches its highest point of development within a given economic mode. Marx asserts that history has so far continually repeated this pattern, and that history is, therefore, comprehensible. He argues that it can only be understood scientifically as the conflict between different social classes, within given productive modes: the classless "primitive communism" of the earliest human societies, followed by the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois or capitalist modes of production.

This succession of productive modes led to economic, social, political and intellectual renewal, as outmoded productive modes were replaced by higher forms, due to a revolutionary ferment by contending social classes. With historical materialism, Marx argued that society can, therefore, be analysed from the vantage point of understanding the totality of its social relations, that is, both its economic base and its legal, political and cultural superstructure. He claimed that this method allows the actual stages of any society to be seen as they evolve and mature. In other words, these stages can only be understood in a very practical way, since the process of cognition is a very concrete, practical question.

### **Marx in a Nutshell**

In a nutshell, therefore, Marx's system is the application of his dialectical materialist philosophical outlook to the problem of understanding human historical development. He proposes that a given society must be understood:

- In relation to the whole of human history and all other existing societies;

- Not abstractly, but in relation to human practice;
- As the conflict between different social classes, within given modes of production, which ultimately determine the general social, political and intellectual basis of society; and
- As a dynamic, constantly changing process, which produces successive modes of production due to a revolutionary ferment by contending social classes, as each society reaches its highest point of development within a given economic mode.

Marx added to this that a never-ending struggle between social classes is the motor of human development. Humanity is compelled to suffer periodic crises, which will ultimately drag it down into the abyss unless the proletariat (the modern working class) is able to unite sufficiently on a global basis to wage a successful, necessarily violent, world revolution against capitalism, replacing it with a classless global economy. We shall see in a moment that Marx's historical materialist scheme leads inexorably to a fatal obsession with economic factors. Taken to its logical conclusion, this can even justify oppression. So, we shall discuss how he was wrong to claim that economy generally negated spiritual factors. We shall also critically assess the importance of the mode of production analysis. Historical determinism reached a highly developed form in the work of Karl Marx - but it did so in the distorted and limited form of "historical materialism." This examination will permit us to conclude this discussion, by examining criticism of Marx's historical materialism by Muslim thinkers.

### **Islam and Historical Materialism**

'Ali Shari'atī comments on Marx's notion that each means of production produces given legal, social, moral and cultural forms and class relations, or superstructure:

Is it not possible to deduce from this precise analysis a justification for all the social systems, class relations, religious and ethical norms and tendencies, and judicial and legal forms of the pre-industrial age? As the texts of Marxism make clear, in the dialectical materialist theory of history, even the causes of slavery may be deduced from this rule; slavery too is the particular social superstructure of the

agricultural mode of production... Accordingly, in every social order and every historical period, the existing conditions have taken the specific form appropriate to the mode of production, that mode itself being determined by the form of the existing tools.<sup>32</sup>

After all, according to historical materialism all previous systems of class exploitation, from slavery through to feudalism, are historically necessary, since a given mode is “determined by the form of the existing tools” in Marxism. Ethically and logically speaking, Marx can, therefore, hardly object to oppression in preceding epochs, given that, according to his logic, those plebeians who struggled for justice in these bygone times — such as Roman slave rebellion leader Spartacus: “essentially struggled in vain ... unaware of the determining character of the mode of production in their time, they were daydreaming and became utopians.”<sup>33</sup> Whereas, had they been Marxists: “They would have waited patiently for the appearance of the promised messiah, the machine, which would collectivise labour.”<sup>34</sup> Shari’ati shows that this is inevitable for Marx, “because the moral values and nobility of human nature that Marx ascribes to humanity have no logical and scientific basis” in the communist system.<sup>35</sup>

Methodologically, Marx’s error was not to highlight the important economic factors — the mode of production analysis — but to assert that, in practice, economy generally negated other influences. Blinded by materialism, historical materialism decrees that ideas (religious, scientific, juridical, cultural etc.) must follow economic development. In reality, the process is eminently more dialectical, that is, more dynamic, more interactive. Man interacts with nature and human society and seeks to understand them. This leads him to develop theories, which he tests out in the process of his continued interaction with nature and human society. At a certain point, this dialectical process produces breakthroughs — a new level of understanding of the phenomena being studied. This, in turn, allows new ways of interacting usefully with nature (new tools, new institutions, etc.) to be devised. This is hardly a controversial sequence.

Yet it runs contrary to the scheme propounded by the materialists, for — while not denying that a very dynamic, interactive process is

involved — it asserts that breakthroughs in human consciousness can precede developments in human culture. This is precisely the opposite of Marx's historical materialism — although not to determinism as such. The sociologist Raymond Aron asserts that social phenomena are subject to a strict determinism, “an inevitable evolution in human societies,” that is “itself governed by the progress of the human mind.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, Aron does not consider the special significance of spiritual factors. In the Qur'ānic conception, spirit (or “real human nature”) takes precedence to matter in the patterns of history,<sup>37</sup> since “[s]piritual needs and spiritual urges exist in man quite independent of his material needs and do not depend on them.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, “economy may be the infrastructure [foundation] of society, but that does not necessarily mean that it is the motivating force of history, also.”<sup>39</sup> This is the key to our problem.

We saw earlier that Ibn Khaldūn had no illusions about ideas obediently following economics as the Marxists claim. But — not surprisingly, since both Ibn Khaldūn and Marx owed a debt to ancient Greek philosophy — both agreed that phenomena, groups and objects in the world must be seen as an interconnected whole, whose various parts interact with and influence each other, so that the parts are determined by the whole and that the world is in a process of constant change.

We have seen that Marx's historical materialist scheme leads inexorably to an obsession with economic factors. Taken to its logical conclusion, it has been shown, this can even justify oppression in bygone eras. This is inevitable, in a methodology that lacks any basis for ascribing moral values and nobility to human nature. Marx's central error was to claim that economy generally negated spiritual factors.<sup>40</sup> This is not to deny the importance of the mode of production analysis, simply to put it into perspective. We need to be clear that our spiritual selves do not depend on our material needs. Both Ibn Khaldūn, the Muslim, Karl Marx, and the materialist, were correct to point to the importance of economic factors, in understanding how history is made.

If Ibn Khaldūn's main limitation (from the point of view of how useful his thinking is to us today) was the time and place he lived in, at least he was clear enough to know that Allah (SWT) stands at the centre of the universe. Muslims today need to learn how to use his

historical method, critically applying it to today's changing conditions.

As this paper has shown, in contrast to Marx and other secular historical determinists, Ibn Khaldūn grasps that history was not only a discernable process, but also that it was a complex process, in which moral, political, economic, social and demographic factors all interacted, subject at all times to the Will of Allah (SWT) and His Laws. "Men," Karl Marx once commented "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please."<sup>41</sup> Marx, the materialist, could not grasp the profound significance of his own words, seeing only the actions of "dead generations" of men as the conditioning factor.<sup>42</sup> Ibn Khaldūn vividly delineates where the error of materialist method leads humanity.

Khaldūn counterposes two quite different human types. First, those who base themselves upon their God-given good nature (*fiṭrah*) and, therefore, find contentment by following their natural inclinations to worship and submit to Allah (SWT). In return, their narrow and destructive tribal and kinship ties are replaced by a new and very strong *ʿAṣabiyyah* (social glue), based on the Islamic brotherhood of all Muslims, which enables good robust co-operation and harmony. Khaldūn offers the nomadic, property-less desert Bedouin of the prophetic era as a rather idealised archetype of such people. In contrast to such types are those who progressively divest themselves of their religion, exchanging it for a deepening materialism and worldly possessions to match. Paradigmatic of this type are sedentary city dwellers, who live way "beyond the level of bare necessity."<sup>43</sup> In practice, few people are of the consistently ideal type, but vacillate between this ideal and tendencies towards evil, due to material temptations, thus tending to become avaricious, sexually exploitative, and so forth. This does not only affect individuals, since society as a whole thus suffers. Khaldūn views man's vacillations as externally determined, since "Man is a child of the customs and the things he has become used to," having become accustomed to luxury, which replaces "his natural disposition."<sup>44</sup>

Those who lose their religion are behaving unnaturally by behaving contrary to their true nature, according to Khaldūn, and pay the price, as their *ʿaṣabiyyah* withers, their human nature (*fiṭrah*) is corrupted and greed overcomes society, sending prices and taxes

spiralling out of control. Such a society is in grave danger, as even basic necessities become out of reach, businesses decline while poverty flourishes.<sup>45</sup> In the process of obtaining luxuries (and losing their *fiṭrah*), people have also acquired evil personal qualities. As luxuries now become unattainable, “[i]mmorality, wrongdoing, insincerity, and trickery, for the purposes of making a living in a proper or an improper manner” now thrive:

The soul comes to think about (making a living), to study it, and to use all possible trickery for the purpose. People are now devoted to lying, gambling, cheating, fraud, theft, perjury, and usury. Because of the many desires and pleasures resulting from luxury, they are found to know everything about the ways and means of immorality, they talk openly about it and its causes, and give up all restraint in discussing it, even among relatives and close female relations, where the Bedouin attitude requires modesty (and avoidance of) obscenities. They also know everything about fraud and deceit, which they employ to defend themselves against the possible use of force against them and against the punishment expected for their evil deeds. Eventually, this becomes a custom and trait of character with most of them, except those whom God protects.<sup>46</sup>

Society then becomes dominated by “low people of blameworthy character ... the affairs of the people are in disorder, and if the affairs of individuals one by one deteriorate, the town becomes disorganized and falls into ruins ... adultery and homosexuality” flourish, leading to the downfall of society. Then, unable to repel harmful things, the sedentary society now lacks courage or the ability to defend itself against external enemies. All these things strike a society when it is apparently at its peak. “It has thus become clear,” concludes Khaldūn “that the stage of sedentary culture is the stopping point in the life of civilization and dynasties.”<sup>47</sup> He adds that, when a man’s strength, “then his character and religion are corrupted,” he is effectively transformed into an animal. Khaldūn then cites *Sūrat al-Kahf* (18: 16) by means of explanation:

If this (situation) spreads in a town or nation, Allah permits it to be ruined and destroyed. This is the meaning of the word of Allah: “When we want to destroy a village, we order those

of its inhabitants who live in luxury to act wickedly therein.  
Thus, the word becomes true for it, and we do destroy it.”<sup>48</sup>

Khaldūn’s assessment is also strikingly reminiscent of *Sūrat al-Rūm* in the Qur’ān, which stresses the perfectly natural signs of Almighty Allah, and calls upon man to “set your face upright for religion in the right state — the nature made by Allah in which He has made men” (30: 30) and warning man that it brings misfortune upon itself: “[a]nd if an evil befall them for what their hands have already wrought, lo! They are in despair” (*Sūrat al-Rūm*, 30: 36).

Man is not the blind slave of the tools of production. The improved technology of a new mode of production provides new opportunities either for a new standard of living for all or as a new form of exploitation. Yet it is man — not his machines — who makes this choice, as Khaldūn argues and the Qur’ān verifies. Ibn Khaldūn shows that Arab-Muslim civilisation arose out of a state of great social and cultural backwardness due to its attachment to values such as *‘aṣabiyyah* and bravery, on the one hand, and to new forces united with it through the brotherhood of Islam on the other. Equally, Khaldūn demonstrates the factors that would lead to the weakening and demise of Arab civilisation, as it moved away from *fiṭric* values.<sup>49</sup>

The Qur’ān explains that, to the extent which justice and equity form the basis of man’s actions, then the more the earth’s treasures become available to man. To cite just one relevant *ayah*:

If the people of the townships had believed and kept from evil, surely We should have opened blessings from the sky and from the earth. But they disbelieved, and so We seized them on account of what they used to earn (*Sūrat al-A‘rāf*, 7: 96).

Islam provides humans with a framework that we are free to accept or reject; we can chose to either act justly or unjustly — or suffer the consequences in each case. Ibn Khaldūn shows that unjust, tyrannical societies are always decadent societies, sliding towards social and political disintegration. Upholding the *Fiṭric* ideal of monotheism in theory and practice — by showing in practice that one does not accept any substitute for Allah, by according any mere human the status of a god — can result in oppression and martyrdom. But the monotheistic ideal also eliminates all differences of class or race that falsely divide humanity.

In *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'* (21: 92) Muslims are told “your community is one community.” A society oppressed by the false gods such as that of the Pharaoh (Fir‘awn) only divides and impoverishes, destroying man’s creative power, the Qur‘ān warns. The various man-made (and, by definition, despotic), modes of production induce the deterioration of man’s relations with nature, while a just society is rewarded with “water in abundance,” as shown earlier.

Current trends in international relations might provide some insights on the relevance of Ibn Khaldūn’s historical method today. It has been shown how, based on the Qur‘ānic methodology, the *Muqaddimah* embodies Ibn Khaldūn’s cyclical method. Nomadic society gives way to sedentary culture, allowing commerce, science and the arts to thrive. But prosperity leads to corruption. Senile civilisations abandon religion — thereby signing their death warrant, as solidarity wanes and people behave immorally, driven by the false gods of *dunyā*. Solidarity having been dissipated, senile civilisations seek to compensate with spectacle, funded by excessive taxation, thereby undermining the prosperity underlying their power.

The rise and fall, for instance, of the Roman Empire, the Mughal Empire and the British Empire, among others, exemplify Ibn Khaldūn’s approach. The United States’ journey as a nation and a world power could also be analysed using Ibn Khaldūn’s deterministic approach. Khaldūn showed how states are constantly passing through numerous phases in their development, and constantly interact with each other — eventually passing into “stagnation and thence into retrogression.”<sup>50</sup> America has expanded globally in all spheres. Its military power seems invincible and its political influence is mighty. Yet it is arguably driven internally by corruption, crime and poverty. Attempts to compensate for declining global political influence with frequent military spectacles directed against Third World countries only worsen the US trade deficit. US military power is now overstretched and the US Empire’s stratospheric military spending contributes to a creeping US economic paralysis.<sup>51</sup> The deepening US credit crisis and recession that are currently unfolding are sharp reminders of the depths of the crisis of US imperial power.<sup>52</sup> Ibn Khaldūn could, therefore, have been describing the coming end of US Empire, when he wrote:

At the end of a dynasty, there often appears some (show of) power that gives the impression that the senility of the dynasty has been made to disappear. It lights up brilliantly just before it is extinguished, like a burning wick the flame of which leaps up brilliantly a moment before it goes out, giving the impression it is just starting to burn, when in fact it is going out.<sup>53</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

Muslims need to learn how to use Ibn Khaldūn's historical approach, critically applying it to today's changing conditions, to contribute to the conscious creation of a new, Allah-centred global civilisation, "a world brought into existence anew," as Ibn Khaldūn himself puts it. Khaldūn is not merely of interest as a historical chronicler; he is more important as a scholar who consciously sought to discern the underlying determinist patterns of history. It is time for him to "be resurrected from the ruins of historical thought" and his approach "actively applied to problems of theoretical and practical import."<sup>54</sup>

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### Notes:

1. Several other *ayāt* also reflect this theme: *Sūrat al-An'ām*, 6: 32, 70, 91; *Sūrat al-A'rāf*, 7: 51; *Sūrat al-Tawbah*, 9: 65; *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12: 12; *Sūrat al-Anbiyā'*, 21: 2; *Sūrat al-'Ankabūt*, 29: 64; *Sūrat al-Zukhruf*, 43: 83; *Sūrat Muḥammad*, 47: 36; *Sūrat al-Tūr*, 52: 12; *Sūrat al-Ḥadīd*, 57: 20; *Sūrat al-Jum'ah*, 62: 11 and *Sūrat al-Ma'ārij*, 70: 42.

2. A. Wafi Wahid states: "It is out of the issues and themes treated in *Muqaddimah* that Ibn Khaldūn has succeeded to put forth a science which we now call sociology. The latter studies social phenomena in order to discover the laws which govern them." See A. Wafi Wahid, *al-Muqaddimah* (Cairo: Dar Nahthati Misr, n.d.), 120. Ernest Gellner (1984, 16) regards Ibn Khaldūn as "the greatest sociologist of Islam." See Ernest Gellner, *Muslim society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 16.

3. J. Arnold Toynbee, *The Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 372. Mahmoud Dhaouhadi calls it "The revolutionary reformist authorship of the science of history." See Mahmoud Dhaouhadi, *New Explorations into the Making of Ibn Khaldūn's 'Umrān Mind* (Kuala Lumpur: A.S. Noordeen, 1997), 78.

4. Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (New Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2001), 110.
5. *Ibid.*, 110-111.
6. *Ibid.*, 112.
7. *Ibid.*, 111.
8. *Ibid.*
9. B. Bruce Lawrence, 'Introduction' to *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton and Oxford: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 2005), xiii-xiv; Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 112. Iqbal states: "It is the application of the principle embodied in this verse to the reporters of the Prophet's traditions out of which were gradually evolved the canons of historical criticism."
10. Mohammad Enan, *Ibn Khaldūn: His Life and Works* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1997), 110.
11. *Ibid.*, 112.
12. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton and Oxford: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, 2005), 36.
13. Yves Lacoste, *Ibn Khaldun: The Birth of History and the Past of the Third World* (London: Verso, 1984), 140.
14. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 91.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), vol. 1, 195.
17. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 30.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 138.
21. *Ibid.*, 245.
22. *Ibid.*, 30.
23. Mahmoud Dhaouadi, *New Explorations into the Making of Ibn Khaldūn's 'Umrān Mind*, 83-4.

24. James Connolly, "Labour, nationality and religion," in *James Connolly: Selected Writings*, ed. Peter Berresford Ellis (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 70.
25. Ibid.
26. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (Macmillan: The Free Press, 1964), 319-23.
27. Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements in Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of Its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.
28. Frederick Engels, "Engels to J. Bloch in Königsberg," letter of September 21-22, 1890, in *Historical Materialism (Marx, Engels, Lenin)* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 294-6.
29. Ibid.
30. In the Introduction to his *Logic* G. W. F. Hegel writes: "For the truth is concrete; that is, whilst it gives a bond and principle of unity, it also possesses an internal source of development. Truth, then, is only possible as a universe or totality of thought; and the freedom of the whole, as well as the necessity of the several sub-divisions, which it implies, are only possible when these are discriminated and defined." See G.W.F. Hegel, 1975 (1873). *Hegel's Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) [online] available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/>, accessed on October 11, 2009.
31. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karx Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works in Three Volumes* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), vol. 1, 394-487.
32. 'Alī Sharī'atī, *Marxism and Other Western fallacies*, ed. Hamid Elgar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 78-79.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Ibid.
36. Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought* (Middlesex: Penguin/Pelican, 1981), vol. 1, 65.
37. Iqbal notes: "History in its totality is a movement of human soul. Human soul has no specific environment. The whole world is its environment... To treat it as belonging to a particular nationality is to demonstrate narrow-mindedness." See M. Naeem Qureshi, "The state of social sciences in Pakistan,"

in *Whither history? The state of the discipline in Pakistan*, ed. S.H. Hashmi (Islamabad: Council of Social Sciences, Pakistan (COSS), 2001), 109.

38. Murtaza Mutahheri, *Man and Universe* (Qum: Ansarian Publications, 1897), 386.

39. *Ibid.*, 426.

40. Mainstream (non-Marxian) 'secular' theories of history have also been subjected to withering criticism from within the academy. Bryan S. Turner remarks: "History as a discipline is a major haven for empiricism in its a-theoretical effort to describe how history happened by connecting together historical events in a temporal sequence." See S. Bryan Turner, *For Weber: essays on the sociology of fate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 37.

41. Karl Marx, "Theses On Feuerbach," as an appendix to "Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, trans. W. Lough (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), vol. I, pp. 13-15.

42. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," 398.

43. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 92.

44. *Ibid.*, 95.

45. *Ibid.*, 286.

46. *Ibid.*, 286-7.

47. *Ibid.*, 289.

48. *Ibid.*, 287.

49. Mahmoud Dhaouadi, *New Explorations into the Making of Ibn Khaldūn's 'Umrān Mind*, 217-8.

50. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 138.

51. Emmanuel Todd, *Après l'empire: Essai sur la Décomposition du Système Américain* (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 2002); Idem, *After the Empire: the Breakdown of the American Order*, trans. C. Jon. Delogu (London: Constable and Robinson, 2003).

52. Isolationist until Pearl Harbour, the United States might not be at first glance an imperial hegemon on the model of the Roman Empire. Yet, as Emmanuel Todd explains, America displays the interrelated characteristics of all 'true empires' — especially the Roman Empire: it is born from military force, and that force permits the extraction of tribute that nourishes the imperial centre. Second, the centre treats conquered people as ordinary citizens and inversely treats ordinary citizens like conquered people. Todd argues that, just

like the Imperial Roman Empire, the US Empire is now not only receding militarily and economically, but is unable to sustain its ideological universalism. Unable to treat either individuals or whole people equally, it can neither continue to count on their allegiance nor to compel their acquiesce. See Emmanuel Todd, *Après l'empire: Essai sur la Décomposition du Système Américain*, 95-96; Idem, *After the Empire: the Breakdown of the American Order*, 76-77.

53. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), vol. 1, 246.

54. Syed Farid Alatas, "Ibn Khaldun and the Ottoman modes of production," in *Arab Historical Review for Ottoman Studies*, no. 1-2 (1990): 63.